

Preface

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"Memesis" — a hybrid composed of Richard Dawkins' "meme" [coined by analogy with "gene"] and "genesis" — is the watchword of the 1996 Ars Electronica Festival and its overriding theme of "The Future of Evolution". At the heart of the debate are the conditions which will increasingly determine our cultural self-conception and thus our thinking and acting, above all with the establishment of communication spaces for data and telematics. Every orientation to which we have hitherto been accustomed to align our life seems, as a consequence of its technological mutation, to have developed the capacity for a life of its own. For the first time, observations seem to permit us not only to plausibly predicate utopian or dystopian prototypes of a future based on information and digital technologies, but to identify palpable — memetic — conditions under which the cultural development is proceeding. The scientific, philosophical, artistic and political debate, which experts of all disciplines are called upon to conduct in the context of the Festival, is informed by these new findings based on observation.

The experiment designed to generate an interdisciplinary and controversial debate on the topic — by starting it up in the network — can itself be regarded as indeed pointing the way ahead for the form of the debate itself. Ars Electronica 96 seeks to identify orientations for the thinking and acting of a dawning cultural praxis; networked locally and globally, it is honing the skills needed for fulfilling its memetic mandate in the impending debate on the direction of cultural evolution.