Ars Electronica, All Aboard!
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John Lasseter, ten years ago the winner of the first Golden Nica, the Prix Ars Electronica for computer animation, will receive his third Golden Nica in September 1996 for his work on *Toy Story*. If,after taking a night flight from San Francisco to Vienna, he decides to take an early train to Linz, he may be in for a bit of a surprise at Vienna's Westbahnhof.

The station's loudspeaker will inform him that "Eurocity train EC 562, Ars Electronica from Vienna West with stops in Linz, Salzburg and Bregenz is now departing from Track 6. Ars Electronica, all aboard!" Since June 1, 1996, the EC train linking Vienna and Bregenz, the longest single route in Austria, has been named in honour of Ars Electronica, the festival of art, technology and society. The list of train names, spanning the full spectrum of Austrian culture includes not only Mozart, Kepler and the Vienna Philharmonic, but also the name of a contemporary media festival which, since its founding in 1979, has established a rich tradition unsurpassed by any festival of its kind.

Austria's 1,000-year anniversary in 1996 marks a further milestone for Ars Electronica. With the opening of the Ars Electronica Center as a Museum of the Future, the development of this festival has reached another high point and one that simultaneously points the way for its subsequent evolution in the years immediately ahead. The theme of this year's festival, though, directs our attention toward an even more distant future, measured in millennia rather than in centuries. The point of departure is Richard Dawkins' theory of the meme, which he defines as a cultural DNA analogous in a certain sense to that found in the genes of a living cell. Along with the rhetorical reference implicit in this artificially coined term "memesis", Ars Electronica 96 also explicitly evokes an association with genesis and thereby raises one of the most important issues of the next millennium: the future of human evolution which has entered a new era with the arrival of the Digital Age. With the emergence and spread of virtual systems, the interlocking of man and machine had assumed a new dimension. The prediction of chip implants in the cerebral cortex within the next 50 years, elaborated by Marvin Minsky at Ars Electronica 1990, may still sound utopian, but the "Things That Think" project by Nicolas Negroponte of MIT Media Lab has already shifted this concept from the realm of utopian fantasy into a very real discussion phase.

It is not only in term of its thematic orientation, however, that Ars Electronica 96 directs its aim beyond the year 2000; rather, it strives to simultaneously present itself in a new context whereby the festival itself is assured of maintaining its thrust and vitality into the next millennium. Like any product which must be modified in a certain time rhythm in order to remain attractive to consumers, Ars Electronica has made an effort from the very outset to introduce decisive innovations in the festival format and to broaden its field of effectiveness.

Ars Electronica was founded in 1979 by the Bruckner House in Linz and the Austrian Broadcasting Company [ORF] studio in the Province of Upper Austria. Following the early pioneering years during which the festival's initial positioning was established, Ars Electronica underwent a process of expansion and internationalization in 1986-87 due to a sharper thematic focus and the philosophic and artistic reorientation carried out by Peter Weibel, due to its being held on a yearly basis and due to the initiative leading to the creation of the ORF's Prix Ars Electronica as a competition for computer artists.

Ten years later, the next step which was already initiated in 1992, is being successfully completed with the opening of the Ars Electronica Center. Thus, Ars Electronica is not simply

the name of a festival or one connected with an artistic competition — or, for that matter, with the EC train covering the Austrian Federal Railway's longest route — but rather that of an established institution in Linz, the Ars Electronica Center, the Museum of the Future.

With the completion of this step, Ars Electronica is no longer only an event which takes place in Linz once a year, providing a temporary forum for intensive encounter. Rather, Ars Electronica is now present on a daily basis, existing in a fixed, real form as one of the first digital media centers. It makes its facilities available not only to virtual visitors in the WWW, but also to the general public as well as to specialists in the field whose projects at the leading edge of digital media are revealing the possibilities and applications of these new technologies.

The Ars Electronica Center occupies a position at the interface of art, technology and science. It sees its mission as that of a "house in progress", a living organism not only providing the public with a glimpse into virtual reality, data visualization, networks and the applications of digital media in education, science and the arts, but one that makes its foremost contribution in actively promoting interactivity.

Above all, the Ars Electronica Center will strive to be a place dedicated to the raising of consciousness — of the Digital Revolution, of the radical nature of the breakthroughs and shifts brought about by digital media and thus of the new stage of digital culture which has already begun to unfold before us.

We stand at the dawning of a new age. Much remains unseen and unrecognized, much still lies hidden. Ultimately, no one knows where the Digital Revolution will lead in the coming century.

In an essay written ten years ago on the occasion of Ars Electronica 86, I attempted to elaborate ten indicators of the emergence of computer culture. "If we visualize the Computer Age as a timeline of 100 years," I wrote, "we are now, perhaps, in Year 10. Today's kindergarten kids, growing up with video clips and home computers, will from the very start regard the computer as an available instrument and a useful tool." In the meantime, ten years have elapsed since 1986; on our timeline, we are now in Year 20. One thing has certainly changed during this decade: anew gold rush has long since gotten under way, at least in the USA, when one considers the extraordinary number of newly founded firms that have achieved spectacular growth. And something else has taken place during these ten years: the content of the world's data bases today exceeds that of human memory. We have reached the point of critical mass. All prognoses agree in one respect: this new digital age means change in the life of each and every individual. "In one more generation," Peter F. Drucker says, "we will no longer recognize the world."

Art constitutes the point of departure for the Ars Electronica Center and, above all, for the Ars Electronica Festival. More than ever, artists consider themselves and have proven to be sensors of new developments that will ultimately encompass life in its entirety. In this sense, the Ars Electronica Center sees its role as that of an "evangelist" of the digital age of virtual reality, of cyberspace and of the evolution of communication which for the first time enhances the quality of the human spirit in stark contrast to the tools strengthening our bodies , which we have had up to now.

The Ars Electronica Festival, the Ars Electronica Center and the Prix Ars Electronica constitute a triangle enabling Linz to assume a key position in this process.

Just as every new medium has brought forth certain physical locations — printing produced the library; the telephone — the telephone booth; film — the cinema; and as television, makes its presence felt in every living room — digital media culture will likewise lead to the creation of new places, new sites, new installations, and the Ars Electronica Center seeks to become the prototype of such a location of the new stage of digital culture. Linz will thus continue to support the leading role played by Ars Electronica, and through the Ars Electronica Center establish itself as a prototype of a vibrant nucleus of digital culture.

The Ars Electronica activities undertaken by Linz thus encompass a time frame of almost two decades: from 1979, when the personal computer was in its infancy, to 1996, a time in which the Internet is in the process of unifying within it all previously existing media and thus contributing to the full-blown breakthrough of the new digital era — whether within the network structure which has emerged to date or something closer to Craig McCaw's vision of "Teledesic" and the 840 satellites orbiting 435 miles above the earth which, it is claimed, will make the Internet accessible from every point from Earth in broadband audio quality by the year 2002.

In conjunction with the opening of the Ars Electronica Center, the activities of Ars Electronica will also be reorganized. Whereas up to now, Ars Electronica has been organized by the Bruckner House, a cultural facility of the City of Linz, and by the ORF, in the future, the management of all Ars Electronica activities will be consolidated in the hands of the center's board of directors within the City of Linz. The ORF's Upper Austrian studio will remain a co-sponsor of the Ars Electronica Festival; the prime focus of its involvement within the festival's framework will be the judging and awarding of the Prix Ars Electronica. The project idea proposing an Ars Electronica Center can likewise be traced back to the ORF, which has thereby taken another step forward in advancing its role as a driving force in the field of digital media.

The history of the Ars Electronica Center goes back almost five years, and thus to a time in which the WWW, Netscape or Yahoo was not yet invented.

The Ars Electronica Center is based upon a project proposal which I submitted in 1992. Following a hearing and a presentation of a total of five project ideas in the course of the proposed discussions in March 1992 regarding the use of the Donautor Building already completed as planned by the architects W. H. Michl and K. Leitner, the City of Linz decided in favor of the realization of this idea. ART+COM Berlin, under the direction of Prof. Edouard Bannwart, was then commissioned to carry out a feasibility study. The project managers were Mag. Siegbert Janko representing the City of Linz and Dr. Hannes Leopoldseder from the ORF. As a result of the feasibility study, the City of Linz decided in March 1993 to go ahead with construction of the Ars Electronica Center at a cost of 180 million Schillings, of which 30% was to be provided by the Province of Upper Austria and 10% by the Austrian Federal Government in the form of ERP credits. The Ars Electronica Center project was then assigned to the Building and Construction Corporation of the City of Linz headed by Dipl. Ing. Fritz Angerhofer. Architect Rainer Verbizh was given responsibility for the interior design. For the management of the center, the Board of Directors of the Ars Electronica Center was created in 1995, and media artist Gerfried Stocker was appointed its managing director in July of that year. Gerfried Stocker is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the Ars Electronica Center and jointly with Dr. Christine Schöpf of the ORF, for the Ars Electronica Festival.

A digital media center like the Ars Electronica Center has an especially urgent need for the cooperation and partnership of private firms, particularly those in the electronics and technology sectors. The Ars Electronica Center's most important sponsors are Creditanstalt, Digital Equipment, Hewlett Packard, Microsoft, Österreichische Brau AG, ORF, Oracle, Quelle AG, Ericsson Austria, Siemens Nixdorf and Silicon Graphics.

With the triangle Ars Electronica Festival, Prix Ars Electronica and Ars Electronica Center, Linz has established itself in a leading position in cyberspace, both regionally and worldwide. The aim of this Ars Electronica triangle in Linz is to enable us to work together, bringing economic and social efforts into harmony in dealing effectively with the digital transformation of our culture as we move towards a cognitive society in which knowledge is the most decisive resource.

For Linz, Ars Electronica has functioned both as leader and signal in the process of change which for this city, as for so many other cities and regions, has run parallel to the development of an iron and steel metropolis into a modern industrial center, where steel is today regarded quite properly as a high-tech product. Ars Electronica personifies the future-orientedness of this city on the threshold of a new cultural epoch in the next millennium.

For Austria, Ars Electronica fulfills the function of an ambassador, providing this country with a presence abroad which expands the traditional image of Austrian culture. Thus, for example, the Prix Ars Electronica as an award recognizing excellence in digital media, presented by a country such as Austria with its long and rich European cultural tradition, has enjoyed an extraordinarily positive reception, particularly in the USA.

Over the past ten years, as a result of its continuity, its demanding criteria and its wide-ranging media impact, including book publications, exhibitions and TV documentaries, the Prix Ars Electronica has become a sensor of artistic developments in the field of digital media. This is also attributable to the variety of new categories, corresponding to media developments, which have been continually added, such as the World Wide Web in 1995.

Since 1979, Ars Electronica has made many new friends in the world of the "electronic community." For many, Ars Electronica has created a new "spirit of Linz," to recall the words of Brian Reffin Smith, the first winner of the Golden Nica in computer graphics. It is a meeting place of the most prominent figures from the most diverse fields of science, art, philosophy and business.

Along with the Golden Nica of the Prix Ars Electronica, digital artists have also been awarded a total of well over one million Dollars in prize money since 1987 — thus, an award of virtually unparalleled continuity that has been expressly dedicated to the advancement of new media and their creators. At this point, an expression of gratitude is due to the corporate sponsors whose support of the Prix Ars Electronica this year has contributed to this goal: Siemens AG, Kapsch AG, Austria Tabak AG, Gerhard Andlinger Foundation and VOEST-ALPINE Stahl AG and Siemens.

For the Austrian Broadcasting Company, the Ars Electronica Center represents a milestone in the long-term commitment and great initiative it has displayed in Ars Electronica activities since 1979.Through this engagement, the ORF wishes to express its positive attitude and active approach to digital media in confronting the challenges which they now pose.

At the same time, the ORF's tremendous efforts on behalf of the Ars Electronica Center should be understood as an invitation extended to the public of the future, an invitation to get to know the new world of media that has begun to unfold before us. Furthermore, in addition to its involvement with the Ars Electronica Festival, the ORF will continue to pursue cooperative ventures in partnership with the Ars Electronica Center, including projects in the area of artistic media, developmental work regarding the utilization of ATM conduits linking up the Ars Electronica Center and the ORF studio, as well as collaborating in the production of radio and television programs.

The history of media communication has occured in a series of secular epochs – from cave painting to Gutenberg to the telegraph, telephone, radio, television and finally to the universal medium of the computer, which appears like a werewolf threatening to devour all the others. Thus, everything starts anew. New forms of storage and transmission, new design, new formats, a new society. These require new places for their manifestation. The Digital Age with its universal medium, with its on-line existence, creates new sites, new places, new buildings. If this new Digital Age requires vibrant new centers beyond the capitals of the electronics industry which embody the social reflection of the Digital Revolution, centers functioning as both nexus in the real world and interface and point of contact in cyberspace, then Linz, in the form of its Ars Electronica Center, has boldly announced its readi-ness to act as prototype and test field, extending an invitation to all those who, with optimism and critical reflection, are prepared to encounter the new era of digital culture.