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Ars Electronica 99 • LifeScience

PREFACE

The first festival of art, technology and society in 1979 initiated the inquiry into the cultural correspondences of technological change, and thus the undertaking dedicated to analyzing the process by which new technologies become a culture (and, indeed, a cult as well), and to finding possibilities of designing and managing this process.

During the ensuing 20 years, the Ars Electronica project has expanded and diffused into a broad spectrum of social domains and attained the status of a model in the context of art and science. These 20 years, however, have also been marked by the emergence of a global Information Society. Although some highly problematic issues raised by this economic, social and political reordering have not even been formulated yet, the public discussion of progress and the future is already being dominated by a new development. In the aftermath of the Digital Revolution, a Biological Revolution is being proclaimed.

Along with the success stories of computer technologies and the fabulous stock market profits reaped by their promoters, reports from the life science field have achieved headline status as dispatches from the "world of wonders." Molecular biologists and genetic engineers equipped with the tools of information technology made available by the Computer Age have opened up doors whose thresholds have, in many instances, marked the limits and taboos of our culture, though it is the traversal of precisely these boundaries upon which our civilization has increasingly pinned its expectations and hopes for continued prosperity. In any case, the utopias promised by the life sciences make the option of doing without their potential benefits in remedying existing dystopias seem a hardly realistic one, and–in light of hunger and disease–many observers go as far as calling it a moral imperative to deploy every technological means possible to alleviate these problems. Life science has emerged as leading contender to become *the* key technology of the coming decades.

Beyond any doubt is its cultural potential. What can well be foreseen are the efforts going beyond those of scientists and scholars–economic and industrial enterprises on a scale on which we have heretofore gone about the task of mastering, harnessing and exploiting our physical environment that will now be concentrated upon life itself and its constituent elements. The social and political decisions that must be made in this regard have, in turn, deep-seated democratic political implications–and not the least of the factors which must be taken into consideration in reaching them is the repeated ideological instrumentalization of genetics and biology, and thus the historical burdens borne by their findings. Moreover, the very idea of having the capability of forming life beyond the morphological level of the body and designing its predispositions and talents makes it incumbent upon us to assume new perspectives on the limits of this life and its social and metaphysical constitution.

This is a situation in which we require a Wissenschaftskultur (the way science is done and promulgated) and a critique of science that dispense with the myth of neutral facts and findings. The experiences and methods of a media art that gets beyond moralizing political correctness to actively engage in social discourse could be an orientational aid in going about this.

With this year’s Festival, Ars Electronica begins to focus on issues in the field of modern biotechnology. This constitutes a reorientation as well as the continuation of a practice with a

long history: namely, turning attention to those areas where conflicts develop in the sphere of tension and interplay at the nexus of technology and society, and bringing art into play as an interface and catalyst for the interaction involving science and the general public.