

Ars Electronica 2000

NEXT SEX

The cultural revolution in cybertechnologies has always been accompanied by a way of thinking that not only registered and grasped those technologies' concrete developments, but also has been what tended to enable them even to become realities. If Horace F. Judson's classic *The Eighth Day of Creation* apostrophizes the molecular technology emerging in the wake of the revolution in information as the "new dynasty of thought," then this makes implicit reference to the preparatory qualities of cybertechnologies. In the meantime, the life sciences are being hyped as the key technologies of the coming decades. As a festival of art, technology and society, Ars Electronica has taken this development into account by seeming to turn its attention away from cybertechnology—the hard- and software—and focusing it on the "wetware."

The 1999 *LifeScience* festival program that was dedicated to the current state of science and research in biotech as well as to its leading edge applications, the latest contemporary critiques and up-to-the-minute prognoses completed a transition whose first step had been taken by *FleshFactor* (1997). That festival was devoted to the consideration of a realm in which the dividing line between the information machine "computer" and that which is biological—which, as a living, growing creature, had always been distinguishable from manufactured, constructed technology—can no longer be clearly drawn. As reflected in such mirrors as the neurosciences, AI research, cyborg fantasies and their extrapolations, as well as under the influence of the "Dolly effect" that Ian Wilmut caused to explode into the public's consciousness, the *Informationsmaschine Mensch* assumed the spotlight. The fact that this had been preceded by an intellectual encounter with evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' concept of the meme—units of cultural information analogous to genes—is characteristic of the necessity of turning to biotechnology.

The shift of Ars Electronica's focus is only an apparent one in that nothing has changed with respect to the programmatic agenda of analyzing new technologies' cultural processes and process of becoming a culture, as well as the possibilities of intervening in their formation. With NEXT SEX, however, Ars Electronica takes a step backwards for the sake of a higher degree of precision, and assumes a perspective conducive to cultural critique with respect to the social implications of the life sciences. And, as the self-fulfilling prognostications of the thinking about and as a consequence of cybertechnologies have illustrated, it is precisely here that some extrapolation are called for.

If sex is stripped of its procreative function and, in return, modern reproductive technology shifts female fertility into the focal point of (patriarchic?) interest; if pop icons orchestrate the media frenzy surrounding their partnerless IVF parenthood, while conservative forces propagate the ideal of the family; if there emerges the prospect of the emancipation of biological genders as well as socially constructed gender identities by means of the utopian possibility of choosing one gender or the other, or even both—options which also become available as an upshot of biotechnological interventions—then sex and gender will be relativized, and not least of all in relation to the fictional narratives that coalesce about them.

In continuing its thematic focus on *LifeScience*, Ars Electronica 2000 presents NEXT SEX to meet the obvious need for critical analysis of the social and technological environment in which such prognoses are starting to become operative realities.