Gerfried Stocker / Christine Schöpf

UNPLUGGED
Art as the Scene of Global Conflicts

UNPLUGGED … means the severed thread, fractured lines of development that had been thought to move only higher and higher, the abyss alongside the routes traveled by the caravans of progress …

UNPLUGGED proceeds from the factuality of a globally networked world from which nobody can withdraw, no matter how distant they are from the dominant US-Europe-Japan capital triad and regardless of how far away the next electrical outlet might be. UNPLUGGED focuses on the blind spots of globalization, those barriers of a mental and geographic nature that make getting connected to and taking part in this process of global networking ("the Net") and the cultural and social models it conveys impossible, illicit or even unwelcome.

UNPLUGGED thus also confronts our own inability to enter into a networked arrangement with "the others" that goes beyond the exploitation and preservation of our own spheres of influence.

It is not just since the World Wide Web's breakthrough to the status of a force capable of shaping society and culture that continual growth as the yardstick of progress has become a standard assumption of modern society. The paradigm of constantly improving technical performance, of the periodic doubling of processor speed, has become a symbol and leitmotif of social development. But since the events of September 11, 2001 at the very latest, this belief in ongoing upward development continually projected to rise and progress even further has been deeply rent and undergone an abrupt breach.

This caesura is the point of departure for our considerations in conjunction with UNPLUGGED. In what resembled an unmasking, a curtain was torn aside and the non-simultaneity of global developments suddenly became plain for all to see. In one fell swoop, it was clear how thin the ice is upon which global balances of power are played out, and the developments since then have only gone to intensify this feeling of insecurity.

UNPLUGGED … is also the question of who organizes the world when politics and traditional institutions can no longer get the job done … Networks?

This problematic non-simultaneity can be identified as one of the central causes of seething social crises on a global scale, of potential for conflicts, and of wars that have long since ceased to be conducted only by nation-states. In considering such things, we must not fail to address the role of globally networked media and especially electronic visual media that make an essential contribution to an internationalization and global omnipresence of conflict scenarios. UNPLUGGED is thus also conceived as an update on the current state of global society.

In their simultaneity, the triumphal progress of the World Wide Web together with Glasnost and the fall of the Iron Curtain once provided an occasion for inspiring visions and utopias. A free and open society seemed to be achievable on the basis of technological infrastructure (collective mind, global village, etc.) that would make possible a worldwide exchange of information far from the clutches of censors and market interests. Many thought they held the key to a better future in their hands. But that's not how things turned out. Digital technology became a symbol and driving force of global economic network linkages that impact and encompass everyone, and constitute a reality no one can escape. Nevertheless, the global economy established in this way is based on the demarcation of "delivering" and "consuming," and is characterized by differentiation and exclusion along the lines of economic interests.

Instead of a reordering of global relationships based on horizontal network linkages and participation, the upshot of the newly established worldwide communication structures was to unleash capital flows. Those very same infrastructural framework conditions gave rise to the exact opposite of this utopian network philosophy. Taking part thus takes place in one direction only—allocation instead of participation. Along with expanding sales à la global branding, cultural and social patterns are simultaneously transferred which, in turn, pave the way for further product turnover: steamrolling instead of cultural pluralism.

Globalization, now installed via digital acceleration of financial transactions as the dominating principle of the world's sociopolitical fabric, is—in stark contrast to the myriad potentialities of the technologies it utilizes—not a practice based on openness and integration but rather on exclusiveness and exclusion.

Not able to, not permitted to, not willing to

The aim of UNPLUGGED is to deal with those domains of both a geographic and mental nature that make active participation in this process of global networking impossible for technological and economic reasons, unlawful due to considerations of power politics, or possibly even unwelcome on ideological or religious grounds. Many are only too glad to overlook the fact that participation—the really fundamental precondition for networking—is possible only when both sides coexist in a dialogical—that is to say bi-directional—situation.

The choice of topic for Ars Electronica 2002 is also indicative of how the issue of the political element in art has returned with a vengeance to the agenda of intellectual discourse and artistic practice—a development that did not just begin to manifest itself as a reflex to 9/11 but was already emerging in conjunction with the protest movement in Seattle, Genoa and Porto Alegre, and is moving forward essentially on energy and input supplied by the computerkids generation.

The issue of art as the scene of global conflicts is a question of the viral power of

Gerfried Stocker / Christine Schöpf

art and its capability of coming up with alternative conceptual models, strategies and approaches.

The concept of art as antithesis, as corrective and counterpoint to society, is also inseparably linked to the concept of radicalism and resistance, a concept that contemporary art has accompanied in many ways and endowed with identity, and, since the attack on the WTC, one that is being aggressively called into question and subjected to re-evaluation.

In 2002, the Ars Electronica Festival turns its attention to the conception of self of a young generation of media artists and their consciousness of the problems confronting them, and analyzes their positions on the sociopolitical, cultural and sociological implications of the technologies they work with.

Perspectives obtained by looking out beyond one's own horizon are meant to intersect and interact with points of view held by "the others," and thereby make this festival for art, technology and society itself a setting for the complex dynamics of a global reorientation.

R. Buckminster Fuller: Re-Mapping Our Mental Model of the World

R. Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion Map helps us to replace our 16th century mental model of the world with views of "spaceship earth" that are attuned to the 21st century and to the discussion of the different aspects of being UNPLUGGED.

Even someone who has never heard of the Dymaxion Map need only glance at the logo representing the theme of Ars Electronica 2002—UNPLUGGED—to directly experience the effects of this revolutionary concept. What might at first seem to be merely a solution to the deficiencies of the classical projection of the globe into a two dimensional map is in fact the introduction of a radically new view of the earth. The practical philosopher R. Buckminster Fuller invented the so-called Dymaxion Map (an acronym derived from: dynamic + maximum + tension) to replace the Mercator projection that has been used for centuries and is still the dominant model for viewing and describing the world. As early as the 1930s, Buckminster Fuller analyzed the distribution of resources on earth and saw the need to replace the worldview of the 16th century with one for the 20th century. World War II, air travel and the understanding of living on "spaceship earth"—the term he coined and for which he is probably most famous—led to the full development of the Dymaxion Map, which allows us to recombine its 14 segments and to describe the world from different viewpoints—for instance, the worldview of US imperialism, that of Hitler's Third Reich or Japan's visions of an empire as Buckminster Fuller analyzed them.

Now, at a time of globalization and in a world in which the concept of distance has become more relative than ever, this model assumes new and enhanced importance. The discussion of globalization and the critique of it demand a method to recast our mental model of the world that goes back to the days of the conquistadors and should indeed be replaced by one appropriate to the 21st century. Merely reading about the Dymaxion Map is hardly a substitute for personally experimenting with it. R. Buckminster Fuller was an inventor, architect, engineer, mathematician, poet and cosmologist, but he saw himself above all as a "practical philosopher" who demonstrated his ideas as inventions he called "artefacts." It was his declared intention to enable all "of humanity to see total Earth, [because] nothing could be more prominent in all the trending of all humanity today than the fact that we are soon to become world humans." This and his other ideas make him one of the true intellectual pioneers of the approach that is being taken by Ars Electronica 2002—UNPLUGGED.

(Andreas Hirsch)