

Memory Theater

Heimo Ranzenbacher: 25 years of Ars Electronica—in its own way, this project has always nurtured a prospective perspective. But this year, its 25th, “Timeshift” is explicitly focusing on the future. In your retrospective look at the quarter-century-long history of this undertaking, though, you utilize a technique whose roots go back to the distant past—the “Memory Theater.” The study exists in print form and is also available online at <http://www.servus.at/kontext/ars/>.

Gerhard Dirmoser: Basically, the memory theater is a method that was developed during the Renaissance and has proved to be an excellent basic form for the representation of knowledge. Furthermore, its arrangement in sectors almost automatically leads to the formulation of issues to investigate further. One attempts to work textual material into these sectors and to confront them with one another, whereby the individual text passages contextualize each other. In doing so, one moves into the proximity of the art history methods that Aby Warburg developed for graphic material. The volume of content from 25 years of Ars Electronica is, of course, enormous. Graphic material could at best be used as links, but, on the whole, it’s hardly feasible on such a limited surface area.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: A memory theater is for the most part characterized by its capacity to endow knowledge, regardless of its temporal provenance, with a certain degree of presence—that is, to give it currency. Another striking aspect of your “mnemonic overview,” however, is that it provides a historical cross-section of tendencies related to themes, terminology and applications.

Gerhard Dirmoser: The memory theater technique per se is not necessarily appropriate to depict a temporal perspective, but in this case I made the attempt to provide each text entry with a catalog reference and to thereby take the time aspect into consideration as well. The advantage here is that, for instance, phases of thematic emphasis become apparent in that a viewer sees that the process of dealing with a certain issue is concentrated within a period of two to three years. After all, other representation techniques such as a network arranged along a time axis or a so-called synchronopsis are far better suited to the portrayal of a view over time. Therefore, it was very important in this study to use manifold approaches to representation in order to treat different questions—from networks of individuals to intellectual and scholarly circles to the history of the application of particular techniques.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: Another representation technique that is important in your study is that of “semantic networks,” which have to do with the cognitive relationships between conceptual entities ...

Gerhard Dirmoser: The techniques that I utilize are primarily designed to bring to light particular content and the mode of expression inherent in it. This is based on working to condense this material, which is, in turn, based on decisions as to which formulations are feasible and productive. Through the process of montage, individual terms/concepts are intensified through their very context or reciprocally call each other into question and are thus endowed with further intensity. This results in both open clusterings as well as explicitly produced terminological networks consisting of linkages—in graphic terms, “edges.” A semantic network consists of nodes and lines of connection—or, more preci-

sely, “edges.” Whereas concepts or text passages—and perhaps graphics as well—are set up at nodes, the lines of connection are the bearers of meaning. This state of connectedness between the nodes represents meaning, whereby more open and more rigorous forms are applied. The method is based on experience with works whose suitability has been confirmed especially in the context of the graphic arts. In the case of the 25-year study, we have had recourse to a basic pattern that has a proven record of success in connection with performative approaches in the broadest sense.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: ... whereby “in the broadest sense” refers to a conception of performance that is more expansive than in the context of Modernism in art history, in which it is associated with aspects related to physicality and time. Performativity as a concept that encompasses the production of an artwork or the way artists go about what they do as well as the processes and conditions that are definitively operational with respect to protagonists and cultural events ...

Gerhard Dirmoser: And that is expanded even further when—for example, in American studies—it encompasses the computer and the stock market, or, as in Judith Butler’s work, power structures and identity. In Germany as well in recent years, fundamental research conducted under the motto of “performative cultures” has been attempting to produce a new reading of art history from a performative perspective. This performative approach is evident not least of all in the electronic media, the objective of which is not only to make an impact on the perceptive faculties of viewers/recipients but also to realize a variety of different interaction concepts that go far beyond the conventional possibilities provided by the graphic arts. In the graphic configuration of the memory theater, the performative element in the left-hand field has its areas of concentration above all in works of art; the discursive element is covered in the right-hand field, primarily in an elaboration of accompanying symposia.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: Another advantage of this memory theater is that it can impart its statements and representations visually as well ...

Gerhard Dirmoser: That’s a key aspect. We have also attempted to solve such interpretational challenges in the form of classic databases, but a databank engulfs, so to speak, every data set. The content must repeatedly be brought to the fore through a process of active questioning. On the other hand, the big advantage of working in graphically oriented fashion is that the viewer is constantly cognizant of what is already present, clustered and network-linked, where something is located, what is adjacent to it and what it is contextualized by. Aby Warburg’s technique of conveying significance by means of graphic tableaux is practically identical with this adaptation for text fragments.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: How strongly do the Ars Electronica themes correspond to the general problems and issues raised by the culture that has been addressed by the Ars Electronica project as a festival—as well as a museum and laboratory—for art, technology and society?

Gerhard Dirmoser: Certain focal-point issues—the interest in the body, for example—certainly have emerged simultaneously in the graphic arts and in other contexts. Very early in the course of its development, though, Ars Electronica lodged the claim to establishing the theme that everyone would subsequently be discussing. Especially in the middle phase with its strong orientation on the natural sciences, branches of research such as nanotechnology premiered in the city and were accorded a level of attention that they probably would not have received without mediation by Ars Electronica. The presence

of certain stars of Post-Modernism, on the other hand, makes it clear that the result was the mobilization of interest in areas outside of Ars Electronica as well—among institutions as well as individuals. There has been a phase of especially intense focus on Vilém Flusser, in correspondence with Baudrillard with simulation concepts or the process of coming to terms with speed and acceleration in connection with Paul Virilio.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: Were there any surprising finding that emerged during the course of the production of this study?

Gerhard Dirmoser: In light of the extraordinary diversity of the themes of these 25 festivals, it was a big surprise for me, on one hand, that the reservoir is not even close to being exhausted—in other words, even from our current point of view, exciting themes are in store for the next 15 years. On the other hand, following completion of the study, it was obvious that the wall of the natural sciences still constitutes a relatively high barrier. Even in such a specialized circle as the one surrounding Ars Electronica, the proximity to art apparently makes it difficult to operate with topics that are anchored in technology, technical applications and the natural sciences. The acceptance accorded issues from the humanities is far greater.

In light of the enormous number of individuals who submitted entries once or twice to the Prix Ars Electronica or who realized projects for the Festival, another surprise was the fact that there have actually been only a very few artists who have been represented by major projects over the course of many years. As a rule, only stable teams are in a position to accomplish that. One of the most characteristic manifestations of this situation is the concentration of the specialized literature in the field—particularly in Great Britain and the US—on the same group of 100 artists. Which is a shame, when one considers, for example, the approximately 10,000 artists who have submitted a total of over 35,000 entries to the Prix since its inception. The fact that the field turned out to be so narrow was indeed a surprise.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: Could it not be maintained that the fleeting careers of these artists are attributable to the not inconsiderable technical and thus financial expenditures involved in their pursuits?

Gerhard Dirmoser: That's probably one of the reasons. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that, for example, diverse hypercard applications that were connected with considerable expenditure as recently as 15 years ago can be mastered by anyone in a small studio today. In the case of installations that require a great deal of high-tech equipment, one is necessarily totally dependent upon the resources of certain institutions. Another question that arises has to do with the capacity to finance the personnel necessary for the entire duration of a project's development. Needless to say, this makes for very limited tolerances.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: In your explanation of the memory theater, you speak about, among other things, a lack of success in attempting to break loose from the “old” media, and state that the respective Ars Electronica Festivals are solidly anchored in the “classic” media. Would you please elaborate on this observation?

Gerhard Dirmoser: First and foremost with the involvement of a media institution, the ORF – Austrian Broadcasting Company, which has been lead organizer since Ars Electronica's very inception. It is obvious that media such as TV and radio play an important role. On the other hand, this issue was formulated in “Takeover” through the attempt to construct a polarity between—however one defines them—old and new, electronic and

non-electronic media. It turns out that every medium continues to play its role, and, what's more, the so-called new media initially repeat everything that the old media have long since taken leave of. It's no mere coincidence that one kitsch discussion follows the next and permanently raise the question of why something should be repeated electronically when a better solution was already available in 1910. Even greater efforts have to be made in the fields of theory and practice in order to reach the point at which electronic media really take advantage of their full potential and are definitively irreplaceable, in order to work out what is possible only by means of computers, software and complex control operations, which forms of perception, interaction and corporeal embeddedness are addressed thereby, and which limitations apply. After all, it basically makes no difference whether we're wearing data goggles or if we imagine we're embedded in a panorama image. The novelty of panorama techniques is limited. To be sure, they are realized in a more elegant manner today, but one cannot take leave of one's body in order to surmount the distance to the projection. In my opinion, there is still a great need for fruitful discussions and symposia.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: To what do you attribute the lack of such discussions?

Gerhard Dirmoser: Basically, the field of art certainly has opened up. But there are still many different sorts of hesitancy to undertake closer contact—with topics like computer games that do indeed have a massive presence but that nevertheless do not advance to the status of main theme. For me, this is fascinating to observe: which topic becomes the main theme, which lands in the Ground Floor, which in the Lobby? For example, even though the claim to entering into the pop segment is sometimes lodged very boldly, it is apparently not easy to get away from professorial approaches.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: The memory theater also yields potential themes that, on one hand, of course, emerge from personal interest but, on the other hand, can be put forth with the claim to have been derived from the methods of network-linkage itself ...

Gerhard Dirmoser: Yes, as a sort of erroneous position. To some extent, this is a matter of more or less well-defined discourses in which—in the mapping field, for instance—one can observe that something has been developing over the course of several years, or, as in the case of cyber-feminism, where solid scholarly literature exists. With regard to the memory theater as well, I suspect that there are those who have certain apprehensions about closer involvement.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: Presumably triggered by the many bad examples.

Gerhard Dirmoser: ... which indeed exist in every field.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: What is, in your opinion, the greatest shortcoming?

Gerhard Dirmoser: The most severe deficiency is the absence of an analysis from the perspective of the history of art. Although the *Ars Electronica* catalogs are quoted with enormous frequency, they lack profound scholarly treatments whereby media theorists and media and art historians are expressly commissioned with the task of undertaking accompanying research or dealing with the respective focal-point themes. This would also be a way to bring experts in these fields to Linz on a permanent basis—whether to the University of Art or directly to the *Ars Electronica* Center. Furthermore, such a form of sustainability would also be an appropriate way to carry on the particular discourses throughout the rest of the year, which could, in turn, play an important role in the substantive preparations for upcoming festivals. In my personal opinion, that would be very important.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: Besides Hannes Leopoldseder, the actual inventor of Ars Electronica, and personalities like Christine Schöpf, Katharina Gsöllpointner and Herbert Franke who have been closely associated with the project, there have been only three artistic directors to date who have had a strong impact of the festival's direction: Hattinger, Weibel and Stocker. What traces have their activities left in the memory theater?

Gerhard Dirmoser: This was, of course, an important subject of investigation. We wished to establish the extent to which certain thematic and medial axes had a stronger presence in the respective years of Ars Electronica, and already in the initial analysis it was evident that three phases could be identified and that they were, generally speaking, connected with these personalities. I then highlighted these three phases in color in the memory theater so that viewers can concentrate on one of these colors and subsequently see sectors that were definitively rooted in only one of the three teams. Naturally, there are also interests that are important over the entire 25-year period and are thus distributed evenly throughout. Others, in turn, are tied to the history of technological development. As long as the Internet and especially the WWW did not yet exist, there was, of course, no way to thematize the specific form of network art.

Heimo Ranzenbacher: Another aspect that emerges in the memory theater is the participation of the City of Linz and its culture in the fields of interest covered by Ars Electronica ...

Gerhard Dirmoser: Participation can be traced, for instance, on the basis of different groups of artists and institutions, and by following the many projects that were realized over the years within the framework of Ars Electronica and have remained in existence in the Ars milieu. To this can be added the fact that in the field of university-level scholarship in Linz, access to the social sciences has to be provided primarily by the University of Art and the Institute of Theology. In this connection, Ars Electronica plays an eminently important role in bringing personalities from the field of philosophy and the sciences to Linz, the long-term consequences of which are attested to by the ongoing process of dealing with what they present here. It is quite amazing how the precise themes of Ars Electronica and the presence of their leading proponents coincide with reading behavior and, through books and seminars, leave their mark on the intellectual culture in the city. There is nothing emerging on the horizon that would seem to be able to replace this effect. Quite the contrary—the Ars Electronica databank contains a total of about 3,000 pages full of particulars about individuals, theoreticians and artists active in these fields. In a survey of the specialized literature—and particularly that of American origin—it was fascinating to see that considerably more than 80% of the names mentioned therein were also represented in Linz. After all, in this connection, it is by no means something to be taken for granted that, so to speak, the entire world production of necessity leave behind certain exemplary manifestations at one particular geographical location. Furthermore, just who left behind traces there and what significance that has is still presumably underestimated by many residents of Linz.

In retrospect, it must seem totally crazy to formulate an idea like Ars Electronica in 1979 if you consider the state of development of electronic media and the computer at the time. This foresight is an essential part of the enormous achievement of the last 25 years and is one of the reasons why Ars Electronica has succeeded in maintaining its position amidst the competition that has been growing in the meantime.

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald