

..... Chronological Age: Ars Electronica's Timeline Project 1979-2003

The organizing principle of Ars Electronica has never been to take stock of the past, but has always been firmly oriented toward future developments in art, technology, society, and their intersections. Hence the paradox of taking a fixed measure of Ars Electronica's chronological age when the exponentially growing and constantly morphing entity comprised of visionary participants and organizers has always expressed itself in the future rather than the past tense. And yet, that's the inherent enterprise of timelines and the motivation behind the selection of archival images and records that have been amalgamated into an architectural-scale timeline installed throughout the length of the Brucknerhaus lobby on the occasion of Ars Electronica's twenty-fifth anniversary.

The timeline's first aim is expressive. It sets out to describe and illustrate the development of Ars Electronica from its fledgling years as a forum for dispersed artists who gathered in Linz for the first time on September 18, 1979 to its current manifestation as a vital, interdisciplinary exhibition and research platform for media art.

The second aim is more affective. It makes a tacit, if impossible promise to list the totality of events, symposia, exhibitions and participants of the twenty-two distinct festivals that were organized between 1979 and 2003.

Moreover, the timeline's design will inherently elicit responses from viewers who will undoubtedly compare the names, dates, and significant world and art events we have chosen to monumentalize in the timeline's panels against their own personal data sets for accuracy as well as legitimacy as pivotal moments or transitions periods in media art's inchoate history. The very act of "comparing and contrasting" is so ubiquitous, so foundational to the activity of being an historian, critic or artist that the task has become almost invisible or at least barely registers as a discernable conscious act.

And yet this survey of Ars Electronica need not embrace the fantasy of comprehensive coverage, and instead the timeline follows a particular procedure for conceptually mapping these dense and complex gatherings—chronology. No one should substitute the timeline for the dynamic entity it seeks to represent; timelines are abstractions, distillations. The timeline we have constructed does not adequately represent every artist or event of merit that took place during the history of Ars Electronica, nor does it pretend to do so through a simulated reportorial neutrality geared toward an imaginary public: priorities were set, hierarchies quickly became established and the language clearly addresses those who are fluent in the particular grammar and syntax of new media art. But, like maps, the arguments put forward in the selection of texts and images may function as a navigational tool to enable viewers to make sense of the diverse content and wide range of issues and debates addressed each fall in Linz. Ideally, the timeline will also provide useful insights into the dynamic nature of Ars Electronica as a whole from which to evaluate and appreciate those many individuals or events, too, that were not specifically highlighted or elaborated upon.

In addition, through the inclusion of prediction terminals situated at the other end of the axis defined by the timeline, viewers have the chance to not merely reflect on the past, but develop and share their own hypotheses about the future. That is to say, if the timeline is effective, it will assist in and encourage further exploration not only of the festival's past, but new media art's future.

Tracing the evolution of Ars Electronica over the past twenty-five years gives form to the changing conditions of media art in general. In charting the consistency of the festival's

content and format over its duration, as well as the diversity of such efforts, the timeline reinstates the relevancy of chronology within the media arts in general. Consequently, a timeline's inherent preoccupation with time or the insistence on a strict chronological order allows the particular trajectory that Ars Electronica draws to cut across movements, mediums, and genres, and illuminates the emergence of newer forms of media and artistic practices within this pivotal period of art production.

In the overarching history of visual art, a period of twenty-five years registers merely as a blip, a nano-second in a historical record that can span millennia. However, within the rise of the Information Age in the Post-War period and the concomitant emphasis on the speed and accelerated models of communication, twenty-five years has become an eternity, making Ars Electronica a primary resource in the bibliography of new media art.

The challenge of developing a timeline, which functions as an accurate record of Ars Electronica and, simultaneously, offers a genealogy to trace the emergence and presence of new media art in general is plagued on several scholastic fronts. How do you track the paradigmatic shifts that have occurred in the production and reception of visual art ushered in by exponentially growing advancements in digital technology, computer processing, and networking capabilities within a radically short period of time? What tools other than the "compare and contrast" function must historians adopt to address the complications that arise when the subject of analysis is immaterial, ephemeral, resists archival documentation, actively eschews authorship and absolutely obliterates rather than conforms to the demands of medium specificity, the most dominant typology for organizing art? If we are to agree with George Kubler's assessment in *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (1962) that events and the intervals between them are the elements of the patterning of historical time, then which events will act as fulcrums in the Post-War period when art no longer pivots around wars, along national borders or within the confines of discrete movements?

If the aim of the historian, regardless of specialty, is to portray time, then the Ars Electronica timeline offers a strategic genealogy of new media art that actively reflects the dynamic and contested nature of the various forms of art practice that the festival not only comprises, but also encourages. In addition, the timeline demonstrates that like Ars Electronica itself, new media art is composed of several parallel histories that are formed and circulated in correspondence if not in conjunction with one another. And the timeline may prove that chronology may be the only format not subject to built-in obsolescence.