

## Ars Electronica Center Perceiving, Not Just Viewing

Since it opened in 1996, the Ars Electronica Center—Museum of the Future has positioned itself with a highly individualized profile as it has gone about its mission of providing accessibility to complex technological developments. This is an interactive exhibition scenario that puts application possibilities at the interface of art, technology and society ahead of the hierarchization of technology. In this exhibition dramaturgy, there occurs a two-fold breach with curatorial traditions operative in museums as well as presentations in science centers: on one hand, in the object-centered presentation and the associated focus on the objective facts of the matter; on the other hand, in the linearity of a theme- or technology-specific form of representation.

What consequences do the selected formats as well as the specific forms of representation have on the visitors' possibilities of experiencing what is on display?

Despite the medial and interactive form of staging the exhibitions, guests are continually enabled to break out of conventional rituals of viewing the objects on display. They can move about through the facility's five levels as if in a hypertext. Setting up installations with intuitive interfaces and the effort to clarify contexts and interconnections through juxtapositions that compare and contrast two different applications of the same technology—all of this makes possible a playful, creative approach. No prior skills or background knowledge are required; instead, hands-on experimentation delivers direct experiences that sensitize visitors and equip them with concrete capabilities to deal with technology.

The multidimensional approach—virtual reality and mixed reality as hybrid forms combining physical and digital domains of action and communication—that the Ars Electronica Center has opted for provides users with individualized access. Here, the focus is on experimental, situational perception possibilities. Especially great significance is attributed to the visitor's sense of fascination and the concept of edutainment (still looked down upon by some) for the activation and acquisition of knowledge gained from experience.

The visitors' navigation through the Museum of the Future and the process of mediating their encounter with the exhibits are supported by infotrainers. These guides come from the same backgrounds as Ars Electronica's target groups: students, artists and retirees. After all, this job doesn't call for experts with abstract knowledge but rather people who can get across the essentials.

Another unique feature of the Ars Electronica Center is the origin of the exhibits themselves, which include projects by artists from all over the world as well as in-house productions by the Ars Electronica Futurelab, whose staff collaborates with artists and works together with R&D facilities and private-sector associates in Austria and abroad. The museum as production site thus makes possible feedback from creatives, mediators and visitors, whereby the Ars Electronica Center becomes a venue for both communication and action.

The focal-point target groups of the facility's mediation activities over the coming year will be kids and young adults. This is not solely a matter of nurturing competence in dealing with media and technology; rather, the aim is to foster a proactive encounter with content and aesthetic forms. Youngsters get one-of-a-kind opportunities to work with prototypes like *Gulliver's World* that are usually reserved for experts in the field, and to develop their own independent projects directly in mixed reality installations. Interactive forms of presentation make possible a degree of involvement that transforms actions on the part of visitors into palpable changes. Heightened attention, curiosity and an awakening spirit of experi-



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mentation create the preconditions for nurturing facilities of perception and the skills with which to take action. Long years of experience in developing a wide variety of formats of interactivity and facilitating the public's encounter with complex themes makes possible integrated approaches to mediation that are worked into the very conception of the exhibitions themselves as well as mediation formats that go beyond conventional didactic-pedagogic methods and are thus attractive for other target groups (e.g. adults and seniors) as well.

The premiere of an exhibition of prizewinning works from the Prix Ars Electronica's u19—freestyle computing category will showcase the development of the young digital creators scene. These three interactive exhibit scenarios were developed by the Ars Electronica Futurelab. Here, young people really show off their expertise, both in the great diversity of their creative and technological approaches as well as in their critique of inadequate programs and forms of mediation. Accompanying lectures and workshops featuring competition participants dealing with selected themes underscore this youth-oriented, kids-friendly approach. The installation of "WikiMap Linz," the Ars Electronica Center's contribution to the City of Linz's pioneering wireless LAN initiative, will feature a wide variety of opportunities for individual and project-oriented submissions and thus provide an additional approach for mediation activities.

Kids and young adults as surfers between the realities will also be addressed in the context of Ars Electronica's emphasis on virtual reality. Special presentations ranging from reconstructions of Greek Antiquity (in cooperation with the Hellenic Foundation) to an international conference on the topic of simulation will not only illustrate the broad spectrum of possible applications but also offer an interesting field of research into the possibilities of getting across complex scientific interrelationships.

As a vibrant site of production, as an integral component of the Ars Electronica's quadripartite structure, as a facility actively pursuing its role as both international authority and regional presence, and as an institution that will be celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2006, the Museum of the Future is an important driving force setting new directions with mediation models that hold tremendous promise for the future.

## u19 freestyle exhibition

“u19—freestyle computing” is Austria’s largest computer competition for young people. It was founded in 1998 and is held annually in conjunction with the Prix Ars Electronica. In u19—freestyle computing, the young generation’s creative spirit encounters our high-tech future. From the very first call for submissions each year, the jury is overwhelmed by a plethora of creative projects. The fresh approaches and impudent content of these nonconformist works are sources of surprise and enthusiasm, whereby the often reckless ways of dealing with media frequently lead to innovative ways of doing things and original results that garner amazed respect from the experts invited to serve as jurors.

The decision to dedicate an entire level of the Ars Electronica Center to u19 will create a prominent showcase featuring the artistic submissions and the 4- to 19-year-old personalities behind them, and thus an exhibition that goes beyond a conventional display of the winners and their work.

In developing this exhibition, museum staffers intentionally had recourse to presentation techniques that spotlight the expressiveness immanent in the material itself. The architectural centerpiece is an oval-shaped “Best Of” station in which a blend of interactive screenings and personalized displays encourages users to stick around and partake of rich informational offerings. The Info-Lounge, a space designed for chilling out, presents documentation about the high points of the u19 category. A reactive media frieze patterned on a boarder’s halfpipe is the setting for the collage-like Wall of Fame showcasing the chief protagonists themselves: the young inventors and artists. The Console station utilizes objects resembling collectors’ cards as navigation tools for viewing data, videos and works of animation from the extensive archive of submissions to u19—freestyle computing.

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