

Addressing Time

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The two most prominent observations many attendees of Ars Electronica Festivals have are first, how absolutely astounded we are by these events, particularly if we are Americans. The city of Linz appears invaded by an army of mostly young, clad-in-black, laptop toting artists, scientists, and critics who take over the streets, the squares, and the banks of the Danube with temporary art structures, video projections, and giant speaker systems. This doesn't happen everywhere, and outsiders, particularly Americans, are left with the sense that the city and region around Linz support electronic art more than the entire United States government (which is probably true).

The second most prominent observation about Ars is how un-astounded the locals are by this: the Ars Electronica Festival seems like just another cultural tradition, like national holidays and food festivals, albeit a bit more eye opening.

Ars Electronica is now twenty-five years old, and the first generation of "Ars babies," locals (and non-locals) who witnessed the Festival every year as far back as they can remember, are now adults. It just may be the case that Ars nurtures the next generation of Leonardos, Michelangelos, and Galileos—and Lovelaces, Curies, and Kahlos—better than any other place in the world.

For this twenty-fifth anniversary, the theme for the Ars Electronica Symposium is "Timeshift: the World in Twenty-Five Years," and a good opportunity for deep reflection. Rather than highlighting what's been "hot" over the past year, for which Ars is so wellknown, this year's symposium seeks the long view, looking back over the past twentyfive year period to facilitate an informed look forward twenty-five years.

An early realization about this theme of the future was that age does matter: a twenty-year old, a forty-year old, and a sixty-year old all have very different perceptions about a twenty-five year period, in both directions, much more than they would about a one or a five-year period.

Another realization was that history is important for discourse about the future but sentimentality is not. We want to use history as a tool for looking forward rather than as a means to escape it. The specific history of Ars Electronica is not only emblematic of the times, it's also particularly well documented, given its association with ORF Austrian Television.

Our solution, at the risk of being "age-ist", was to invite senior pioneers to speak about the future and young practitioners to speak about the past, particularly about the past of Ars Electronica. In this way, we would reap the benefits of experience when looking forward without getting snagged by romanticism, and we would gain insights into the past through fresh, unbiased, eyes.

We also wanted to integrate the three "mantras" of Ars Electronica: Art, Technology, and Society. Since a theme such as "The Future" has less intrinsic structure than a theme like, say, "War" or "Nanotechnology," it became obvious and important to insure that representation was shared by these three areas. We therefore sought to structure each panel around experts loosely specializing in art, technology, and society, as well as having a generalist and a young history "revisitor."

Finally, we wanted to give the symposium shape, dramatic shape, over its two-day course. The natural place to begin was with The Dream. It was the dream of connecting everyone to the world's information and to each other, of leveling the playing field for the disadvantaged and under-represented, and of empowering everyone with powerful, new, ubiquitous tools for their own expression and exploration. Even the most ardent critics share a piece of this dream. With a few

well-known exceptions, critics use email and have Web access.

Hence the first panel is on PROGRESS, about the promise of science and technology. Roger Malina, astronomer and Executive Editor of Leonardo Journal, serves as its generalist. "Progress Revisited," based on the Ars Archive, is presented by Jose-Carlos Mariategui, a young Peruvian scientist and media theorist dedicated to promoting such work in Latin America. Both as an artist and a meta-artist, ZKM Director Peter Weibel discusses art and progress. Esther Dyson, a writer, high-tech entrepreneur, and former Chair of ICANN (Internet Corporation For Assigned Names and Numbers) with a long history of working in Eastern Europe and Russia, speaks on technology and progress. Ismail Serageldin, Director of the Library of Alexandria in Egypt, the world's grandest international library initiative, speaks on society and progress.

The second panel, to end the first day, is the obvious and necessary counterpoint to Progress. This panel is on "DISRUPTION" about error, accident, and dissent. As many in the arts community perceive their role as being a mirror for society, these issues are particularly resonant today. Ars also has a lively history here. (Gernot Stork: "We need this panel because we do it so well.") This panel's generalist is Joichi Ito, an early Internet adopter, activist, and entrepreneur in Japan. Jonah Brucker-Cohen, a researcher at the Media Lab Europe and a PhD candidate at Trinity College in Dublin, and artist and writer, will present "Disruption Revisited." Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, known for large-scale public art interventions and currently the Director of MIT's new Center for Advanced Visual Studies, addresses art and disruption. David Turnbull, an Australian sociologist and cartographer working with Aboriginal and other indigenous groups, speaks about technology and disruption. Science-fiction writer and Wired Magazine net critic Bruce Sterling speaks on disruption and society.

Our goal at the end of the first day is exhilaration and exhaustion.

We wake up the next morning to the third panel, SPIRIT, about beauty, passion, and inner drive. Our approach is less about “happy art” than about cognition and consciousness, including both the light and dark sides. The panel’s generalist is Geetha Narayanan, founder/director of the Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore and member of ThinkCycle, an international initiative supporting distributed collaboration among underserved communities. “Spirit Revisited” is presented by Alena Williams, a Columbia University Art History PhD candidate with a background in the history of modern art and media theory, currently Visiting Scholar in Berlin. Roy Ascott, founder of the first PhD program in Interactive Art and organizer of the Consciousness Reframed conferences, speaks about spirit and art. Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist whose attention turned toward computer culture and who is founder/director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, reflects on spirit and technology. And Artificial Intelligence pioneer Marvin Minsky, whose recent work explores emotion as well as cognition, speaks on spirit and society.

The final panel is about mapping and prediction. We call this panel “TOPIA,” to denote both utopian and dystopian scenarios. We begin with local computer scientist Gerhard Dirmoser presenting his unique and ambitious information-theory-based (but hand made) word diagrams culled from the past twenty-five years of published Ars documents. Nadja Maurer, a Cultural Studies student at the University of Hamburg working with code translation of transcultural phenomena and media structures of communication, presents “Topia Revisited.” Joan Shigekawa, Associate Director for Arts and Humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation, discusses current large-scale community studies about art and culture. Derrick de Kerckhove, Director of the McLuhan Program in Culture & Technology, speaks about possible futures of the next 25 years. Stewart Brand, Founder of Whole Earth and co-Founder /President of the LongNow Foundation, speaks on long-term thinking.

The goal in all four panels is to focus on the future, the World in Twenty-Five

Years, and in the end, to provide a unique insight into an expanded moment, about timeframes long enough that generations grow up, ideas evolve, and landscapes are transformed. Ars Electronica is not only a venue; it's a large-scale cultural experiment. And there is a flipside to assembling artists, musicians, and scholars to exhibit, perform, and speak. They are both witnesses and participants in this experiment. When they leave Linz, they take away with them a potential model for their own community. And in doing so, they perhaps enable the next generation of Leonardos, Michelangelos, and Galileos—and Lovelaces, Curies, and Kahlos—to be nurtured there as well.

Good news. We could all use a Renaissance right now.