

Nothing Would Ever Be the Same

The 30th Anniversary of Ars Electronica

(Hannes Leopoldseder)

2009 is not only Linz's year to serve as European Capital of Culture. It also has very special significance in conjunction with Ars Electronica. The Internet is a direct descendant of the ARPANET that was developed 40 years ago; Ars Electronica made its debut 30 years ago; it's been 20 years since the Iron Curtain fell and Tim Berners-Lee designed the World Wide Web at CERN in Geneva. We celebrate the birth of the digital future. Nothing would ever be the same.

In this timeline, Linz's most significant milestone is 1979. With the founding of Ars Electronica, a festival for art, technology and society, this city became an early adopter in a new technical epoch. This move would trigger an earth-shaking process of development and change that would proceed at unprecedented speed. For Linz, this opened up the chance to create a higher profile image for itself between Austria's two great cultural centers, Vienna and Salzburg. "The Future: All Aboard!" became Linz's new slogan in 1998—literally words of welcome to bus and streetcar passengers, but, in a larger sense, a mission statement for an entire city. The Ars Electronica Festival established in 1979 was organized by the Brucknerhaus and the ORF—Austrian Broadcasting Company's Upper Austria Regional Studio. Herbert W. Franke, Hubert Bognermayr, Ulli A. Rützel and I were involved in the original conception. Ars Electronica commenced on September 18 with the Linzer Klangwolke (Cloud of Sound), a classical open-air event featuring Bruckner's 8th Symphony visualized with lights and lasers. The ORF called upon locals to put their radios in their windows to let the music resound throughout the entire city. And 100,000 people came to experience the first Klangwolke live in Donaupark. The result was a reverberation heard 'round the world.

The 1980 Klangwolke was visualized by Otto Piene of MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies; Blue Star Linz featured a helium-filled sculpture. In 1982 in Linz, Piene organized the Skyart Conference, an international conclave of media artists including Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik, Bazon Brock, Jürgen Claus, Tom van Sant and Bernd Kracke. Several projects were produced with the express aim of creating a following for Ars Electronica among the general public in Linz—for example, Klaus Schulze's Linzer Steel Symphony that entailed steel workers and voestalpine machinery in the Brucknerhaus in 1980, and Georgio Battistelli's Steel Opera performed before an audience of 10,000 on Hauptplatz in 1982.

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Isao Tomita's *Universum* got an enthusiastic reception from a crowd of more than 60,000 in Donaupark. Its' production was made possible by a \$1 million grant from Japan's Casio Corp. During these years, the scientific and artistic focus was on staging exhibitions, commissioning works of art and holding symposia on the emergence of computer culture. In 1984 in the Brucknerhaus, scholar and media artist Peter Weibel produced the multimedia opera *The Artistic Will*, a hymn to electricity ("the light bulb is the new human sun"). Over the ensuing years, Weibel, as festival consultant, together with Regina Patsch and Gottfried Hattinger, were the driving forces determining the festival's orientation. From 1991 on, responsibility for the festival was turned over to a board of directors with Karl Gerbel, myself and Peter Weibel as chairman of the artistic advisory council.

In 1987, ORF took the next step on the basis of an idea I proposed: launching the Prix Ars Electronica as an international competition in the computer arts featuring three categories: computer animation, computer music and computer graphics. The prize's most noteworthy features: the Golden Nica statuette as its symbol, a million Austrian schillings (72,672 euros) in prize money for the artists, and a jury comprised of world-renowned experts.

From 1987 to 2003, the ORF's Christine Schöpf was in charge of the organization of the competition and the jury selection process. Her strong commitment and people skills in dealing with the artists contributed decisively to the Prix Ars Electronica's successful development. The first sponsor of the Prix Ars Electronica was Siemens AG. From 2004 on, Festival and Prix were organized jointly by the Ars Electronica Center and the ORF.

Since 1987—thus, over the last 22 years—42,245 works have been submitted and evaluated by the juries. The Prix Ars Electronica functions not only as a trendsetter in the individual categories; many of the competition's entrants, jurors and prizewinners also go on to become part of Ars Electronica's extensive international network. A fortuitous happenstance: the first Golden Nica in Computer Animation went to *Luxo Jr.* by John Lasseter, then a member of the staff of a small animation studio; today he is probably Hollywood's most successful animated filmmaker (*Toy Story*, *Find Nemo*, *Cars*, *Wall-E* and *Up*). In 2009, the Prix Ars Electronica encompasses seven categories that reflect the development of digital media.

Ars Electronica's activities in the late 1980s and '90s focused on the strategic triangle of art, technology and society in accordance with the dominant technological themes of this period.

1989 *In the Network of Systems*, in 1990 *Digital Dreams-Virtual Worlds*: participants included Marvin Minsky, William Gibson, Laron Lannier, Timothy Leary and Bruce Sterling.

1991 Out of Control, a critical encounter with technological development starring, among others, Jean Baudrillard, Hans Morawec and Elfriede Jelinek.

1992 Endo & Nano, 1993 Genetic Art–Artificial Life, 1994 Intelligent Ambience, 1995 Information Myth–and in this year, the Ars Electronica Award for Innovation was given to Tim Berners-Lee for the development of the World Wide Web, the birth of a new era. Nothing would ever be the same.

This was also the beginning of a new era for Ars Electronica. Mayor Franz Dobusch began considering a cultural use for a planned building adjacent to the Nibelungen Bridge in Urfahr. Many proposals were submitted; the City of Linz eventually decided on the construction of the Ars Electronica Center as a Museum of the Future. Thus, Ars Electronica was to get its own facility.

Director of Cultural Affairs Siegbert Janko and I, the originators of the concept, were put in charge of project content; Edouard Bannwart (Art+Com, Berlin) conducted a feasibility study; the Ars Electronica Center opened in 1996.

Gerfried Stocker, a 31-year-old media artist was appointed artistic director; Horst Hörtner was named director of the Futurelab R&D laboratory; each still serve in his respective capacity. Financial director since July 1, 2009 is Diethard Schwarzmaier; he is in charge of the business end and is also responsible for running for the Futurelab.

The AEC was set up as a corporation with a board of directors; it is wholly owned by the City of Linz. Ars Electronica thus has a solid legal and financial footing. Gerfried Stocker and Christine Schöpf share responsibility for planning the Festival program.

The Ars Electronica Center sees itself as an educational facility. The most important aspect of its mission is to raise consciousness of the digital transformation that is making an impact on all areas of our life: education, career, the economy and, above all, communications. Gerfried Stocker has succeeded in imparting a fresh new impetus to the Festival and to making the facility an international hub for media artists from all over the world. Ars Electronica's annual themes look to the future: 1999 LifeScience, 2000 Next Sex, 2001 Takeover–Who's Doing the Art of Tomorrow, 2002 Unplugged–Art as the Scene of Global Conflicts, 2003 Code–The Language of Our Time, 2004 TimeShift, 2006 Simplicity, 2007 Goodbye Privacy, 2008 A New Cultural Economy and, now, 2009 Human Nature.

The Futurelab has become a very innovative, high-profile and extremely successful R&D facility that not only develops infrastructure for the Museum of the Future itself, but also works on projects worldwide (USA, China, Japan, Berlin, Madrid, Lisbon, etc.) either as sole proprietor or together with partners. One of the Futurelab's chief areas of emphasis is music visualization; in this area, important commissions have come from the Brucknerhaus, Germany's WDR and the eArts Festival in Shanghai, to name just a few. Gerfried Stocker has continually expanded Ars Electronica's regional, national and, above all, international network. Numerous cultural institutions in Linz collaborate with Ars Electronica—the Brucknerhaus, the Lentos Art Museum, the OK Center for Contemporary Art, the Linz Art University, the ORF, Architekturforum, Stadtwerkstadt, Times Up et al.

The Ars Electronica Center also played a key role in the preparations for Linz's stint as European Capital of Culture. For the AEC itself, 2009 has also represented a giant step forward: the architectural expansion of the Ars Electronica Center. Treusch Architecture created the design that dovetailed nicely with the pre-existing structure. On January 2, 2009 the new Museum of the Future made its debut. The 4,000 square meters of new space brought the facility's total to 6,500. The entire ensemble is enwrapped in a glass shell—a 5,100 m² LED façade.

The AEC also got a reorientation with respect to its content. "New Views of Humankind" goes boldly forward on a path that brings artists and scientists even closer together. The BrainLab focuses primarily on the neuro-anatomy of the eye; BioLab provides visitors with glimpses into the human body and lets them experiment with DNA; the FabLab presents possibilities for the handicrafts of the future—a design is created on a computer screen, and a 3D laser printer transforms the data into a real object; and, finally, the RoboLab offers insights into the world of robotics. As an enterprise, Ars Electronica had a staff of 190 in July 2009—one-third full-time employees; two-thirds part-time.

As its major contribution to the 2009 European Capital of Culture year, the AEC is collaborating with voestalpine to produce "80+1," a virtual round-the-world journey to shed light on the most pressing issues now facing humankind.

The festival that premiered in 1979 with a budget of only 120,000 euros has developed over the course of 30 years into a globe-spanning network of artists, scientists, and technicians representing all fields having to do with digital media. Over this time span, Ars Electronica has achieved sustainable synergy as the Ars Electronica Cluster whose components include the Festival, the Prix Ars Electronica, the Ars Electronica Center, the Futurelab, the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute Media.Art.Research as well as cultural and scholarly institutions in Linz, Austria and abroad. In this configuration, Ars Electronica is nicely positioned to face the challenges of the coming decade that will bring a quantum leap in the digitization of everyday life, and in the wake of which nothing will ever be the same again.