

Out of the Box

The Midlife Crisis of the Digital Revolution

Ars Electronica Festival 2019

September 5-9, POSTCITY Linz

ars.electronica.art/outofthebox

(Linz, April 8, 2019) Since 1979, Ars Electronica has followed, anticipated and analyzed the digital revolution and its origins, its successes, even its follies. As a festival for art, technology and society, the cultural and social significance of new technical and scientific developments has always been at its forefront.

In 2019, Ars Electronica celebrates its 40th anniversary and, as always, looks to the future. In keeping with its title "Out of the Box – the Midlife Crisis of the Digital Revolution," the festival embarks on an expedition to artistically and scientifically survey our modern world and its techno-economic influences, asking questions about our future prospects and options for action.

Along with fellow artists and scientists, engineers, designers, technologists, entrepreneurs and social activists from all over the world, Ars Electronica invites you to attend conferences, panel discussions, workshops, exhibitions, performances, interventions and concerts from September 5-9.

Center stage for this five-day program will be – for the last time – POSTCITY at Linz Central Station. Starting here, the festival mile leads straight out through the city center, with stops at the New Cathedral Linz, the Offenes Kulturhaus in the Upper Austrian Cultural Quarter, the University of Art and Design Linz, the LENTOS art museum, the Donaupark, the Stadtwerkstatt, the newly redesigned Ars Electronica Center and the Anton Bruckner Private University. On Saturday, this year's festival will offer a special attraction: an excursion to the Abbey of St. Florian.

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40 Years of Ars Electronica – 40 Years of Art Thinking

Art as a critical thinker's "second opinion" on the digital revolution

Being a festival for art, technology and society means using art and the sensorium of artists to observe and analyze current and possible future developments, and to come to conclusions about their cultural and social dimensions and their consequences.

The time-honored principle of artistic thought and action "making the invisible visible," the curiosity to look at what's behind the scenes and the impulse to make something better, dissatisfaction with simple answers, skepticism toward default solutions, an unflagging creativity in the search for new ways and means – all these are factors, originating in the artistic ecosystem, that are perfectly suited to help formulate the enlightened, critical and qualified perspectives that we urgently need on our path into the future. A path that must take into account the problems of the present no less than it needs visions of a better future.

The history of Ars Electronica and its many visionary artistic projects for the future which, while not always positive, nonetheless so often prove to be true – these underscore the effectiveness of collaboration among art, technology and society. Just like the visionary power of those who four decades ago founded Ars Electronica, a festival that has developed over the years into an international platform.

Out of the Box, or the Midlife Crisis of the Digital Revolution

"Out of the Box" has several very different meanings. On the one hand, it refers to ready-made products that can be used immediately. This is exactly what we see offered to us these days, in the form of consumption- and entertainment-oriented devices and the digital worlds of social media. We line up before opulent glass temples to purchase unnecessarily expensive devices which we can then only use as the company that brought them to market sees fit. We can't even change the battery ourselves. They have also stripped us of the right to say how and by whom all the data can be used, all the information that is generated as soon as we begin to use these devices. What started out as a dream of technology that is easy for everyone to use has long since become the nightmare of a digital leash, for which we also pay a hefty price. As is so often the case, economic success causes a decline in creativity and innovation. New and useful features

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haven't been coming "out of the box" for a long time – just the same old things in different packaging.

This very sobering "out of the box" of the economic sphere stands in contrast to the charismatic icons of the startup and innovation world. Here "out of the box" stands for that which is new, that which disrupts. It is about new paths and thinking outside of every convention. It is about nothing less than reinventing the world – or at least reinventing profit-making products and services...

But "Out of the Box" also puts us in mind of Pandora's proverbial box. A thought that we encounter more and more frequently in light of the many current problems of our high-tech world.

In any case, no matter which of these readings we prefer, we must all get "Out of our Boxes". We must get out from cover, out of our comfort zones, our bubbles, our ignorance. We must get out of the mistaken belief that we can avoid responsibility for shaping the future.

40 years of digital revolution, but we've only just begun

When Ars Electronica was conceived and brought to life in Linz at the end of the 1970s, the digital revolution already had a technological scope to be reckoned with, and yet it was largely unknown. Just 10 years previous, four computers at various locations in the western United States had for the first time been interconnected to form a network. This was completely overshadowed by the spectacular, all-engrossing Apollo space program.

But in 1978 the Apple II and its brethren became the first affordable and usable desktop computers on the market. In 1981 IBM dubbed its new model "Personal Computer," PC for short. This "personalization of computers" marked the beginning of a new, momentous era of digitalization that emerged from mainframe-heavy datacenters and research laboratories into our world and our everyday lives.

Then, in 1989, ten years after the first Ars Electronica, Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau developed and made freely available the foundations for the World Wide Web, thus unleashing the greatest technological avalanche of all time. One might call the current developments in this area a "socialization of computers," which has to date connected more than 4.5 billion people across the world to the Internet.

During this period, the phenomenon of artificial intelligence led a comparatively much less glamorous existence. Apart from short periods of hype and the always captivating frisson

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of dystopian science fiction novels and films, AI consistently failed to fulfill its promise. Now this has suddenly changed. Exponentially increased computing power and the availability of mass data have meant great success above all for machine learning, finally making AI the next game changer. While to date digitalization has only applied to the world of industry and its systems, something completely new is now dawning: the digitalization of thinking and decision-making. And although we are still a long way from achieving an independent, a strong or a general artificial intelligence, we have begun to grant digital systems a new independence. It seems that our next step will lead us from automation into autonomy.

Once again, we find ourselves awestruck and also fearful; we ask ourselves what could come of all this. What we have hopefully learned in the last 40 years is that we dare not leave these developments to the technology companies alone. We must use the occasion of the digital revolution's current midlife crisis to reformulate our questions about the future, and to concentrate not only on what is technologically possible, but on what we wish to accomplish with technology in the first place. And on what we don't.

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