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1999

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## Ars Electronica 1999: Life Science

On-line version: <http://www.constantvzw.com/modestwitness1/aae.html>

I always feel a bit odd writing festival reports. There is no way one can encapsulate the atmosphere of a festival in a few paragraphs. All one basically can do is share the taste of a few delights and frustrations. A huge event like Ars Electronica [www.aec.at], which celebrated its 20th anniversary this year, is always more than the sum of its parts. Though I cannot shrug off the impression that this year's AEC thrived more on the almost mythical proportions its reputation has taken on over the past years, than on the actual quality of its parts.

Hosted by the picturesque Austrian city of Linz at the Danube, the festival has been at the forefront of digital media art, querying the intersections between technological change and cultural production. Originally starting out 1979 as an electronic music event, initiated by the ORF (the Austrian Broadcasting Company in Upper Austria) and the cultural centre Brucknerhaus, the vast developments in ICT soon enough caused the organisers to include other art forms utilising digital media. Over the years AEC has become more and more of an authority within the digital arts community. This process institutionalisation, if you will, materialised in the opening of the Ars Electronica Center in 1996. The venue hosts on the one hand the "Museum of the Future" (exhibiting works of media artists), and on the other hand the "FutureLab" (a workplace with hi-tech infrastructure available to artists, technologists and businesspeople). Institutionalisation works similar to the dynamics of identity formation: it provides a structure which is stable and recognisable. However, often much time and effort is invested in maintaining that particular structure, and then the innovative glance towards the future gets somewhat lost in the process. Perhaps what AEC needs is an identitarian crisis, to propel it again towards the future.

The inertia of institutionalisation can also be felt in the choice of projects awarded a Golden Nica for the Prix Ars Electronica. Probably commercialisation is something long-running huge festivals cannot wholly avoid. Yet, selecting Hollywood blockbusters for the visual effects category, is pushing it a bit too far. Last year Titanic ran away with the title for best visual effects, and in the same vein the film What Dreams May Come, starring Robin Williams won this year's Nica. In the digital music category Aphex Twin got a prize for "Come to daddy". One might as well attend and Oscar or MYW award ceremony instead. Nonetheless, what is most irritating is the stubborn persistence of Ars Electronica to preserve the idea that art is not a commodity, and thus not prone to commercial contamination, let alone circulation. This creates an absurd situation wherein festival-goers feel they're attending a shopping mall event, wherein the organisers desperately try to sell their products, but deny it. I bet the big sponsors SIEMENS, Silicon Graphics, Microsoft, Hewlett Packard, Oracle and Compaq, are laughing all the way to the bank. Interesting note here is that the Hollywood productions were bestowed the largest sums of money.

### The Symposium

Since 1987 AEC has set a thematic focal point and symposium to the festival in order to augment its scientific authority. Previous themes have been: Endo & Nano Technology ('92); Artificial Life ('93); and Infowar ('98). This year's festival dealt with the subject of life science, more specifically biotechnology and genetic engineering. The point of departure for artistic and theoretical elaboration was whether the Digital Revolution will be followed by a Biological Revolution (Press Release, September '99). The list of speakers was very impressive (e.g. Manuel

De Landa, Bruno Latour, etc). Nevertheless, the speakers I heard disappointed. Take Eduardo Kac for example, professor of art and technology at SAIC, Chicago. Kac mixes digital media with biological systems in his creative process. The " Genesis " and " GFP K9 " projects he presented at the symposium are examples of " transgenic " art : a new art form based on the use of genetic technology. " Genesis ", which was also exhibited at AEC, is created with the genetically engineered JM101 bacteria, which cannot survive outside a petri dish. The idea was to create an " artist gene " by taking a sentence from the book of Genesis, translating it into Morse code, and then transferring it to a DNA base pair. The bacteria and the " artist " gene continue to mutate, the former through natural processes, the latter through a synthetic one. By the end of the exhibition the mutated sentence from the Bible is re-translated into English and the extent of modification is revealed. The " GFP K9 " work is still in development. Kac went into a lengthy and totally pointless discussion about human canine interaction, while showing a puzzled audience slides of dogs. The point of this history of dog domestication was to stress that humans have domesticated dogs, but that dogs have also domesticated us. Kac wants to create a fluorescent dog by injecting the GFP (Green Fluorescent Protein) gene of fluorescent jelly fish into the dog's nucleus. Quite a noble project, but why bore the audience for 30' with doggy history instead of coming straight to the point?

### **Life Science Installations**

Arguably this part of the festival was most interesting. The selected art works for the Cyberarts 99 Prix Ars Electronica were exhibited in the beautiful O.K. Centre for Contemporary art [[www.ok-centrum.at](http://www.ok-centrum.at)]. Founded in 1988, the OK Centre prides itself on being an exhibition and production house for (multi-medial) art. It was a pleasure wandering from room to room, checking out the installations. I really liked Daniel Rozin's (USA) elegant interpretation of what digital painting could be. In this work traditional art meets cyberart. Rozin devised a large painting easel with a blank canvas. The painter/spectator applies a paintbrush to the canvas, yet instead of paint live video from 3 cameras positioned nearby, appear on the canvas. Each brushstroke puts a new updated layer of video on the canvas. Rozin used fishing wire in the paint brush, in order for the bristles to act as fibre optics and emit infrared light through the canvas. The camera captures the IR light and transfers it to the computer through a video digitising board. The other cameras supply the computer with data of the surroundings. Consequently the computer mixes all the images and sends them back through a projector to the canvas. The effect is wonderful, as if real brushstrokes were creating the image.

Another stunning piece of work were the " Sound Creatures " created by Japanese artist Kouichirou Eto. The installation consists out of 3 major elements : Web browser, consoles and robots. Upon entering the room one encounters a " stage " where 6 little robots are buzzing and whirring. Through the input of visual patterns over the internet, which are transformed into sound patterns, the visitor can influence the movement and sound the robots produce. When the robots come close to each other they exchange sound data, which on its turn gradually modifies the robots' sound production and moves. In addition to this, there are 2 consoles placed in the exhibition space, where visitors can give the robots commands regarding movement and sound. However any robot at random only execute this instruction when in the " Infection Zone ", a location on the stage lit by a spotlight. Eto's idea was to present the robots as performers who exchange sound information by bumping into (infecting) each other. The beautiful thing about this piece is that the whole is more than the sum of the parts : all 3 elements are interdependent and inter-influential of each other. For example, it may well be that a visitor witnesses his/her web sound input change immediately by the bumping of their robot into another one. The result is a mesmerising robotic dance.

Canadian artist Luc Courchesne won an award of distinction for his interactive video installation " Landscape One ". Courchesne has a background in interactive design, and claims to be much more interested in processes than results. Another concern of his is to transcend the technology by putting emphasis on content, and interaction with people. In " Landscape One ", for example, a realistic landscape is projected on all 4 walls of a room. This landscape - the Mont-Royal park in Montreal - is visited by real and virtual figures. In order to take a stroll through the virtual garden,

real visitors require the help of the virtual characters, which is established through touch pads, and microphones. I did not particularly like this work, but Courchesne was one of the few artists who had something interesting to say about the labour and (wo)manpower involved in creating a piece of multi-media art. He was indeed one of the few artists, who explicitly thanked the whole battalion of technicians and programmers who helped creating the artwork. More often than not it is the artist coming up with a concept and a troupe of other people giving it shape. These people have invested their labour, time and talent in the art work, and thus only deserve to be acknowledged for that.

Christoph Ebener, Frank Fietzek, and Uli Winters' installation also got an honorary mention in the Interactive Arts category. With the intriguing title " Hamster-symbiotic Exchange of Hoarded Energy ", this group of German artists had 12 (!) hamsters use a running wheel in order to move little vehicles (intelligent robots) which ought to transport portions of hamster food, located at the other side of the space back to the hamsters. Both machine and mammal are co-dependent : the robot vehicles are immobile if not moved by the hamster's running wheel, and conversely the hamsters will starve if not brought the food. It is interesting to see how this project seeks to investigate behavioural patterns between animal and machine. Sadly enough we didn't see too much interaction : the hamsters were quite terrified from all the attention, and decided to remain in their little cots most of the time.

### **Open X/Closed X**

The Open X part examined new strategies for net.art. So-called " net-practitioners " were invited to show and explain their websites to the public. Granted, this is a bit strange : these things should be viewed on the web and not exhibited. Check out the following URL's :

- Rtmark (USA) : [www.rtmark.com](http://www.rtmark.com)
- Eugene Thacker (USA) : [www.formless.org](http://www.formless.org)
- C5 (USA) : [www.c5corp.com](http://www.c5corp.com) (a personal favourite!)
- Rhizome (USA) : [www.rhizome.org/starrynight](http://www.rhizome.org/starrynight)
- TNC Network (F) : [www.tnc.net](http://www.tnc.net)
- Radio B92 (FRY) : [www.freeb92.net](http://www.freeb92.net)
- DreamTech (USA) : [www.d-b.net/dti](http://www.d-b.net/dti)
- Margarete Jahrman & Max Mooswitzer (A) : [www.konsum.net](http://www.konsum.net)
- Encart : [www.encart.net](http://www.encart.net)
- X-change : <http://xchange.re-lab.net>
- Olia Lialina (RUS) : <http://art.teleportacia.net>
- Irrational/UK : [www.irrational.org/](http://www.irrational.org/) (another favourite)

Closed X featured the same people as in Open X, yet now they were supposed to talk about their latest projects. Again, checking out the web sites, should give you all the info you need. A remarkable appearance, though, was made by the boys from etoy [[www.eto.com](http://www.eto.com)], who won a golden Nica in 1996 for their Digital Hijack [[www.hijack.org](http://www.hijack.org)] : between March and July 1996 etoy infiltrated the web's search engines, and placed over a thousand designated key-words within the top 10 rankings. Etoy agent Zai sketched brief etoy history, and then had the audience in stitches when he confessed that etoy stole the visual effects Golden Nica, at a party the day before, and were going to donate it to RTmark. It is still unclear whether they were bluffing or not.

### **The Commotion around Linux**

Linus Torvalds of Finland got the Golden Nica in the .net category for the Open Source system Linux. Often misinterpreted, Torvalds is not the great inventor of Open Source : most components Linux runs on are derived from GNU, which was developed in the States by people like Richard Stallman. However, GNU lacked a system kernel, and this is what Torvalds provided, when a student in 1991. Open Source is the term used for computer systems where the source code is accessible for the user to modify according to her/his preferences. OS is a countermove against proprietary software. For more info on Open Source check out the Wizards of OS conference, which was held on the 16th and 17th of July in Berlin [[www.mikro.org/Events.OS](http://www.mikro.org/Events.OS)]. Nevertheless, the public needs a guru, and what better guru than a talented Finnish Wunderkind?

Torvalds, who now lives in the States, was contacted via videoconferencing. He came across as humorous and modest. He made a very interesting point that Open Source models retain a sense of totalitarianism when viewed from a single leader model. As in politics, these models have to evolve to more democratic models if they want to survive as Open Source, wherein people can make use of their own creative input.

Linux was not submitted as an entry for the Prix AEC, but the jury chose to award Linux for its evolutionary, collaborative and organically growing merits. Here's where the commotion starts. On September 6th, the day of the Prix AEC Gala, a hoax email message is sent to the nettime mailing list, stating that Microsoft forced the jury to award Linux a prize. Of course the hoax was immediately discovered, but it did trigger a very interesting discussion whether an Operating System could be awarded an artistic prize, and on the aesthetics hi-tech media. Member of the jury Lisa Goldman justified the jury's decision as follows : " The jury was looking for works that reflected a net aesthetic - Derrick de Kerckhove coined the term " webness " to describe this quality. We thought of this as work that is distributed, community-driven, evolutionary in it's form and development, and that actually couldn't be created without a network. Using this criteria, Linux seemed to us to be an outstanding example of what the net makes possible, and to be well deserving of the Prix " (nettime, 12.9.99).

### **FutureLab Exhibition and Other Events**

Gunter von Hagens, who also was a speaker at the symposium, is the inventor of " plastination ". This method allows life-like preservation of human tissue for an almost unlimited time. At the Brucknerhaus a few whole-body specimens were exhibited : morbid artistry. It's quite a disconcerting experience viewing Hagens' "Chess player ", knowing that perhaps once upon a time the plastinated body might have really played chess.

The exhibition at the AEC Centre was independent of the festival. A very fun work was German artist Anna Anders' "Touchscreen ", where upon touching the screen at various different spots, the visitor interacts with different video sequences, like someone wiping the screen, someone kissing the screen etc. It is a nice play on visual dialogue, human and machine can have.

Another beautiful project is Rebecca Allen's (USA) " Bush Soul ", which explores the role of avatars and human interaction in an Artificial Life environment. The user navigates through the space with a haptic, force-feedback joystick. The visuals and audio are stunning. It took 3 programmers, 6 visual designers and 4 sound designers to realise the project.

The night program of the festival was rather disappointing; somehow Austrians fail to throw a good party. One starts wondering why on earth they invited Michael Nyman to give a concert : we stayed for exactly 5', and then ran. A crazy project from the Linzer art forum Stadtwerkstatt, was " The World's Fastest Bug Race ". Here people could bet on cockroaches for 4 consecutive nights : lots of shillings were spent, and some roaches did disappear into the crowd. The program for the last night looked fantastic : curated by Digital Music jury member Naut Humon (USA) it featured performances by Farmer's Manual, Rehberg & Bauer, Otomo Yoshihide, DJ Craze, Ikue Mori, Granular Synthesis, and many many more. Lots of noise, of which some excellent, but still no party in sight. Perhaps next year's AEC will give visitors more of an impetus to party.