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The Infrastructure Behind Ars Electronica's Success

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This year Ars Electronica marked its 20th anniversary making this festival for art, technology, and culture one of the longest running and most important of its kind. What started in 1979 as a small congregation of computer art insiders, expanded to a week-long multitude of events in a variety of venues all over the city of Linz, Austria and eventually turned into a world-class event endowed with a renowned prize, the Prix Ars Electronica.

Highlights of the Anniversary Festival

The festival kicked off with an academic conference on 'Life Sciences', designed to discuss technical strategies and potential problems of genetic engineering. Even though it was partially sponsored by the Swiss chemical giant, Novartis, the program brought together proponents and opponents making for a lively, controversial debate. Jeremy Rifkin, one of the most vocal critics of genetic engineering practices, gave a stimulating presentation based on his new book, "The Biotech Century". The topic of genetic engineering is sure to occupy us well into the next century. The mailing list moderated by Klaus Amman, Director of the Botanical Garden in Bern, Switzerland [klaus.amman@sgi.unibe.ch] offers an opportunity to stay in touch with the scientific issues surrounding this debate.

Dozens of on-line Web projects and interactive art installations were on display in the lobby of the conference center. The presence of the creators, allowed the chance to personally interact and understand the nuances of their creations. One of the most stunning displays was Gunther von Hagens' Anatomy Art. He developed a unique method, called plastination, of preserving actual human tissue in a lifelike state. Plastination specimens have been seen by millions of people in blockbuster shows in Germany, Austria, and Japan, always evoking deep emotional and ethical responses.

The Prix Ars Electronica with cash prizes of more than \$100,000 yearly, was awarded at the studios of the Austrian Radio and TV station ORF and included a two-day seminar on animation, net-art, and digital music. This year, the jury gave the .net award to Linus Torvalds, inventor of the operating system LINUX. This choice, while highly unusual for an art competition, indicates that Ars Electronica appreciates the merits of the technological infrastructure and defines artistic achievements in a broader sense. Moreover, the organizers do not shy away from using a certain amount of provocation to stimulate and attract discussion and controversy.

Many interactive exhibitions in the Ars Electronica Center and the OK, the Center for Contemporary Art showcased the state-of-the-art in digital media art, today. Nightly parties and receptions at the Art Academy of Linz, housed in a remodeled old tobacco factory, at the Stadtwerkstatt, an alternative culture club, and elsewhere made networking with an international cast fun and encouraged a variety of personal contacts with the local scene.

A Comparison: Ars Electronica and Siggraph

Of the digital media or computer graphics conferences only Siggraph boasts a longer history than Ars Electronica. Both enjoy an international reputation and both are considered to be important venues for professionals in the field, each attracting more than 30,000 attendees, annually.

Siggraph originated as a purely academic conference, with emphasis on computer graphics research. By a stroke of genius early on its organizers added a trade show to the program urging the booming computer industry to sponsor a technically sophisticated animation theater and an elaborate computer art show. These stunning showcases became the highlights of the conference and are key ingredients motivating the creative and intellectual talent to return to Siggraph year after year. Siggraph is powered by a clever and very American combination of the presentation of premier technology research, spiced with a good dose of Hollywood pizzazz, all conducted within a thriving commercial market place.

Whereas Siggraph had the advantage of growing up in the heartland of computer technology, the US, the real question is: How could Ars Electronica become so successful, happening pretty much at the outskirts of these developments?

Ars Electronica's success relies on its founders' ability to create strategic alliances between local/regional political organizations and public and cultural institutions in the relatively small city of Linz, the capital of the state of Upper Austria and the third largest Austrian city after Vienna and Graz with 250,000 inhabitants. Initially, the funding structure of Ars Electronica resembled a fairly typical European undertaking in which cultural activities and events are supported in large measure by public tax money. Today, industry partnerships, ticket sales and other merchandizing combined contribute about 50% of the entire budget.

The Power of Strategic Vision and Pooling of Resources

The broad support Ars Electronica has gained over the years as a technological art festival – almost a given today in our age of the internet and cyberspace - did not exist from the start. Consider the timing of the first Ars Electronica conferences in the late 70's and early 80's when European youth referred to itself as the 'No Future' generation, and public opinion was constantly challenged by opponents of nuclear power and missile deployment. That Ars Electronica was born and succeeded despite the deep mistrust in technology and widespread techno-phobia in Europe is testament to the vision, perseverance, and resourcefulness of its founders, the director of ORF, the Austrian Radio and TV in Upper Austria, a publicly owned and politically administered monopoly, and the director of the Bruckner Haus, the local concert hall. Together they decided to completely re-vamp the traditional festivities previously held in honor of locally born composer Anton Bruckner.

Instead of symphonies, Ars Electronica produced modern and populist musicals with names like 'Sound Clouds' and 'Sky Art'; spectacular audio-visual outdoor events along the banks of the Danube, replete with lasers, smoke, and huge inflatables. Given the right support of good weather, like the beautiful Indian summer evening this year, these shows attract an audience of more than 100,000 people.

The success of these grand events helped to secure a good deal of public support for the more esoteric sections of the conference and created the freedom for the organizers to include computer art hardly anybody cared for at the time. It's still a hallmark of Ars Electronica to simultaneously produce shows with mass appeal along with esoteric conferences.

The founders also employed a powerful tactic to gradually widen the scope of the festival. By pooling the resources of Bruckner Haus and ORF and by enlisting the support of the large political parties in city hall and state government, they made use of multiple facilities, peoples' talents, time, and budgets, to create events far beyond any individual institution's capacities. Ars Electronica has grown so big, it would be quite an accomplishment for cities many times the size of Linz.

Ars Electronica Center (AEC) – Museum of the Future

Another important step to sustain growth and permanence beyond the annual one week of the festival was the building of the Ars Electronica Center (AEC), a specially created institution dedicated to education, production, and exhibition of digital art. I lived in Austria at the time of its conception (1991-94) when its founders gathered a wide base of support for this novel museum. The opening of the museum to the public on New Year's day 1996 was impressive... Equally impressive is the building itself, a modern structure offering both, exceptional panoramas of the city stretched along the banks of the Danube as well as completely enclosed media laboratory spaces.

The five story building is filled with interactive installations, hosts a very popular cyber café, and even a CAVE, a sophisticated, interactive VR environment. Yet again, the founders made an excellent strategic choice when they decided to install one of the few public CAVES in Europe. They understood that its substantial cost would be justified by its unique benefits. I know of only one other CAVE which is used exclusively for artistic purposes, this one installed at the ICC in Tokyo, most of the other two dozen or so are either not public or not permanent. The

CAVE at AEC, designed in close cooperation with its inventors from the EVL at the University of Illinois, Chicago, brought the most advanced VR technology to Linz and proved to be so popular that reservations have to be made in advance. I was only able to see one work by Peter Kogler, commissioned by Ars Electronica, which turned out to be a rather traditional rendering of a virtual fantasy cave inhabited by ants and other scurrile creatures. Tickets for the most recent pieces created at the EVL were no longer available. In my view, scheduling of the CAVE presentations could be more flexible and oriented to let more visitors see them.

Two other installations need to be mentioned since they are aesthetically integrated into the architecture of the Center. The floor of the elevator serves as the screen for a fast paced computer animation. It starts at the lowest floor with a view of Linz and then, closely synched to the movement of the cabin, shoots into the galaxy. The other is Humphrey, an Icarus like contraption in which the visitor can take a virtual glide around Linz. Teenagers were lining up in large numbers to take this flight while they were enjoying the spectacular real view onto the city. Visitors of all ages were eager to take advantage of the free internet access offered in the cyber café of the Ars Electronica Center, yet another good reason for frequent visits.

Reaching Out: Industry and Education

The AEC has already provided many impulses to the city of Linz and all of Austria, in particular to industry and education. I interviewed top executives from three Austrian engineering companies and heard them all praise the virtues of the CAVE. They had successfully used CAVE presentations and its portable version, the ImmerserDesk, at international tradeshows to convince their customers of the outstanding functionality and technical excellence of their products including welding machines, robot assemblies, and automated processing plants. These pragmatic business managers used the competence gained in cooperation with the AEC to enhance their ability to market and position their products and to significantly increase the exports of their companies.

Another surprise awaited me when I visited the press office responsible for first, attracting several hundred journalists from all over the world to cover the festival and then, supplying them with materials and working facilities. Huge stacks of mailings were ready to be sent to primary and secondary schools in the region to promote the educational program of the AEC. Tens of thousands of schoolchildren come to the AEC each year representing by far the largest percentage of visitors. It is impressive that Ars Electronica serves today a broad array of constituencies: industry and business, art and culture, research and education with its systematic and comprehensive approach.

highly motivated team of competent professionals and volunteers the success of the festival. Regardless of whether I spoke with one of the Managing Directors of the AEC (one in charge of the artistic direction, one responsible for managing the business), or one of the InfoTrainers who act as friendly and knowledgeable guides, or with members of the technical staff, or the people administering the Prix, they all share the same vision and pride. Clearly, the festival has created its own people talent, and it is now on its way to help create a pool of students growing up with full cognizance of computer media.

The synergy of a team of highly motivated professionals and volunteers makes Ars Electronica such a success today. Managing Directors of AEC, guides called InfoTrainers, technical staff and administrators of Prix all share the same vision and pride about their work. And, the investment in nurturing a pool of children in touch with the computer media is by far the best insurance for the continued success of the show.

Digital Youth and Structural Change

A good example of this young, digital generation is Raimund Schumacher, co-founder of the media group Conspirat and winner in the newly introduced Prix category, Cyber generation – under 19 freestyle computing. Raimund was born in Linz in 1979, the same year Ars Electronica got started. For him it is important that “the Ars is not trying to give answers!” This emerging multi-media artist grew up taking advantage of the many opportunities Ars Electronica offered and has already started to contribute to its current and future vitality. Raimund designed the “Global Village”, a garden parcel community made out of do-it-yourself wood cabins, to house dadaist displays of

computers and TV sets, sound boxes, lots of cables, and several washing machines. Reminiscent of a Tyrolean village in the Alps this became the perfect setting to play video games and to listen to the beat of the youngsters' techno tracks.

Many Roads Lead to Linz

After twenty years of perseverance and consistent execution on a strategic vision the festival and the Ars Electronica Center continues to be a vital international forum where the future direction of digital media technologies are presented and debated. Moreover, Ars Electronica has become an important catalyst for structural change for Linz, the region, and beyond to foster an informed and economically sound entry into the next millennium.

I encourage the reader to consider submitting work to the Prix Ars Electronica or to attend the next festival and enjoy hospitality a la Linz. The organizers are also very prolific publishers of conference materials, videos, and computer art catalogs. This year alone about a half-dozen titles were published in various media not counting the numerous flyers and brochures printed to promote the festival. If you want to catch up with the issues and discussions which shaped the first 20 years of the festival I recommend to read "Ars Electronica, Facing the Future", edited by Timothy Druckrey, MIT Press 1999. This publication provides a pretty comprehensive overview and outlook of things to come. Definitely visit the continually expanding web site which now features the complete archive of twenty years of digital excitement and social commentary: www.aec.at

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