

Through the Looking Glass

Austria's Ars Electronica Centre

Andrew Garton July 97

Published by Real Time Magazine, Australia, 1997

Cataloged, packaged and displayed, through glass our history. Corridors of locked cabinets within which are stored a phantasmagoria of human inquiry... screens we dare not touch, through which we can only but gaze. Down every corridor of this mighty building, on either side, butterflies of every imaginable colour; shells the size of emus; skulls of men, women and children who knew well the primal dark; skeletons of beasts of unimaginable proportions - all protected within controlled atmospheres where room humidity measuring devices murmur quietly amidst the shuffling feet of visitors. A sarcophagus of speculation and intrigue down through which we wander, in awe, in dreams, inside the Museum.

For many of us, this was the kind of Museum we grew up with, one where history was untouchable, but presented with a sense of showmanship... The Museum was filled with drama. Frozen battles, hunts and representations of historical moments stimulated the imagination much like a wax-works museum on steroids. But these are Museums of the past. They may one day be on show themselves within a Museum of Museums, but such a place would no doubt be virtual, to be explored, perhaps more interactively, via another display case of sorts, the computer screen.

In Melbourne, we are losing the last remnant of our once magnificent Museum, its Planetarium. A few moments in the Planetarium, seated in one of its cozy chairs and you were transported into the heavens. No VR goggles, no 3D glasses. An early 1960's Japanese made projector with multiple lenses, a domed ceiling for a screen and reclining seats was all it took. But it's going... perhaps to be replaced by something akin to the infamous CAVE, a walk-through virtual environment driven to by two powerful ONYX computers, a suite of video projectors and an armory of 3D glasses. Sounds great, doesn't it!

Visitors to the launch of the Ars Electronica Centre, Austria's Museum of the Future, first saw the CAVE, in September 1996. Ars Electronica is host not only to the CAVE, but a screen-based display and interactive environment, of research and inquiry. The Museum has grown out of the spectacle into an "intelligent environment".

Ars Electronica describes itself as a "knowledge machine" with a mission to help visitors attain information "fitness". A kind of mental gymnasium where science, art and business are seen to be working together in an "interdisciplinary interface between technology, culture and society". More a Musuem of concepts, ideas and the commercial development of them. In fact, changing the notion of Musuem as historical archivist to an open laboratory.

Keeping its foot literally in the new media door, Ars Electronica has founded and continues to host international forums from which it draws its conceptual frame work from. This year, from 8 – 13 September, Ars Electronica mediates its annual festival and symposium. This year's theme, titled "Fleshfactor – Informationsmaschine Mensch", is the Mensch, the human being. Festival Directors Gerfried Stocker and Christine Schöpf are creating an investigative environment around their short, but potent, manifesto for Fleshfactor:

"In light of the latest findings, developments and achievements in the fields of genetic engineering, neuro-science and networked intelligence, the conceptual complex now under investigation will include the status of the individual in networked artificial systems, the human body as the ultimate original, and the strategies for orientation and inter-relation of the diametric opposites, man and machine, in the reciprocal, necessary processes of adaption and assimilation".

Participants to Fleshfactor will include Donna Haraway, Neal Stephenson, Steve Mann and Stelarc. The net version of the symposium has been active for several months, consolidating the key issues and subject matter that will be explored throughout the duration of the festival.

Each year, in collaboration with the Upper Austrian Studio of Austrian Radio Ars Electronica invites artists the world over to contribute new works to the Prix Ars Electronica. This year, four out of the nine hundred entries won a total of AUD \$135,000.

Many of us hold Ars Electronica with great esteem, a place where innovation, where the edge of new media arts has both a home and centre for research and discourse. That it is, but on the ground, it's also a business and a very young communicator. It has created expectations of itself through its manifesto, its vision... much of which it is still learning to accommodate let alone live up to. That said, Ars Electronica is most certainly of the "brave new world". It displays both courage and commitment to experimentation that we have yet to see of any equivalent institution in Australia. We have Scienceworks and it's successful Cyberzone exhibit, but it is a long way from the technology and cultural incubator that is Ars Electronica.

Resources

Ars Electronica Centre

<http://www.aec.at/>

Ars Electronica Festival

<http://www.aec.at/fleshfactor/>

Prix Ars Electronica

<http://prixars.orf.at/>



Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 2.5 Australia License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/au/).