

Table of Contents

Back to the Future -Â- Ars Electronica at 25 1

Back to the Future -Â- Ars Electronica at 25

ByMichelle Kasprzak

This year the Ars Electronica festival glimpsed the future through the past.
Michelle Kasprzak reports

In 1979, Ars Electronica was born. The concept was to produce an innovative festival that would integrate art, technology and society as major themes in its workshops, symposia, and concerts. 25 years later, what started off as a small but ambitious festival has transformed the city of Linz from an industrial city into a culture capital, and become the Oscars of the electronic art world. But what has really changed in a quarter century for this behemoth of festivals?

By bestowing this year's festival with the theme of Timeshift: The World in 25 Years, it appears that the Ars organisers were not interested in becoming overly nostalgic. Rather, the theme suggests that the 25th Ars Electronica would unfold in keeping with the innovative spirit that sparked the genesis of the festival, endeavouring to put a finger on what the next 25 years will hold, not just for Ars, but for electronic art itself.

But prudent people know that attempting to predict the future is usually a fool's game, and so the theme is defeated before the festival even begins. The conference presentations this year mostly focussed the idea of the future through the lens of the past, or as Marshall McLuhan would have said it, 'We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.'

Of the notable few who were brave or foolish enough to step forward with some divinations of the future, Bruce Sterling's lecture stands out. 'The future is already here, it's just not well distributed yet', Sterling tells us. He described the slavery of early adopters to their over-functional gizmos as the precursor to the imminent development of smart, auto-Googling objects he calls 'Spimes'. Spimes will be high maintenance but also high functioning, with their own e-mail addresses, histories, and intelligence of their own life cycles and potential for re-use. This history and intelligence that Spimes offer will allow us to deal more effectively with growing piles of techno-trash, since the Spime itself will tell us when it is ready to be recycled, and how. His messages were visionary, though disheartening – dealing with our disposable culture involves being in thrall to objects that won't stop e-mailing us, and the elderly will blog the intricacies of our involvement with Spimes because they have nothing better to do than complain.

In an attempt to extract the most out of the future-as-theme, a new competition called The Next Idea was introduced, wherein young artists were invited to submit an unrealised concept for judging. The Next Idea, in principle, seemed to hold the most promise in terms of providing the wild and speculative gaze into the future that the theme of the festival demanded. However the winner of the competition, Moony, by Akio Kamisato, Satoshi Shibata, Takehisa Mashimo, disappointed by privileging technical feat over content. 3D butterflies are projected onto water vapour, and react to the outstretched hands of visitors. The prize announcement describes the potential for the technology to 'work with computers in ways that go beyond manipulating a keyboard and a mouse'. A quick browse through the Ars archives, particularly at work by Golden Nica winners David Rokeby and Luc Courchesne, would show that going beyond the keyboard and mouse is a fait accompli, and that content need not be sacrificed on the altar of techno-fetishism. To be fair, living up to the moniker of The Next Idea is daunting, and when you speak of the 'next' thing at any electronic art festival, techno-fetishism is never far behind.

Which brings us to the two main exhibitions, in order to seek out that ideal marriage of technical novelty and compelling content. An exhibition at Linz's new Lentos Museum of Golden Nica winners

from previous years proved that the winners' work holds up well over time. Simultaneously at the O.K. Centre, the exhibition of this year's Golden Nica winners and honourable mentions was on view. Since the show at the Lentos was basically a greatest hits show, it may not be surprising to note that it was more satisfying. However, what was surprising was that some of the work from 2004 seemed more dated than the work in the Lentos. Again an obsession with interactivity that doesn't rely on the keyboard and mouse does viewers a disservice, when the only reward for learning the right sequence of hand-waving or foot-tapping is content that is not particularly strong.

The weak showing of 'interactive' work highlighted a problem for me, again, in the theming and naming of components of the festival and the festival itself. The 'Interactive Art' label doesn't really apply to Listening Post, this year's Golden Nica winner in that category, because Listening Post could hardly be called interactive at all. What is interesting about this it is that its excellence, combined with its mis-definition as interactive, offers the least hypey and most interesting peek into the future of electronic art. The piece, by Americans Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin, consists of 231 small displays arranged in a grid. A computer scans Internet chat rooms and message boards, filters the raw input, and outputs selected snippets of text to the displays. A sombre soundtrack fills the room, and occasionally a computerised voice speaks one of the text snippets aloud.

The poetry of Listening Post derives from the fact that the communication of the chatters lives outside of the chat room, but only for a moment, and it is not archived. In other words, Listening Post operates very differently than the history-conscious Spimes mentioned earlier. The Listening Post has no memory, it is a monument only to the present. Its effect is hypnotic, and viewers who sat in front of the piece for a time were watching a performance for which the stage direction was provided by a filtering algorithm, and the characters were the thousands of chatters who were supplying pieces of content.

Watching Listening Post for several minutes provided the view of the future of electronic art that I had been waiting to see, one in which artists orchestrate systems, find beauty in the analysis of information flows, and become choreographers of data. The rear-view mirror just needs to be polished up a bit to see that technology will keep on marching backwards into the future, and it is up to cultural producers to direct that march to a meaningful place. a

Ars Electronica, Linz, 2-7 September, 2004

Michelle Kasprzak <michelle AT kasprzak.ca> is an artist, writer and lecturer based in Montreal, Canada. She recently founded Chimera Society, an organisation devoted to the critical analysis of interdisciplinary practice. You can read her blog at <http://michelle.kasprzak.ca/blog>