CHRISTINE SCHOPF
CO-ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE ARS ELECTRONICA FESTIVAL

Christine Schopf

You were one of the co-founders of Ars Electronica in 1979. What were your thoughts as you were conceiving this first festival dedicated to electronic arts?
We weren't thinking 30 years ahead, but we thought the scene of art, technology and society the subtitle of Ars Electronica - would consist of the future. This was from the very beginning. The name didn't change, and the subtitle didn't change. […] My boss, Hannes Leopoldseder, whom I think is the real founder of Ars Electronica, came up with the idea, because just a few years before, the first Apple product came on the market as the first personal computer. He and we were convinced that this personal technology would influence the arts, that artists would use it, could use it now, and it would influence our society.
Before it was meant to be just a small symposium on electronic music, because an electronic musician came with the idea to do a symposium and then he contacted Hannes Leopoldseder. For Hannes it was quite clear that this could be more than a small symposium, that this could be a festival, and that it could lead into the future. […] We had the idea, but we didn't know that it would be that fast and that strong, that this technology would become part of everybody's lives. We didn't know, nobody knew, that it would happen within a few years.

These days, digital and online technologies are ubiquitous. Is it the social aspect of your event that keeps it relevant?
The word "society" was present from the very beginning, and we also included sciences. So it was never meant to be an elite art festival. It was meant to be more of a cultural festival, dealing with cultural questions, and it was clear that this technology would influence our society a lot. And what we see nowadays is that even the current crisis would not have happened without digital technology, without networks, the globalization of IT.
It was our precise idea to create a festival that included science. The first time it had rather been a technology-oriented and art-oriented symposium […]
In the beginning, the topics were not meant for the general public of Linz. They would never go to Bruckner House. This happens everywhere. The people from the city where it happens don't come, but you get people from around the world.

The politicians of the time wouldn't have continued to finance an event that excluded the locals!
Hannes Leopoldseder's idea was that we needed to have an event outside. This was Sound Cloud: Linz Klangwolke in the big open air, outside. […] So this first Sound Cloud was the

8th symphony of Anton Bruckner. We had an 8-track tape, which was split into four, with loudspeakers on both sides of the Danube, inviting the orchestra, a big balloon in the center, a laser (which was a new technology at the time), and we expected about ten thousand people. In fact, a hundred thousand people came. We had done a lot of promotion work and we also invited people to participate: If you can't come to Klangwolke, take your radio, put it on your window, put it in your garden, and create your own Sound Cloud. The symphony was transmitted and broadcasted on the radio at the same time. So, a hundred thousand people came and this convinced politicians. The latter first said, "ok, let's keep Klangwolke, but forget Ars Electronica, that's for a small audience, it doesn't impress us". Finally, Hannes Leopoldseder convinced them to keep it. His proposal was, "let's do a biennale. So you give the budget every year, we put it together, and every two years we do it". This was just a practical thing. With that, Ars Electronica got more and more attention. So finally, the politicians understood this was something. […]

The evolution of the Prix Ars Electronica is fascinating. In the past, for example, the Golden Nica for Computer Animation was the most anticipated, whereas now,

Ars Electronica Center.

it's the Hybrid Art category that is in the spotlight...

When we started Ars Electronica with those categories, we made clear from the very beginning that this was a growing project. Because technology grows, and it has to be open in the future for new categories, it has to be open so that we can withdraw some categories. So the Prix Ars Electronica grew to seven categories over the years with more or less technological changes and art changes.
We increasingly find that the borders between the arts are disappearing.
For instance, if you go to the CyberArts exhibition, you see the Nica final animation. Is it an installation? Is it an animation? You see in music, the German piece with visualization and acoustics. Is it music? Is it sound art? So this is really moving around. As I mentioned in the very beginning, I don't understand Ars Electronica as a pure arts festival, like Documenta. We understand it more or less as a big research lab.

Digital technology continues to shape our society...

There have been years when we focused more on art. There have been years when we focused more on technology. For instance, in 1990: virtual reality and artificial life. All this related to the question: "what does this mean?" We did not merely present virtual reality as a technological new thing, but asked: "how could this influence our society? What will this mean?" So we had a brilliant round of people here, from very different positions. There was Bruce Sterling, who is definitely not a technological person, William Gibson, people coming from a quite different position, talking about what it means. Other topics were more society-related or even politically influenced. It changes.
Some years, it's a more philosophical topic, then it's more technological.

Institutional museums are still reticent about the idea of collecting unstable artworks. Could we say that Ars Electronica, through its openness to emerging artistic practices, has become a sort of lounge for the rejected, for those banished from the contemporary art market?

I recently talked with Julius von Bismarck. I asked him about the situation of media art. Is it on the traditional art market of museums, galleries?
There is always the financial question. What is the original work when you talk about art? Is it sustainable? Technology changes. Soon, maybe in 10 years, you will no longer be able to display it. This is a problem we have. For the art market, and I think for museums and galleries, there's also a little risk in installing interactive pieces, genetic art, because it's not that sustainable, it needs a lot of maintenance. Most museums have nobody who could do the maintenance [...].

Is the low visibility of the digital art market essentially linked to the question of original artwork, which makes it a rare commodity?

What we show here is more or less coming from laboratories, individual studios [...]. I talked to Steven Sacks of Bitforms Gallery in New York. He sells media art. We talked about ARCO in Madrid, where he had a booth. As a certificate of originality, he gives the source code, but it's a joke. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, who does many large-scale interactive works, produces prints instead. So an artwork always has to try to find a way to be sustainable.
Our history is over 30 years old, and looking back, it always took a while. I remember the first images of Herbert Franke, one of the pioneers of computer graphics and also very related to Ars Electronica. Galleries and contemporary art museums did not show the work he had done. It was prints, easy to make, easy to exhibit. It came really over the years; with a delay of I don't know how many years, the art market opened. It began with video art, which started at the same time in the '60s in the U.S. and Europe. Video art became matter for collectors 20 years later! ●