LEONARDO*



Goldsmiths



VOL 17 NO 1 A collection of articles, reviews and opinion pieces that discuss and analyze the complexity of mixing things together as a process that is not necessarily undertaken in an orderly and organized manner. Wide open opportunity to discuss issues in interdisciplinary education; art, science and technology interactions; personal artistic practices; history of re-combinatory practices; hybridizations between old and new media; cultural creolization; curatorial studies and more.

Contributions from Frieder Nake, Stelarc, Paul Catanese

and other important cultural operators.



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Leonardo Electronic Almanac

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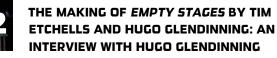
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Sidetrack or Crossroads?

Ars Electronica 2010

by

Erkki Huhtamo

With the second second

After the Ars Electronica 2010 festival was over, the press office triumphantly touted in its communiqué: "90,227 visitors at the greatest Ars Electronica Festival since 1979." For someone who has visited the festival every year since 1989 (with only two exceptions), it is easy to simply reverse the statement, and claim that this was the poorest – or to put it more nicely: the most mediocre – Ars Electronica of the past twenty years.

Reality never fits neatly within such polarities, so explanations, and perhaps amendments, are needed. True, the setting was unusual. Instead of the customary venues distributed throughout the city (The Brucknerhaus, the ok Center, the Ars Electronica Center, the Art University, etc.), the organizers had taken an unique opportunity and brought practically the entire festival into a single location, a massive industrial complex that until the previous year housed a cigarette factory. The Tabakfabrik Linz was originally founded around 1850. In its present form, largely designed between 1930–35 by Peter Behrens and Alexander Popp, it is considered a monument of modernist architecture, and a landmark of the city. The move was a gamble that produced very mixed results. True, the logistics must have been formidable, partly because the infrastructure, including the allimportant IT structure, was in no way in place to house a major arts festival. The venue's uncertain status (its future use was under debate) also caused limitations. Although the labyrinthine corridors and halls looked – and even smelled – as if the workers had moved out the day before, I heard that even such simple and necessary acts as hammering nails to the walls were strictly regulated.

Considering the formidable challenges, and the limited time in which the transformations had to be made, the organizers had performed wonders. An ample entrance area had been created, and the factory yard turned into a food and beer court. Obviously the local promotional machinery (including the jungle drum) had worked well. Although it would be interesting to know by what kind of mathematics the organizers determined that there were over 90,000 visitors (by the total ticket sales?), the Tabakfabrik was indeed crowded, particularly during the festival's first weekend.

The vast majority of the visitors were local townspeople, from young families with babies to grandmothers and grandfathers. Many of them seemed to have been attracted by the unique opportunity to have a peek at the well-known building complex, which was open for the general public for the very first time. Another attraction was the outdoor food court that offered a kind of Octoberfest ahead of its schedule. Indeed, downing beer and tasting local specialities in this special location was a pleasant experience, in spite of the variable weather.

The real problem of the festival was what should have been the center of everything: its artistic and intellectual offerings. Perhaps preparing the venue had been such a time-consuming undertaking that the organizers had simply ran out of energy to think about what to exhibit. There may have been a bit of panic: the Tabakfabrik was so large that filling it in a satisfactory way was very difficult. This may partly explain the prominent presence of a kind of trade fair or "Messe." True, the theme was "Repair," but one may still ask what commercial exhibits of house insulation companies have to do with electronic arts.

Just a few short weeks before the festival was supposed to begin, there was no detailed information about the program available on its website. Snippets started appearing after I (and probably others) started repeatedly asking for it, and reminding the organizers that they were running the risk of losing their international visitors who had to make their travel arrangements (several non-Austrian people I know decided to stay away for this reason).

The cold fact is that there was very little extraordinary, ambitious, and challenging work on display; something that would have warranted the long and costly trip to Linz. Ars Electronica had turned into a very local town festival, offering next to nothing for international professionals, electronic art fans and insiders looking for cutting-edge art, media and technology, as well as high-level intellectual debate. Interestingly, this was implicitly confirmed by the press office's final communiqué that focused on figures, but did not mention anything at all about the contents of the festival.

I remember numerous highlights from the Ars Electronicas I have attended during the past twenty years, but I have hard time recalling even a single truly important experience from the 2010 festival. I saw no exceptional and path-breaking performances. The conference, once again chaired by Derrick de Kerckhove, lacked energy and originality, and was mostly poorly attended. The exhibitions suffered from the



limitations of the venue, so video documentations too often took the place of the works themselves. Interactivity was rare – "don't touch" signs were common.

Even the Golden Nica winner Eyewriter, an innovative eye-tracking device (but not an artwork), could not be tried personally (this was done without problems at the crowded Japan Media Arts Festival in Tokyo in February 2011). The creator of another prize winner, the astonishing remote-controlled robot named Dirk, told me that the organizers had asked him to submit just a video documentation. He refused, and brought the robot to the festival on his own. Pushing its shopping cart around the factory area it became a central attraction. Countless baffled visitors tried to find out if it was a real robot, or a human being posing as one.

Ars Electronica has always had to dance the tightrope between local interests and international relevance. Local politicians and businessmen provide the money, and expect something in return. In 2010 they received plenty, I think, seeing the townspeople appreciate their investments. The international relevance of Ars Electronica, however, was put in serious jeopardy. As a small, but telling, sign, most of the festival's long-term international supporters, those who have helped to make it what it is, were not even invited to the Prix Ars Electronica Gala, the main social gathering of the festival. They were left outside to their own devices.

While preparing for the next edition, which is unlikely to take place again at the Tabakfabrik (so I hear), the

festival organizers should look into the mirror and ask themselves some serious questions. Whom are we serving? Are we concerned about advancing the cause of the electronic arts on a superior and truly international level (as during the festival's glorious past)? Or are we content with degenerating into a popular but artistically and intellectually lame/tame local mass event, serving Bier, Wurst, and a little bit of electronic arts on the side?

