

# ARS ELECTRONICA re:shaping a city's cultural identity

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Abstract: 30 years ago the first Ars Electronica festival took place in Linz, Austria. Ars has grown to be one of the most influential Media Art festivals and centers worldwide. But while much has been written about it, and still more will be talked about its history when Ars celebrates its 30th anniversary in 2009, there has not yet been a comprehensive study about Ars Electronica's influence on the local community and its impact on the cultural development of Linz. This paper investigates the sociocultural and artistic traces Ars Electronica has left on the city of Linz. This Media Art historical account also details a very personal history, as the author, being four years old at the time of the first festival and amazed by its fireworks display, remembers the festival's beginnings from her personal experience and ñ having worked for Ars Electronica's Futurelab for many years - from a professional perspective as well.

The main question of this talk is how the then marginal field of art, science and technology, placed in an even more marginal, working-class and steel-producing city contributed greatly to the creation/development of a new cultural identity of the city, the art scene and the community as a whole. My investigation into the histories of this cultural institution focuses on the regional impact, regional being interpreted as geographically located/rooted as well as interpersonally built.

Keywords: Ars Electronica, public space, cultural identity, local communities, media art histories

Linz = Province

Linz is a practical city. You can tell, for example because you can't study humanities here. Instead, it has a huge steel company, and consistently, the university mainly focuses on technology. Up until recently, the Art University offered a program simply called imetal1 . It seems that the city has no sense for the beau arts and never established its own fine arts tradition. Its cultural identity is one of working class and industry. Everything is headed towards production.

Heavy industries, founded by the Hitler regime in World War 2, made Linz grow and get prosperous. Before that, Linz was not known for anything. Afterwards, it was known for its bad air quality. Being a prosperous and promising place, you don't want to be known for that. You want to be known for beautiful achievements, for your culture. Only problem was, since Anton Bruckner Linz did not have any famous artist of international caliber. An identity that was not connected to dirt, pollution and province was needed. Being situated in the middle of two cultural capitals with their rich histories, Salzburg in the West and Vienna in the East, Linz suffered from being a cultural dwarf, a province. In this vacuum, something that would really make a difference, a strong, modern and unique cultural identity was desired. And because it was not possible to conjure one out of thin air, Linz would have to invent itself as the city of the future. In the 70s, inspired by the general political air of the time and promoted by the social-democratic administration under chancellor Bruno Kreisky, the idea was to offer iculture for all. In this spirit, Ars Electronica came to life.

The Invention of the Future

One of the first of these icultural attacks on Linz in the 70s was the start of the annual Brucknerfestival, named after the one patron saint of art that was summoned ever so often these days. Bruckner was the alibi, the certificate that guaranteed that what is done under his auspices is art. The framework of the festival also served as an environment for more daring experiments like the iforum-series, comprised of forum steel (1971, 1975), forum metal (1977) and forum design (1980), which received a lot of international praise - and public outrage against some of the artworks. For example, the artist collective Haus-Rucker-Co's iNike of Samothrake2, an eight meter huge statue that was put on top of the art university's roof on main square. Much hated by the public, it was soon removed. But as one of the first icultural victims, after it's death (= removal) it began a kind of after life and became a local myth. Ten years later, in 1987, it would return as a small statue and become the Golden Nica of the Prix Ars Electronica3.

Metal flows in the city of Linz's veins. Metal was what brought the city to life. It had become THE symbol of prosperity and the city's working class identity; it was responsible for the prosperity of the 70s as well as for the decline in the 80s. And it turned into an artistic material. Very different, but also connected to industry rather than art, was another promising material. The fast approaching development of microelectronics was regarded as the 3rd industrial revolution. And Linz not being a cultural city, but an industrial one, could be imagined as taking this direction into its future. This would transport the city's past into modern times without meaning a complete break from its roots; the digital phoenix would be born from the industrial ashes. The computer thus became a substitute for metal and was introduced as the new cultural medium before the culture was even there. It was a top-down approach driven by the desire to create a unique, authentic identity. Metal and microelectronics were promising materials for both the economic and the cultural future of Linz.

#### Linz welcomes the Future

In the late 70ies, the heads of the then very young regional studio of the Austrian broadcast cooperation ORF also went on to search for a cultural identity for Linz. Not a search, but rather an invention. Chance happened, that right then electronic musician Hubert Bognermayr from Eela Craig approached ORF Upper Austria's director Hannes Leopoldseder and his colleague Christine Schöpf with his idea of an electronic music festival. In this proposal, Leopoldseder and Schöpf saw the potential for the festival to become something much bigger. In the end, the music festival was accompanied by a competition (simply called the big prize and later replaced by the Prix Ars Electronica) and a symposium, that was held in cooperation with the local university. In these events, the topic of microelectronics should cross disciplinary boundaries, involve artists and engineers alike in dialog and give fruitful new input for everyone<sup>4</sup>. Inspirations for the festival also came from Nove Tendencije, Siggraph and Steirischer Herbst, a festival for new art in Styria. As the idea was born, the first Ars Electronica was to be held from the 18th to 21st of September in 1979 and Linz was ready to welcome its brand new cultural future.

That this first Ars Electronica was not a one-hit-wonder was mainly due to the huge success of one of its highlights, the Klangwolke (Cloud of Sound). From the beginning it was clear, that Ars Electronica would not be a mere art festival, but a cultural festival that would involve the public. In this spirit, the Cloud of Sound was conceived as a huge outdoor spectacle of classical music and visualizations. Inside Brucknerhaus, the orchestra performed Bruckner's 8th Symphony; in the park outside, along the Danube, vast loudspeakers broadcast the live music from the concert hall and the sky and river served as a gigantic screen. The concert was also live broadcast on the radio and people who could not come to the park were invited to put their radios in the open windows and thus contribute by making their own mini Cloud of Sound. The original plan also involved people walking around in the park, from one loudspeaker to the next and thereby having an ever changing musical experience. This did not work out, because about 100.000 people attended and there simply was no space to move. (Just to compare it with, the whole population of the city is 250.000.) Because of this – also in terms of cultural politics – huge success, it was immediately clear that the Cloud of Sound had to be repeated (= would receive public funding) and thus a second Ars Electronica festival was bound to happen<sup>6</sup>. As an effect, for a long time the terms Ars Electronica and Cloud of Sound were used synonymously, the two events perceived as one and the same thing. They were not only meant to profile Linz to the outside, but first of all to the people in Linz. Via the transposition of Anton Bruckner into the realms of electronic music and art, Linz and by this its population should become culturally recognizable.

In the last paragraph of his article for the first Ars Electronica catalogue, Hannes Leopoldseder wrote: "ARS ELECTRONICA is not an event that deals with a record of the past, but addresses the developments of tomorrow. For this reason, this event about electronic art and new experiences has the notion of the incalculable and risk, too. At the same time, however, ARS ELECTRONICA is a challenge for artists, technicians, cultural critics, and not least the audience, that will encounter new expressions of art."<sup>7</sup>

Top-down and into the future was the way to go that is addressed here, out of the museums and into the open space, involving the public, not just an interested, international or even intentional audience, but foremost

the local community in and of Linz. In the years that followed, Linz saw a number of spectacular Clouds of Sound, for example Isao Tomita's laser show *iMind of Universe*<sup>8</sup> in 1984. The sky was the limit in 1982, when the topic of the whole festival was Sky Art. Otto Piene, being the main organizer of these events, collaborated with Charlotte Moorman in *iSky Kiss*<sup>9</sup>. Moorman was floating above Donaulände, playing her cello, hanging suspended from a bunch of balloons for a whole day. Conquering the sky with balloons remained a topos and was picked up again in 2005 by local artist Martin Music, who tried to fly across the Danube, supported by 5000 inflated balloons only<sup>10</sup>.

As Ars Electronica and time went on, ever new places were occupied. The city's baroque main square repeatedly became the center stage. As of its central location, also the (unsuspecting) public constantly became involved in Ars Electronica. Examples from the early years include "Klangstraße" (Sound Street, 1980, by Michael Jülich)<sup>11</sup> and Walter Haupt's "Mach-mit-Konzert" (Join-In-Concert, 1980)<sup>12</sup>. Two of the most spectacular events were Giorgio Battistelli's "Steel Opera" from 1982 and Klaus Schulze's "Steel Symphony" (1984)<sup>13</sup>, that both involved the steel mill's workers and machines in their performances.

Especially the 80s and early 90s saw another public space being occupied and taken over by artists. ORF as an organizer became a protagonist of plays, where art became media art because of fully being accomplished on their channels, in their broadcasts, and sometimes even through the credibility of their reporters. ORF provided TV and radio as a platform, tool and material for artists. Very often, this resulted in Media Art in an Orwellian style. For example, in *iNobody is Safe*<sup>14</sup> from 1991, when local artist group Stadtwerkstatt requested the TV-audience to vote whether a little dog should be blown up<sup>15</sup>. The result was that the dog should be executed and the dog was exploded live on TV. The audience was enreaged and the next day ORF had to declare that it was all a hoax, an art project, and that the dog was well and alive.

Playfulness always was one of the main ingredients to involve the public into participation. Whether it was that people should bring self-made instruments and gather on main square to be an orchestra or to cast their shadows in Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *iBody Movies*<sup>16</sup> (2002)<sup>16</sup>. Playing Pong together in Loren and Rachel Carpenter's *iAudience Participation*<sup>17</sup> (1994)<sup>17</sup>, simply being specators of Theo Jansen's *iStrandbeesten*<sup>18</sup> (2005)<sup>18</sup>, or collaboratively writing a piece of code by climbing a facade in Gruppe FOK's *iTeleklettergarten*<sup>19</sup> (2003)<sup>19</sup> are just a few of the many, many examples. Playfulness and events in public space both were used to literally get people in touch with art. Events like these also perfectly fit in with the city's desire of providing *iculture* for all<sup>1</sup> and *iculture* by all<sup>1</sup>.

## Networks

In addition to the city's support, the takeover of the public and its spaces was only made possible through a dense network of individual and institutional cooperation and collaboration. From the beginning, the local alternative art scene has been involved<sup>20</sup>. Stadtwerkstatt, contained (in the mid 90s, followed by:), time's up, Radio Fro, servus.at, transpublic, Kunstraum Goethestraße and Social Impact ñ to mention just a few ñ mainly contribute by developing their own projects for the festival and providing their spaces. Museums like OK centrum, Brucknerhaus, Stifterhaus, Designcenter, Lentos, the Art University, the Architecture Forum or Landesgalerie<sup>21</sup> host exhibitions and events and also give support to the artists. Private companies sponsor the festival and Prix in general as well as individual projects.

Ars is not just an event and museum, but also represents a tight personal network of friends and collaborators, internationally as well as locally. First and foremost through the still ongoing involvement and commitment of the founders Christine Schöpf and Hannes Leopoldseder, early supporters like Kathy Rae Huffman or Roy Ascott, who were also part of the group that gathered to write the proposal for the Ars Electronica Center in the early 90s<sup>22</sup>. Via radio art and telematic projects, current director Gerfried Stocker got into contact with Heidi Grundmann, who was working for ORF's culture department in Vienna and founder of Kunstradio and her husband Robert Adrian X. These two had already been in close contact with Schöpf and Leopoldseder and were part of the proposal group as well. When Stocker became the artistic director of Ars, he brought with him a network of friends and collaborators from his home in Styria. Through all the changes that Ars had to undergo in its 30 years, these ties meant stability and kept the original spirit

alive. Change and stability together contribute to the success of Ars Electronica. Similarly, almost everyone in Linz who is interested in culture has directly or indirectly been involved in the Ars Electronica festival. As the city is small, most of these people also entertain personal friendships amongst each other and work together in various small and large scale, temporary and permanent projects and groups. In addition, through Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau's Interface Culture Lab at the Art University and the working opportunities at Futurelab, a lot of international students have come to Linz and enriched this network.

The relation between Ars Electronica and the alternative scene is not always unambiguous and without friction, but nevertheless has proved to be fruitful for both sides. A lot of the most interesting festival projects come from the alternative scene. One of the earliest examples of this involvement is Stadtwerkstatt, a group that started in 1979 as well. Stadtwerkstatt was invited to contribute by founder Christine Schöpf as early as 1984 (with their project 'Singing Pool'). The 'enveloping-technique' of placing new cultural experiments in the context of an already existing, strong and stable framework is still continued in the collaborations of Ars Electronica with the local art scene, but at least in the view of the alternative scene it tends to act patriarchic and at times not as an equal partner.

### Cultural Identity and Politics

Culture as something that was identified as badly missing became a political issue. In the spirit of the 70s when the administration of social democratic chancellor Bruno Kreisky was responsible for a lot of social advancements for the public, like free access to universities, free school books, affordable public housing, etc... culture also became a public good and should be freely and openly available for each and everyone, especially for the working class. To achieve this goal, culture had to come to the people and get out of the ivory towers of museums. In the Cultural Development Plan (CDP23), these goals are still alive. To bridge the gap between high art and culture for all is one of its main goals. The CDP was created by politicians, art institutions and artists together. It sets the longterm goals of cultural development for Linz. Written in 1998/99, it builds on three pillars, technology and new media, public spaces and the alternative scene. That Ars Electronica plays an important role in the public perception of this development, is made clear:

The focus on technology and new media can only be successfully maintained if we can together provide a package of innovative and financially secure measures effective in the longterm. With the support of the Federal Government and the Province of Upper Austria, the Ars Electronica Festival should be put onto a broad financial and institutional basis to consolidate its international status, to ensure its strong presence in the Open Space sector, and to promote ever closer ties with the city and the region. A closer relationship between art and science is also needed.

[...]

The further development of the concepts "Culture for all" and "Culture in open spaces" will remain in the future an important focus of activity for the City of Linz. We see the development of a new type of "Culture for all" concept in a direction leading towards "Culture by all" as a significant contribution to the establishment of a democratic cultural policy. It is important above all to promote the active participation of as wide a spectrum of the population as possible in the cultural life of the city. Projects involving measures of this sort receive particular support (further development of the Cloud of Sound concept, artistic enhancement of city spaces etc.) and this element is taken into consideration in the city's own cultural projects (see also the chapter "Promoting culture and the arts").

[...]

The stronger integration of Ars Electronica into the "Open Spaces" concept, and the further development of the "Cloud of Sound" is another part of this expansion of the Art and New Media platform.<sup>124</sup>

One aspect that affects the alternative scene in particular is that part of the funding which Ars Electronica receives has to be re-distributed by Ars Electronica to the alternative scene. This is mainly the case for festival productions. It is meant to involve local artists and groups into the international festival and by that to give them a platform far bigger than what they would usually have. But as project proposals first have to be acknowledged and evaluated for funding by Ars Electronica, the model is mainly seen as hegemonic and thus not appreciated. For that, the relationship between Ars Electronica as the Big Brother and the local alternative art scene is not always without friction.

Local politics stylize Linz as a symbol of the future-oriented community par excellence, that now is prosperous and productive in both culture and economy. They still perceive culture as something that can be produced in an industrial manner rather than something that grows. Through the tendency of thinking that only the new is good, of permanent progress almost became an obsession and sometimes it seems that too much emphasis is attributed to this aspect. As in many other Austrian museums and as a result of public funding for museums, the city's political representatives are also board members of Ars Electronica and still guard its overall development.

#### Ars Electronica in the Public View

Using so many different platforms, being around for such a long time, using so many institutions' spaces and temporarily taking over their audiences and employees, using TV and radio as another public space, it is hardly possible not to participate in Ars Electronica. While many people might not regard all the projects as art, there definitely is a high recognition and pride of Linz's international top-position in Media Arts.

In a poll conducted by the opinion research center Spectra in May/June 2008<sup>25</sup>, when asked what they spontaneously associate with Linz, people mentioned Brucknerhaus in the first place, followed by Ars Electronica in second and the Cloud of Sound in third place<sup>26</sup>. They also said that compared with other cities in Austria, they see Linz as a) an industrial city, b) the city in Austria they associate most with technology and that c) stands for digital art<sup>27</sup>. By the people of Linz, the city is perceived as modern and dynamic with an attractive alternative cultural offer<sup>28</sup>. This last aspect is especially because of the digital arts - Ars Electronica still is considered to be alternative culture. The polls show that the self perception of the people in Linz is highly associated with Ars Electronica and with culture as well as with industry. Over the course of the years, the top-down implemented cultural identity has become a natural identity and so the program that was started 30 years ago can be regarded as very successful.

#### Conclusion

Ars Electronica has certainly had a deep impact on the city's cultural development, but somehow still remains a friendly alien within the city. The concepts of Avant-Garde and futurism are not meaningful for the working class mentality of Linz, but have come to live in peaceful coexistence. In the years since Ars started, a very active and attractive alternative Media Art and culture scene has grown; with the Interface Cultures program, the offers of the local art university have expanded into Media Arts as well.

Where elsewhere you may hear art historians musing whether Media Art ever existed, in Linz it is much more regarded as an environment than a tool. Over the course of 30 years it has become omnipresent. 'Culture for all' remains on to be the motto for politicians and is manifested in a range of free (digital, mainstream) art festivals and activities in the Open Source sector. Linz, despite being a small city, has a high density of digital art in many different facets. It must be acknowledged that the fact that Ars Electronica and therefore digital arts have been accepted as a naturally developed culture in Linz, although it was a top-down implementation. Part of this success is the 'culture for all'-approach. On the other hand: The event-like character of so many Ars projects might in part also be due to this and sometimes results in productions of doubtful artistic relevance.

Ars Electronica definitely and most influentially changed the cultural identity of Linz and put a unique trademark on it, that is both internationally and locally recognized

#### NOTES

1 The Art University of Linz, history: <http://www.ufg.ac.at/index.php?id=1237&L=1>

2 See for example: <http://www.linz.at/english/culture/4678.asp>

3 From an unpublished interview with Christine Schöpf, May 19th, 2008

4 Summarized from the above mentioned, unpublished interview with Christine Schöpf, May 19th, 2008

5 [http://www.aec.at/festival\\_about\\_en.php](http://www.aec.at/festival_about_en.php)

- 6 From an unpublished interview with Christine Schöpf, May 19th, 2008
- 7 [http://90.146.8.18/de/archives/festival\\_archive/festival\\_catalogs/festival\\_artikel.asp?iProjectID=9503](http://90.146.8.18/de/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=9503) (German only)
- 8 [http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/festival\\_archive/festival\\_catalogs/festival\\_artikel.asp?iProjectID=9324](http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=9324)
- 9 [http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/festival\\_archive/festival\\_catalogs/festival\\_artikel.asp?iProjectID=9378](http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=9378) and [http://90.146.8.18/de/archiv\\_files/19821/1982\\_058.pdf](http://90.146.8.18/de/archiv_files/19821/1982_058.pdf)
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- 15 <http://www.servus.at/stwst/kunst/niemand/niemand2.htm>
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- 18 [http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/prix\\_archive/prix\\_projekt.asp?iProjectID=13388](http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/prix_archive/prix_projekt.asp?iProjectID=13388)
- 19 [http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/festival\\_archive/festival\\_catalogs/festival\\_artikel.asp?iProjectID=12538](http://90.146.8.18/en/archives/festival_archive/festival_catalogs/festival_artikel.asp?iProjectID=12538)
- 20 Stadtwerkstatt: <http://stadtwerkstatt.at>, Radio FRO: <http://www.fro.at/>, Time's Up: <http://www.timesup.org/>, transpublic: <http://www.transpublic.at/>, KunstRaum Goethestraße: <http://www.kunstraum.at/>, Social Impact: <http://www.social-impact.at>, <http://servus.at>
- 21 OK Centrum: [www.ok-centrum.at](http://www.ok-centrum.at), Lentos: [www.lentos.at](http://www.lentos.at), OÖ Landesgalerie: <http://www.landesgalerie.at/de/lg/>, Architekturforum: <http://www.design-center.at/-6913-1-1-decom-/cms.html>, Stifterhaus: <http://www.stifter-haus.at/>, Designcenter: <http://www.design-center.at/-6913-1-1-de-com-/cms.html>, Brucknerhaus: <http://www.brucknerhaus.at>, Kunstuniversität Linz: [www.ufg.ac.at](http://www.ufg.ac.at)
- 22 From an unpublished interview with Christine Schöpf, May 19th, 2008
- 23 <http://www.linz.at/kultur/Kep/E-start.htm>
- 24 <http://www.linz.at/kultur/Kep/E-Profil.htm>
- 25 As recently included in the exhibition "Stadt im Glück": <http://www.stadt-im-glueck.at/text/20>
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- 27 [http://www.stadt-im-glueck.at/sites/www.stadt-im-glueck.at/files/images/C\\_1\\_2\\_13\\_web.jpg](http://www.stadt-im-glueck.at/sites/www.stadt-im-glueck.at/files/images/C_1_2_13_web.jpg) , section itechnology and industryî
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