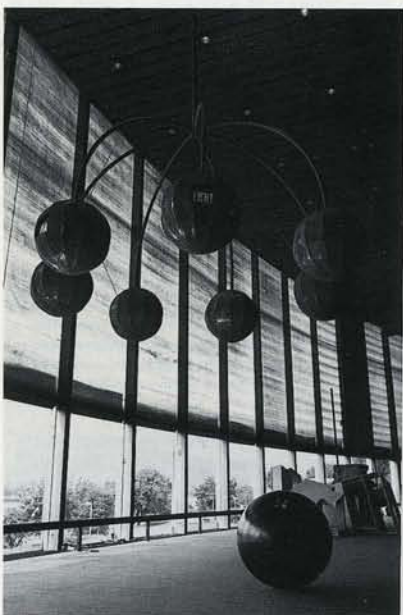


R E P O R T S

Ars Electronica

June 22nd - 27th, Linz, Austria.



Michael Bielicky 'Der Innere Beobachter'

The World from Within was the theme for this year's **Ars Electronica**, Europe's key computer arts festival, which took place in Linz, Austria. References to the theme abounded, from the ubiquitous data-glove/helmet VR set-ups through to **Stelarc's** performance with a camera in his stomach, in which the interior is formidably on display. However, all certainty of the existence of the interior was fairly rapidly questioned, following US animator **Charlie Gunn's** explanation of the ideas behind the computer animation *Not Knot* - one of this year's prizewinners. Offering us a guided tour through hyperbolic geometry it makes simple the concept of anti-knots

and flying through right-angled dodecahedral tessellations of hyperbolic space. Or so he said.

The problem that many of these works encounter is typified by *Not Knot*. We seem fascinated by the look and the spectacle but seem unable to find much of ourselves within it. *The World From Within* seems to be about the world as seen by the sterile eye of the computer camera as much as any human view. A large-scale performance by **Kirsti Allik** and **Robert Mulder** from Canada attempted to depict the 'basic contradictions associated with human awareness' by miming in white suits alongside large scale projections of computer generated images. They managed to include all the key elements like 'interactive', 'multidisciplinary' and 'Steven Hawking' into their catalogue notes, but I found it vaguely reminiscent of *Vision On* set to the soundtrack of Darth Vader's spaceship directly overhead.

The festival featured the works of over fifty artists in many media and divided the work up into Computer Graphics, Computer Animation, Interactive Art & Computer Music. The festival was obviously well supported in that way only middle-Europeans know how, with buses to all venues and the occasional chilled Austrian bubbly on arrival. The infrastructure was all there, with plentiful, well researched notes and well-run events. It all reeked of the high art world at work, calling the shots with its credence undiminished by commercial compromise. But it's a sad footnote to these events that the British experience will never match this, while most of us still feel horribly guilty about spending this much money on something which **Peter Weibel** (on the festival jury) describes as "transcending the local event horizon". I guess by this he means computer art allows us to see beyond (as he says) the "prison of space and time". If so, I'm still waiting to be convinced that we are ready to be let out.

Some works, however, did begin to chip away at their intended targets. **Jeffrey Shaw** offered us a Virtual Museum, with a cool trip through a finely rendered computer museum courtesy of a wired up office chair, a rotating platform and a whacking great big Silicon graphics workstation. By sitting on the chair and rocking or spinning it, the platform on which you are positioned rotates. As you move, the image on the screen in front of you guides you through some beautiful virtual exhibits in time with your movements.

A piece that offered us another form of graphic quality was **Jean-Louis Bossier's** *Globus Oculi*. Using the computer like a personal snapshot album,

the work allowed us to elegantly flick through a series of short Quicktime animations which were triggered by a trackerball pointer. If we placed the pointer beneath a child's chin, for example, we heard and seen her chuckle.

The installations were spread across two main venues in Linz. The modern Brucknerhouse concert hall, in a small park overlooking the Danube, and the classical Landesmuseum Francisco Carolinum. Various other venues were also used, such as the ORF (Austrian Broadcasting) studios and a spectacular church high on a hill overlooking the town, reached by a cute wooden funicular railway. The festival also made some attempt at a historical perspective with exhibits of milestones in software (including Tetris, After Dark and an anonymous virus) plus an extensive trawl through someone's garage to produce a large museum of experimental video and audio hardware. It's very strange to see the kind of thing I last saw propping up shelves at LVA being tastefully presented within natty perspex cabinets. Some of the pieces had been brought back to life and allowed a degree of interactivity, so the place was full of Austrian schoolkids playing D.I.Y Nam June Paik.

It was a large festival, with stacks of hardware, and was pervaded by a strange kind of artificial showmanship which demands that you put up a screen to hide the hardware, but you leave a gap so everyone can look behind to see how it's done. A festival like this is part train-spotting, part fearless aphorisms, with computers being seen as something unified, a single tool with some common approach for its users, and a notion that being a technological paradigm, it must also be an artistic paradigm. It's intriguing how long this approach can be sustained as the various branches meander off in their own direction, often making more successful reference to their lineage, not to their technological base.

However, it has to be said that his festival did still retain an air of experiment and eccentricity, with scientists talking about art, and artists remembering their O'Levels. With creditable installations by **William Seaman**, **Agnes Hegedus** and **Christopher Steffner**, the art was well-represented, but personally I am still trying to decipher the nanotechnology seminar with **Richard Dawkins**. It seems likely that, if it has anything in common with hyperbolic geometry, I will need to direct my imagination, as it says in the programme, 'into the very bowels of the material'.

CLIVE GILLMAN