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Ars Electronica: *"Repair"*

Pau Waelder

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ARS ELECTRONICA: REPAIR

Described by its organizers as "the greatest *Ars Electronica* since 1979," the 31st edition of the Festival for Art, Technology and Society that takes place every year in Linz (Austria) will probably be remembered for its record-setting numbers: 90,227 visitors, 307 events, 570 artists and speakers from 25 countries and an 80,000 m² exhibition space. This last figure is relevant due to the fact that it is the vast amount of available space that has made the 2010 *Ars Electronica* a totally different experience from the previous editions. In December 2009, the City of Linz purchased the Tabakfabrik, the former tobacco factory located next to the Danube, and decided to declare it "the nucleus from which the new potential for this city's future will emerge."[1] The festival moved to the factory that comprises several buildings, and therefore was able to centralize all its activities in a single venue, instead of hosting its exhibitions, symposia and workshops in different locations scattered around the city centre (Brücknerhaus, University of Linz, OK Centrum...). This entailed, on one hand, separating *Ars Electronica* from the city and turning it into an enclosed event (although at the same time it increased the number of visitors), while on the other, it became the perfect opportunity to illustrate the festival's theme: *REPAIR*, a concept that applied to environmental issues as well as to economic and cultural concerns. The festival organizers did in fact "repair" the factory by giving it a new life, but they had to face serious problems: the main buildings, constructed between 1928 and 1935 by Peter Behrens and Alexander Popp, are now listed as having historical and architectural interest and therefore it is forbidden to attach any fixed structure to their walls or (numerous) pillars. Temporary walls were built with cardboard boxes and other solutions were found (in many cases involving large amounts of plastic wrap and a big waste of electricity), but in the end the space itself became the biggest challenge.

Large rooms that used to store boxes and machinery, connected by ramps on different levels, hosted the various exhibitions from the festival's program, be it CyberArts, the selection of *Prix Ars Electronica* award winners, the *Repair* exhibition or the display of works by the students in the Interface Culture program at the University of Linz. Although very different in nature, the artworks in each exhibition were placed in similar environments, thus making the experience confusing for the visitor. An industrial setting may seem ideal for an artwork based on technology, but in fact, some of them looked less engaging when placed at the far end of a room saturated with worn pillars or on a cardboard base. The ambience was more suited to students' projects or hacker workshops than fully developed artworks. Among the latter, some interesting works were reduced to mere documentation, notably the Golden Nica winners in the Interactive Art and Hybrid Art categories: *The EyeWriter*,[2] by Zach Lieberman, James Powderly, Tony Quan, Evan Roth, Chris Sugrue and Theo Watson, an open-source collaborative research project, consisting of a pair of low cost eye-tracking glasses and custom software that allows artists and graffiti writers suffering from paralysis to draw with their eyes, was exhibited as an object and a video; *Ear on Arm*,[3] the long-term body modification project carried out by Stelarc since 1997 that consists in surgically constructing and cell-growing an ear on the inner forearm and inserting a miniature microphone that can transmit wirelessly, was presented as a set of sculptures and several videos showing the artist's career. Of course, Stelarc's project cannot be shown without the artist being physically present and the *EyeWriter*, developed for disabled people, may be frivolous to exhibit as a simple gadget that anyone can test, but these limitations were only some of the festival shortcomings. On the other hand, the artworks and initiatives that were usually located in smaller rooms or in open-air spaces, such as workshops and sound art projects, benefited from the large rooms. Yet in some cases, such as Martin Bédard's *Champs de Fouilles*,[4] Award of Distinction in the Digital Music & Sound Art category, the artwork could be heard in the staircase inside one of the buildings; however, this quickly became a busy area and visitors going up and down had little time to actually listen to it.

The festival's theme also enhanced the presence of industrial design (under the title *Design for Repair*), showcasing interesting proposals such as *PappLab*,[5] the cardboard exhibition architecture that was used during the festival, and *PROBEN*,[6] a selection of full-scale model vehicles designed and produced at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg between 1983 and 2009, as well as a large amount of eco-friendly products that included electric cars and buses. In contrast, *The Toaster Project*[7] by Thomas Thwaites eloquently explained the
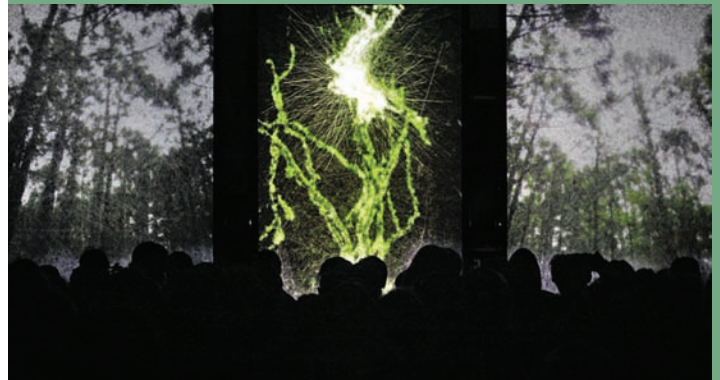
Minoru Fujimoto, *Lighting Choreographer* is a system to expand the expressive capability of the human body by lighting. It synchronizes light effects on the user's body with motion and sound, based on the view that the produced effects recursively influence the choreographer. Credit: Rubra.

49-50. Ryoichi Kurokawa, Digital Musics & Sound Art in Concert. Credit: Rubra.

51. PappLab, A product that, in the world of commerce, is merely packaging and thus of secondary importance, becomes a key material serving countless functions: walls, tables, benches and chill-out zones. PappLab is a cooperation of o-werk and mia. Credit: Papplab.

52. Thomas Thwaites, *The Toaster Project*.This is the result of the attempt to make an electric toaster from scratch - literally from the ground up. Starting with digging up the raw materials from abandoned mines around the UK, processing them at home, and finally forming them into a product that can be bought. Credit: Rubra.

contradictions in the massive industrial production of objects by attempting to make an electric toaster from raw materials (iron, copper, mica, nickel and plastic) in a complex process that cost £1,187.54 and took nine months. Many of the exhibited projects, as well as the venue itself, largely illustrated the main theme of this year's edition of *Ars Electronica*, in fact probably more than ever before. Still, it remains unsure if this location is suitable for the festival. As the afo architekturforum oberösterreich states: "the prevailing attitude is a vague unanimity that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Linz; nevertheless, a concrete proposal detailing how to launch the process of conversion to a new and sustainable use of this facility has yet to emerge."[8] Repairing is a process, and as such it needs time and planning.

Pau Waelder

Pau Waelder is an art critic, curator and researcher in digital art and culture. Among his latest projects are the conferences En_lloc (Now_here), Digital Culture (Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca) and the exhibitions Metalandscapes (Deichtorcenter Hamburg) and FLOW (CCA Andratx). As reviewer and editor, he has collaborated with *Rhizome*, *Artnodes*, *Vernissage TV* and *Furtherfield*. His articles have appeared in *a minima magazine*, *Magazine du CIAC* and *Leonardo*. He is New Media editor at art.es magazine.

Notes

1 Gerfried Stocker, "REPAIR – ready to pull the lifeline," in Hannes Leopoldseder, C. Schöpf and G. Stocker (eds.), *Ars Electronica 2010. Repair. Sind wir noch zu retten.* Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010, 13.
2 *The EyeWriter.* <http://www.eyewriter.org/>
3 *Ear on Arm*, Stelarc. <http://v2.stelarc.org/projects/earonarm/index.html>
4 Martin Bédard, *ElectroCD.* <http://www.electrocd.com/en/bio/bedard_ma/>
5 *PappLab*, *Ars Electronica.* <http://new.aec.at/repair/en/2010/08/13/papplab/>
6 *Proben*, *HFBK.* <http://www.hfbk-hamburg.de/index.php?id=862>
7 *The Toaster Project.* <http://www.thetoasterproject.org/>
8 afo architekturforum oberösterreich, "Jewel in Transformation. Some Thoughts on the Future of the Linzer Tabakfabrik," in Hannes Leopoldseder, C. Schöpf and G. Stocker (eds.). *op. cit.*, 119.

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