

## THE ART OF WAR

This year's Ars Electronica festival tackles globalization and conflict through art. Shift.com reports from the front lines. by mark moyes



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**It's opening night** at [Ars Electronica 2002](#), the festival of art, technology and society held in Linz, Austria every year. A hundred thousand people or more have gathered on the bank of the Danube after dusk for the presentation of Christian Muthspiel and Hans Hoffer's *Harmonices Mundi* -- a mixed-media symphony featuring orchestra, soloists, video projection, lasers and fireworks. As the sounds of strings lift up off the water, a giant screen across the river displays images of space and the globe. A green laser flits across the sky. The orchestra swells; strains of Indian music, African rhythms and jazz-influenced vocals work their way into (and sometimes out of) the melody. Featured soloists, in glass elevators built especially for the performance and affixed to the exterior of the Brucknerhaus building behind us, are lit up as they add their voices to the mix. A tabla player glows red as he ascends three storeys, beating out his solo, then descends. The music becomes painful, almost cacophonous, as sounds from different cultural traditions fight to be heard. When an Asian soloist yelps out her strange, childlike chant, titters travel through the crowd: The sound is too foreign for ears educated on European music. When, later as the music swells, the screen across the river floods us with larger-than-life images from 9/11 -- a twin tower crumbles, pedestrians run from a thousand tonnes of concrete dust -- it seems emotionally cheap; the American journalists I'm traveling with will later say it felt pornographic. Then there are fireworks, launched from a long wooden skiff sailing downstream, which has been built to look like a large house -- and before the different voices manage to reach anything resembling harmony, it lights on fire. The music dies, huge flames leap four storeys into the air, and there's silence as the collected crowd watches this, the most impressive spectacle of the evening -- forget the lasers, forget the video, forget the glass elevators -- an immense house burning against a black sky, engulfed by flames larger than we've ever seen.

**The funny thing about** being at an art conference discussing the issues surrounding globalization, in Europe, on the anniversary of 9/11, as the president of the United States preps his country to go to war, is that you get a completely different perspective on things.

This year, the six-day festival's theme was "UNPLUGGED: Art as the scene of global conflicts." Gerfried Stocker, artistic director of the Ars Electronica festival, asked the artists and speakers he invited to examine art's role in reflecting and shaping global issues and global consciousness. "UNPLUGGED," according to Stocker, means focusing on the issue of access and awareness in our discussions of globalization: How does a country (or continent) fit into our new world if they can't access the web? And can we ignore them? The second part of the tagline, "Art as the scene of global conflict," means that as we examine the global social crises that lead to wars and terrorism, "we must not fail to address the role of globally networked media and especially electronic visual media that make an essential contribution," according to the introductory essay in the festival handbook.

Stocker is an optimist; he talked about "the utopian quality of art" in his speech on the opening night of the festival. He said he hoped artists would be able to transcend the pessimism surrounding globalization, to build a vision of a better future. In an interview a few days later, he laughed at his own naiveté: "I have been criticized very often this year for saying this. 'You are bluntly naïve: Look out at the world. Everything is crashing and you are saying, "Art has to wave the flag of humanity" or something.' But, I mean, why not?"



It was a compelling, hopeful introduction to the festival. Over the next five days, however, it became apparent that most of the artists and speakers he's invited don't share his optimism. In fact, if the international presenters were unified on anything, it's that.

\_ unplugged \_

**A few quick facts about internet access in Africa:** The average total cost of dialup internet access for twenty hours a month is U.S. \$60, which is higher than the average African monthly salary. (In 2000, twenty hours of internet

access in the U.S. cost \$22 and the average salary was close to fifty times the average African salary.) Of the 770 million people in Africa, one in five have a radio, one in 130 have a PC and one in 150 use the internet (one internet connection is often shared between four or five users). More than half of the estimated 4 to 5 million African internet users live in South Africa. Five years ago only a few countries on the continent had internet access, but now it is available in every capital city. While only seven countries in Africa have only one public access full-service ISP, eighteen have local dialup internet access available nationwide.

"Usually we talk about... the undeveloped spots," Stocker explained when asked about the festival's theme. "By saying this and looking at this in such a way, you already express a hierarchy: 'You are undeveloped, so come on, develop and take what we give you.' But when we see it as a blind spot in terms of the way we are recognizing it, that's the first step to changing this hierarchy."

Stocker chose to focus on the big blind spot that is Africa at Ars Electronica, inviting artists and speakers to submit essays and artwork and speak at symposia on the subject. Ironically, by focusing all its energy on one blind spot, the festival merely accentuated the others: What about South and Central America? South-East Asia? China?

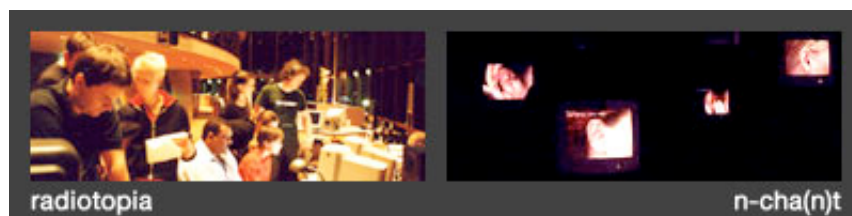
One of the problems with focusing on places with less access to technology and tools is that there isn't as much media art coming from those countries. Although there were some interesting projects, like the [Tonga.Online](#) project -- a collaboration between the Austria-Zimbabwe Friendship Association, KUNZWANA Trust and the Valley Tonga people, which archives over sixty examples of music created by the third-largest but perhaps most marginalized ethnic group in Zimbabwe -- the relevance of such projects for Zimbabweans, who live in one of the countries that do not have nationwide local dialup access, is debatable -- at least at this early stage.

The speakers at the symposia stressed this. On the subject "Who is Unplugged?", Aminata D. Traoré, the former Minister of Culture and Tourism of Mali, put things into perspective in her essay: "The players and organizations claiming to represent civil society... must not stand surety for the flooding of the poor quarters and villages of Africa with gadgets when the population is in need of food, schools, healthcare, water and work."

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In case that wasn't clear enough, in the "Local Conflicts -- Global Media" symposium, Winters Negbenebor, a Nigerian social and media activist, put up a slide which reads: GLOBALISATION = NEO-COLONIALISM. He quoted a Newswatch article on GlobalPolicy.org from last May, in which Nigeria's minister of finance Adamu Ciroma issued the following statement: "In 1984, our indebtedness to the IMF [International Monetary Fund] was only U.S. \$5.5 billion. From that time to date we paid U.S. \$17.5 billion as interest. If you fail to pay such interest, you will be surcharged; so much of the payments we make go for interest payment, not the principal. But until now, the outstanding debt stock remains at U.S. \$28 billion." He went on to say, "the IMF adopted this strategy so that no third-world nation would be out of debt. Their plan is that all countries should have a permanent debt, which is unfair." Negbenebor agreed. "It is indeed heartbreaking to hear that after repaying a debt two times over, the record still shows an amount three times more than the principal... Whatever arrangement produces such a state of affairs is unconscionable, cruel and unjust," he said, concluding, "the world of international finance stinks to high heaven, replete with a double standard and accentuated by racism."

When asked direct questions about the future of the information economy, many of the symposium speakers from around the African continent appeared reticent. Sometimes they didn't answer the questions asked, saying instead: We need water. We are so far in debt, we can't see our way out. The implied message was clear: Forget an information economy, we need a real economy.



The delegates were not against new technology, but most of them expressed very strongly that they did not want the West's hand-me-downs. Stocker is right: "Develop and take what we give you" is the last thing Africa needs. Jennifer Sibanda, the regional director of the "Federation of African Media Women -- SADC" from Zimbabwe, explained a truth that should be self-evident: The West can't tell Africa what it needs. Speaking at the same symposium as Negbenebor, she said: "The technologies that are needed by Africa are different than the technologies that are needed elsewhere... Governments tend to want to dictate what kind of development is needed, but development not by the people will fail."

The festival organizers took obvious care to make sure that African artists were well

represented, that it was not simply a case of colonialists discussing The Problem Of Africa. But their good intentions were trumped by poor planning: The first floor of the Brucknerhaus, where the African art was showcased, was dark and uninviting (bleachers set up outside the windows blocked the natural light), and suffered from a lack of traffic. People milled around the artwork by American and European artists on the brighter second and third floors, mostly because that's where the entrance to the presentation halls and cafeteria were. Although it wasn't deliberate, it was a shame, because it felt like yet another instance of the West brushing Africa off to the side.

\_ art as the scene of global conflicts \_

**The artwork at Ars Electronica was actually** divvied up into a few locations: the Brucknerhaus, which housed the art commissioned or curated to reflect the festival's theme; the O.K. Centre for Contemporary Art, which exhibited the winners of the Prix Ars Electronica 2002, an annual contest that judges works in a number of categories (with no theme restrictions) -- and which, this year, received 2300 submissions; and the Ars Electronica Center, with a permanent collection (or as close as you're going to get in the young world of media art) of technology and art projects.

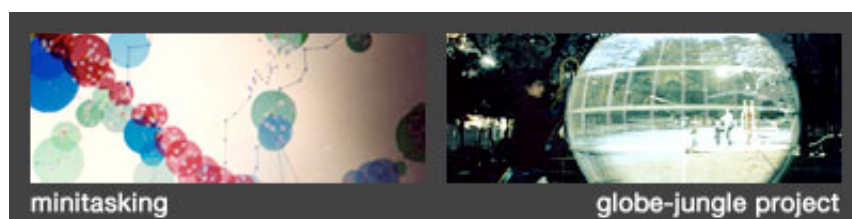
The Brucknerhaus pieces -- those exploring the problems or potentials of globalization - varied greatly in quality and relevance. There were a number of good concepts which suffered from poor execution: Mark Napier's *net.flag* was an effort to create the equivalent of a "national" flag for the internet people: It looks different every time you visit the page because every netizen who passes through is encouraged to edit it before they leave. The idea of a mutable flag had potential, but the visual design and interface looked like they were designed by a UNIX geek circa 1994. Similarly, Peter Fend's *Energy Solution / Water Resources*, a project which redraws the world's map in terms of who has water and who doesn't, sounded interesting. But it suffered from poor presentation: Disappointingly, it was nothing more than a series of maps and pencil-crayon sketches strewn randomly over a countertop with no real documentation, making it indecipherable and reminiscent of a Grade Eight science fair project. Josh On's *They Rule* was a different problem: His visual representation of big-business power structures in the U.S. wasn't exactly about global access, so why was it curated for a festival that was supposed to be dealing with breaking down blind spots? And Schoenerwissen's Gnutella-network visualization app, *Minitasking*, was pretty, but claiming that it addresses the issue of access is a bit of a stretch.

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That's not to say there weren't interesting and relevant projects there. Kunstradio's *Radiotopia*, a huge database of cross-cultural, user-submitted sounds and music that can be mixed together over the net through a web interface, produced some beautiful music in a live performance. And some of the implementations of the Radical Software Group's *Carnivore Project* -- which allows designers to visually interpret packets of data (mimicking the FBI's project of the same name, which is allegedly snooping our email) - were excellent, particularly *Carnivore is Sorry* by Mark Daggett and *Guernica* by Entropy8Zuper!. *Monsters, Inc.* and the PlayStation 2 game *Rez*, while not part of the UNPLUGGED works (they won awards at the un-themed Prix Ars Electronica competition) were relevant if only for the fact that they were presented as art: It brings up interesting questions about commercialization and consumerism, issues that turn up in every discussion on globalization.

But where is "Art as the scene of global conflict?" Iba Ndiaye Diadji, Senegalese art critic, suggested that Africans had to start asserting their identity through artistic aggression during his talk at the September 8<sup>th</sup> symposium. "It's through art that we have to retaliate... I think that we have to work to develop the capacity of the cultural spirit for resistance and also for offensive." But this cultural tension, this friction, seemed to be absent from most pieces (except maybe those that dealt with music). Most of the art seemed to deal with these issues from an intellectual or technological perspective, not an emotional one.

There was a marked difference between the way the artists addressed the issues of access and globalization and the way the speakers did, however. In the symposia discussions, there was no lack of conflict. Although many of the symposia focused on Africa, the underlying theme of the conference, what everyone wanted to talk about, was The Problem of The United States of America.



This became particularly apparent in the "Local Conflicts – Global Media" symposium on September 9<sup>th</sup>. Philippe Quéau, director of UNESCO's 'Information society' department, launched an attack on the U.S. media and foreign policy. He accused the U.S. media of becoming more conservative as they grew larger and more interested in distracting the public, of deliberately giving Lewinsky-type stories more coverage than international

affairs. He quoted George Bush's statement, "My favourite philosopher is Jesus" to demonstrate that the U.S. was becoming a theocratic state, or at least using theology to justify its foreign policy. "Can a political philosophy that is based on neo-puritanism and neo-calvinism, and that describes the world in terms of an impending Armageddon, be considered in the general interests of humanity? I think not."

In the discussion afterwards Quéau and the other speakers at the symposium, including Negbenebor, Sibanda and Derrick de Kerckhove, accused the American public of ignorance, and the American media and politicians of willfully misleading them. Danny Schechter, the founder of the independent media outlet [MediaChannel](#), who had spent his podium-time explaining the need for independent media in America, found himself in the awkward position of defending America and its media outlets. "I would like an opportunity at some point, on behalf of the people of the United States, to respond to this attack on the American leviathan. While I agreed with the specifics of the critique we heard, I felt it was a bit one-dimensional, in the sense that it excludes a lot of the energy, enthusiasm, militancy and activism of a large part of the American people who do not buy into the dominant ideology, and in many instances, manage to challenge and defeat it throughout our history. So I think it's wrong to portray the United States as the America of George Bush and only George Bush... It's wrong to be mechanistic and reduce the United States to a caricature, in my humble opinion."

Quéau responded that he was against caricatures, such as Bush's "evil empire," and that America should use fewer. Sibanda pointed to the one-way flow of information outside of America -- every country in the world watches CNN, but does America watch news from foreign news outlets? "When is America listening?" she demanded.

This symposium in particular was draining. A lot of people were talking, but it didn't feel like they were listening. Although Schechter had spent his presentation time at the podium explaining that independent media was trying to give alternate perspectives to CNN's one-sided coverage, the other speakers addressed only the one-sided coverage. How could Quéau say he was against caricatures minutes after conjecturing that the U.S.'s repetition of the phrase "In God We Trust" was an effort to present Bush as a divine leader? The discussion was exhausting, not because the points of view weren't based in fact -- as Schechter pointed out, many of the details were true -- but because they were so one-sided, so simplistic. Because everyone was saying the same thing -- independent media inside and outside the U.S. is good, and necessary -- but they didn't understand that. No one seemed to be *trying* to understand. There was no effort to synthesize all the ideas into any sort of complex *reality*.

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\_ utopia \_

**The next night, I made the trek** over to the O.K. Center to see Yasuhiro Suzuki's *Globe-Jungle Project*. The piece consists of a spherical jungle gym that is filmed during the day as children play on it; at night, the sphere is spun and the images of the children are projected back. There are no flat surfaces, but it's spinning fast enough that the jungle gym's metal crossbars reflect most of the light. In the darkness, the effect is beautiful and haunting: Glowing, ghostly images of children playing on an ethereal globe. And I think: This is Stocker's Utopia. It's a beautiful world filled with images of solidarity and understanding, but it's translucent and, if you look closely enough, hollow.

In the end, did the art at Ars Electronica reflect or influence reality? The art certainly didn't reflect the symposia, but that may be partially because the media artists were generally younger than the speakers -- and therefore had a fundamentally different, and in most cases less-informed, view of globalization. Some of the art was naïve: The *net.flag* project allowed every user to dynamically modify the flag of the net, but what are the consequences of a constantly changing representation? How do we deal with it?

Stocker said he was optimistic that the festival would have an effect on the global art scene in the next couple of years. It's possible he's right; the festival was thought-provoking. It's possible that the young artists and attendees learned from what they saw and heard, and developed a greater understanding of the issues surrounding globalization. It's possible that some of the artwork presented in the next couple of years will reflect that.

But if Ars Electronica *did* reflect the general zeitgeist surrounding globalization, one thing that can be concluded is that we're a long way off from all speaking the same language and having the same thoughts. The bad news is, we still have a long way to go before we understand each other truly. But the good news is (and this is almost certainly too simple an answer) that maybe Ars Electronica was proof that people *are* fighting against homogeneity; perhaps the fact that no one agreed was a good thing.

And sometimes the works that *weren't* commissioned to reflect the UNPLUGGED theme did the best job. If you'll allow me one last metaphor (after all, if art is going to reflect reality, it's probably going to do it though an artistic device):

**On a rooftop above the O.K. Center, David Rokeby admits he's upset.** His *n-cha(n)t* project, which won the Golden Nica for

Interactive Art at the Prix Ars Electronica 2002, isn't working the way it *could*. Seven computers hang suspended from the ceiling at eye-level in a dark room; the monitors show human ears. Affixed to each is a microphone. When you speak into one, Rokeby's program performs voice recognition and recites a series of phrases back to you, built on related words and themes. The computers are networked; the others will "hear" some of the words and go off on their own tangents, creating seven unique simultaneous conversations.

But Rokeby's disappointed. Sometimes in his own studio, purely accidentally, all seven computers would eventually synchronize – they would start chanting the same phrases in unison. He describes the effect as unnerving: seven machines unanimously spouting words in a monotone, in a large, dark room. But because of the noise from other works and people nearby, his computers won't. They just won't harmonize.

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