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ARS ELECTRONICA

LINZ, AUSTRIA

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The Web as new-millennium juggernaut is already an old anthem, and it was only slightly refreshed by a politically hip twist at the twenty-third annual Ars Electronica new-media festival. At a cost of nearly \$1.7 million dollars and with 1,373 artists submitting work for the Prix Ars, which takes the Oscar-like form of the Golden Nica, the festival is no small affair. Still, like digital art itself, it has remained marginalized in the larger arena, and its codirectors, Gerfried Stocker and Christine Schöpf, took a calculated run this year at greater art-world relevance. Riding the coattails of Okwui Enwezor's postcolonialist Documenta 11, they chose the catchy theme "Unplugged: Art as the Scene of Global Conflicts." Africa was their focus, but their argument ultimately devolved to an imagined case of modern envy.

Throughout the festival, Stocker kept talking brightly about the utopian possibilities of a networked world, but a devastating equation emerged from five days of symposia: $b2b = c2c$, but also $t2t$. That is, business-to-business networks easily connect continent to continent (and consumer to consumer), but just as easily offer nefarious uses for a terrorist-to-terrorist network conspiring carnage at the speed of light. More to the point, as various speakers noted, the Third World doesn't need

Disney.com—it needs water, medicine, food, debt relief, and, by the way, widespread electricity to plug into. Parachuting in a million laptops, fun as it might be, especially if they come with *solitaire*, probably won't tip the scales against the mountain of disease, mayhem, and poverty.

Amid this cheery patter, I kept coming back to one nagging question: Where's the art? Bewilderingly, much of the work chosen to reflect the political theme was displayed like an afterthought on a balcony above the conference hall: a half-dozen websites that propounded not the network dream but the dystopian arrogance of power. No doubt the fact that none of these projects was by an African—indeed, that there was almost no work at the festival by Third World citizens—confirmed the curators' notion of unpluggedness, but it struck a clanging note on the hopeful globalist ear; and works such as *Carnivore*, 2001, by the collective Radical Software Group, and *They Rule*, 2001, by Josh On and Futurefarmers, logged in as merely competently designed, predictably cautionary tales of the six degrees of separation between powerful networks and corporate kings.

What was interesting was a comment of Stocker's. He argued that the look of the interface is less the point: The art is in the interactivity. The formulation struck me as strange but familiar, the inverse of an argument made thirty-five years ago, in fact, in this magazine. That was when Michael Fried published "Art and Objecthood" and characterized Minimalism as a theatrical art dependent on the spatial engagement of the beholder to *participate*, to complete the experience of the work, which was not pure enough to provide the

instantaneous epiphany that begets grace. But interestingly, Net art and a lot of other new-media work sees participation as the very essence of its quality. Online gaming is often the metaphor for and the means of interacting; its goal is release (however brief) from our daily lives through a medium of entertainment, not through grace.

Is this bad? Not necessarily. Entertainment in place of spiritual grace is surely a different calculus of community—as other, more compelling, work at Ars Electronica suggested. Among the sixty-seven honorable mentions and award winners on view in the Prix Ars exhibition, the theatrical and interactive were there in full sensorial

ENTERTAINMENT IN PLACE OF GRACE IS SURELY A DIFFERENT CALCULUS OF COMMUNITY—AS THE MORE INTERESTING WORK IN THE SHOW SUGGESTED.

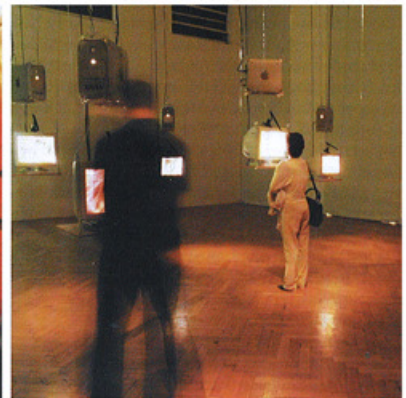
force: for example, the visually dull but awfully stimulating *PainStation*, 2001, by Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff—a contest of Pong that punishes the loser's gaming hand with electric shocks (literally not for the faint of heart). Far more pacific was Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's winsome *Body Movies—Relational Architecture No. 6*, 2001, whose huge screen in Linz's main square showed us Goliath-size photographs of passersby upon which our own shadows danced, triggering a change of the image and locking in to the idea that the power of new-media art derives finally

from the instant inventions of interaction.

The communal was underlined by the festival's most satisfying work, despite its creakily clever name, *n-cha(n)it*, 2001, by David Rokeby. The work's seven Mac computers and monitors hung from the ceiling in a darkened theatrical space filled with the dulcet tones of machines murmuring skewed sentences based on the words of visitors picked up by microphones. Each monitor showed an ear, hand cupped beseechingly to it or covering it in rejection, as if to say, "Too much input!" The computers prattled nonsense Lewis Carroll would have envied: "The twice silvered davenport outlives the little. The designated distance forms the beggared half." But occasionally, when left uninterrupted by human speech, they chanted the same words in unison—an oddly comforting gathering of voices that suggested all the nattering in our lonely heads quieting to one universal speech, at once silly, fantastic, and ephemeral.

Here was hope and a little bit of madness, and it captured the cacophonous politics of Ars Electronica, with its servers and servitude, mixed signals and messianic gloom. W.H. Auden wrote that art is "one of the most powerful means of transforming closed communities into open ones." That art can actually propel political change is doubtful now, but no art more thoroughly courts the possibilities of openness than this networked art of interactivity. These are still early days for the technology. When the visual, the aural, and the feeling touch truly join the interactive, this art will grow beyond mere novelty: It will be new. □

Steven Henry Madoff is a frequent contributor to *Artforum*.



From left: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Body Movies—Relational Architecture No. 6*, 2001. Installation view. Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff, *PainStation*, 2001. Installation view. David Rokeby, *n-cha(n)it*, 2001. Installation view.