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Ars Electronica 2024 wants to turn the tide of indifference

The Ars Electronica Festival 2024 embraces the theme "HOPE - who will turn the tide", and shifts the previous years' perception of "how" to bring change, to "who" actually does it. The festival opened yesterday (Sept. 4) and will run until September 8 in Linz, Austria.

"HOPE as a festival theme is not a resigned statement that all we can do is hope that someone or something will solve our problems, but rather a manifestation that there are many reasons for hope," writes Gerfried Stocker, Artistic Director of Ars Electronica, in the festivals declaration.

This year's festival marks a significant shift in focus, moving beyond mere technological showcases to emphasize the role of art and creativity in driving societal change. Unlike previous years, the focus is not on how to solve global issues, but on who is already working towards solutions. This year's theme is not a passive call for optimism, but rather a call for active change.

"Yes, technology will not solve our problems, but a lot of technology will be needed to address the problems. But this requires a different understanding both of technology and of our responsibility for using technology" writes Gerfield Stoker, stressing that while technology plays a crucial role in addressing global challenges, it is not a panacea. "Such visions must not be used as an excuse not to act; they must not tempt us to sit back and wait for the "super technology that solves everything".

For 45 years, Ars Electronica has been at the forefront of the intersection of art, technology, and society. The 2019 edition titled "Out of the Box - The Midlife Crisis of the Digital Revolution" addressed the challenges arising from our increasingly digital world, and emphasized the need to move "out of the box" of our comfort zones and take responsibility for the consequences of technological progress; from AI to genetic engineering, to shape our collective future.

AI & HUMAN / Ethel Lilienfeld (FR), Ines Sieulle (FR), Tomás García (AR), Paul Trillo (US), Ida Kvetny (DK), Glenn Marshall (GB), CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

2020 responded to the global pandemic with "Kepler's Gardens - A global journey mapping the 'new' world", while 2021's edition was all about "A New Digital Deal" and sought to reimagine our digital future. "In Kepler's Gardens" focused on the changes the world was undergoing amid a new crisis, using "Kepler's Gardens" as a metaphor for a global, networked event that combines local physical and distributed digital components. In 2021, A New Digital Deal recognized that digitization has radically changed how we engage with the world and called for rethinking the foundations of the digital world through collective action and responsibility.

The 2022 version asked "Welcome to Planet B - A different life is possible. But how?" The Festival acknowledged the urgent need to address the ecological crisis and make a fundamental, far-reaching change in how we live on this planet. Finally, in 2023 "Who Owns the Truth?" brought together 88,000 visitors, 1,542 artists, scientists, and activists from 88 countries to examine the challenges around truth, interpretive authority, and responsibility in the digital age.

As we face numerous global challenges, Ars Electronica 2024 stands as a beacon of hope. It reminds us that change is possible and that countless individuals are already working towards a better future. The festival invites attendees to not only observe but to become part of this movement of hope and action.

Photo from Claudia Larcher's "AI and the Art of Historical Reinterpretation"

The 2024 program

The epicentre of the festival is once again POSTCITY, the former postal distribution centre at Linz Central Station that hosts this year's Main Theme Exhibition "HOPE: the touch of many", co-curated by Olga Tykhonova. The exhibition approaches the theme by hosting an array of projects that focus on creating smaller or bigger changes in matters of our times, like Claudia Larcher's "AI and the Art of Historical Reinterpretation". An installation, that focuses on AI not as a threat but as a tool that can bring change by re-writing history-filling Gender Bias Gaps. Or Stefan Schönauer's "Digital Ruins" a digital archive project in the form of an animated digital installation that envisions a future in which we are forced to leave behind vivid and experiential personal archives.

Photo by Stefan Schönauer's "Digital Ruins"

The POSTCITY exhibition showcases works created as part of the European Media Art platform. Among else, visitors see the "Compost as Superfood" installation by Masharu, which examines sustainable practices and their potential to address contemporary challenges. "Fu(n)ga" by Tiziano Derme and Nadine Schütz, is an artistic exploration of responses to the pressing issues of our time.

The Prix Ars Electronica Exhibition features 2024's award-winning works inside the Lentos Kunstmuseum Linz. The Prix Ars Electronica is the world's longest-running media art competition that this year received nearly 3,000 submissions from 95 countries. As "HOPE" is explored through various lenses, engaging AI inquirers, art lovers, community builders,

and sustainability advocates same thing happens by looking closer at some of this year's winners. For example, Beatie Wolfe's "Smoke and Mirrors", uses art "to communicate six decades of climate data, specifically rising methane levels, set alongside the verbatim advertising slogans deployed by the Big Oil industry to “Deny, Doubt and Delay” the climate data and awareness through the decades."

From a different perspective that annotates the variety of the theme's interpretations, there is Paul Trillo's music video made with OpenAI’s Sora video model titled Washed Out “The Hardest Part”. As Trillo states: "This video is about learning to let go of a loved one and dreaming of them after they are gone. For this, I leaned into the hallucinations and Sora’s dream logic to explore memories that never existed."

Art and Science

The JKU MED Campus hosts an innovative exhibition that blends artistic expression with scientific exploration. The exhibition features "Spaceship from Hope" by the PiNA collective an inflatable installation that promotes interspecies collaboration to preserve the environment. "Whispering Gardens " by arc/sec Lab combines the aesthetics of historical gardens with futuristic soundscapes. The installation invites visitors to immerse themselves in a sensory experience juxtaposing the natural and the technological. "Transient – Cloud Chamber" by Japanese artist Yuri Tanaka is an interactive piece that allows visitors to explore the mysterious world of cosmic particles.

"Deep Sea", an immersive 3D application that transports viewers into the depths of the ocean, fostering a deeper connection with the aquatic world. The festival also showcases a range of projects from around the globe. "Temporal Shifts: Along the Red Dot" by BeFantastic, for example, uses immersive technologies to address social issues in Singapore. Works by artist Jiabao Li, including "Squid Map" and "Arctic Phantoms," advocate for ecocentric perspectives and a deeper consideration of our relationship with the natural world.

How (not) to get hit by a self-driving car / Tomo Kihara (JP), Daniel Coppen (GB), Photo: Luke O'Donovan, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The 2024 Ars Electronica Festival featured an event called "Die Domfrauen laden ein!" (The Cathedral Women Invite!) at St. Mary's Cathedral in Linz. Approximately 30 women of various professions, ages, and faiths stood at freely chosen locations throughout the cathedral and shared personal life and faith stories that had a deeper connection to that particular place. This event aimed to make the cathedral experienceable from a female perspective, showcasing diverse voices and experiences within the sacred space.

Last but not least, "Applied Virtualities: Extended Reality in Practice" that showcased how XR technologies are opening up new paths and posing important questions about the future of the digital world. The exhibition highlighted projects that leverage VR and AR to drive innovation in medicine, education, art, and environmental awareness, while also exploring the ethical and social implications of these technologies

The full program at Ars Electronica's can be found at the festival's official website.

Main Image: Nocturnal Fugue / Jiabao Li (CN), Matt McCorkle (US), Amber Botao Hu (CN), Ars Electronica, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0
A full gallery of photos from Ars Electronica can be found here