ARS ELECTRONICA 2003: CODE—THE LANGUAGE OF OUR TIME

Linz, Austria, 6–11 September 2003, <http://www.aec.at/en/festival/>.

Reviewed by Maia Engeli, Zurich, Switzerland. E-mail: <maia@enge.li>.

Ars Electronica is a 24-year-old annual festival with exhibitions, conferences, award ceremonies, events, parties and concerts spread over different places in the city of Linz, Austria. This was the fifth time that I have been to Ars Electronica, and I am still improving my skill in being at the most interesting place at each point in time. The decision to travel to Linz on the Friday evening prior to the official opening was a good one. I thus had enough time to see the different exhibitions on Saturday, before the start of the conferences on Sunday.

The main symposium in the Brucknerhaus was devoted to the festival theme, "CODE—The Language of Our Time." In seven sessions—"The Meaning of Code," "The Art of Code," "Social Code," "Collective Creativity," "Tangible Code," "Software & Art I" and "Software & Art II"—theoreticians and artists contributed their views and knowledge. Among the 39 invited symposium speakers, there were only seven women; such a poor ratio is upsetting! I skipped some of the men's talks in the symposium to go downstairs and participate in the alternative platform "The Electrolobby Kitchen," with its spontaneous, dynamically changing program.

The first session on "The Meaning of Code" unveiled different understandings of the notion of code. Friedrich Kittler highlighted the historical background of the word "code," explaining that from the Roman Empire until the time of Napoleon it meant books of law. Later the words "to cipher" and "to decipher" were replaced with the technical notion of coding and decoding, which, thanks to Alan Turing, became the operational basis of computers. Cindy Cohn's talk "Seven Ways in Which Code Equals Law" further expanded what code could stand for. Erkki Huhtamo added the view from art, and Peter J. Bentley the view from computing. The first session made clear that CODE is a big theme and "the language of computers" might not be the main issue.

In the "Art of Code" session, artists Richard Kriesche, Roman Verostko and Casey Reas showed how code, genetic or generative, becomes an integral part of the artistic process as well as the product. Kriesche uses *Datawerk: Mensch* (Datawork: Men) and overlays different human codes to generate works that include sociopolitical aspects, whereas the work of both Verostko and Reas focuses on producing the generation of aesthetic qualities.

The "Social Code" session included aspects such as collective action, constructed languages, writerly computing and design noir. As expected, the Babylonian language confusion about and around the notion of code grew further. A divide between literate and illiterate computer coders seemed to open up after Florian Cramer's praise of the "writerly" command-line centric user interface versus the "readerly" GUI (graphical user interface). Fiona Raby's refreshing presentation was characterized by designs that provoke critical thinking about established codes, inventions and research discoveries including life, love and sex.

The "Collective Creativity" session had too much of a commercial touch for my taste, so I stayed in the electrolobby to listen to the young guys from the demo scene <www.scene.org>. It was a good choice in favor of a vibrant global community enthusiastically programming amazing computer animations—collective creativity at its best. Back in the "Collective Creativity" session upstairs, Marc Canter was enthusiastically speaking about blogging; it seems that there is another divide—bloggers and non-bloggers.

"Tangible Code" evidently had to start with a presentation by Hiroshi Ishii. Speaking at the pace of a machine gun, he went through the different aspects of code, coding and tangible code, which he presented as the fourth issue in the sequence of code = program (formal), code = interface (input/output), code = interaction (causality loop), code = ideation (abstract and tangible). He showed numerous projects from the tangible media group as examples for haptic coding and tangible coding. Oliver Fritz showed examples of digitally produced building elements. Joachim Sauter emphasized generativity. He presented the technically as well as visually amazing generative stage and costumes developed for the opera *Der Jude von Malta* for the Munich Biennale 2002. Another example was a Libeskind architecture generator based on elements from Libeskind's architectonic vocabulary and 12-tone music, with its very tight generative rules, which apparently was used by Libeskind to generate the design of the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Further speakers in this session were Scott deLahunta, who added the aspect of dance, dance notations and dance algorithms, and Jonathan Norton, who discussed coding versus composing music and how programming and composing have merged.

Ars Electronica is a wonderful festival where one can experience a synthesis of newly established media art and listen to different lectures on an interesting theme such as CODE, thereby learning a lot without getting too disturbed in one's established beliefs. Previous years' themes, such as "unplugged," "next sex" or "life science" may have been more exciting, but after all, AE is a festival (fest = party), and the various generations of media artists, researchers, designers, writers, curators, critics and theoreticians that travel to AE seem to get their share of insights, networking and fun out of it.

Two bilingual (German/English) publications are available from Hatje Cantz publishers: *Ars Electronica 2003, Code—The Language of Our Time,* with the texts of the symposium speakers, curators and artists from the different exhibitions, and *CyberArts 2003, International Compendium Prix Ars Electronica,* including a DVD and CD, featuring all the winners and honorary mentions of the Prix Ars Electronica. These books are valuable documentations of the symposium and the Prix. And there is the promise on the festival web site that "all presentations and discussions of the Ars Electronica 2003 CODE Symposium will be available on this website by the beginning of October."

(An extended version of this review can be seen at <http://leonardo reviews.mit.edu>.)

EISENSTEIN: THE MASTER'S HOUSE

by Naum Klejman, Marianna Kireyewa and Alexander Iskin. 1998. VHS video,

102 min., color. Available from First Run/Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11201, U.S.A. Web: <www.frif.com>.

Reviewed by Roy R. Behrens, Department of Art, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0362, U.S.A. E-mail: <ballast@netins.net>.

Even those unacquainted with film history may recognize at least one image from the Odessa steps segment of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), a film that brought immediate fame to Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948). It is a close-up of a distraught Russian woman, wearing pince-nez glasses, whose face and glasses have been struck by the sword of a Tsarist soldier. That frame is often reproduced, not just as a scene from the movie, but also because it was "quoted" (just as famously) 25 years later by British painter Francis Bacon in his portraits of pontiffs in boxes. As a Marxist, Eisenstein believed in the dialectical process by which the opposition of one force (thesis) by another (antithesis) is resolved by their emergence in a new, unanticipated unity (synthesis). He used a comparable process in film editing (called "dialectical montage"), juxtaposing this moment with that, believing that the audience would synthesize those (at first incompatible) elements in a new, cohesive event. To its credit, this film biography of Eisenstein uses related editing techniques to show us the life of "the master" of montage—a surprisingly short life (he died of a heart attack at age 50) in view of how widespread his influence has been.

The film's title alludes to Eisenstein's architectural training (his father was a prominent architect) and the fact that the film is divided into seven episodes of his life, poetically referred to as his "houses." Born in Latvia, he grew up in St. Petersburg and was an architecture student when the Bolshevik revolution began in 1917. While designing posters and stage sets, he became a follower of avant-garde theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who taught him how to create forms that were both structured and spontaneous. His international renown was established between 1925 and 1928 by four films (*Strike; Battleship Potemkin; October*, an account of the revolution 10 years earlier; and *Old and New*), after which he spent four largely fruitless years in Hollywood (under contract to Paramount, while friends

with Charlie Chaplin and, of all people, Walt Disney) and Mexico (where he worked on an ill-fated project about Mexican socialism, funded by Upton Sinclair). By the time he returned disillusioned to his homeland, forced collectivization had been established, and experimental art and film had been outlawed in favor of Social Realism. In his final decade, he fought to maintain his artistic integrity (and, surely, his sanity) while dodging the growing restrictiveness of the government censors. His last huge film, never finished, was a reinterpretation of the life of Ivan the Terrible (who had unified Russia in the 16th century). He suffered his first heart attack in 1946 (the year in which part of that film was denounced for suggesting parallels between the historic tsar and Stalin), followed by a second and fatal attack in 1948.

Like the unrestrained dreams of its subject, as well as the ambitious films he produced, this detailed (and often humorous) biography of Eisenstein is at once fascinating and exhausting. Narrated in Russian with English subtitles, it is enriched by the juxtaposition of scenes from historic documentaries, dozens of photographs and film clips of Eisenstein himself, current footage, and excerpts from the master's films. Anyone seriously interested in film history, the Russian Revolution or the rise of Modernism will be delighted by it.

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HOWARD FINSTER: MAN OF VISIONS

by Julie Desroberts, Randy Paskal and Dave Carr. 1988. VHS video, 20 min., color. Available from First Run/Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn NY 11201, U.S.A.. Web: <www.frif.com>.

Reviewed by Roy R. Behrens, Department of Art, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0362, U.S.A. E-mail: <ballast@netins.net>.

Howard Finster was a Southern tent preacher and a prolific creator of amateur art. In a mere 25 years, he made more than 46,000 works of "sacred art" (once producing as many as 17 pieces in less than a half hour), some of which he initially placed in his Paradise Gardens Park and Museum, a major tourist attraction in northern Georgia (U.S.A.) He experienced his first religious vision

at the age of three: While searching for his mother in "the 'mater patch' " on their farm in Alabama, he saw his dead sister Abby emerge from the clouds. (He was sure of the date, because it took place in the year that he was hit in the head by his mother with "the tater fork.")

Called to preach at age 16, he served as the pastor for nine different fundamentalist churches, while also conducting tent revivals. He retired from the ministry in 1976 and turned instead to making art (along with bicycle and mower repair). This happened in part because one day, while repairing a bicycle, he saw a face in a paint stain on his fingertip. When a voice then told him he should "make sacred art," he demurred, believing that he lacked the training to be a serious artist, to which the voice then responded, "How do you know?"

In this brief and slightly dated film, a somewhat tired Finster talks about his religious and artistic development and the way in which the two tracks merged in the use of his paintings for preaching. This film (which is made up of portions of interviews with Finster and with university art professors, critics, collectors and art dealers) was produced in 1988, by which time the artist had appeared on the Johnny Carson Show, had illustrated album covers for R.E.M. and the Talking Heads, was selling his "Outsider Art" like hotcakes, and was well on his way to becoming as much of a ballyhooed insider in the corrupt New York art world as any aspiring artist would want. In anthropology, sincere observers do their best to guard against their own contamination of the culture that they are observing. Just back from a final publicity jaunt to New York, Finster came down with pneumonia and died in 2001 at age 84. From all appearances, he was a sincere, ambitious and talented man (even gifted)— but he was not, as a scene from this film would suggest, the postmodern era's equivalent of William Blake.

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AUDIO CD

STEP ACROSS THE BORDER

by Fred Frith. Fred Records/ReR Megacorp, Thornton Heath, Surrey, U.K., 2002. (ReR/FRO 03)