

Profoundly shocking Ars Electronica

by William Osborne

There's no doubt that "Next Sex: Sex in the Age of Procreative Superfluosity"--the latest edition of Ars Electronica, Europe's largest festival for digital media and the arts--was calculated to shock. The festival has focused on bio-technology for the last several years, but this time took things a step further, demonstrably a step too far, by centering on the aesthetic use of eugenics.

The goal of the festival, held earlier this month in Linz, Austria, was to "scrutinize the contours of a society in which human beings are genetically configured--not simply born." [1] Eugenics has a long history. It has, de facto, become a part of society, particularly through the use of biological engineering, according to Ars Electronica director Gerfried Stocker. [2] Anyone even vaguely familiar with the 20th century, let alone with new developments in medicine and bio-technology, can see that.

But since presentations opposing eugenics and biological determinism were not included in the festival, the potential for debate was, to say the least, restrained. [3] Indeed, Ars Electronica embraces a future where humans will be "fabricated," and where sex will be "relieved of its functional indispensability for reproduction." This will "reorder ... the battle of the sexes" and the "moral steering mechanisms" of society, according to the festival program. [4]

IRONIES ABOUND

Historical ironies abound. After the Anschluss of 1938, Hitler planned to destroy the national identity of Austria by reducing Vienna to provincial status and transforming his hometown of Linz into one of the largest cultural centers of Europe, a grand city reflecting the newly created eugenic purity of the Aryan race. (In nearby Mauthausen concentration camp, 100,000 people were murdered as part of Hitler's "purification" of Europe.) A half-century later, the Linz-based Ars Electronica embraces eugenics, biological engineering, and the use of living tissue for the creation of artworks. And one key festival participant notes, "Even rape can be considered an art-creational strategy." [5]

The festival's views reflect a Darwinist philosophy. "Complex tools and technologies are an integral part of our evolutionary fitness. Genes that are not able to cope with this reality will not survive the next millennium," says a recent festival press release. Meanwhile, the festival's discussions of genetic engineering, its confrontation of sexual taboos, and its masculinism were all couched in what many saw as an emphatic misogyny.

MAJOR EVENTS

The misogyny is illustrated by some of this year's major festival events:

+ Evolutionary biologist Randy Thornhill, author of the controversial book *A Natural History of Rape*, presented a lecture asserting that rape is a natural part

of male sexuality, and that women should restrict their behavior to avoid this "natural" phenomenon.[6]

+ Media artist and prophet of cyber-sex Stahl Stenslie presented a lecture in which he said, "Even rape can be considered as an art-creational strategy." This statement, also printed in his contribution to the festivals 415-page program book, is not conditioned or qualified; it is meant literally.[7]

+ The festivals most publicized event was entitled "Sperm Race." A "container laboratory" was placed in a central location of Linz where men could go to produce sperm samples. The "quality" of the sperm was then tested using "computer-assisted sperm analysis." At the end of each day, a winner was announced. Women were allowed to go to the container and place bets on their "favorites." [8]

+ Nobuya Unno, a member of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Tokyo, presented a lecture on artificial placentas (extra-uterine fetal incubation.) His presentation included grotesque photos of goats being incubated in artificial placentas.[9]

+ Researchers from Massachusetts General Hospital, in Boston, presented a project entitled "Tissue Culture & Art(ificial) Wombs." Their goal is to use tissue culture and tissue engineering as a medium for artistic expression. They have created what they call "semi-living" dolls.[10]

'NATURALNESS' OF RAPE

Thornhills biological views of rape were consistent with most of the festivals other presentations. His "naturalization" of sexual violence easily followed along the lines of Stahl Stenslies notion that "rape can be considered an art-creational strategy."

Stenslie, known for his "cyber-s/m" experimentation, studied at the Academy for Media Arts in Cologne. His work has centered around tele-tactile communications. In a project called "cyberSM," he constructed leather bodysuits with built in "sensors" and "effectators" that allow people to engage in forms of sexual activity via their computers modem.

His work is somewhat dated. Cyber-sex was a theme among media artists and theoreticians in the 80s, but by 1993 it was already declared "tired" by publications such as Wired Magazine. Stenslie, however, remains undeterred. By embracing eugenics and bio-engineering, he hopes to make his ideas more plausible and provocative. In an e-mail article published in 1996 as part of a symposium on mimesis, he wrote, "The Web is full of intentions, but where can one feel the essential, hard core experience? Why shouldn't the memes and digital metaphors boot up the body in ecstasy?" [11]

In the same article he explained that digital technology and biological engineering will transform humans into self-evolving cyborgs--though, of course, he doesn't say how.

SPECULATIVE HYPE

Such speculation is commonly referred to as "hype" among computer specialists, but Stenslie insists this combination of biological and virtual reality, "opens up the thrilling possibility of a mind independent of the biology of bodies. [...] Disguised in delicately coded flesh," humans will "experience the primal scream of digispace." After such revelations, Stenslie asks taunting questions, "What is there to be afraid of? Because the nature of the beast is bizarre and monstrous, alien and terrifying?"

Ars Electronicas reactionary postmodernism, which defines the new man as a perfectly engineered, hard-core cyborg of transcendent, male creativity, is not especially new. Eighty years ago the Italian futurists worshiped power, masculinism, speed, eugenics and technology as they moved toward Benito Mussolini, their hard-core Nietzschean superman. Hitler followed and created the largest eugenics program in the history of humanity.

Such considerations answer Stenslie's question about what there is to fear.

If Ars Electronica represents the future of the body and gender, then women will face a continuation of one of patriarchy's most common and violent narratives: domination, rape and dismemberment. It's an age-old myth, but the festival's curators remain oblivious to its meanings.[12] (Being a woman is a biological curse; the womb represents a chaotic force of nature which must be tamed; woman is a receptacle for the "natural" desire of rape, she is a half-living doll to be played with, she carries a burden of womanhood that can only be lifted by dismembering and re-engineering her body to effect a leap to men's self-appointed status of creative autonomy.)

EMBRACING EUGENICS

If the festival's curators had included gender studies scholars in the program, the narratives that inform the festival's misogyny could have been examined, but in the parochial atmosphere of Austria, such fields of thought play little role in the arts.[13]

Ars Electronica is able to embrace eugenics, because historic ideologies related to biological determinism and cultural nationalism still influence many members of Austrian society. The Vienna Philharmonic provides an interesting example and corollary. The orchestra forbids membership to women and people of color, because they believe gender and ethnic uniformity give the ensemble aesthetic superiority--a sort of low-tech bio-engineering.[14] Rightist Jorg Haider, head of the Freedom Party, exploited these forms of chauvinism in his rise to political power.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Ars Electronica Statement, September 15, 2000.
(<http://kultur.aec.at/festival2000/timetable/index.asp>)

[2] Gerfried Stocker, "The Pencil of Nature II." *_Next Sex: Ars Electronica 2000_* Ed. Gerfried Stocker and Christine Schoepf (Wien: Springer Verlag 2000): 20-24.

[3] Jeremy Rifkin attempted to oppose the festivals acceptance of eugenics, but he is not listed anywhere in the festivals official 415 page program book or anywhere on its official website.

[4] *_Ars Electronica Statement_*. September 15, 2000. (<http://kultur.aec.at/festival2000/timetable/index.asp>) See also note 2.

[5] Stahl Stenslie, "Terminal Sex: Future Sex as Art Practice." *_Next Sex: Ars Electronica 2000_*: 209.

[6] Thornhill presents a summary of his views in this article: Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer, "Why Men Rape" (http://216.3.77.242/membersonly/sciences/thornhill_body.html) For responses to Thornhill see: Susan Brownmiller, "Thornhill: Rape On the Brain" at: (<http://www.echonyc.com/~sueb/Review/review.html>) See also: Jerry A. Coyne and Andrew Berry, "Socio-biology and Fascism at the Front Door" at: (<http://csf.colorado.edu/pen-l/2000I/msg02450.html>) (Jerry A. Coyne is in the Department of Ecology and Evolution, University of Chicago, and Andrew Berry is at the Museum of Comparative Zoology Labs, Harvard University.)

[7] Stahl Stenslie, "Terminal Sex: Future Sex as Art Practice." *_Next Sex: Ars Electronica 2000_*:209.

[8] *_Sperm Race_*. September 15, 2000. (<http://www.aec.at/nextsex/spermrace/>)

[9] Nobuya Unno, "Development of an Artificial Placenta." *_Next Sex: Ars Electronica 2000_*: 252-3.

[10] Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr, and Guy Ben-Ary, "Tissue Culture & Art(ificial) Wombs." *_Next Sex: Ars Electronica 2000_*: 252-3.

[11] Stahl Stenslie, "Fleshing the Meme" September 15, 2000. (<http://www.aec.at/meme/symp/panel/msg00061.html>)

[12] See: Gena Corea, *_The Mother Machine, Reproductive Technologies from Artificial Insemination to Artificial Wombs_* (New York: Harper & Row Pub., 1985.) She discusses how present-day medical practices controlled by men attempt to appropriate birth itself.

[13] Marie-Luise Angerer, a media theoretician and gender scholar, presented a talk but did not direct any comments to the festivals misogyny, such as Thornhills and Stenslies assertions. Even in an interview in Telopolis she seemed reluctant to criticize the festival. (<http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/konf/8667/1.html>)

[14] Osborne, William. "Symphony Orchestras and Artist-Prophets: Cultural Isomorphism and the Allocation of Power in Music." *_Leonardo Music Journal_* 9

(1999): 69-76. See the article on the web at: (<http://www.osborne-conant.org/prophets.htm>)

Additional Reading:

<http://www.nettime.org/nettime.w3archive/200009/msg00001.html>
<http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/konf/8667/1.html>
<http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/konf/8658/1.html>
http://www.prairie.at/002/seypo/002_seypo_start.php3
<http://www.t0.or.at/~tissa/polemika/ars.html> <http://rhizome.org/object.rhiz?1871&r>

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A shorter version of this article appeared at <http://msnbc.com/news/465919.asp>.

William Osborne is an American composer and arts activist living in Germany.

+++ list of all links <http://kultur.aec.at/festival2000/timetable/index.asp>
http://216.3.77.242/membersonly/sciences/thornhill_body.html
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