



## Electronic renaissance

There are very few aspects of our lives these days that are not in some way impacted by digital technology. Raffael Dörig, curator of the House of Electronic Arts, would like to see change. *Jo Caird* investigates

Whether it's chatting with friends on social networking sites, conference calling for business or being caught on CCTV when out and about, digital media technology has become so much a part of who we are and what we do that it barely provokes a thought anymore. The House of Electronic Arts (HEA), Basel, which opened last May, is dedicated to encouraging "a more conscious use of technology" in its visitors. With a year-round programme of exhibitions and events, including the annual Shift Electronic Arts Festival, which takes place over three days in October, the HEA is opening people's eyes to digital media technology through this exciting and eclectic art form.

The HEA opened following the closure of Basel's previous centre for electronic arts, [plug. in], a space a stone's throw from the city's most important gallery, the Kunstmuseum Basal. The transition was made to coincide with the development of Dreispitz, an area that until recently has been characterised by warehouses and local manufacturing infrastructure, but is now in the process of becoming the city's newest art quarter. Dörig, who worked as assistant curator at [plug. in] and was one of the initiators of the Shift Festival, which began in 2007, is excited about the possibilities of the new location.

Dörig comments: "Basel is not a big city – people are used to going to certain areas and this is really something that wasn't on the map before, even though it's just 10 minutes from

the train station". In a few years, Dörig predicts, Dreispitz will be completely different: the city's art school is consolidating its buildings at a base on the site, and it is only a matter of time before bars and restaurants start popping up to cater to the area's new population. For the moment though, Dörig and his team are "pioneers" in this undiscovered land.

Pioneer status somehow feels entirely suitable given the type of work that the HEA champions. The field of electronic art is highly varied, but easy to define: the gallery specialises in work that makes practical use of media technology and work that considers our relationship with that technology. In many cases, of course, there is a significant cross-over between the two. Dörig explains that "because everyone uses media technology every day, it's become an important part of our daily life. The art that we show is very often a reflection on this everyday aspect and the impact on our daily life in terms of economy, politics, social life, communication".

The new gallery's inaugural show, 'Together in Electric Dreams. Absent presence' was a case in point, presenting all manner of works exploring this topic, from Marc Lee's 'TV Bot', a viewer-controlled programme which collects breaking news from the internet and presents it in one swirling mass of information, to Stefan Baltensperger and David Siepert's 'Inside and Outside', an installation that invites visitors to pick up a phone and be connected



- 01 Entrance to the Schaulager venue, Shift Festival 2010 © Eva Flury
- 02 Jimmy Edgar exhibition at Shift Festival 2010 © Eva Flury
- 03 Visitors enjoy the interactive workshops at Shift Festival 2010

with a randomly selected public phone somewhere in the world.

An important feature of a great deal of electronic art – including much of that on display at the HEA – is interactivity. “The activity of the visitor”, Dörig says, “might very often be different from [that which takes place in] traditional art spaces”, with the viewer encouraged to actively participate in the artworks they encounter. The curator acknowledges that “there is a bit of a cliché of electronic arts and media arts as hi-tech and pseudo-interactive”, but stresses that this notion belies the intellectual and artistic validity of art whose interactivity has been properly considered. In ‘Inside and Outside’ for example, “the artists just provide a setting and the visitors really fill it with activity and interaction... it’s not just clicking through a sort of route that was prepared by an artist”.

The Shift Festival, which takes place across several spaces on the Dreispitz site, is another opportunity for visitors to actively engage with digital technology and art inspired by it. Alongside a rich and varied programme of art exhibits, film screenings, concerts, lectures and parties, the festival runs workshops that teach participants how to build their own simple machines, as well as how to tinker with existing devices. The workshops are a practical manifestation of one of Dörig’s central aims for the HEA and Shift – “to change our relation towards technology from seeing it as

a black box to something that can be opened and altered and perceived in a different way”.

The festival, however, does not assume an extensive prior knowledge of digital technology in its visitors; the opposite in fact. In previous years Shift has welcomed a very mixed crowd; Dörig has a policy of programming events that will appeal to a wide audience, in addition to the more challenging artistic happenings taking place. Visitors tempted to Dreispitz for a particular concert or film find that once there, their interest is piqued by other aspects of the Shift programme, with the result that digital art finds new fans and the HEA attracts new audiences. The festival is a dynamic time for all involved and this year’s will be no different.

The world’s first publicly owned museum, the Amerbach-Cabinet, was set up in Basel in 1661. Over the years, this collection of artistic treasures grew and developed into the Kunstmuseum Basel, arguably Switzerland’s most important art institution. It’s still early days for the House of Electronic Arts – and not even the clever technology on display at the gallery is capable of predicting the future – but if Dörig’s ambitions bear fruit, Basel might just have another major art success on its hands. Watch this space. ■

**Shift Festival of Electronic Arts takes place from October 27 to 30.**  
[www.shiftfestival.ch](http://www.shiftfestival.ch) [www.haus-ek.org](http://www.haus-ek.org)