

MAPPING CONTROVERSIES

THE GALLERY OF RESEARCH | GALERIE DER FORSCHUNG

THE CASE OF GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOOD

EVENT REPORT

INTRODUCTION

On the 31st of January 2005, THE GALLERY OF RESEARCH | GALERIE DER FORSCHUNG held its first pilot event in its construction site: "Mapping Controversies: The Case of Genetically Modified Food," showcasing novel ways of communicating scientific results to a large public of non-experts. As such, the event exemplified the Gallery mission and its methods, which will be developed on a larger scale after the official opening, in October 2006.

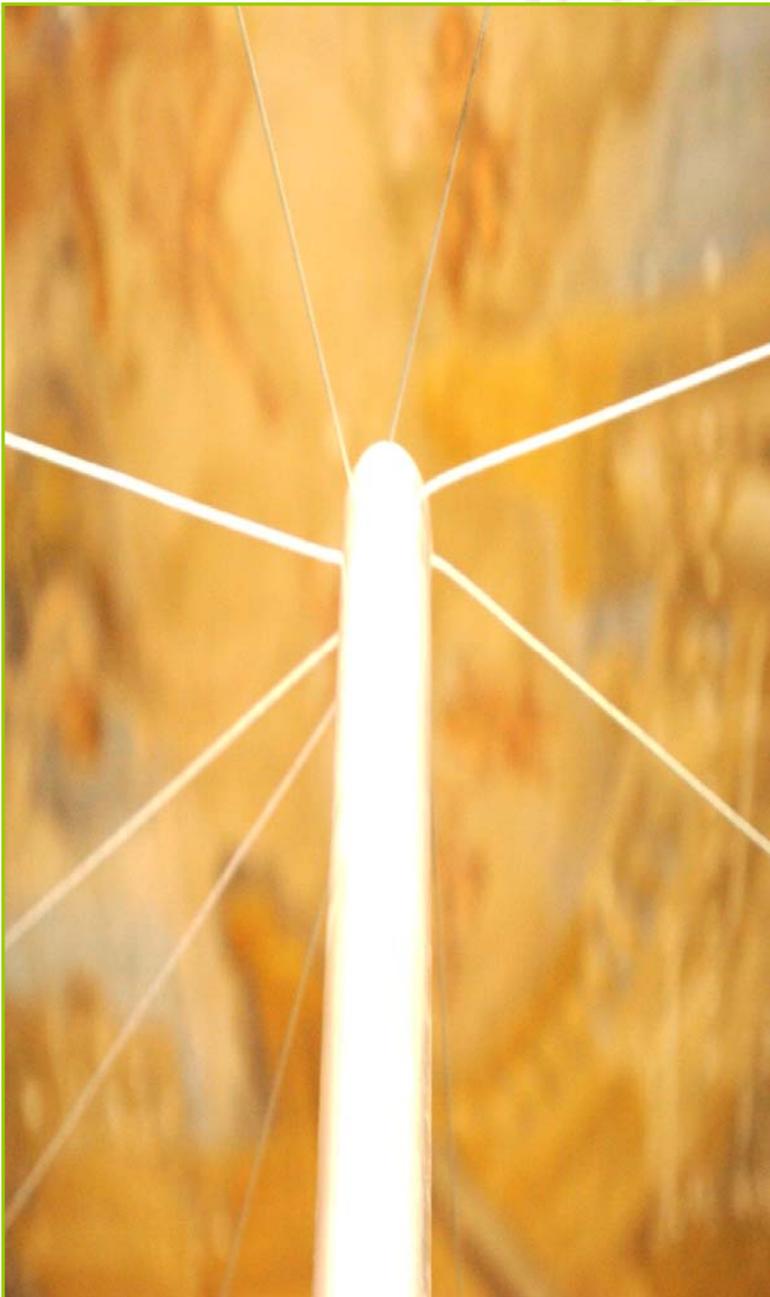
Science is generally thought of as a practice of calm and studied observation. However, from bio-engineered food to global warming, science is rife with disputes, debates and ambiguity. "Mapping Controversies" invited the public to explore these polemic aspects of science.

The event illustrated the Gallery purposes:

- to tackle not only successful scientific findings, but also challenges, unpredictable turns, pitfalls, failures and aberrations in research;
- to make citizens consider the social, ethical, moral and political implications of these issues, and the ways they become the basis of technological innovations and political decisions.



The participants came from various backgrounds: policy-makers, researchers, journalists, representatives of museums, etc. Due to the situation of the building site, the number of visitors was strongly restricted and attendance was on invitation only. Albená Yaneva, director of THE GALLERY OF RESEARCH | GALERIE DER FORSCHUNG, opened the experimental event with a short **guided tour**:



The visitor entered the installation vectorial space, endowed with various tensions, echoing the dynamism of the research cartography. She was invited to stroll in the space and visit the 3 different kiosks, where researchers presented **visually** their findings about the GM food debate. Immersed within the social, ethical and political aspects of the controversy, the visitor was not a passive viewer or listener, but an actor of the debate.

THE KIOSKS

The first kiosk was presented by Richard Rogers, lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam, who uses the Issue Crawler software to map issues on the web. In particular, he **located the Austrian web debate** on GM food and found it was not taking place in the country, but imported from Germany, Washington and Brussels. This statement triggered some strong reactions, for some visitors found it provocative. Rogers was inspired by the possibility to do produce “live research” in such a novel setting.

In the second kiosk, Christophe Bonneuil, from the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, presented the results of his work. Using mapping methods, he explored the **dynamics of biosafety research** in the EU and the USA. His findings were also translated into new maps developed by the Gallery, trying to give a novel insight into the “black box” of science. Bonneuil himself was skeptical a couple of years ago, and has since been captivated by the power of the methods in his own work. Now, the maps and the presentation techniques need to be improved to convey this potential to a larger audience.

Lastly, Ulrike Felt, from the University of Vienna, showed the results of her collaboration with Andrei Mogoutov, based on a cartographic study of the Google Austria News output and the Austrian Press Agency (APA) database. She decrypted the story of these network maps, offering a different **“walk” through the information landscape**. For Ulrike Felt, this event was a great opportunity, not only to bridge science and art, but also to make experts and lay people meet and enter a discussion.



THE LOUNGE AREA

This area lent itself to a calmer time for reading information about the Gallery and the event, consulting printed maps etc. The special visual design pieces invited the participants to continue discussions on the topic:



A short **slide show** combined images, sounds and quotes from the big demonstrations of anti-GM activists in Seattle. The pictures were collected by the American anthropologist Chaia Heller, who did an extensive field work on this debate, following its heated moments in Europe and the USA. The video allowed the visitors to literally hear the voices of protests. The lowly positioned 3 monitors created a lively visual environment in the middle of the installation setting.

An installation of shelves displayed empty **tins**, with especially designed labels of three major GM crops (maize, soybean and tomato). The labels drew the visitors' attention on the E.U. labelling policy and its special requirements to indicate that some day-to-day products contain genetically modified ingredients. Visitors were invited to take a tin as a souvenir, allowing us to test the consumers' willingness to get a GM product. The success of this installation showed the amazing discrepancy between negative opinions, usually expressed against GM food, and the consumers' behaviour in the supermarkets.

A **keyword wall** turned to be the central point of the visitors' attention. Derived from a unified database of scientific literature and media, it illustrated frequent keywords in the GM food debate. The words' colours signified different clusters of meaning; their size indicated the frequency with which they appeared in the debate: the bigger the size, the bigger the role of this keyword turns to be in the public space.

The **timeline wall installation** presented stepstones in the GM history. This installation showed, in a pop-art fashion, the entanglement of different political, scientific and legal actors. It stated in a convincing way that there is no neat chronological axis of the debate, but rather complex assemblages of actors with various ontologies. Moreover, the shape of the "timeline" turned to be that of a complex curve.



Even functional elements of the installation had an informational role. Thus, some events of the timeline were developed on so-called "**footnote tables**," printed with a short text and visual elements about key episodes in the GM debate.

REACTIONS AND ANALYSIS

We conceived this event as an experiment: this means we are willing to take both negative and positive results on board to develop our methods in a creative way. Scientific findings are usually communicated in the specific, esoteric language of the field, and remain understandable only for a community of specialists. We argue that a radical change in the 'genre' of traditional science communication is needed, different from the established patterns of scientific exchanges, such as workshops and conferences.

Richard Rogers remarked that this format contrasts with conventional museums, the exhibits of which are often already out-of-date at the time of their opening. Gerald Herlbauer (from the company "4youreye") was also enthused by the mixture of new technologies and exhibition mode, that allowed visitors more involvement than in a traditional display. Nevertheless, Manfred Tragner (Technisches Museum Wien) believed that these new methods could find their place alongside more usual, object-based displays. Rather than displacing conventional museums, THE GALLERY OF RESEARCH | GALERIE DER FORSCHUNG will complete and enrich the science communication landscape.





Despite the unsettling context, the cold, the roughness of the site, the demanding content, we were pleased to see a genuine interest on both the visitors' and the researchers' side. The kiosks, design and small installations engaged scientists and the public in an active, unbiased exchange of opinions. Yet, we feel that the atmosphere, though nicely informal, could have been more interactive. The Gallery intends to use such 'dialogue' modes of communication by the means of inquiry-based methods. By so doing, it will facilitate and enhance public participation in research.

In terms of space, the installation generally turned out to be a success: in particular, Christian Mandler (architect) appreciated the juxtaposition of the historical building and the modern installation, rendering a harmonious, original atmosphere. In addition, he was impressed to see that the conceptualization and implementation of the whole event was completed in just two and a half months, at such an early stage in the history of the institution.

Martina Hartl (Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Culture) underscored the importance of making well-founded scientific insights generally accessible, and sees the work of the Gallery as an important source of input in future public discourse. Anita Silmbrod (Austrian Federal Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry, the Environment and Water Resource Management) views events such as this, as well as the work of the Gallery as a whole, as a key contribution toward making debates accessible to the public, with implications reaching well beyond the discussions dealing with genetic engineering.

In a broader perspective, for our team and partners, this has been a unique and fruitful experience, from which our budding institution will learn to develop some effective forms of dialogue and engagement with research at the European level.

The installation positioned the visitor in a simulated public space, where the variety of protagonists in the debate was made present, talking, acting. Democracy is possible only when the whole range of opinions becomes visible *at once*. In order to act in a controversial situation related to technological risk, scientific uncertainty, conflicts of moral and ethical values, citizens need a *visual map* of all positions and interpretations. That is what makes us consider "Mapping Controversies" as a powerful tool in public participation and democracy-making.

In the future Gallery spaces, a permanent interactive "Mapping Controversies" platform will provide the visitor with the unique possibility to follow up lively cartographies of polemic topics in Science and Technology, establishing a public forum for debate.





SUPERVISION Albena Yaneva

EVENT COORDINATION Tania Rabesandratana

P.R. Birgit Greiner

RESEARCH Garo Barakian

VISUAL CONCEPTION Patricia Reed
<http://aestheticmanagement.com>

METHODOLOGIST Andrei Mogoutov
<http://www.aguidel.com>

CONSTRUCTION Ausstellungswerkstatt
<http://ausstellungswerkstatt.at/>

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