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ENTREVISTA  
INTERVIEW

DESENVOLVENDO NOVAS MANEIRAS DE RECONHECER O OUTRO  
DEVELOPING NEW WAYS OF RECOGNIZING THE OTHER  
ROY ASCOTT, ANJA PRATSCHKE

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INTERVIEW HELD ON NOVEMBER 26, 2020

**Anja Pratschke:** Conducting and publishing this interview is, for us, an acknowledgment of your valuable lifetime contribution to Media Art in a Cybernetic context, as an educator, director, and the founder of Planetary Collegium and the Technoetic Arts Studio, in DeTao Masters College, Shanghai, China ([www.royascottstudio.com](http://www.royascottstudio.com)). Thanks to your encouragement and leadership, several procedures and debates about methods in teaching, research, and extension activities have been innovated. We are therefore very honored that you accepted our invitation.

The background of our discussion is the notion that the pandemic is a global tragedy, of course, but it is also a plentiful, unexpected source of inputs for reflections on digitally mediated communication at all levels: its assumptions, potentialities, limits, means, risks, and consequences. We would like to know your opinion about this idea. How do you see the relationship between pandemic and the digital?

**Roy Ascott:** Well, first of all, the pandemic has made the whole field of digital communication processes familiar to people, of necessity. Until now, there has been a kind of indifference towards using the full scope of digital media, largely through ignorance, even though the very phone people use is intrinsically telematic. But now, in the COVID-19 Era, the idea of actually involving oneself in processes knowingly digital is quite

familiar, quite accepted, and quite preferred. I don't know how common it is, but if you take the newspaper for example – suddenly, within a matter of months of the plague striking, many people are wondering what to do with these enormous sheets of paper, so huge, and with all these pages. It is ridiculously difficult to properly navigate and hold it in your hands. The TV too: largely a one-way street, non-stop, no detours, an all-at-once entertainment and info, consumable. There is the start of the whole thing. I think that the ease of use of interactive digital communications media, where it was formerly thought to be threatening, has become part of the general public's cultural repertoire. It is now a matter, of course. So that is one thing.

I suppose a second immediate domestic thing is the access to goods, the choice of goods, and to have them delivered on-demand, directly to your door. This is what we do need to talk about because that is where it hits and that is where it is going to grow from. We should, of course, see increasingly who has, as you know, in the last ten months, the efficiency of transporting products and consumables, and that is why Jeff Bezos – of Amazon.com – is the richest man in the world. You say "I want this", and virtually the next day, it is literally on your doorstep. That is changing things a great deal, I think. At the same time, I am quite aware of the nature of the bazaar and the excitement of the bazaar, the pleasure of being confronted by a variety of products, and sampling experiences. And so equally, I presume, people enjoy themselves immersing digitally in that. So I think on the everyday level, which is where we need to start, there is a familiarity with telematics – with digital dialogue, digital exchange, digital access, and digital acquisition. What needs now, however, to be developed is the immersive sense of texture, touch, and smell.

The next thing is the question of transformation – of the self, of position, place, and performance! How individuals can now transform images, made possible through relatively simple digital means, and make choices and bring things together in their everyday life. This immediately, of course, leads to the question of architecture and how general Artificial Intelligence, or AI, as we currently practice it and its development, could replace architecture in many ways. We know very well how schools of architecture generally teach, based on models of the immediate or long past. Sadly, we have not found something else, and I should say this with respect, that despite exceptions architecture seems to be the teaching and the re-iteration of models. It is a very expensive business for the layperson to indulge in daydreams about how they might live. But I think with AI, there will be a substantive development towards user-driven AI architectural design processes.

Something called *design-build* bypasses the architect, where the builder simply picks the window, walls, and door from the catalog and bangs it all together. I think we might see a much more sophisticated development of individual choice, where the whole question of water supply, electricity location, and so on, can be computed, can be offered as a solution through AI to individual tastes. So I think architecture is an interesting place to look. Of course, the other thing and perhaps the most fundamental one, and certainly central to your question is that of Education, where and how do we develop. We have at this moment this rather bizarre COVID situation, where half a dozen children sit six foot apart pretending that things are the same as usual – you know that a blackboard is still a blackboard and all those sorts of things –, and yet they can go online and navigate quite other ways of accessing knowledge, and so on. The criticism, I would agree, is that discourse, which is essential in school teaching, is absent at this moment. I don't think that we have yet solved the problem of really fluid discourse through human/digital systems for school teaching.

Nevertheless, I suppose my main answer to your question is that there is no turning back. There is a digital instrumentality now, with which the general public is now more familiar. They see its utility, and I think that will be applied more and more to our behaviors and habits. COVID feeds the evolution of a digital sensibility, both to the material world and eventually to matters more "spiritual", perhaps. The other aspect of that is what I call the *rematerialization* of Art. Because things occur on the screen, and when people become accustomed to that sort of screened environment, which is aided by digital systems, there can be a rematerialization. I think that is what we are probably going to be looking at in the future: new kinds of materials and new functions of materials, objects, tools, and environments. New sensibilities to and with the material world.

**Anja Pratschke:** Can Cybernetics help us to understand the present moment? How can Art – or media art – be useful as a means to dialogue with this so-called "new normal"?

**Roy Ascott:** I think that from the first, Cybernetics was understood as a tool in biological understanding, as with Ross Ashby for example. That seems to be the most important function. It also has a very important social function apart from that of engineering and so on. In my view, it is a tool of socialism: the tool for caring, and learning, and sharing, and building, through the concept of the organism. And I think, the more that we can bring social institutions into an understanding of their form as a cybernetic organism, the more fruitful they will develop politically, as well as in other ways. So I think cybernetics is a fundamental tool. It is also central to my studio in Shanghai. We look at identity, behavior, and environment within that sort of cybernetic framework of interactive systems. I think it has a central place in the curriculum and informs the practice fundamentally. Not sure if I have answered your question actually, but that is my general attitude to its value as a tool.

Ross Ashby is still an important reference, and basic to this understanding of how to relate to Consciousness, even though *Design for a Brain* is an old text. Alfred North Whitehead, a pre-cybernetic mathematician, and

philosopher offers a good deal of philosophical understanding. And even if one looks at P. D. Ouspensky and some of the Russian mystics, you detect in there the seeds of what I see as dynamic systems. This is, for me, the direction in which much research could be going. And that is in terms of the study of Consciousness because I think Consciousness is absolutely at the top of the agenda. How can we understand the conscious process in terms of behavior and environment, in terms of the individual, in terms of the group, bringing together all the issues to communicate, if we can begin to explore consciousness more thoroughly? That brings us, of course, to chemistry. Essentially, I mean the chemistry of the brain which allows us to explore conscious states, and I think this is certainly in my field. That is going to be the next step: moistmedia, as I call it, or bio-art is on the path towards it.

I mean that artists will not leave the digital behind, but the digital process will support, let's say, our interventions into the chemistry of the brain. I like that loop because that brings me straight to Brazil, to the plants, and where I first became aware of the power of the plants in terms of consciousness. So I think that here is an important field of exploration, and I love the way that it might bring much older cultures to relate to current cultures.

**Anja Pratschke:** What would you say about the impacts of the pandemic on local cultures, the so-called originary peoples, such as the Amazon peoples, and to what extent do these impacts open us to new understandings about the notion of globalization?

**Roy Ascott:** I spent a short time with the spiritual groups Umbanda, Santo Daime, and the União do Vegetal. Maybe the most important aspect I found in this sort of crossover was that they were very syncretic. This is a most important aspect, the celebration of the syncretic by bringing together quite otherwise disparate approaches to consciousness and identity through rhythm and ritual. I found a lot there, particularly staying with the Kuikuro people in Brazil, just for two or three weeks. We would have to re-examine the relationship between a ritualized behavior in many of the groups like the Kuikuro, their relationship between their patterns of behavior, and their attitude to consciousness and the natural environment. I think that has to be explored a lot more thoroughly again.

Since we started with cybernetics, I think a cybernetic tool for that exploration would be useful, but I think there is a lot of work to be done in analyzing and immersing ourselves in these practices of the forest or come from the forest, like the Santo Daime or the União do Vegetal. Yes, this is the chemistry of the brain basically, of course. The relationship between chemistry and consciousness is very much at the top of the agenda. How we engage in that as artists has to be explored. We have gone through an intense materialist period: first the representation of a sort of childish materialism – "what I see is what I get" –, and then that kind of abandoned materialism, which we called non-figurative, a sort of abstract expressionism or a more considered word, and a kind of dematerialism of the screen. But it is now essentially "bye-bye Baudrillard!", a re-materialization of art that is evolving, repositioned, and refigured. We use photography to *construct* images, printing to *build* structures, drawing to *defer* to the diagram.

In the domain of Art, I think we have to revisit the work of Duchamp, not as a conceptualist full of wit and surprises, but to re-examine his *Grand Verre*, *The Bride*, on the one hand, and his final work, *Étant Données*, and their hermetic implications. I think there is a lot further to be explored there and I would put it all under the rubric *Consciousness*. These questions of Mind have been largely put aside since the Enlightenment in Europe, in fear or loathing of religion: enlightenment which was actually a darkening of many valid and more mystical understandings of the world. The Age of Reason, at its worst, fuelled ambitions of Empire, domination, and the false logic of Capitalism. If we think of military arms expenditure of the United States, where trillions of dollar budgets are spent in a deadly pursuit of world domination, continuing the colonial horrors of Portugal, Spain, and Great Britain.

In the art of the modern era, the colonial impulse plays its part still in the form of Biennales and other Western capitalist cultural expansionist events. It is quite familiar to everyone now how the Abstract Expressionists were CIA-backed to finance their tour around Europe and to affect the world's artistic sensibility – minds like mine, for example. I was deeply affected at the time by the New York School. And that sort of thing needs to be uncovered and recovered, re-examined.

Our evolving relationship to knowledge-building and Artificial Intelligence, the nature of mind, and the expansion of consciousness lead us to rethink the structure and nature of education. COVID alone has demanded this, however meekly. But it fuels the need to rethink education at all levels – virtual and local, where it is delivered, why, when, and how. I mean, very thoroughly to consider even the setting up of many educational establishments, and some of them we need to look very very carefully.

Anyway, I think in terms of your question, there is much to learn from older cultures. Buddhism, for example, is now being understood more as a practice and in terms of the development of Consciousness, than as a 'religion'. So things are shifting in Western understandings of the world, and somehow we have to bring that into the orbit of the education of artists because they have a chance to cut some of the bonds and bindings of the old sensibilities. So I think that has to be brought about somehow.

**Anja Pratschke:** Talking about affecting minds at present leads us to the notions of technopolitics and technoethics. The mandatory digitization of much of humanity during the pandemic renewed issues such as the production of big data, surveillance and privacy, the construction of artificial intelligence databases, the dissemination of security and control computer applications, and especially the many uses that you can do of all this, or whoever is interested in this monitoring.

**Roy Ascott:** Yes, we came out of this idea of private thoughts. I hate to hang it all on Christianity, but it is responsible for a lot of evil in the world and not least this idea of sin and sinning, which somehow bypasses compassion, understanding, and love in terms of human actions. So even if we have got the tools that provide some insight into behavior, there are probably still things that are kept hidden.

It is quite amusing, if you look at reports on China, and you consider the issue of surveillance, with people spotted in airports and railway stations, and zoomed in on and being identified. Rather than repressive, it can be seen to have all kinds of benefits. It can be a very effective way not just of tracking criminals, or errant citizens generally, but in challenging COVID-19, for example, and tracking those who are sick and unstable. In every respect, the law only works well in benign societies. It can be distorted, just as common law can be distorted, to the ends of the fascist leaders, who will cite morality as the basis of their actions when it is purely used as a tool of subjugation.

So I think this idea of identity being digitally recognized and developed beyond the gesture, beyond the clothes that you wear, beyond the smile, the frown that you make, to that of consciousness itself, is truly technoetic. Usually, we can only see this kind of recognition system in terms of rather bad stories about the autocratic rule. Many think that China, the leader in this field of digital recognition and data application, is still run by the Chairman Mao regime. I find that ludicrous. Its success in mastering COVID-19 medically and politically is equaled only by its civil engineering research, and social and educational advancement. In short, China is the world exemplar of the *technoetic* political impulse.

On the other hand, the West understands the commercial Chinese company *Alibaba* very well. What is going on in China, commercially speaking? They have seen incredible advances: in civil engineering – the buildings, the bridges, and aircraft –, advanced medical research, and brilliantly equipped health centers, and so on, but yes, they say: "everywhere there are armed guards walking around, looking at you, in the airport, at the railway station, on the street, and seeing that you owe money to the Inland Revenue or expressing social dissent or something, and they are going to lock you up!". Of course, this is a huge, often politically-motivated distortion, and open to political exploitation. However, digital recognition systems are not at the moment in the ownership of the public. It is in the government domain, in the hands of authorities. And of course, should it remain there alone, then that is open to tremendous abuse, but I think, more positively, with these recognition technologies, we are probably developing new ways of recognizing and understanding the Other. Not simply based on sight and hearing, touch and smell, gesture and location in space but in a more fundamental sense, through these technoetic, digital processes.

This gives us access to a new way of understanding the other. We will learn how to behave with new kinds of signaling and recognition systems. Now, this adds to our repertoire of understanding, when it is properly understood and employed. This is another element, of course, to be brought into education at an early stage, so we don't see that as a sort of fascist tool of surveillance and control. We understand that it is another element in managing our sensory system and, in the emotional, intellectual, and *spiritual* understanding of the Other, I think there is a lot to be explored, frankly.

**Anja Pratschke:** This is a very interesting perspective. How do your current projects dialogue with China? What are your projects?

**Roy Ascott:** Well, at the moment, I am trying to make sense of the archives that I have got. I have a tremendous amount of material over quite some years and I am figuring out how to contain that so it can be accessed. I am dealing with and I am trying to put together some understanding of my pathway through all these fields of cybernetics and different cultures. You know, I have an interesting career – having been fired five times for my "radical" restructuring of some major institutions (!), and I am interested in re-tracking that journey, in various ways.

The structure of my DeTao studio in Shanghai ([www.royascottstudio.com](http://www.royascottstudio.com)), I see as an evolving paradigm. A great deal of my current thinking is with my studio in Shanghai, because for me that is the fulfillment of everything I have been trying to do in art education over the years, and it is where, finally, I have been given absolute backing. The curriculum and students wholly reflect that. I think people are truly blossoming from what is being developed there. Because of COVID, the course delivery is transformant. You could say my staff and I are telematically joined at the hip! As I said, I am also in the process of putting into order my extensive archive, and relationships between various of the many projects I have been engaged in over the decades, and planning how and where I want my work to move next. I have put my artwork in the hands of a new, innovative Italian dealer, but my immediate project at the moment is the Shanghai studio, for post-COVID cultural changes worldwide that may need to become permanent. I have closed down the *Planetary Collegium* which I set up at Plymouth University – following CAiiA at Caerleon College in the University of Wales – 20

years ago, and from which we have graduated some 80+ Ph.D. students. I am shifting the hub to my studio in Shanghai. Of course, there is still a lot to be dealt with, for the Chinese education authorities to approve it.

I must tell you an amusing story: we first advertised the proposed De Tao Academy-based Ph.D. in Chinese social networks like Weibo, Renren, and Wechat, and advertised it for what it is: essentially three meetings a year, three 10-day critical meetings with a group of fellow Ph.D. students throughout the year, continuous online supervision, and they are expected 20 or more hours a week to research at home. Somehow the message that went through was that you can get a Ph.D. *doing no more than three weeks a year*, total! Yes, without mentioning the rest!! So, inevitably everyone thought this Mickey Mouse – absolutely ridiculous – just three weeks work a year! So of course we did not recruit a single student! – but once we got a clue as to what happened, we were able to reshape it, and make plain the full demands of the program. At the moment, until we get approval, we cannot enroll students. But that is something I very much want to develop, in order to bring into orbit a lot of scholarship, both of new media art and old, even ancient knowledge in Chinese culture, which we probably miss out on in many ways in the West. That is another aspect of my agenda.

Although it is no doubt frowned on by intellectuals, I have a lot of pleasure in using Facebook as a kind of publishing medium. And I have to say curiously, and delightfully, a huge number of people interact with what I publish, and many are from South America, particularly Brazil, which is very interesting to me. I am interested in why that might be. I have no idea, but it is the case that it is a very useful form of publishing, in many ways better than those academic journals, which no more than half a dozen people read, when they can afford the fee, and so on. Of course, flesh and blood conferences and lectures are useful, but I like this Zoom process of using a telematic medium to get ideas out, and get feedback, and to learn how people see these ideas, with immediate data access to images and documents on demand.

**Anja Pratschke:** Roy, does the future look promising to you?

**Roy Ascott:** Well, I think it is going to be very different for different countries. I mean, if we try to look at a sort of universal development, I am not sure that would be helpful. I am fearful of the political unrest in the US and regress in the UK and Europe. But I see hopeful emergence in Africa and parts of Asia. These are things professionally a little bit out of my field; but in the UK, at the moment, there is a great regression, politically, very seriously, very very very seriously. We probably may not want a parochial political discussion on this right now, but the backbone of socialism, what we used to call the working class, was very misled by the current party now in power – the Conservatives. Socialism has been heavily abused by the press, which is, of course, totally owned by capitalist interests. And so socialism, instead of being understood as the peoples way forward is somehow persuasively represented to them as an impediment! And so you have many working people voting for capitalism. It has been most extraordinary. So the Conservatives now have an enormous advantage and landslide vote, wrecking the European Union, and degrading national harmony.

In my view, completely irresponsible people are leading the country. It is a gravely serious situation. Compounded, of course, infinitely compounded by what is happening in the United States of America. I mean nothing has changed there, with Biden. In my view, it always was imperialist, warlike, and abusive, on the one hand. And on the other hand, the very same people – Biden's – are pretending to be opposing it. So you have a double nightmare, where the external perception of the new regime of Biden is simply replaying the Trumpian tune, without the fascist gestures, without the shouting and screaming, and no visible armed factions with military-style rifles. So, I am sorry, but you asked the question, I have to answer that way.

At the moment, it is looking rather desperate in the West, and I am very hopeful for the way things are developing in the East, particularly in China, where there is a good balance between the encouragement of innovation, of enterprise, of testing new ideas socially, as well as economically and in terms of industry, engineering, architecture, and so on. I think the way that this is working – this kind of "growth socialism", or socialism with Chinese characteristics, as Xi Jinping puts it – is because of the habits of people being much more committed to each other. There is a much greater sense of the group, there is that feeling of responsibility towards others, somehow.

The West favors the lone ranger, the special, singular one – striding out and leading the way, and all that sort of things. There is a sort of balance now, between individual initiative and collective consciousness, in the development of Chinese culture currently, which is very positive. I look at that, and I think that we will see, by contrast, a frightening economic and cultural recession in the West. As a product of COVID-19 and the socio-cultural Reset, we may see a kind of revision of the Socialist idea, which in my terms will be technoetic. I am hopeful but I think we will have a very very very difficult time in the next 20 years until this does fully emerge. This is how I see things.

**Anja Pratschke:** Would you like to add something that we did not ask you?

**Roy Ascott:** I am wondering how we collectively view what is being called the spiritual. It seems to me that it is missing in our discourse nowadays. And where it is admitted? It is admitted in an archaic, often superstitious, intellectually regressive, and rather silly way. I do think that cybernetics leads to lots of

questions about what is integrated, what is the whole, what are the interactions, what are the elements which interact.

Are we missing something? This understanding of the universe, of ourselves, and that which I think used to be called the spiritual. That is not a word that one should use in polite society! You know you are going to be dismissed immediately from any sort of academic, cultural, or political discussion if you try to bring it in. But I want to bring it in. I want to re-examine what "the spiritual" means relative to biology, physics, and chemistry, and to data communication systems – what the spiritual means to our sense of the organism, the sense of society, precisely through what we both share as a cybernetic tool, which allows for this idea of dynamic systems of interaction. The question is essentially technoetic!

So yes, I use the word "spiritual", though we are probably going to have to find a new word to make it more universally acceptable and something to be urgently and more thoroughly examined. But it is not in our present discourse and must, I think, be explored more creatively and thoroughly. And Brazil is the most wonderful place to explore that, in truly human, technoetic terms! I would say so, absolutely! Absolutely!