

Professor Roy Ascott. Acceptance Speech. Award of Honorary Doctorate, Ionian University, Corfu, 18 May 2016

To Professor Vassilios Chrissikopoulos.

Dear Rector

It is with the heartfelt pride and gratitude that I accept this Honorary Doctorate of the Ionian University and its Department of Audio and Visual Arts, School of Music and Audiovisual Arts. I am humbled to think that the University and its professors, responsible for the University's artistic energy and transdisciplinary intent, would honour me in this way. The current festival and conference *Taboo - Transgression - Transcendence In Art & Science* is itself a tribute to their creative and critical vision.

Greece is very special to me, not least in the friendship of Greek colleagues who in the past, and today, contribute richly to my perspective on art at this time of radical technological and cultural change, and who have created forums and convened conferences for me and my colleagues, that generate discourse and debate at the critical and creative edge of new knowledge and transformative practice.

The Greek language is also special to me, being at the root of three words that are central to my own practice as an artist, to my research, and to my teaching.

The three words are: *cybernetic*, *technoetic*, and *syncretic*.

In my view, they are words of power, the power of creativity.

While not in any way eschewing the materiality of art, my focus is always on process and system, flow, interaction, and the transformative quality of the organism. Thus *Cybernetics*, to take its Greek language origin, concerns the steersman, the pilot, navigating chance, change and the multiple pathways of creative practice and meaning. I see Cybernetics as the art of steering towards the unknown, with and through dynamic networks, with feedback to guide the way. This is my basic discipline. It has from the start informed my creative process and my approach to the various art institutions and organisations which I have been charged to develop over the years in London, San Francisco, Vienna, Shanghai, and with my international research platform, the Planetary Collegium, whose conferences and research sessions have been hosted in more than sixty-five cities across the globe.

Technoetics brings in to focus my understanding of art as an outcome of the interplay of technology and consciousness, such that our modalities of seeing, thinking, and feeling are augmented and extended by the applications of science, and, as I must insist, the applications of more ancient understandings of the self and its body, through somatic disciplines, the structuring of psychic space, and the chemistry of plants. Yes, *plants!* The pharmacology of

consciousness is not limited to the esoterica of the deep past, or the reckless frivolity of today, but will lead the way over future decades to the new media of mind, just as compelling to artists as new digital media of today.

And then there is *Syncretism*, with its origin in *synkrētismós*, *union* of Cretans, opposing parties united against a common foe, in which both unity of purpose and difference of attitude, even at a profound level, are creatively maintained. The artistic potential of the word came to me first, not in Greece but in Brazil, and more in terms of extended mind than artistic matter. As a consequence of spending time with the Kuikuro in the Xingu Region of the Upper Amazon, and then visiting with various spiritual communities throughout Brazil, I came to understand how the syncretism of Umbanda, brought together quite distinctly different (and in the rest of the world, bitterly opposed,) philosophies and spiritual practices. In art today, syncretism is the only saving grace: the integration of difference, aesthetic, and procedural, even, political, into a dynamic whole.

I have defined technoetic art as a convergent field of practice that seeks to explore consciousness and connectivity through digital, telematic, chemical or spiritual means, embracing both interactive and psychoactive technologies, and the creative use of moistmedia. *Moistmedia* is a neologism I coined, as with such words as *hypercortex*, *cyberception*, and *variable reality*, to describe media practices or consequences for which no prior vocabulary was available. *Moistmedia* emerges from the confluence of (silicon) dry computational systems and wet biological processes, to produce a new substrate for creative work, consisting of bits, atoms, neurons, and genes.

Syncretism, as with cybernetics and the technoetic perspective, is essentially transdisciplinary. In art, as in science, all perspectives are incomplete, all hypotheses transitory. In Art, it is the instability of the image, its indeterminacy and potential for transformation that can relate it to contemporary science - and to the principal issues of human life: self-identity, connectedness, and consciousness. In consequence, art will become progressively more syncretic, or risk losing entirely its social and spiritual significance.

In reference to self-identity, and the building of the creative personality, it cannot be ignored that the single-self organism, as it were, is giving way to the multiple self. As a consequence of technoetic evolution we are rebuilding the self, not least in social media, where avatars and alternative, additional persona are constantly being instantiated, liked, and shared, only to be removed and abandoned. We are each engaged in constructing and syncretising many selves. The deeper we go into ourselves, the more selves we discover. We can recognise that the self is not fixed but generative. We seem to be in an endless state of becoming, in a reality that can only be described as variable. Progressively we shall become more permeable and transparent, at the edge of the mind as well in the materiality of the body, and not just to others but also to ourselves, and our own self-realization.

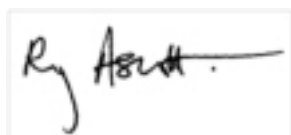
I particularly treasure this honour bestowed on me, dear Rector, because it marks a high point of recognition of my particularly complicated and convoluted odyssey, a rather restless traversing of East and West. I have been active in many parts of the Americas, Europe, and the Far East. To be celebrating this long and eventful journey here, on this island jewel, in a youthful, dynamic university, rich in vigorous innovation, and planted in soil that relates its history in part to my own soil and its cultural sensibility, is a moment of wonder and joy, for me, and for my supportive and loving family.

With digital technology, moistmedia, telematic connectivity, and distributed authorship, we artists are constantly challenged to reposition ourselves, metaphysically and aesthetically. The vision we bring to our role will be critical in the coming decades, not only to the way we comprehend our connective reality, but the ways in which we choose to live it.

The qualities of immaterial connectedness confer a spiritual dimension on both art and quantum physics. The solid objective world that we see is a representation at another level of resolution of the oscillating immateriality that we recognise as constituting quantum phenomena. Whilst the artist sees the significance of science in this understanding, science has yet fully to value art's subjectivity. This may change as our perspective on technologically assisted perception changes. *Ask not what science can do for art; ask what art can do for science.*

Aesthetics and metaphysics are closely allied. Where metaphysics examines the nature of reality, including the relationship between mind and matter, aesthetics deals with beauty and the integrity of meaning. But reality, beauty and meaning are not independent of our participation in their construction and their representation. Both the artist and the scientist are central to these processes of mediation and creation.

To young artists and designers of the university I say: be prepared to look anywhere, into any discipline, any view of the world - however esoteric or arcane - any culture, immediate or distant in space or time, in order to find ideas or processes which might engender creativity. There is no meta-language or meta-system that places one discipline or world-view automatically above all others. Syncretism is emergent at all levels of artistic research. Look in all directions for inspiration and understanding: to the East as well as the West, the left hand path as well as the right; working with both reason and intuition, sense and nonsense, subtlety and sensibility.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Roy Ascott" with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Professor Roy Ascott