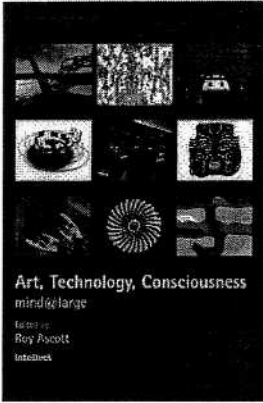**Roy Ascott (ed)**
Art, Technology, Consciousness:
mind@large
Portland, OR and Bristol: Intellect Books, 2000,
£24.95 / $44.95, 204 pp., ISBN 1-84150-041-0 (hbk).

Art, Technology, Consciousness
mind@large
Edited by
Roy Ascott
Intellect

Roy Ascott, the founder and director of CAiiA-STAR (University of Wales College, Newport) has been pioneering for many years with internationally acclaimed conferences the place of cybernetics, telematics and interactive media in art. His second volume *Art, Technology, Consciousness: mind@large* is the collection of lectures, presentations and interventions of the 2nd International Research Conference *Consciousness Reframed* which was held in Newport in August 2000. It is an outstanding approach which addresses contemporary theory of consciousness, the creation of meaning and emotion and the mind as both the subject and the object of art.

As pioneers in the philosophy and technological impact of the digital culture, Ascott and his colleagues (they come from very different research backgrounds such as the physical sciences, art, media and design) go far beyond the dominating hype of the so-called *innovative* digital debate. This too often turns out be pure 'moonshine' regarding the claim of media art's overarching capacity in encompassing artistic encounters with the technological reality. The volume's focus is in fact both on and *beyond* digital culture and it includes aspects of artificial life, robotics, performance, computer music, architecture, telematic art and biotechnology.

Our culture is at the point, it seems, where the commitment of new kind of *visionary pragamatism* (Ascott) is an imperative. Today new scientific experiments like teleportation and superluminal tunneling, whose interpretations are at stake, challenge us to become more open-minded. This is exactly the point where the volume offers a wide number of contributions to radically rethink the nature of awareness and cognition by identifying key questions rather than definitive answers. Eduardo Kac's *transgenic artwork* presented and explained is an illuminating example of how media art today is capable of exploring the intricate relationship between biology, belief systems, information technology, dialogical interaction, ethics and the internet. Most contributing artists and scientists included in this publication have been involved in a variety of public exhibitions and the majority of their work is available online.

The volume presents in my opinion the most up-to-date discussion at the intersection between art, technology and consciousness. It addresses a wide range of topics ranging from the concept of intelligence (Ted Krueger) to the bicameral mind (Gregory P. Garvey) and the nature of memes in visual art (Nicholas Tresilian). John Cowley, the author of a contribution titled 'Quantum Mechanical Model of Consciousness', refers to Henry Stapp who suggests that the universe could be considered as having an 'informational' structure, rather than consisting of 'rock-like' particles. We are tempted to get exciting new thoughts and perspectives which in fact are a challenge to our definition of being human, consciousness and the physical world.

Roy Ascott's suggestion that we currently see an artistic shift, 'as silicon and pixels merge with molecules and matter' and thus intelligence is about to spread to every aspect of living, is understandable and even compelling. He foresees 'the insertion of a new but very ancient technology' — that of the psychoactive plant. And Ascott even goes one step further when he claims that art is the search of a new language and new metaphors for the means of re-defining ourselves. Our identity has become transformable. This means that the many selves hypothesis, like the many worlds hypothesis of physics (Everett), is necessary to life and liberty in a culture where cyberspace and postbiological life meet. Ascott proposes a new reality with new *technoetic* networks (Greek *noetikos*, mind/consciousness) in which consciousness is both the subject and object of art. This means that the artist not only embraces new technological developments and theories of mind, but explores the practices and perceptions of other cultures and traditions. For many of those cultures, the ritual ingestion of plants is entailed,
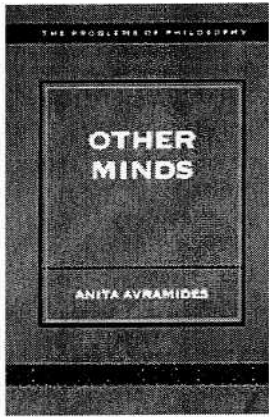
leading Roy Ascott to propose a kind of *vegetal reality*, invested in a psychoactive plant technology, to compliment the virtual reality of interactive digital technology, and the reactive, mechanical validated reality of the everyday world.

René Stettler

Anita Avramides
Other Minds
London: Routledge, 2001, xv + 333 pp.,
$24.95/£15.99 ISBN 0 415241 93 6 (pbk)

In her accessible treatment of this familiar problem, Anita Avramides recommends that we reorient ourselves to a 'postlapsarian' counterpart of the ancient Greeks' innocence regarding the question of whether others possess minds. Regaining innocence here means discarding what Avramides calls the 'Cartesian framework,' a conceptual structure that entrenches a fundamental gap between a subject and the objective world. Endorsing such a gap, as Descartes does by entertaining the possibility that all of one's beliefs are false, leads to the troubling epistemological problem of reconnecting mind and world. If we abandon the conceptual framework, the epistemological problem simply cannot arise.

This book belongs to Routledge's Problems of Philosophy series, and, consonant with the goals of that series, Avramides devotes its first two parts to a historical survey of the problem of other minds, examining the degree to which the problem plagued certain central figures. Its history proves interesting, especially considering the lack of concern ancient Greek sceptics expressed about the existence of other minds. Ancient scepticism, Avramides observes, began with the assumption that an epistemological difficulty lies in knowing the world as it is, not whether or not it exists. Accordingly, the problem of other minds does not become pressing until Descartes introduces a more radical scepticism that divides mind from world. Since others are part of the external world that is epistemologically problematic, Cartesian scepticism unavoidably entails a problem about the minds of others.

Though Descartes' successors, such as Malebranche, Locke and Berkeley, address the problem (with varying degrees of urgency), it was not until Reid, Avramides convincingly argues, that an appreciation of the epistemological problem prompted a reconsideration of the Cartesian framework as a whole. She devotes Part Two of the book primarily to elucidating the dissatisfaction Reid and Wittgenstein express with the view that knowledge of one's own mind forms the basis for attributing mentality to others. In Wittgenstein's later work, we see his attempt to free us from deep Cartesian intuitions about the first person by considering what we actually say and do. Moreover, the Private-Language argument evinces the difficulties inherent in the Cartesian framework should one succumb to those intuitions.

Avramides devotes the final section of the book to her own proposal. History teaches that the Cartesian framework is fraught with difficulties and should be discarded. The decisive difficulty lies in its reliance upon the assumption that a subject's knowledge of her own mind forms the basis for her concept of mind. Mental concepts are applied asymmetrically, for one ascribes them to others on the basis of observable behaviour but needs no such basis to ground their self-ascription. Given this asymmetry, Avramides argues that adopting this assumption forces one to confront two questions: first, one needs to account for the generality of our concept of mind or how one is licensed to extend the concept to others (the 'generality problem'); and second, even if one assumes generality in our concept of mind, one needs to ask whether the concept applied in one's own case is the same concept applied to others (the 'unity problem'). Starting with one's own case makes the ascriptive asymmetry insurmountable and the generality and unity problem unsolvable.

These conceptual questions run deeper than the epistemic one, Avramides suggests, since the latter is raised in terms of knowing when to extend our concept of mind to others. We avoid