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Consciousness Reframed 2003: Art and Consciousness in the Post-biological Era

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 Convenor: Roy Ascott

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Consciousness Reframed 2003 returned to Caerleon where the conference was first convened in 1997, as the multidisciplinary arena for issues of art, technology and consciousness. Combining both theory and practice, it offered an extremely broad range of presentations. The issues varied from purely philosophical approaches to consciousness allowing a glance on the hotspot dialogue between virtual reality and our everyday reality, to practice-based analysis and the exploration of embodied mind and its possible applications in negotiating the boundaries between arts and sciences. Many perspectives seemed to involve the post-biological condition of art, put to practical use in the symbiosis of technology and consciousness, or, the technoetic as defined by Roy Ascott. [1] Many apparent differences between various approaches on the conceptual level may only be matter of perspective. As Eril Baily put it at the Newport train station: "We all know, what we are talking about, but we do not know, what it is".

When attending the presentations, it seemed to me that philosophers, on one hand, artists on the other, understand and discuss consciousness very differently. This is, why, as a preface to my review for Consciousness Reframed, I would like to briefly sketch my vision of convergence between conventionally distinct disciplines like, let's say, cognitive materialism, represented by Daniel Dennett [2], and conceptual idealism [3] adopted for example in the theories of telematic art by Roy Ascott. Transgressing the preset conceptual borders of these distinct domains enables us to

scrutinize their structure from outside. This method of stepping outside is traditionally used by artists, trying to view phenomena from unconventional perspectives, e.g. upside-down, or, as a collage of conflicting perspectives. The inside and outside are interdependent entities, evolving in a continuous interaction and transformation. This interaction is emergent and productive as such, but viewed in the scientific context, it needs to be, if not explained, but somehow conceptualized, or described.

Neuroscientists and consciousness researchers may or may not accept a view of the global neuronal workspace model as a conceptual metaphor for consciousness, but in this review I reflect it as a plausible one. The workspace model, according to Dennett [4], suggests a non-hierarchical, collateral, cooperative, even competitive, modular system, which allows a multidimensional global accessibility. I claim that the metaphor of consciousness as a global workspace attributed above, characterizes perfectly well the assertion of phenomena both on the neuro-biological and techno-social levels of observation. This is why I am tempted to suggest a broadscale conceptual isomorphism ranging in-between the microscale structure of consciousness to the macroscale structure of the planetary consciousness. I dare to put forward this idea, because I am convinced that the fundamental structure of human conceptual system is relatively independent of the differences in languages and cultural inheritance, but intrinsically dependent on the embodied orientation to the environment. I also assume that the way we speak about very different issues is based on the repetition and recycling of same, assumably limited and slowly changing embodied inference structures, such as the body-based orientational metaphors of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. [5] And this allows us to conclude that at least artists and other visionaries can freely use the method of intrusion, transgression and analogizing when exploring the conceptual resources of other disciplines. For an artist the tools of broadscale conceptual isomorphism, and, the metaphor of multidimensional global workspace enable an access to the infinite domain of conceptual evolution – from private/neuro-biological to public/cultural dimensions of consciousness. Through my understanding, this no-one's land is where the micro and macro-environments of consciousness research intertwine, and where a holistic dynamic organism-like ontology about consciousness as a subject-environment interaction emerges.

Consciousness seems to be easier to explain in conceptual form than to grasp in material form (e.g. neurobiological, electrochemical). It reveals itself, not in products, but in processes, like the behavior or interaction of a Subject within his or her environment. For a journey to an unfamiliar and exotic environment as consciousness is, between the mystical and rational, Michael Punt suggested adapting the phenomenal aspects of nineteenth century science.

Observing and experimenting with the actual processes, as they appear, might expose something to our scrutiny that is conventionally, scientifically, or even intuitively, not presupposed to appear.

Consciousness Reframed, literally, puts out the question whether we can study consciousness only from outside, inside, or outskirts. The sovereignty that inhabits peripheral fields of consciousness is Art, or, more widely, imagination plus conceptual structures mediated by metaphors. These are the tools that enable an access to consciousness, which becomes both Subject and Object of research. For observing the phenomena of world-embedded self-consciousness, for example, Robert Pepperell introduced the metaphoric tool of video feedback, a loop of infinite regression. I am tempted to suggest that innovation of this kind of experiment supports the idea of the broad-scale conceptual isomorphism outlined above. According to Pepperell, the video feedback's actual self-reference in interaction with the dynamics of its environment visualizes the system's awareness of its audience, and its own awareness of this awareness – it becomes the conscious artwork.

Many participants of the conference worked on sketching the "Big Picture". But how big can the picture be? And, what there is to frame? Artists, while exploring how to couple the separate environments of virtual and real (e.g. "Matrix"), seemed to concentrate in the human mind/body experience, either conscious, and/ or subconscious, or preconscious, depending from the perspective. Roger Malina pointed out to the other direction: most of our environment, the universe, is inaccessible to human senses. It is virtual in the deep sense, Malina affirms. The universe as a virtual environment is described only by augmented and amplified senses of simulations and visualizations, and with the help of machines and non-human scale techniques. Of course, we also can claim that these tools are extensions of human imaginative consciousness. Seen from either the material or phenomenological point of view, even if we did not know anything about the existence of universe, we would still inhabit it.

The functions (thoughts, behaviours, material products) of conscious mind can be seen as reflecting the evolutive (biological) state of that proper individual mind, and, simultaneously, the evolutive (cultural) state of the global techno-social consciousness. In some aspect, consciousness with its imaginative power, is virtual in as deep sense as Malina's universe. When added that augmented digital technologies enable human mind to escape its bio-physical stone-age prison, the matrix of a 'reality'. Eril Bailly suggested that every-day-reality can be considered a sub-set of the virtual. According to her "the authentic locus of consciousness [is located] within the virtual out of which realities are fabricated and substantiated".

While cosmologists continue working with the macro-scale mysteries of the universe, such as dark matter and dark energy, which are assumed to compose 70% of the universe, the same mysterious 70% must also somehow penetrate and define the micro-scale environment of human bio-physical body. This is relevant question in the perspective of the broad-scale conceptual isomorphism. Could human body and its sensitivity for embodied emergent phenomena work as another kind of experiment field for observing these phenomena normally related to cosmology? What is the material cause for private experiences like emotions or the feelings of what happens? In his presentation Jim Laukes proposed that interactive art could provide the toolkit for verifying identical, shared subjective experience, such as empathy.

A remarkably large number of presenters' curriculum vitae included active participation in creating interactive immersive art. Many cases were practice-based, functioning as a starting point for combining artwork and theory. Char Davies presented her view on immersive virtual reality experienced in a real cave environment – a perception of a shared "expanded" consciousness. The sensual dimension of aesthetic experience, built around bio-spherical metaphors, also guided Stahl Stenslie's multi-sensory experiments. According to Stenslie, the dynamic indirect, tacit and body-based processes are a fundamental modus operandi to the consciousness. Yacov Sharir had created a control tool for an interactive dance performance, where his disembodied dancer/self is re-embodied in cyber-performers. The domain that rarely is approached or defined from the preconceptual, which is its most natural and sovereign field, is the body. Kjell Petersen claimed that advanced formal body language is the primary knowledge base in investigating "how the technological augmenting of our access to the world can be understood from the perspective of the body".

How to tell difference between fictive, or virtual reality and the normality? In Karin Søndergaard's work the fictive reality of actors gets intertwined with the every-day-environment of the normal-others, who will never know that they participated in a scripted trans-normal situation. On the one hand, fiction is fiction. On the other hand, once emerged in human mind, imaginative ideas tend to turn out factual. Only literature can deal with the blurred line between cognitive science and science fiction, says Armando Montilla. I would like to ask how soon will the future entertainment transform external body media (e.g. audio-visual books, film) into internal, being directly "printed" into the individual's brains, as anticipated in the science fiction by Montilla.

According to Adriana de Souza e Silva, the cell phone environment is creating a hybridization of physical space, with a novel generation of cyberspace nomads always connected,

navigating in the digital/virtual environments. In order to interact more deeply with complex virtual (mind and environment) spaces, Lucia Leão suggests that the orientation of the ancient maps and labyrinths could help us to better understand phenomenon of expanded consciousness. Also the sense of atmosphere could be described as virtual environment, or consciousness. As Ioanna Spanou and Dimitris Charitos associate atmosphere "not only with the interface between perception and cognition, but also with the interface between perception and feeling". Shaun Murray's three architectural experiments with the life-like organic-dynamic metaphors Breeding, Feeding, and Leeching, are produced in order to observe an object interacting with the environment, resulting a set of most interactive and astonishing 2D still images I have experienced in a while.

Consciousness Reframed 2003 juxtaposed many apparently different discourses of art and science, characterized by dichotomy between theory and practice, private and social, biology and technology, virtual and real. It seemed to allow interrelated, competitive, and cooperative human activities emerge in a mutually accessible global workspace. The reason may be found in Ascott's words: "To artists (...) it is less a matter of seeking to explain consciousness and more a matter of exploring how [consciousness] might be navigated, altered, or extended; in short, reframed." [6]

The facts of reality forced me to leave out more profound scrutiny of many interesting presentations. We look forward to the forthcoming publications of the collected texts which will do justice to those, whom I was not able to include, and open the debates to a wider constituency. Consciousness Reframed 2003 fulfilled my expectations as a planetary platform, or workspace, and, as returning to Finland to my own solitary research chamber, I knew that many enthusiastic artists and researchers were out there to reconnect.

Abstracts are found in <http://www.caiia-star.net/production/conref-03/abstracts.html>

[1] R. Ascott (ed.), Reframing Consciousness (Exeter: Intellect Books, 1999) p.1.

[2] D. Dennett, Tietoisuuden selitys (Consciousness Explained), Finnish edition, translator Tiina Kartano (Helsinki: Art House, 1999)

[3] See the introduction by E. A. Shanken (ed.) Telematic Embrace: A Love Story? Roy Ascott's Theories of Telematic Art. "Peter Russell, writing in 1982, built on Teilhard's notion of noosphere in his thesis on the 'global brain.' Such an idea appealed to Ascott, who in 1966-67 had theorized that 'A highly interactive CAM network on an international level might form the embryonic structure of a world brain.' [See R. Ascott,

"Behaviourist Art and the Cybernetic Vision", Cybernetica: Review of the International Association for Cybernetics, Vol. X, No. 1, 1967, 25-56 pp.37.]" Reference in http://telematic.walkerart.org/timeline/timeline_shanken.html

[4] D. Dennett, "Are we Explaining Consciousness Yet?" , Final draft [cognition.fin] for Cognition, (August 27, 2000) <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/cognition.fin.html>

[5] G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and it's Challenge to Western Thought (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[6] R. Ascott (ed.), Reframing Consciousness (Exeter: Intellect Books, 1999) p.2.

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