

Keynote

## MIND-LAUNCH: Reflections/Projections on Education as Art

**Roy Ascott** (gb)

Planetary Collegium  
University of Plymouth  
Founding President

This paper looks primarily at the development, and the possible present and future relevance, of two specific projects, the Groundcourse of the early 1960s and the Planetary Collegium of the new millennium. There is a third project of the early 1970s, lurking in the wings, which, although more radical, and potentially efficacious than the first, lasted a mere 12 months, and so has been consigned by some to the dustbin of history. The link between all three initiatives has been the search for structures that elicit and support creativity, enable research, and develop innovation – of systems, cyberception, identity, language, and behaviour. The field is art, technology and consciousness (technoetics). The thread that links these initiatives is what I call 'cybernetics of the third kind', the art of connective, interdependent, associative, transformative syncretic systems. Education as art resists orthodoxy, denies academic predictability, opens up the territory of the unknown in all its fields of inquiry and practice.

The Groundcourse began in 1961 at Ealing, London and ended in 1967 at Ipswich, an education based on process and system, concerning behaviour, identity and change (eventually closed down by educational experts). It was the first of a number of ideological interventions, the most spectacular perhaps, being at the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto, where I was the president for just one academic year. My sin was to have totally restructured the curriculum, establishing primary zones of Information, Concept and Structure, articulated from the point of view of theory, analysis, speculation and social application, thereby desacralising the century-old divisions

of fine art, weaving, potting, graphic design, fashion, product and industrial styling, and removing the petty privileges of old territorial serfdoms. The architecture of this initiative, the work of a small team working closely with me over an intensive summer, was made totally transparent, and available to students as a tool to build the curriculum of their dreams. But the pioneering spirit of Upper Canada faltered here. I was duly beheaded! [1]

It was at ISEA 1994 in Helsinki, that I first presented proposals for the Planetary Collegium [2], defining a worldwide organism of advanced research in art. 30 years earlier, *The Construction of Change* [3] described the Ealing Groundcourse (later developed as a *Cybernetic Art Matrix* [4]). The years between these events, took me on a tortuous but enriching journey across several continents, involving many remarkable people, the publication of hundreds of papers, manifestos, conference presentations, seminars, and some quite radical institutional restructuring. In 1994 I launched CAiiA, The Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts, and the first Ph.D. programme in the practice and theory of interactive art. In 2003, *the Planetary Collegium* was finally established with its Hub at the University of Plymouth, and Nodes in Zurich and Milan. Around this time also, I was installed in a new chair for Communications Theory at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna where for the next seven years the opportunity was provided to develop processes for education as art in the telematic context.

If the seeding and growth of meaningful educational innovation under the various political and educational regimes have been fraught with resistance in the past, the future is no less problematic. There is for example considerable confusion between inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary methodology; the one synthetic, the other syncretic. Synthesis is often only skin deep; a cautious accommodation of disciplinary interpenetration, preserving old words in new contexts, and generally more ideological than creative. Syncretism, on the other hand, calls for new language, new structures, and new behaviours. The future I see is of a wholly syncretic, planetary art.

Back of the earlier projects I have cited, and at the root of all my education as art initiatives since then, is an understanding of the central role of cybernetics, the science of dynamic, interrelated systems and processes of communication and control in living and artificial organisms. It has served to inform my practice as an artist, in perfect sync with my work as a teacher and administrator. It was as true for me in the 1960s, as it is for me now. as I continue to develop the Planetary Collegium. While many issues for education remain the same, and von Foerster's second-order 'cybernetics of cybernetics' remains the foundation stone of progressive thought about emergent networks, newer, and in a sense, more pressing issues are upon us: the necessity of a syncretic resolution of cultural and political differences, the emergence of the multiple self both in cyberspace and in the material world, our experience of the variable reality of worlds currently discovered and constructed, the navigation of consciousness, the utility of field theory, the prevalence of process over product, the social value of social networks, the spiritual significance of the nanofield.

The old cognitive fix of digital systems will increasingly give way to new approaches to the chemistry of mind. Media has not just become *moistmedia* but is beginning to embrace the notion of bio/neuro/geo/chemico/cogno/nano/astro/pharmo/psycho media. Media, in other words, that transits the spectrum of wet and dry, natural and artificial, embodied and distributed, tangible and ephemeral, visible and occult.

Equally longstanding in the practice of education as art is the question of evaluation, which has grown progressively problematic and destructively bureaucratic. Quality, ownership, authorship, intentionality, meaning, skill, purpose, responsibility, as traditionally defined in art discourse, are all up for re-evaluation and interpretation. Students increasingly challenge the canon of values that try to assign them a place in the firmament of art. Their rejection and refusal of old codes of assessment and aesthetic differentiation come from the recognition of the quicksand of taste on which they are so often based.

Given all these changes and challenges, a crucial contemporary question is, where are to be found the guides to new possibilities and necessities of an education as art? By what experience and skills will these guides supervise unforeseeable behaviours, and fluctuating aesthetic decisions? Who will guide the guides when the event horizon is always receding? Who guides the guides, when they are themselves exploring the unknown and challenging the unknowable? It is in these unknown territories of pixels and particles, mind-to-mind communication, and out of body telepresence that research in media arts practice is located, where no meta-language presides, and where new forms of description, navigation and mapping must be invented. In the new educational territory, who will extricate travellers from the quicksand of relativism, and support radical methodology? Education as art becomes the collective responsibility of groups of explorers, collaborating across networks to climb the summit of new knowledge, sharing insights and websites along the way.

#### References

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