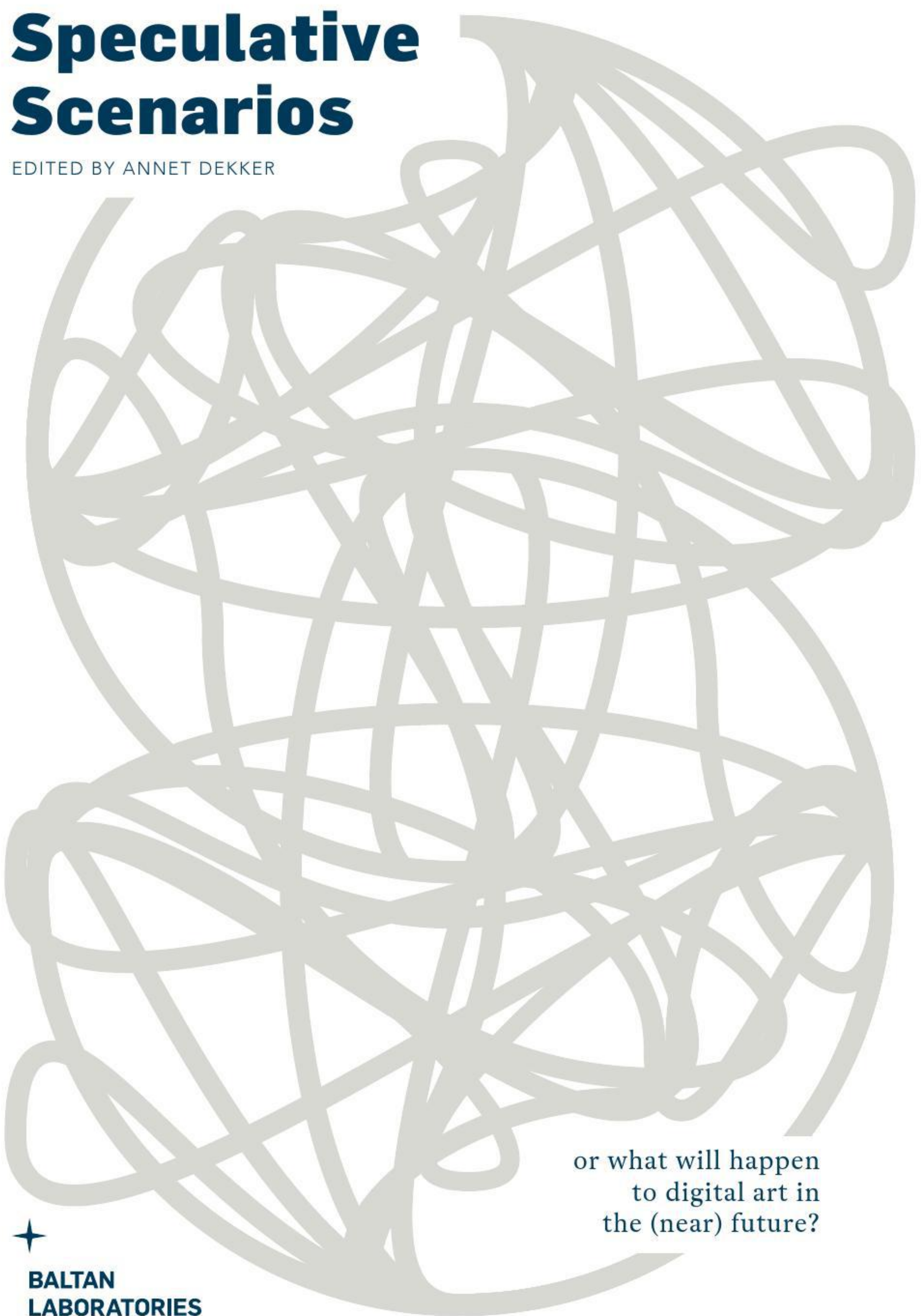


# Speculative Scenarios

EDITED BY ANNET DEKKER



or what will happen  
to digital art in  
the (near) future?



**BALTAN  
LABORATORIES**



## THE \$34.2 MILLION QUESTION

Writing Histories or Staging Alternative Futures

— EDWARD SHANKEN

‘What would the world be like if Roy Ascott’s *La Plissure du Texte*, 1983 (or your favorite work of net.art or proto-net.art) sold at auction for \$34.2 million instead of an abstract painting by Gerhard Richter? In what sort of world (and artworld) would that be possible?’

### 1

The complete discussion can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/edward-a-shanken/what-would-the-world-be-like-if-a-work-of-netart-sold-at-auction-for-342-million/576700859027714> and on nettime-l <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-1305/msg00031.html>.

### 2

Had I asked the question a few days later, the number would have been \$37 million, the sum paid for Richter’s painting *Cathedral Square, Milan* (1968) at Sotheby’s on 14 May 2013.

I posed this question on Facebook on 10 May 2013<sup>1</sup> to expand on a related provocation that curator Annie Fletcher and I initiated at the working conference, ‘Collecting and Presenting Born-Digital Art’, organised by Baltan Laboratories in collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum (14–15 December 2012).<sup>2</sup> A considerable discussion string emerged on Facebook, generating twice the word-count allotted to this article. For those familiar with *La Plissure*, it may be apparent that Ascott’s work has not only influenced my thinking about art but has also impacted my scholarly method. *La Plissure du Texte* [The Pleating of the Text] is an early example of ‘telematic art’ (art that uses computer networking as a medium). Eleven locations around the world, each representing a character (magician, princess, beast, etc.), participated in the ‘distributed authorship’ of a ‘planetary fairytale’ by collectively creating and sharing texts and ASCII-based images that comprised the unfolding narrative, a sort of electronic cadavre exquis. Riffing on Roland Barthes’



*Le Plaisir du Texte* (1973), Ascott's *La Plissure du Texte* similarly emphasised the 'generative idea' of 'perpetual interweaving', but in a way that more profoundly contested conventional subject-object and author-reader relationships because the work was not the product of a single author but was pleated together through distributed authorship. There was no finished work, no final outcome, no object as such; rather, the work consisted of the process of distributed authorship, which provided a working model for experiencing emerging forms of telematically-enhanced, collective consciousness. Similarly, utilising social media as a forum to pose and debate ideas might be considered a form of telematic art criticism. What follows attempts to convey a collectively pleated web of ideas while also commenting and elaborating on them.

The first response came from Caroline Seck Langill, who wrote, 'And all that money would be distributed, like the artwork'. This short, sharp prod shrewdly suggests an alternative economic model based on 'distributed authorship', whereby royalties from the resale of a telematic artwork would be shared among the project's geographically disparate commanded participants.

Under *Droit de suite* (right to follow), enacted in France in 1920, 3% of the resale value of an artwork is paid to the artist or heirs. Similar laws were adopted by the European Union, which has a sliding scale from .25% to 4%, with a maximum royalty of €12,500. For a work like *La Plissure*, which implicitly problematises conventional notions of authorship, one can imagine that a percentage of the \$34.2 million sale would be distributed among the work's several authors, the seller, and the auction house. But should Ascott get a larger cut than the other participants, given his role in creating the underlying context and organising the project? Moreover, in a world that values distributed authorship so highly, would legislation be more generous to artists, increasing the percentage and removing the cap? Later in the discussion, artist Randall Packer proposed a form of distributed purchase, 'How about a 34.2 million dollar Kickstarter campaign for *La Plissure du Texte*?'



Jennifer Canary responded with a particularly imaginative approach reminiscent of Ascott's emphases on creative play, collaboration, and symbolic narratives:

It would be a world in which people would be much more aware of the importance of play; just imagine 'playtime' at work, crawling around, turning over your desk, pretending it is a spaceship in which your colleagues begin a journey! A moment to delve into the inner narratives of the symbolic. It would be a world in which creativity was valued more than it is feared.

Indeed, since the early 1960s Ascott has propounded Thomas Mann's notion of art as play 'in deep seriousness' and his practice, theory and pedagogy have advocated the crucial importance of creative play, not just in art but in society in general. Building on his work on Joan Littlewood's *Fun Palace* (1964) project,<sup>3</sup> Ascott's concept of a 'cybernetic art matrix', outlined in 'Behaviourist Art and the Cybernetic Vision',<sup>4</sup> established an elaborate framework to nurture various forms of creativity and play that would replace workday drudgery with activities designed to generate symbolic meaning.

Philip Galanter took a more sober, if not contrarian stance, calling attention to the rarity of such high-stakes sales and championing Richter: 'I'm not sure it would mean a darn thing. Art sales in the tens of millions are so far out on the thin tail of the bell curve that they say very little about the mean.... [Richter] is a great artist, and it's not his fault the wealthy have decided to use his work as the coin of the realm'. Noting that there is 'an inherent relationship between Richter and Ascott' in as much as 'the better art today always bears conceptual features', Matthias Kampmann concurred that 'A society in which [La Plissure] would gain millions isn't much different to our[s]'. In my reply, paraphrased below, I summoned Joseph Kosuth's essay 'Art After Philosophy' (1969) to argue why Ascott is a more important artist than Richter and why the market's recognition of this would be meaningful.

## 3

Joan Littlewood conceived the *Fun Palace* in collaboration with architect Cedric Price. For more information: <http://www.audacity.org/SM-26-11-07-01.htm> and Joan Littlewood (1964) A Laboratory of Fun. *The New Scientist*, 14 May, pp. 432–33.

## 4

Roy Ascott (2002, original 1966–67) Behaviourist Art and the Cybernetic Vision. In *Multimedia. From Wagner to Virtual Reality*, edited by Randall Packer and Ken Jordan. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 104–20.



For *La Plissure* to have an exchange value of \$30+ million would demand a complete retooling of not only the commercial art world but a major overhaul of cultural values. Richter exemplifies the secondary market's infatuation with retrograde forms of practice that are out of touch with aesthetic developments (to say nothing of techno-cultural developments) since the 1960s. Over four decades ago Kosuth wrote that:

Being an artist now means to question the nature of art. If one is questioning the nature of painting, one cannot be questioning the nature of art. If an artist accepts painting (or sculpture) he is accepting the tradition that goes with it. That's because the word art is general and the word painting is specific. Painting is a kind of art. If you make paintings you are already accepting (not questioning) the nature of art.

By this logic, Richter might be a great painter, but he is not a great artist. This rationale further suggests that *La Plissure* is a superior work of art than any painting since 1969, when Kosuth called the bluff and the jig was over. 'So a quote over four decades old is authoritative for art today?' Galanter challenged back. He further criticised Kosuth's position, which he characterised as 'end-of-art thinking where the only legitimate art is art about art'. Jaromil responded that only time will tell and noted that art investments are a double-edged sword:

Investments aren't good just because they move market value today. Actually, they might be epic fails as well – and that's what is happening all over – as we speak – to several big capitals. So that is pretty consequent with the times we are living isn't it? 'nuff said, lemme order that copy of PdT now to get it signed by Roy...

These comments set me thinking about the difference between use value, exchange value, aesthetic values embedded in art history, and the value that works of art have not just in capital markets but in ever-changing markets of



ideas. In terms of art's use value, defined as the cultural capital accrued by a collector today, a Richter painting has a great deal to offer. The financial appreciation of Richter's work over time (\$34.2 million is 30 times the purchase price that the previous owner, musician Eric Clapton, paid for it in 2001) also suggests that it has great investment value, hence the high price tag, i.e., its exchange value. An artwork is not like a standard commodity in the sense that it has potentially significant value in terms of its contribution to the history of art and to the larger history of ideas (histories that are perpetually reconstructed and retold from various, ever-changing future perspectives). This observation is indebted to Kosuth's claim that 'Art "lives" through influencing other art... artists from the past are "brought alive" again... because some aspect of their work becomes "usable" by living artists'. Let's call that its posterity value. The history of Western art from *contrapposto* to conceptual art celebrates innovation and embraces work that challenges the status quo. I would argue that a Richter painting has little posterity value, compared to Ascott's *La Plissure*. The order of magnitude of Ascott's innovation is incomparably greater than Richter's. Although the contemporary art market – and the discourses beholden to it – do not acknowledge this differential now, one can imagine a future in which Ascott will be generally recognised as having made a more valuable contribution to the history of art and visual culture than Richter.

The disparity between use value and posterity value, and between posterity value and exchange value, is the core of the issue. Over time, as posterity value is established and renegotiated from various present perspectives, it becomes closely aligned with exchange value. Jaromil's point is insightful here, because I think \$34.2 million for a Richter is destined to be an 'epic fail' when the correction between posterity value and exchange value takes place – not because the art market is overvalued as such, but because from the perspective of the future, it will be seen to have valued the wrong things.

Oliver Grau agreed that 'the art of Richter is not commenting at all on our time' and that Ascott has continually 'tried to understand our time and reflect on it with new



aesthetic languages and new timely theories'. Grau claimed that the challenge today is 'to allow the multifarious potential of media art... into new (post-museum) institutions, which are able to exhibit, collect and preserve the art in the media of our time'. Recalling the histories of how photography, and film entered museum collections, he argued that 'the same effort – and perhaps much more – needs to be done for all the digital art forms of our time. It is a great anachronism: Our complete society is digital... but the [art] market remains stubbornly yoked to the last century'.

Galanter conceded that 'in a (proposed) world where people throw money to those who carry the banner for abstract ideas, rather than a (current) world where people throw money to purchase property, I suspect many things would be quite different. In fact the resulting changes in the art world would be a small part of it'. Kanary pointed out that 'there is an intricate relation between what is valued in art and what is valued in society'. An artist functions like 'a canary in a coal mine, as a... nomad of meaning'. She continued, 'the "bubble" of Koons and the "bubble" of Hirst both reflect ... the metaphor of "gas" that forces its way to the surface of a... coalmine shaft – the hiccups of society'. So the question is, 'how would the world be different if that breath smelled like Ascott instead of Richter?'

Annet Dekker argued that when prices become hyper-inflated, art becomes inaccessible and the art world becomes invisible except in news headlines, so if 'the tables were turned, it would likely not make a difference'. Cautioning that in the proposed scenario, 'net.art would have fallen victim to the capitalist bubble', Sandra Fauconnier asked, 'Is that something to strive for?' Packer argued that 'the (art)world would be a better place if neither work were worth much at all in terms of monetary value. Art is so overvalued as a commodity that it corrupts everything and everyone in its path'. Artist Lynn Hershman countered that 'art can never be overvalued'. Also responding to Packer, Kanary expressed concern about what Ascott's work would be about today if he had made a fortune early in his career. Regarding Ascott's renowned Ph.D. art research program, she asked, 'What would be the nature of the Planetary Collegium?' Several respondents noted the obvious fact



that a collector can carry the Richter home. It is, as Florian Kramer observed, ‘an object that can be conveniently traded as a commodity and, on top of that, a unique object and an autograph’. ‘What would they be carrying home with La Plissure?’ asked Michael Hohl. These various comments led me to reflect on what I was driving at with my question and to articulate it more precisely.

I wrote that my aim is to place in tension two different sets of values: those of the art market and those of telematic art. To this end, my question proposes a scenario in which a work of art that does not satisfy traditional market conventions (e.g., as Florian Kramer notes, ease of exchange, signature, etc.) rises to the top of the heap in terms of exchange value. Referencing Julian Stallabrass’s *Art Incorporated* (2004) and Ben Lewis’s film *The Great Contemporary Art Bubble* (2009), Matthias Kampmann’s post rightly pointed out that the art market ‘guzzles’ whatever it likes. Stallabrass would argue that any art world in which an artwork – be it an abstract painting or a telematic network – attains values in the tens of millions of dollars reifies neo-liberal ideology and its inherent commodity (and luxury) fetishism. With this in mind, Langill’s suggestion that ‘the money would be distributed like the artwork’ should be taken seriously.

And why not? There are economies in which the creation and hoarding/multiplying of wealth for its own sake is not valued as highly as sharing, gifting, and ritual expending. Over half a century ago, Yves Klein’s *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensitivity* (1959) brilliantly challenged market and aesthetic conventions by juxtaposing capitalist models of exchange with the incalculable value of a paradoxical work of art. The ‘authentic immaterial value’ of the invisible work of art could be acquired only through an exchange of gold (half of which was thrown into the Seine by the artist), for which the collector attained a receipt of ownership, which had to be burned to achieve full immaterialisation.

Returning to ease of exchange, signature, and so on, these are not neutral qualities or formal characteristics. Rather, they embody deeply held ideological commitments, just as the basic conventions of Ascott’s telematic art



embody deeply held ideological commitments. So what are the implications if these worlds collide and the market ends up valuing most highly (and putting its money where its mouth is) a work that challenges its traditional values? If, as Langill intimates, the market were to embrace Ascott's *La Plissure* and its ideology of distributed authorship, it would be logically consistent for art world actors to express those commitments by distributing the economic wealth generated by the sale of the work. Indeed, what could generate more cultural capital in a gift economy than making a gift of the appreciation in value of an artwork that was a harbinger of participatory culture?

But let's say the art market embraces Ascott, while retaining its capitalistic imperatives. Althusser might argue that any critical value of telematic art would be evacuated once it becomes interpellated by the hegemonic ideology of neo-liberalism that is reified by the market. At the same time, by gaining the sort of public recognition that comes with great market success, Ascott would command a much larger stage (to say nothing of financial resources and cultural/political power) from which to infect neo-liberalism with ideas that undermine its economic *modus operandi*.

Since this article is, in many ways, a collaborative effort, I shall entrust the final words to Kanary. With 'a head full of flu' she wrote a passionate, personal meditation that further teased out a moral conflict inherent in my thought experiment. Moreover, her comment manifests a remarkable selflessness that one might hope would characterise the art world, and society at large, if *La Plissure* were the most highly valued work of contemporary art.

The paradox, I realise, is perhaps connected to the amounts mentioned – if Roy's work would be valued for its true social and spiritual nature, then never would such amounts be given in the first place (not that I begrudge Roy such wealth), but when there is so much suffering in the world, spiritual decency would not accept and condone such obscene differences. My fear is that the collector who bought Ascott instead of Richter would not value Ascott's art as such; most likely what would be valued is a



store-bought ‘aura’ of spirituality that they believed might ‘rub off’ on them.

For my art, I value... sharing more than anything – as it makes me feel the true value of insight that my person can give to the world. If I can just have sufficient finances to do what I need to do, in a way that gives more than it takes – that would be a system more befitting (in my imagination). Art, for me, at all times finds its value in how it lets us see, experience, feel, understand differently – it helps to keep things in motion.