Women, Art, and Technology
Women in New Media
Sources in Art and Technology
Edited by Judy Malloy
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003 (Leonardo Series)

Review by Belinda Barnet

Is the tech-art made by women different from men? This is the heavy question (Bureaud, cited in Malloy 2003, xvii).

With a title like Women, Art and Technology, you'd expect a book like this to explore (or even answer) the heavy questions. The obvious ones relate to gender; is there a feminine aesthetic? Can or should we understand art based on the gender of the artist? Editor Judy Malloy seems to think we should, for the book is a collection of critical essays and artist's statements produced exclusively by women. The question of gender identity does surface, though it is never answered - except by Annick Buread, whose comment is cited in the preface. Buread concludes that there is no 'common ground that make [women's] artworks special or different from a gendered point of view' unless they address feminist or lesbian issues, which are already identified by the work (Buread, cited in Malloy 2003, xxvii). Perhaps it was a good thing Malloy did not dwell on this comment; it might have undermined the basis of the collection.

Similarly, the book avoids questioning or unpacking the relationship between art and technology. What exactly is 'tech-based' art, and does it include potter's wheels or paintbrushes (evidently it doesn't, for the focus is on digital art, video, virtual reality and audio). It's a shame that these questions were avoided (or even worse - their answers assumed), because the essays included here are engaging and informative in their own right. Perhaps it is best to forget the title, because the book is not about the relationship between art and technology, and does little to explain its typecasting of this group of artists based on their gender. It would be just as easy to claim that what binds these artists is their nationality - three quarters of them are North American. So I'll continue on, with the recommendation that you think of this book as a survey of New Media Art; don't expect any more from it and you won't be disappointed.

The book is divided into three sections - 'Overviews', which is a selection of five critical essays on new media and interactivity, 'Artists' Papers', which is a selection of twenty-six papers detailing inspiration, methodology and also the history of some classic works by the artists themselves, and 'Concluding Essays', which are a group of five essays reflecting on the field and speaking the future.

Three essays in this last section are particularly important; Mexican critic Martha Bonecchi's essay detailing how information technology has forgotten many women in the developing world (something the book performs quite well, but anyway), Carol Stakenas' essay detailing the Day Without Art (DWA) Web Action, a project which mobilised a network of web pieces to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS, interesting as a case study for what net action can achieve, and Australian Zoe Sofia's piece Contested Zones. Sofia's piece, placed right at the end of the book, was the most thorough-going reflection on the relationship between art and technology, art and futurity. In focussing on contemporary women technological artists, she is not implying they constitute a 'genre' (or a typecast collection for that matter), but identifies aspects of their work that question our obsession with the 'new', with ever smarter tools and programs.

I also found the artists' papers quite interesting - except for those written by artists whose work I'd never seen. Reading them without the work was like reading the ingredients on the back of a cereal box without actually eating the contents. Nonetheless, it's important to let artists speak for themselves, and interesting to read about what has inspired them. Lynn Hershmann, Brenda Laurel, Sonya Rapaport and Char Davies' essays were memorable - but this is probably because I'm familiar with their work. Overall, this book is worth reading and worth buying - but don't expect it to throw any light on the relationship between women and technology or technology and art.