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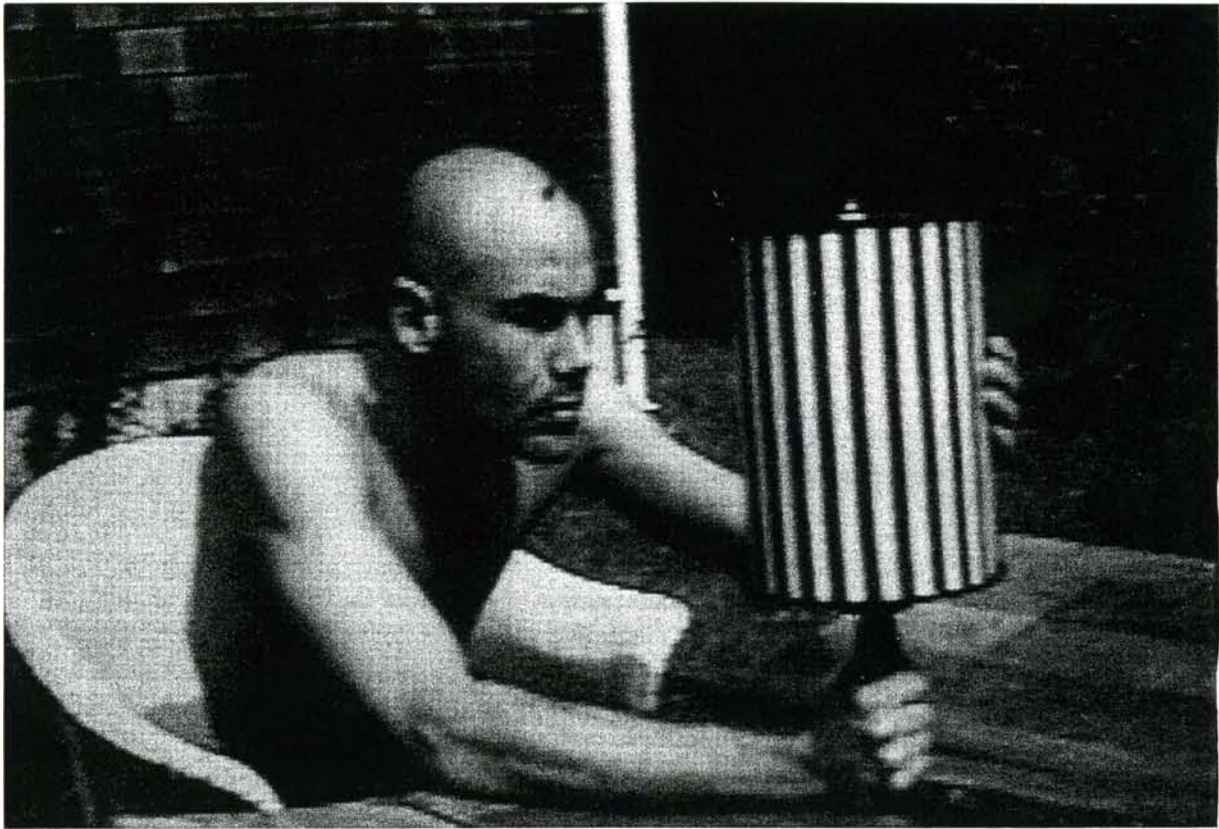
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## PERFORMING OBSERVATIONS Recent Work by Warren Neidich

Regine Basha

Warren Neidich's new performative video works emerge out of an ongoing project which has taken various forms over the past few years in photography and in curatorial pursuits. Essentially, "the project" is concerned with investigating structures: specifically, the overlay of the linguistic and cognitive structures in the face of "art" and aesthetics and the institutional and cultural structures that uphold a certain version of the so-called "art experience." For the purposes of this investigation, Neidich opened a gallery called Spot (his own studio) from 1994–1996. For one year, Spot operated as would a non-profit legitimized exhibition space, but with a self-conscious eye on its own process of concretization and institutionalization—much like a case study of a gallery curiously positioned to question the authenticity of the "art experience." In its initial stages, the gallery/art project invited artists like Diane Lewis, who built a "warped" wall to deconstruct the physical disposition and function of the white cube. Other projects included *Telephone Line: 645-9537*, when six artists were each invited to create a piece for the outgoing message on the gallery's answering machine. The gallery became a forum for collaborations between artists and other curators in a way that was casual enough to subvert hierarchical roles and serious enough to spawn innovative productions and processes—much like the spirit of other "galleries as art projects" by artists like Marcel Broodthaers and Joseph Kosuth. Yet, after three years as an art project, Spot ran its course and eventually came to an end. In 1996, Neidich decided to return to his own art work.

With a background in neurobiological studies (as a research fellow in neurobiology at the California Institute of Technology), Neidich began to do art projects in the eighties which were based in photography and were mainly concerned with questioning authenticity and historical documentary practices as well as photography's specific role in the construction and obliteration of memory. Largely affected by photographers such as Edward Muybridge, Man Ray, Hans Bellmer, and Pierre Molinere, Neidich began considering their work as well as the work of Marcel Duchamp in terms informed by his medical practice—particularly as studies of brain impulses. For instance, in essays such as "Pierre Molinere and the Phantom Limb," he explores the terrain of what he calls "neuroaesthetic theory" and makes a



Warren Neidich, *Brainwash*, 1997. Video stills. Photos: Courtesy of the artist.



case for the phantom limb as seen through the psycho-sexual phenomena of the foot fetish. He explains that by studying the phantom limb, a phenomena in which an absent limb continues to be experienced, a neurological basis for the heretofore psychoanalytically delineated entity of the foot fetish can begin to be unveiled. In his own words,

The Phantom Limb phenomena recounts the body's attempt to re-negotiate its own loss through an internalized re-schematisation of its own form. . . . The phantom limb is about the representation of the physical body and the role that the psychic body plays in its formation. The fetish is about the absence in the psychic body.<sup>1</sup>

His main intention to produce work and writing that moves through the frameworks of neurobiology, psychophysiology, aesthetics, and art historical theory—is a marrying of ideas which may still be considered unorthodox practice in their respective fields. Much of the theory and information behind the work is usually so hermetically sealed and laden with science-speak that the project, as complex and ambitious as it is, runs the risk of imploding under its own weight.

Nevertheless, one of the more compelling aspects of Neidich's project is his persistence and insistence on positioning his work in a way that complicates art with neuroscience—a part visionary, part mad-scientist pursuit. Basically, Neidich is interested in locating the symbiotic relationship and simultaneous operation of our internal perceptual mechanism at the threshold of reckoning the outside world and its categorical constructions. His primary subject is the eye/brain as “proto-cinematic” device which is poised to test the limits of perception and cognition. To induce structuralist imaging in his photography, much of his work involves ophthalmologic instruments lifted out of their normal diagnostic context, in which they usually function to gauge abnormality—such as the Baglioni glasses.<sup>2</sup> In *Double Vision*, for instance, the image of a landscape photograph is interrupted by two large transparent circles, one red, one green, which become the result of the Baglioni glasses placed in front of the lens and selecting the degree of light passing through.<sup>3</sup>

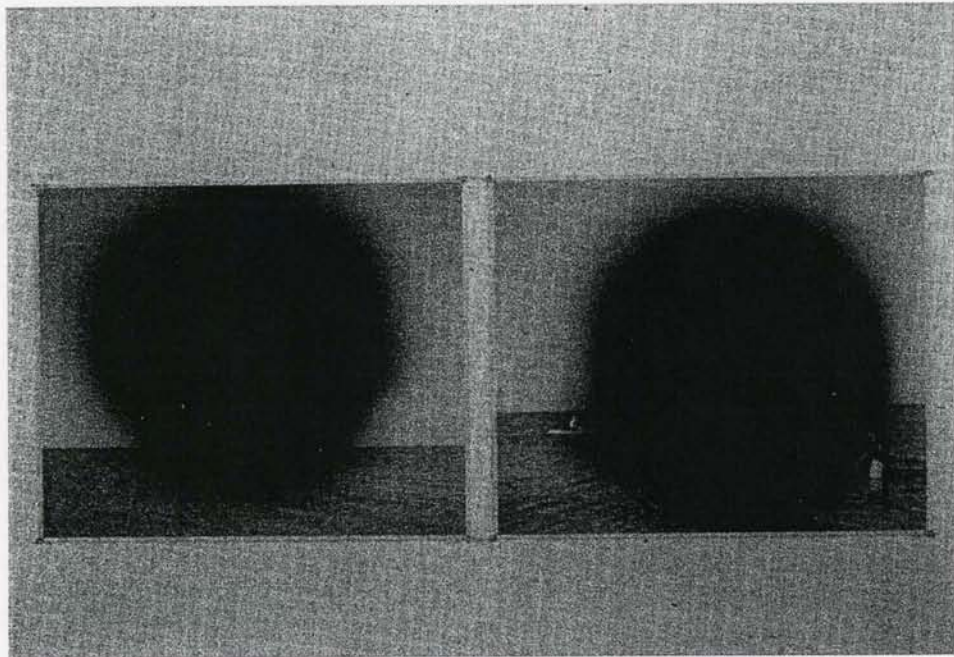
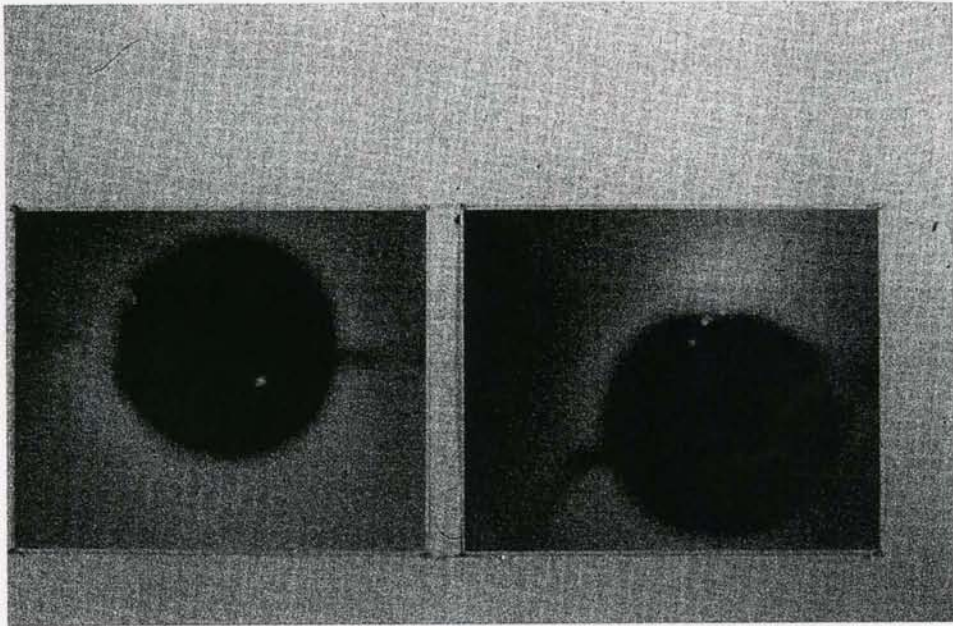
As theory, Neidich's practice positions him as part of a continuum of theoretical debates on vision and perspective. Since the time of the Cartesian model of perspectivalism until today, art historians have taken serious issue with the mechanics of vision as it squarely implicates epistemological debates on perceptual “truth” and essentialism. More recently the work of Jonathon Crary and Rosalind Krauss, in particular, seem to have the greatest resonance in this field.<sup>4</sup> Crary has managed to unravel the complicated history of optics precisely when it shifted from the strappings of positivist science to an era of doubt and debate. He also gives an account—or an archaeology—of optic devices not only as proto-cinematic tools, but also as instruments that reveal the process of their own mechanics—as true structuralist tools. For Krauss, it is Duchamp who challenged the domain of optics as a conceptual, psycho-sexual terrain, rather than one based in aesthetics. Deter-

mining his position as defiantly “anti-retinal,” he set on a course to outline what that meant through his investigations in a project he called “The Precision Optics.”<sup>5</sup>

A point of departure for Neidich’s recent work is Duchamp’s Precision Optics project—specifically his infamous “Roto-Reliefs.” At once scientific instrument and dadaist toy, the Roto-Relief functioned as a spiral instrument that created a somewhat hypnotic effect by producing the illusion of movement and three-dimensional space. When spinning, the image shifted back and forth from abstraction to representation and tricked the viewer into seeing things like the formation of a pupil or a quivering breast, for instance. Wanting to reach a “larger public,” Duchamp actually took a booth at an inventor’s convention in order to present the Roto-Reliefs as his goods. Despite the fact that no one knew what to make of his curious objects, he maintained his conviction that the general public would have a predilection towards “Op Art” and that its rightful place is in popular culture and not in high art. Ironically enough, that prophetic notion was justified only later when “Op Art” exploded into a popularized vehicle for psychedelia with all of its drug-culture, mind bending appeal in the late sixties and seventies. The hypnotic spirals Duchamp played with later appeared on record covers, haute couture dresses, even on the *Twilight Zone*.

Neidich’s video *Brainwash* (1997) takes its cue from this point of convergence. It begins with the image of vertical black and white stripes set spinning almost to a blur—set to the accompanying music by Japan’s Pizzicato Five (which sounds like a nineties version of the *Mary Tyler Moore* theme in Japanese). The camera moves back to reveal that what is spinning is an “optokineticnystagmus drum,” which looks a lot like a Zoetrope (the cylindrical instrument through which to view photographs in motion).<sup>6</sup> Normally this instrument is used to diagnose certain gaze abnormalities, such as when the eye muscles are no longer coordinated, as well as other the diseases of the cerebellum which affect balance and orientation.<sup>7</sup> The character holding this drum is sitting outdoors and is fixated on the spinning stripes, concentrating intently on catching up with them, while shots of his eyes in “saccades” (rapid movement) are interspersed with shots of the spinning stripes. As the video alternates from music video to eye exam for both the character and vicariously for ourselves, the disorientation slowly begins to take effect, and as Pizzicato Five bops along, our friend in the video becomes entranced. The second part of the video records the character’s attempt to walk down the beach towards the ocean—we see what he sees, “through his eyes.” Wobbling from side to side, the camera (or his vision) is unable to adjust to the horizon, and what was once solid ground is now a mere picture plane capable of overturning itself. The video then ends back at the first segment, with the spinning stripes harmonizing to pop music.

In more ways than one, *Brainwash* revisits early 70s television, especially programs like *Zoom* or *The Electric Company*, and certain segments of *Sesame Street* which thrived on viewer participation. Perhaps as a trickle-down effect from their

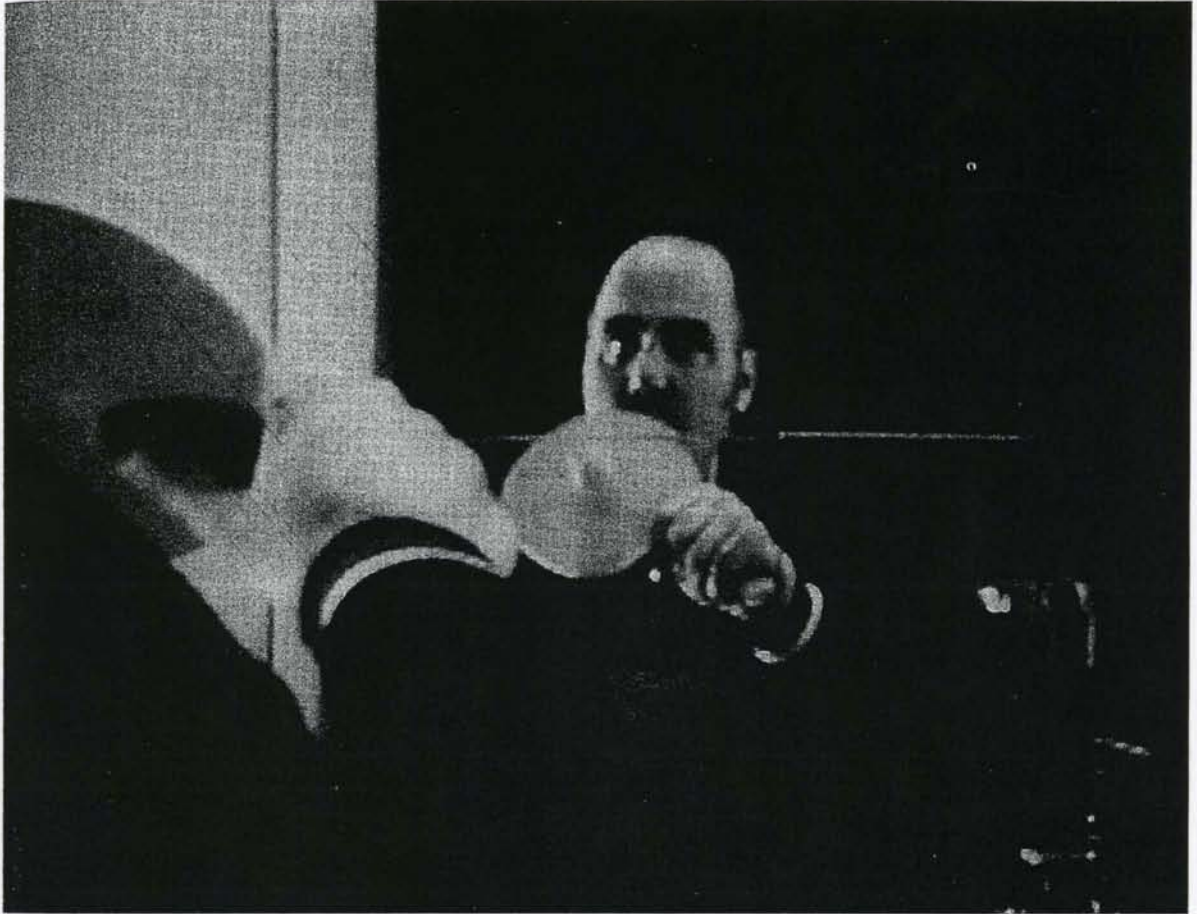


Warren Neidich, *Double-Vision Louse Point*, 1998. Video stills.  
Photos: Courtesy of the artist.

structuralist emissaries like Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, and Nam June Paik, these shows proved effective because they were among the first popular programs that used the television screen not just as a forum for a show, but as a two-dimensional, perceptually-based surface plane in and of itself. As an update, *Brainwash* also draws from the current impact of rave culture and trance music, which, like psychedelia, activates its own sense of "sublime" through relentless repetitions of electronic beats and pleasurable, computer-enhanced color abstractions. Other than being the 90s mode of transcendence for an entire generation, (although less existentially weighted than its 60s version) and perfectly suitable for inducing the effects of certain chemicals, the purpose seems to cater primarily to our inherent desire to disorient ourselves. Remember spinning uncontrollably for dizzying effects or lying down to pretend that the ceiling is actually the floor, or blurring your vision on purpose? Children have always known the secrets. Before drugs entered the picture, these were ways to subvert the illusion of what we knew as the world around us; they liberate us from the concreteness of the physical world and, lulled by an altered perception, we are presented with a different picture of "reality"—one that insures its vulnerability.

In a more recent video/installation, *Phantom Limb* (1998), Neidich himself appears in his studio conducting a seemingly nonsensical act; somewhat reminiscent of early Nauman studio acts like "walking around the perimeter of a square in an exaggerated manner." *Phantom Limb* is largely informed by the findings of renowned neurobiologist V. S. Ramachandran, whose experiments with patients experiencing phantom limb are often aided by the use of mirrors.<sup>8</sup> On four monitors placed around a room the artist appears standing in front of a mirror (actually six mirrored quadrants) playing ping-pong against the mirror. In each video he plays with a different ball—one red, one blue, one yellow, and one white—and a video camera and monitor appear conspicuously in the background. Within the video, the effect is as if he is playing another person, because all we see is an arm in the foreground ponging the reflected image of Neidich, whose whole body is reflected in the mirror. As a surround-sound installation, we also get the impression that he is playing the viewer, as the balls continuously confront us in a virtually tangible way. Monotonously, Neidich plays at different rhythms and speeds in each video—producing a maddening sound sculpture that implodes onto the viewer. In this kind of zen-narcissistic duel with himself, you wonder if the metaphor is about an internal duel, or if it's simply pointing out the perceptual imbalance and physical disconnection that takes place when following the ball from the disjointed "real" arm to the reflection of the "whole" body. *Phantom Limb* very economically eviscerates the sensation of disconnection from the body; there are even moments of real delusion—not knowing what to identify as body, or body part. Ultimately, it's the ping-pong ball, both precious and dumb, that succeeds at maintaining the fusion with a vital, light pulse.

Rosalind Krauss specifically likens the process of seeing to a beat or a pulse, a rhythmic back and forth oscillation that defies modernism's attempts at making



Warren Neidich, *Phantom Limb*, 1998. Video still. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



distinctions between the two. In her view, it is a sexualized dynamic that obliterates the constructs of identity and conflates the temporal zone. Specifically referring to Duchamp's Roto-Reliefs, and his anti-retinal position, she states:

What is clearly Duchamp's concern here is to corporealize the visual, restoring to the eye (against the disembodied opticality of modernist painting) that eye's condition as a bodily organ, available like any other physical zone to the force of eroticization. . . . So that the temporal is mapped onto the figural in the space of Duchamp's Precision Optics as the specific beat of desire—of a desire that makes and loses its object in one and the same gesture, a gesture that is continually losing what it has found because it has only found what it has already lost.

The process of "mapping" becomes the allusion for the performance of *Phantom Limb*—signaling a performance of the operative dynamic of the fetish. "Mapping" refers to the activity of neurological signals connecting and bonding to one another to conjure up cognition of specific memories, emotions, sights, smells, tastes, information, etc., in order ultimately to define and qualify a moment—or "experience." In the realm of art production, qualifying a moment becomes a performed act of added awareness—a simultaneous deconstruction/re-construction that enables an understanding of the myriad possibilities of fluid relations and interconnectedness available to us. Considering the global levels in which we experience "mapping," the desirous phenomena of the phantom limb and the terms for what we call "fetish" are ultimately implicit to our entire modus operandi in and through the world.

## NOTES

1. Neidich, Warren. "Pierre Moliniere and the Phantom Limb," Lecture on neuroaesthetic theory given at the School of Visual Arts, 1997.

2. Baglioni glasses are used to determine which eye is suppressing the other.

3. Another work, *Apparatus*, is a video piece that completes the series with Baglioni glasses. In it, the eye is suggested as an orifice, capable of sexual penetration.

4. For a discussion of these ideas, see Jonathon Crary, "Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century," *October* no. 45 (Summer 1988) and Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, M.I.T Press, 1993.

5. For a discussion of Duchamp's The Precision Optics, see Rosalind Krauss, "The Impulse to See," *Vision and Visuality: Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, Dia Art Foundation. Bay Press, Seattle, 1988.

6. The Zoetrope was fascinating to many artists, especially Max Ernst who made works with them.