

Editor's Note This interview is excerpted from *Earthling* by Warren Neidich, Pointed Leaf Press, Copyright 2005. Reprinted with permission from Pointed Leaf Press.

Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist
Paris, June 4, 2005

Warren Neidich

Obrist: My first question to you is about this complex new kind of work called *Earthling*, that has to do with collage and also with the cultural field. Can you tell me about this?

Neidich: I have been working quite a lot with the history of apparatuses and technologies as they intervene in photography and new media. The history of photography, cinema, and new media is a history of the production and reinvention of time and space. These new forms of temporality and spatiality become imbedded in architecture, fashion, design, and aesthetic practice and, as such, create new kinds of network relations, for instance in the visual-cultural field. These new network relations in the real world, which might be called the real-imaginary-virtual interface, can configure neural networks in the brain. These networks are dynamic and as they reconfigure the matter of the brain, they produce new possibilities for the imagination and creativity. They allow the mind to become perceptual in a very different way. This latest work deals with, what I call, the “Earthling” and looks at the “construction of global subjectivities” formed through the apparatus of global media.

Where does the name come from?

The name came from two sources, though this work is about a lot of other things as well. The first is science-fiction movies, where a visitor from another planet addresses those who have come to meet him or her as “Earthlings.” The second is Sun Ra’s cult sci-fi-blaxploitation-jazz film, *Space Is The Place*, in which Sun Ra and the Intergalactic Solar Arkestra descend on forties’ Chicago from Saturn to enlighten “Earthlings” about an alternative planet built on good vibrations. I am also very much attracted to magazine culture, which is a kind of distributed information system. You can go through these magazines and DJ or VJ them; you can choose them, post-produce them, edit them.

What is your relation to them? Do you collect them or do you buy them everyday? You have something like an archive, though I’m not sure exactly what you’d call it. You deal so much with information. Do you have an archive for processing, for testing everyday information? Do you have a kind of an art lab?

I do have a kind of art lab. This project started in a very different way and then it changed midway. It began with going to cafes, as all these pictures take place in cafes.

Warren Neidich
Morning Star, London
performance, 2004
Type-C print
30 x 40 inches
courtesy of
Michael Steinberg
Fine Art.



And you were recording in cafes?

Yes, I was very interested in this idea of indeterminate spaces, spaces where people kind of linger and then move on. Tourists always go to cafes, the bohemian culture started in cafes, and I wanted to connect with that. In the beginning of this series I started using whatever magazine I found at the cafe as a readymade or found object. It operated as a kind of fetish of the cafe. Then, as the project progressed, I became interested in magazines in general. It was then that I started collecting them. The project started about two years ago, and about a year ago I started realizing that I was missing some of the great headlines: this one about Tony Blair in the *Morning Star*, for instance, concerns the idea of the delusional. I didn’t find that one in a cafe. I saw it on a newsstand and realized that I really wanted to utilize all the information available and not restrict myself to a certain set of rules or regulations.

I think that artists have to put some regulations on the projects they do, otherwise they become unfocused. In this case, I changed the rules and started collecting the magazines from anywhere and anyplace. A lot of different things started happening when I made that decision, and that is when I really got into the language of magazines. How funny they can be. How funny certain juxtapositions of headlines, titles, and advertisements can be, like Surrealist/Situationist jokes. I became interested in how headlines were used in different ways, in the multiple layers of textuality, and how they relate to different kinds of temporality. For instance, the headline is something like a sound

bite. It has a very quick temporality. Then you have the subtitles, which are read in a different amount of time. You can read the newspaper in different temporal zones and you can utilize different methodologies to access the information. You can read each article through and through and in a serial way, moving from one article to another, or you can read it randomly like a *dérive*.

What interests me is that you are always bridging to other disciplines: you have a great and interesting connection to science and architecture. Can you tell me a little bit more about how you came into this contact zone, about how it started?

Well, I have always been interested in history and critical theory. I have believed from the very beginning that art should produce new sensations, new kinds of perceptions, new kinds of imaginings.

Like Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s art produces extraordinary experiences?

Or hallucinatory experiences. Let’s go beyond that. Art is a kind of exercise for the possibilities of the mind. It’s like break-dancing or ballet.

Like a non-chemical LSD?

Yes, a non-chemical LSD. That could get me into my theory called the “Society of Neurons,” which is a different question and one I’m not sure I want to trip into right now. But since you asked, here is a little

of that theory. Different kinds of artistic experience stimulate or call out to different populations of neurons which produce signals utilizing different neurochemistries, like dopamine, acetylcholine, etc. In some cases, artists take specific drugs, like peyote, as part of the rituals surrounding their art production. *Ecstasy*, an exhibition currently going on at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, addresses this very issue that the experience and the consciousness it facilitates is the product of what I am referring to as “Society of Neurons” and how they all act in harmony at any moment of awareness. They express themselves differentially depending on context in a ratiomatic manner. The ontogeny, or individual development, of the nervous system and the subject may be a result of a coevolutionary process by which certain kinds of cultural context call out to the developing nervous system differentially and favor the selection of certain neurochemical systems over others. Each culture may provide a stable enough network or symbolic ecology, which has evolved over thousands of years and which produces individual subjectivities generation over generation through sculpting networks of neurons, spatially and dynamically, preferentially. Art affects visual, auditory, and haptic culture. Art, like cinema, according to Deleuze, may create new forms of connectivity possibly affecting the distribution of neurochemical systems in the brain. This theory gives a powerful new importance to art.

My ideas about art and the brain are not intended to illustrate concepts and ideas of neuroscience, which can be a problem for art-science initiatives. They are about importing a new vocabulary that artists can fold into their art practice, as a way of energizing it through the production of difference and hybridity. If anything, my work is not about perception or sensation but rather about evolution and ontogeny. Artists like Seurat, Duchamp, Cézanne, the Futurists, Richard Hamilton,

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Bridget Riley, Gary Hill, and Dan Graham were all interested in science. Olafur Eliasson, Matthew Ritchie, and Carsten Holler are artists today who also share this interest. I once talked to Dan Graham about the early seventies and he told me that all the artists were reading electronics and science magazines. What I am trying to say is that many artists have folded concerns with science almost imperceptibly into larger networks of culture, sociology, psychology, economics, and history to produce a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Marina Abramovich’s interest in Tessler and so on...

Yes, absolutely. Artists have always worked this way. It’s also interesting what happened post 1992/1993, after the internet explosion. What happened was that all the barriers, all the specificity of materials, started breaking down. Whether you are talking about art or you are talking about the barriers between different knowledge fields like science, cultural theory, or critical theory, they all started breaking down.

Has the internet changed the way you work?

I already had a history of being a scientist, having studied neurosciences and been a doctor in the eighties. After completing a project called



Camp O.J., where I photographed the press at the O.J. Simpson trial as one would a rock-and-roll concert for *Spin Magazine*, I felt that I had nothing more to say about the relation of the production and mediation of the real using the theoretical tools that make up the toolbox of art. I realized that it was time to embrace my past as a scientist in order to inject a new vocabulary into my work, as well as perhaps to discover the neurobiological roots of what I was observing in the macrocultural field. Perhaps I felt the need to reinvent myself as well. Perhaps political and social systems were operating at the level of the neuron network, and biopolitical thought, as in the “Society of Control” outlined by Foucault, was being directed towards the brain. The *Earthling* series and a recent text I wrote for a forthcoming book edited by Deborah Hauptman called *The Body In Architecture* and my essay therein is called “Resistance is Futile: The Neurobiopolitics of Consciousness” are to some extent the culmination of this project. ...

Have you ever thought about memory in your work, because memory has always been considered static, whereas in actuality it is a dynamic process?

I have done a number of projects concerning different aspects of memory. Artists have always embraced memory and one could say there was an aesthetic memory. For instance, Christian Boltanski and Annette Messanger have explored cultural memory and traumatic memory for some time now. *American History Reinvented* (1986-1991), *Collective Memory—Collective Amnesia* (1990-1994) and *Beyond the Vanishing Point: Media and Myth in America* (1996-2001) were three projects I did in which memory was a preponderant interest.



this page, above: Warren Neidich *Respekt*, London, 2004, Type-C print, 30 x 40 inches courtesy of Michael Steinberg Fine Art.

this page, below: Warren Neidich *Newsday*, New York, 2005, Type-C print, 30 x 40 inches courtesy of Michael Steinberg Fine Art.

left page: Warren Neidich *Chitali*, New York, 2005, Type-C print, 30 x 40 inches courtesy of Michael Steinberg Fine Art.

...the images that are most successful in drawing the attention of the observer are the ones that take advantage of the dynamic ontogenic proclivities of the nervous system

The *Earthling* project riffs off these and concerns the construction of a global memory in the sense of what Paul Virilio called “phaticity.” The word phatic is the root of the word emphatic. The history of the image, coevolving with that of the imagination, is one in which images are being produced that are more and more attention-grabbing, more phatic. These images are in competition with each other in the visual-cultural field, and over time they are becoming more refined, or what I call cognitively ergonomic—the images that are most successful in drawing the attention of the observer are the ones that take advantage of the dynamic ontogenic proclivities of the nervous system. What I mean is that the static condition of photography has been superseded by the linear dynamic time of cinema, which has been remediated by the non-linear digital time and space of new media (non-narrative cinema is a transitional phase). The addition of dynamic aspects has made images more and more phatic, more cognitively ergonomic. This refinement is the product of the image-industry, of collusion between advertising, cinematic special-effects, and now the political propaganda machine. ...

In your work you use photography, video, sculpture, installation, and drawing, even the reinvention of photography. If you look at the work of Ed Ruscha you could say that the car is his medium. What is your medium?

What is my medium? Well, I started as a photographer. By the way, Rirkrit Tiravanija started as a photographer too, I don’t know if you know that.

He wanted to become a documentary photographer like a *Magnum* photographer.

Well, in answer to your question, if Ruscha’s medium is his car mine might be the brain. I mean that as a joke. Anyway, what is very important to understand about my work is that since I began as a photographer I tend to think of all mediums in terms of photography. For instance, in London I did this project called *Blindsight* in which I used the machine they paint streets with to paint a green line from the subway station to Moorfields Eye Hospital, so that partially sighted people could find their way there. It was a kind of Situationist project about nested perceptual realities within the larger framework of the urbanscape. In the end, however, that line became something that I photographed and that generated images. Beyond the photographs of the document of my performance I actually made images that recounted the very nature of what it is to be blind and described the limits of the camera as image machine. Could the camera act like touch and construct a total image from a multiplicity of possible focal points in time, in memory?

I did another work called *Silent* in Madrid. My partner, Elena Bajo, and I brought something that’s usually installed in suburban communities—a highway sound barrier—into the center of Madrid. It was a 70m sculpture that created a space of solitude and meditation in the middle of the city. For me, it ended up as something to photograph. It was reminiscent of a large earth work like the *Spiral Jetty*, which became known more as a series of documentary images. I mention this because I am still very much a photographer. No matter what I do, it always comes down to the static image of the photograph or the video. The difference between myself and Nan Goldin, and what makes me very close to somebody like Thomas Ruff, it is that I am not so much interested in the image. I am not a photographer who explores the image and tries to construct a specific style: I am more interested in artists who use different mediums within photography itself. I used many kinds of historical processes in *American History Reinvented*, from platinum to albumen prints. In the *O.J. Simpson* and *Beyond the Vanishing Point* projects I cross-processed the photographs. I am much

more about mediums than actual images, although I do think there is always a perfect process for a particular group of images. I am also about apparatus. Like Jean-Luc Godard, I use different apparatuses. I am interested in how an image is produced. I am making the production of the image transparent. I am not interested in dislocating the viewer from how the image was made, but want him or her to feel part of the process. In Godard’s *Mépris*, for instance, the first scene opens with a man holding the microphone for the actress and the next scene is simply the camera lens. In the middle of the film Godard stops the action and interviews himself.

It’s very much like Lars Von Trier, but in an interesting way he creates a different situation.

Lars Van Trier is very much like Godard in that he dispenses with all the high-tech paraphernalia of cinematic production, leaving you with the grain of the film, poor lighting, and camera movement. So, by complete denial, you affirm what it is you want to relinquish. As I said, everything is Godard.

Everything is Godard.

Yes, everything is Godard. If you look at what many artists are doing today, so much is influenced by him.

I think that is a great conclusion. Thank you. 🇺🇸

Warren Neidich is currently a visiting artist and research fellow at the Center for Cognition, Computation and Culture at Goldsmiths College, London.

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