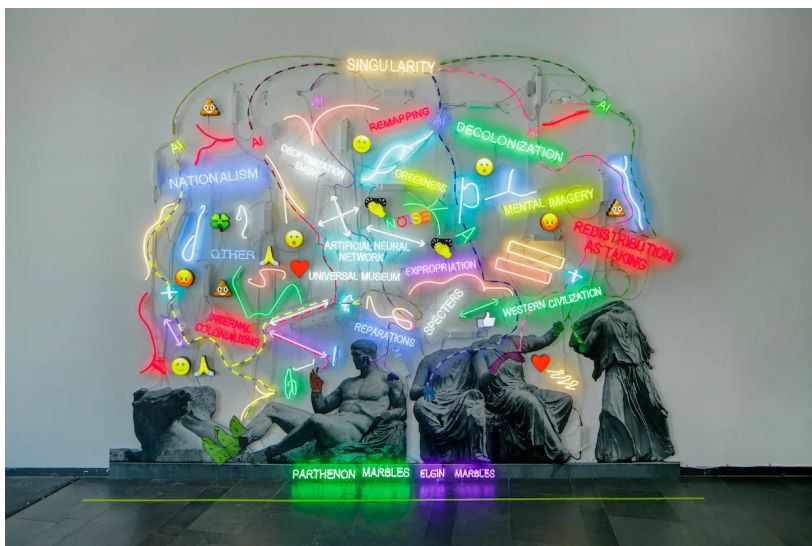


Erik Morse on neuroaesthetics

By Erik Morse

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Warren Neidich, *The Parthenon Marbles Recoded: The Phantom as Other*, 2021, neon installation. Installation view, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Ludger Paffrath.

**TO INAUGURATE THE CHAOID GALLERY** at the New York nonprofit Thread Waxing Space in 1999, curator and School of Visual Arts professor Warren Neidich organized “Conceptual Art as Neurobiological Practice,” convening a mix of phenomenological and brain-related works from relational-aesthetics superstars Douglas Gordon and Liam Gillick, installation artist Jason Rhoades, and post-Conceptualists Jonathan Horowitz and Rainer Ganahl, among others, under the recently minted category of “neuroaesthetics.” Neidich, an artist himself and a former physician, had coined the term in a series of lectures at SVA in the mid-1990s to describe the acceleration in information technologies that had consumed our daily lives and its effects on the development of the brain. For Neidich, post-studio art—with its interest in appropriation, contextualism, and semiotic drift—was uniquely suited to the task of comprehending these effects.

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“Neuroaesthetics can perhaps be understood in the Duchampian sense,” he claimed in a 2004 interview. “Neuroscience is a readymade, which is recontextualized out from its original context as a scientific-based paradigm into one that is aesthetically based.” He pointed to Conceptualists like Dan Graham and Sol LeWitt as precursors of a later generation of artists who would act as mediators between an increasingly technologized and monetized society and its hyperactive visual culture. Neuroaesthetics endeavored not to produce a synthesis of neuroscience and aesthetics, but rather to estrange the former from normal usage—much as Duchamp did the bicycle wheel and bottle rack—and reenvision in a more psychodynamic

capacity its tools for mapping cognitive categories such as color, memory, and spatial relationships, in order to reveal, in Neidich's words, "the idea of becoming brain."

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Chaoid Gallery was an offshoot of [artbrain.org](http://artbrain.org) and *Journal of Neuroaesthetics*, founded in 1996 by Neidich and artist Nathalie Anglès as a critical and curatorial project devoted to the dissemination of neuroaesthetic theory within media arts, a discipline then in its infancy. Although not devoted exclusively to new media art, Neidich and Anglès's work at the nexus of information technology, neurology, and biopolitics nevertheless exemplified how new media's rapidly evolving information platforms and visual styles demanded real-time coding—not only in terms of the software necessary for its production, but as a constantly upgraded lexicon for describing the experience of this work beyond its technological frame. Part and parcel of what feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti has characterized as a reemergence of theory within the millennial arts and the humanities catalyzed by the popularity of posthumanism—whose emphasis on nonanthropocentric forms of knowledge like machinic intelligence, animalian *Umwelten*, and planetary ecology decenter the presumptive universality of human knowledge and the brain as fixed and self-contained—artbrain.org contributed to the proliferation of posthumanist concepts like [neuroplasticity](#), [epiphylogenesis](#), and [noopolitics](#) through its collaborations with Sylvère Lotringer, Mark Fisher, Bifo Berardi, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Yann Moulier Boutang, among other theorists.



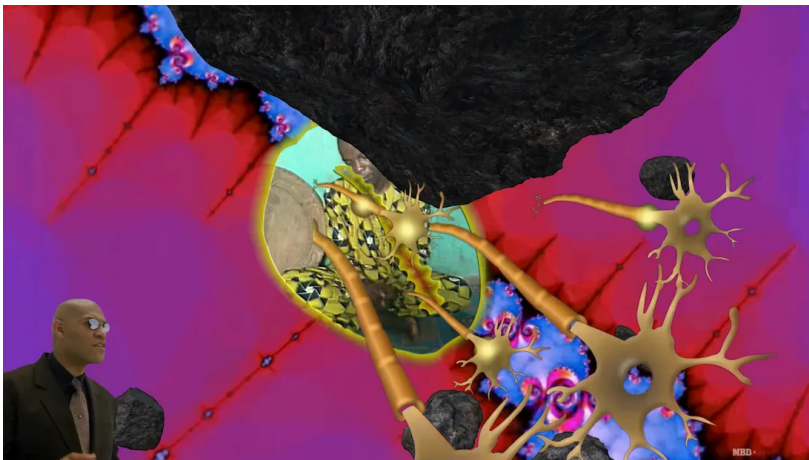
Dafna Maimon, *The She The Same*, 2014, looped 20-minute video. Installation view, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Ludger Paffrath.

Chaoid Gallery continued presenting shows throughout the aughts and beyond ("The Re-distribution of the Sensible," 2007; "Art and Telepathy," 2016) making space for installation and interactive works from Gordon and Gillick alongside younger artists working between science, technology, and media such as Tomás Saraceno, Jeremy Shaw, Jordon Wolfson, and Ryan Trecartin/Lizzie Fitch. But the majority of artbrain.org's institutional work was devoted to art-adjacent conferences and publications, including *Cognitive Architecture. From Biopolitics to Noopolitics* (2010) and *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism* series (2013–17), in

which neuroaesthetics increasingly assumed a posture of resistance as “a counter hegemony against the tactics of the neural economy which attempts to privatize and normalize the neural commons and as a result free thought”—what Neidich refers to as late-stage cognitive capitalism.

This July, for its twenty-fifth anniversary, artbrain.org is hosting “Activist Neuroaesthetics,” an online conference that will examine the most recent transformations to the brain-based polity as well as the symbiosis between new media and neural technologies. The title’s conspicuous addition of “activist” distinguishes it from the popular emergence of so-called positivist neuroaesthetics, a separate discipline that focuses on the quantification and technological application of aesthetic experiences through the use of brain-scan imagery or data sets. (In a prefatory symposium broadcast via Zoom in March, Neidich and cognitive theorists including Victoria Pitts-Taylor and Charles T. Wolfe enumerated some of the fierce debates about the brain among the rival fields of neuroscience, psychiatry, and the visual arts. The foremost among these debates concerns the roles played by art markets, corporations, and universities in the assimilation and management of what was once called the avant-garde in the post-tech-boom era and the disagreement between clinical science and the humanities on the ethics of brain technologization.) Positivist neuroaesthetics includes not only the approach of neurobiologist Semir Zeki, who specializes in mapping the cortical activity corresponding with emotional experiences like love and beauty (in a 2006 *Artforum* essay, Jonathan Gilmore critiqued this branch of neuroaesthetics as “a spurious reduction of art to the science of the brain”), but also those of tech corporations like Google, Facebook, and Neuralink, who more insidiously use their research into artificial intelligence (from advancements in facial recognition to smart dust and neural lace) to catalogue and manipulate the brain’s affective capacities for greater profit.

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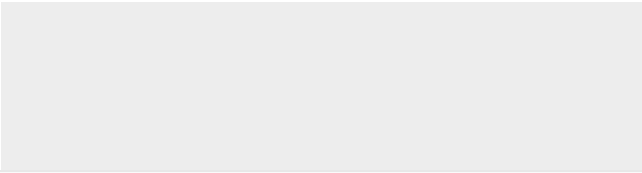


Tabita Rezaire, *Premium Connect*, 2017, single-channel video, color, sound, 13 minutes.

In addition to the conference, an exhibition at Berlin’s Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz surveys work by many of the artists previously featured at the Chaoid Gallery and in the *Journal of Neuroaesthetics*. The exhibition has been divided into three parts, each of which Neidich and cocurators Susanne Prinz and Sarrita Hunn identify as one of the primary motifs of cognitive capitalism: “The Brain Without Organs” (through June 12), “Sleep and Alternative States of Consciousness” (June 19 to July 17) and “Telepathy and New Labor” (July 24 to August 21). Neidich’s own neon installation *The Parthenon Marbles Recoded*, 2021, is the first show’s vivid centerpiece, consisting of ruined statuary resembling a portion of the Elgin marbles over which hangs a sort of cartoon brain scan strewn with political and institutional buzzwords (SINGULARITY, DEOPTIMIZATION EVENT, BREXIT), emoji, and chaotic squiggles. This kind of hypertrophied and

hyperactive neural dreamscape is complemented by videos like Trecartin and Fitch's Tumblrized hallucination *Item Falls*, 2013, and Tabita Rezaire's psychoshamanic *Premium Connect*, 2017, which features Yoruba philosopher Sophie Oluwole lecturing on the roots of digitalization in ancient divinatory practices. The videos showcase the divergent potentials of hyperdigital or hypersensorial imagery: The former is a reality-television-inspired role-playing game whose grotesque characters verge on the android, the latter an Afrofuturist meditation on cognitive decolonization.

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Elsewhere in "Brain Without Organs," works such as Gordon's psychoclinical installation *30 seconds text*, 1996 (based on a 1905 medical report about one Henri Languille, whose eyes remained focused on an observer for thirty seconds after his beheading); Jeremy Shaw's Kirlian photo series "Unseen Potential (Psilocybe Utopia, a.2)," 2021; and Bauhaus artist Alfred Ehrhardt's microphotograph *Faserzüge der Varolsbrücke (Mensch)* (Fiber Strands of the Pons Varolii [Man], 1939) present a scientific history of various images of cognition while demonstrating consciousness's lability and elusiveness. In so doing, these works appear to illustrate what Neidich has termed "the brain without organs," in which cognition has become dislodged from any organizing program or gestalt. Like Deleuze's famous "body without organs," Neidich's brain is an emancipated apparatus—intensive, plastic, and nomadic. It is primarily a metaphor of resistance, functioning beyond regimes of psychic capture and control and incubating radical subjectivities ("post-colonial, post-humanist and post-capitalist") through a continuous resculpting and aesthetic stimulation of neural circuitry.



Alfred Ehrhardt, *Faserzüge der Varolsbrücke (Mensch)*, 1939, silver gelatin print, 9 1/2 x 7". Installation view, Kunstverein am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin. Photo: Ludger Paffrath.

Neuroaesthetics' persistent fascination with a Kurzweilian "post-everything" future tense results in an ambitious project: Attempting to thread the interdisciplinary needle between the determinism of neuroscience and the subjectivism of aesthetics, it risks the rebuke of both disciplines. Moreover, it must maintain a vigilant campaign of reconnaissance and decryption at the vanguards of both art and science, all the while resisting the accelerating rhythms of capital that undergird both. One might object, along the lines of previous critiques of postworkerism and cognitive capitalism, that activist neuroaesthetics subsumes exigent questions of power exclusively under the sign of knowledge or digital labor, implicitly valorizing class- and education-based stratifications while also risking the alienation that it purports to combat by insisting on increasingly rarified and technocratic skill sets and vocabularies. What such criticisms overlook, however, is the multiplication of extraction points that capital produces as it seeks to infiltrate aspects of everyday life beyond the factory and the marketplace, from leisure and sex to sleep and the unconscious. The ultimate goal of neuroaesthetics is to serve as a "chaoid"—despite its name, an organizing device or structure of subjectivation that resists chaos—that enables our disconnection from the psychopathology of surveillance capitalism by restoring a balance between media and mind, information and sensation. If we foreclose the potential of art to aid in this work of healing and remediation, we do so at our own peril.

*Erik Morse is an arts writer and lecturer who is currently working on his third book.*