

# Interview with Warren Neidich – Artworks about Post-Truth Society and Activist Neuroaesthetics

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**Huang Hsiang-Yun (Huang):** It would seem that from 1996 to 2017, you used the word neuroaesthetics to describe your work, and after 2017, you began using the term activist neuroaesthetics. How would you define the latter and how does it relate to your sculpture on display in Taipei?

**Warren Neidich (Neidich):** Activist neuroaesthetics is a term I coined in 2019. With it, I am attempting to distance myself from neuroaesthetics,[1] which was a term I invented in 1995 as the title of a series of lectures I presented at the School of Visual Arts. This term was appropriated by a group of neuroscientists some years later without giving me credit and then went on to present a discourse opposite to my own which was rooted in positivism rather than activism. The goal of positivist neuroaesthetics – and also of the whole project of positivism, dating back to the 19th century Vienna School – is to explain artworks such as paintings as being the result of the brain's neural processing itself. The idea is that the microbiological neural architecture encased in the bony skull is responsible for aesthetic production, rather than something occurring independently outside the material brain's jurisdiction that affects and then modulates the brain's infrastructure.

Positivist neuroaesthetics offers a reductive and deductive definition of the brain. Their focus is on the material brain, the brain inside the skull, and their investigations are very much aided by such technologies as neuroimaging. So it is assumed that the brain is what is inside the head and that it doesn't change. In contrast, activist neuroaesthetics presents the brain as an active organ that exists inside the skull, as well as outside of it. Its extracranial components concern the social, political, economic and technological relations as well as the cosmos and its deep history, beginning with elements that are the result of exploding stars. We are all dust. We all contain different kinds of originary matter. Tomas Saraceno recently ran a beautiful project about this early dust at the Shed in NYC. But the extracranial brain also includes, for example, the microbiological milieu that exists in our gut, the microbiome. It's also about this idea of the importance of mitochondrial DNA. Lynn Margolis talks about a wonderful symbiosis. It's all about these different kinds of forms that make us who we are. This entirety is what I'm calling the brain or the Situated Intracranial-Extracranial Complex.



Photo: Evan Bedford, *Brain Without Organs*, 2022, detail, Museum of Neon Art, Glendale, CA. Neon Gas Lights, Stainless Steel, Vinyl Letters

**Huang:** Does your framework of activist neuroaesthetics presuppose a new materialist approach?

**Neidich:** What connects activist neuroaesthetics to material philosophers is the idea that art is something of a record of a morphogenetic ontology of aesthetic production, whereby the changing and historical relations – social, political, economic and historical – culminate in objects and things that express these changes. The form a becoming cultural milieu or habitus that then elicits changes in the brain. In fact, they mirror each other and coevolve together. The cultural matrix and the material brain are constantly evolving in tandem. The brain is not an unchangeable essence. The brain isn't just in the skull. It is entangled with this extracranial component of the socio-political, economic and historical milieu. There is a morphogenetic process that is going on in this milieu, but there is also a morphogenetic process going on inside the brain. Bernard Stiegler called this a technological evolution rather than one instigated by genetic mutations alone, i.e. an exosomatic organogenesis.

The key here is that the brain, as understood through activist neuroaesthetics, is a brain that is connected to the deep history of time and is composed of inorganic and organic molecules dating back to the beginnings of time some 4.5 billion years ago, when electrical charges administered to the ancient atmosphere consisting of CH<sub>4</sub>, NH<sub>3</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>O and H<sub>2</sub> produced amino acids, hydroxy acids and urea which composed the prebiotic soup. These are the elements of the creation of life and are contained in all of this.

**Huang:** In what sense is activist neuroaesthetics more “political” than postivist neuroaesthetics?

**Neidich:** Models of neuroaesthetics (positivists) are very involved with ideas of Immanuel Kant and issues around transcendental idealism. And they are very much related to ideas of essences that are non-changing. These non-changing essences are part of an outdated, eurocentric and patriarchal concept of beauty. But for artists like us, punk is also beauty, destructive art is beautiful.

Positivist neuroaesthetics are collaborators in what Michel Foucault called the process of governmentalization and what Jacques Ranciere called the policing of the sensible; both important in the production of perceptual-cognitive normalization or normativity. This is key. Ranciere talks about how governments police the sensible in order to produce an easy-to-manage people – what he refers to as the distribution of the sensible. But he also talks about the ways in which artists redistribute the sensible, they estrange the sensible to create a multiplicity of singularities which form pockets of resistance and perceptual-cognitive diversity and disparity. Positivist neuroaesthetics are connected to governmental agencies like DARPA and participate in consumer neuroscience and neuroeconomics, which are connected to neural capitalism. The notion of mentalization concerns the idea of governing the mental. In cognitive capitalism, where the mind and the brain are the new factories of the 21st century and we are no longer proletariats working on assembly lines but cognitariats working in front of screens, the mental takes on added importance. Aesthetics as a form of disturbance, magic, or estrangement must be tamed and the positivist neuroaesthetics are in league with DARPA and Big Tech to manage the mental laborers' cognitive repertoire. They want to be able to make aesthetics less powerful. The power of art is in its capacity to modulate and sculpt the brain's neuroplasticity. It shapes and reshapes the Situated Intracranial-Extra-cranial complex through first reshaping the cultural milieu and secondarily shaping the architecture of the material brain. Furthermore, this reshaped material brain feeds back into the cultural milieu, reshaping it over and over again, something referred to as trans-generational cultural memory. As Gerald Edelman, the deceased famous neuroscientist from UC San Diego, once said, “culture is the generator of diversity” which acts on a highly variable connected brain. Artists are the perpetrators of its diversity.

**Huang:** This notion that the brain is always in a state of evolution and it is not in a reductive and deductive state is very much connected to the work of philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Could you explain how you connect your artwork *From the Society of the Spectacle to the Consciousness Industry* (2022, Digital Art Festival Taipei) to

**Deleuze's notion of body without organs, and what led you to invent your own concept, i.e. *brain without organs*?**

**Neidich:** The Body Without Organs (BWO) was a term that Deleuze and Guattari used in *A Thousand Plateaus*, but it was really the genius of Antonin Artaud. He was a poet as well as the leader of the Theater of Cruelty. He stated that the body is the body – it stands alone and has no need for organs. The body is never an organism, and organisms are the enemies of the body. In other words, an organization of the body that doesn't allow the body to change, to mutate, to become something else, is the real enemy of the body.

Deleuze and Guattari's notion of body without organs emerged in a moment of Fordism. Laborers worked behind the assembly line under the jurisdiction of Taylorist management styles in which the body was entangled with the technology of manufacturing of the day, the assembly line, in order to increase his or her surplus value. Surplus value being the amount of value created by the laborer over and above the wages he or she was paid. By scientifically examining the motions of the body during work, a determination could be made as to what motions produced the greatest effect. The alienation of repetitive and oppressive Fordist labor was the effect of these regimens. Something the Body Without Organs could rally against.

What happens when we talk about the 'brain without organs' is that digitalization produces a similar but different effect upon the mental laborer's mind and brain, as the assembly line did for the proletariat. The neuropil, composed of neurons, dendrites, synapses and glial cells, are platforms upon which cognitive labor depends. They are apparatuses of networked and distributed composition and they produce thoughts that are then translated into data. Instead of Taylorist managerial studies I have suggested that Hebbian styles of neural efficiency produce more efficient mental laborers or cognitariat. These new digital regimes create similar kinds of exploitation and political power but use different means, ones directed at the processes of perception, cognition and thought. We are in the early stages of this process of perfecting mental-screen labor. That is to say that the subject today is cognitive labor under cognitive capitalism. The brain and the mind are the new factories of the 21st century. As mentioned earlier, we are cognitariats working in front of screens and mobile phones. And what we are doing is we are creating data. We are data workers working 24/7. And the data that we are mining is a result of our searches on Google or our likes and dislikes on social media. All of this data is then assembled, collated and sold to corporations, policing agencies and governments: we are datafied. Most importantly, the data is not passive but active and begins to act upon the brain's material agency. Google's filter bubbles, which isolate the user in his or her own ideological and cultural bubble or reality based on Google search choices, the Google Effect, in which one outsources one's memories to Google, and the attention economy in which Big Data is able to digitalize and monetize the capacity to pay attention, are examples of how the mind is being manipulated. According to Shoshana Zuboff, even our future choices are at stake. Our singularities as individuals are now creating another kind of intelligence, a parallel machinic consciousness that is essentially based on the choices we make and institute granular control. And that is why I use these key words in the hanging neon sculpture I am showing with you. It starts with the society of the spectacle and then as you move vertically, it transitions to cognitive capitalism and at the very top lies the consciousness industry. Just as the body without organs was a new form of resistance against the proletarianization of the subject on the assembly line, the brain without organs is a form of resistance to the new situation of data, big data and the big other that constitute the new digital sovereign.

**Huang:** In my opinion, the ideas of rhizome and body without organs do not seem to be valid as a form of resistance when we progressed to control society (data labor in post-industrial society) because the open and fluid time itself and networked structure have been appropriated by post-industrial society and new forms of capitalism (semiotics, cognitive capitalism, etc.). The structure of rhizome only works when our labor conditions are still confined to a physical space in the era of disciplined/industrial society. So, I'm not sure how the structure you propose can resist the norms we live under?

**Neidich:** Before answering your question, I would like to say a few words about the Society of Control which in some ways was Deleuze's response to what he saw as a deficit in the model that had been brought forth by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punishment* (1975), called the disciplinary society. In actuality Foucault had already understood that the disciplinary society was a model of the 18th century and that the new conditions of digitality would make his model less effective. It wasn't until Deleuze's postscript to Society of Control in 1992 that it became understood that Foucault's system of enclosures was in crisis. Digitality respects no boundaries and corporations which depend on flows and modulations have taken over the factory. Codes and passwords predominate. These new conditions pose threats to the self. Even more so today as we move from an information and knowledge economy to a neural based one in which, for instance, brain computer interfaces linked to the Internet will put our conscious and unconscious thoughts at risk. Biopower which has already been replaced by what Byung-Chul Han calls psychopower will be further superseded by neuropower in which the brain's neuroplasticity will be placed at risk. You are correct in assuming that in these new conditions the idea of the Body Without Organs is no longer effective, as the body is not as essential for the new forms of labor that prevail. Body labor has not been eradicated but subsumed by mental labor and a new form of resistance – which I am calling the Brain Without Organs – needs to be conceptualized. But still, I agree with your question, if one accepts the model proposed by the positivist neuroaestheticians who adhere as we saw earlier to a cognitivist approach, but the model I propose is much different, as it depends upon the realization of the degrees of freedom locked in the incredible variation of the brain. The neuroscientist Joaquin M. Fuster said that the degrees of freedom locked in the variance of the brain's cerebral cortex preserve the degrees of freedom of the human mind. Where variation in other systems causes noise and degraded performance, the brain, dependent on neural selection as it is, allows for a differential response to unknown environments. As a result, the brain undergoes change. What causes these variable environments that build new brains? Art, culture, and psychedelics. Time is limited here but I am arguing that the forms of neural optimization at our doorstep is linked to digitalization because, especially post covid, we are spending more and more time interacting with the digital world. Some have suggested more than 40 hours a week. The digital is the environment that is now sculpting the brain's neural plasticity, and neuropower assumes that the digital environment is in some ways constructed to optimize its effect on the material brain. Data is not passive or immaterial but becomes

materialized in the trillions of synapses of the brain. I have been referring to this since my 2003 book *Blow-Up: Photography, Cinema and the Brain*[2] as cognitive ergonomics.

**Huang:** I think Deleuze used the term *dividual* or *immaterial labor* to capture what you were just referring to as *mental labor*. I'm wondering why you employ the notion of *mental labor* instead of *immaterial labor*. Is it because you position yourself in (new) materialism, and if so, in what sense?

**Neidich:** Immaterial becomes a prominent form of labor in Cognitive Capitalism, especially as affective labor becomes ever more important and it becomes for the first time commoditized. It is really Maurizio Lazzarato who first really defines the moment of transition from material labor, which produces things and objects, and immaterial labor, which is performative, like a politician giving a speech or a public relations person starting a rumor. Guy Debord described this as communicative capitalism. According to Maurizio Lazzarato and Paolo Virno, this performative labor doesn't leave a trace. I am diverging from their assumption and arguing that in late stage Cognitive Capitalism, where the brain's neural plasticity is at stake and performative labor leaves traces in the form of memories that can be recalled as working memory. So a musical concert, a political speech or a theatrical performance leaves a trace as imprints upon the neurosynaptic logics of the brain's trillions of living synapses. This leads to another component of *neuropower* – that is, its action on the mind's eye and working memory, that place in our imaginations where we envision scenarios and stories when we contemplate the future. In cognitive capitalism, the mind's eye has subsumed the importance of the archive as a place of remembering and forgetting what a society deems important. Primary source materials are locked in vitrines housed in a museum or institution where scholars can study them and the public can view them. Power then chooses what items are deemed important and as such construct the identity of a people, sometimes unfairly and to the detriment of a specific racial minority. With the advanced technologies of digitality and neural capitalism on the horizon, the physical archive has been subsumed by the mental archive that is situated in long term memories of the material brain which are called up and mixed with short-term memories to create scenario visualizations and internalized narratives. In neural capitalism, the control of memories accrued and the capacity to imagine them as part of a story are the focus of power today and in the future. This is why I use the term *mental labor* instead of *immaterial labor* in the context of cognitive capitalism.

**Huang:** We might connect the idea of simulation and mediated memories to your video, *Pizzagate: From Rumor to Delusion* (2019), because one can argue that fake news and mis/disinformation are to some degree pure simulations (Jean Baudrillard). Are we talking about a reality without references, like putting simulations in your neural system and then creating a whole new world without a reference in reality?

**Editor's note:** *Pizzagate: From Rumor to Delusion* (2019) is an experimental documentary that describes our post-truth society through the Pizzagate fake news story. "The Pizzagate scandal was a conspiracy theory that went viral in which Hillary Clinton and her associates at her campaign offices were accused of running a child sex ring out of the Comet Ping Pong pizza parlor in Washington D.C. It also uncovers the reasons for the madness that motivated Edgar Welch to drive up from North Carolina to free these girls." [3]

**Neidich:** You are right, it connects to the society of spectacle (Guy Debord) and with the society of data and the society of the neuron. Debord actually predates Jean Baudrillard in terms of drawing attention to the spectacle, in the sense that he argued that the spectacle would replace life and representation would dominate. Debord argued that this was the heart of what he called the real society's unreality. Right at the beginning of the 1950s, he understood the way in which news, propaganda and entertainment became a mouth piece for the prevailing way of life. He referred to this as the pseudo-world, that the spectacle created an alternative system of consciousness based on delusion. And it was the opposite of reality. The society of the spectacle is something that constantly reaffirms itself. To cite Debord's famous quote: "In a world that is really upside-down, the truth is a moment of the false". [4] So this is the key to the beginnings of this idea of fake news and the idea of post-truth society.

Jean Baudrillard mapped out three orders of the simulacrum and it is the third order that interests us here. The first is the copy of the original. The second is a product of the industrial revolution, of mass production. Here the relationship between reality and copy begins to break down as a result of commoditization of the copy which takes on more importance than what is real. Finally, in the third order, the sign fakes being connected with the original, whereas in actuality, it isn't. This is a condition of the *Hypereal* or *Irreal*.

The society of the spectacle and simulation form the foundation of postmodernism and the post-truth society. Fake news is a form of propaganda but it is a different kind than what we were formally accustomed to. Yellow Journalism is a type of unfounded sensationalist journalism which corrupted the truth in order to produce revenue. Goebbels' *Principles of Propaganda* is also a case in point as it requires propaganda to be planned and executed by a person of authority. It was always a top-down phenomenon, an authoritarian thing. Now propaganda is coming from the bottom up. The kind of propaganda that characterizes fake news and which is generated through Facebook and other social media emerges from the collectivity at the bottom of the network rather than from the top. Today we have something most akin to a combination of bottom-up and top-down flows.

**Huang:** Could you tell us about your aesthetic choice when dealing with a fake news event? Here I am referring again to your *Pizzagate: From Rumor to Delusion* (2019). For example, among your considerations seem to be QAnon aesthetics, multiple windows, and fast-editing?

**Neidich:** I like the term QAnon aesthetics, you should trademark that. We live in a world where it is hard to know what is true and what is false. The video actually purposefully looks like a Youtube.com conspiracy theory film. On the one hand, it takes on a QAnon aesthetic, and on the other, it kind of has the feeling of a rap music video. The editing is very quick

and follows the beat. It follows a kind of a rhythmicity that you would find in footage shown on ESPN; it uses some components of sports events, like slow motion and fast forward. It has a specific kind of editing style that is reminiscent of a multi-screen set-up. The multi-screen effect was meant to explore the relationship between the attention economy and the disattention economy.

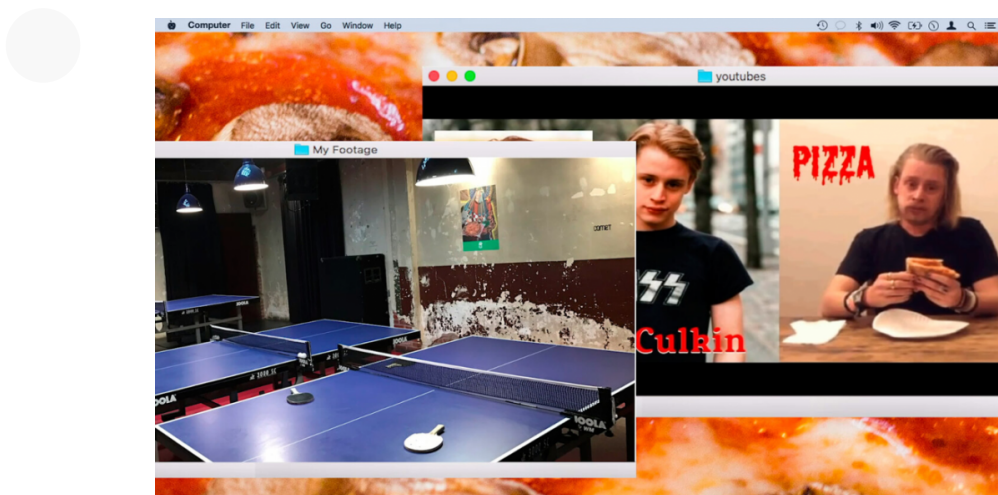


Photo: Warren Neidich, *Pizzagate – From Rumor To Delusion*, 2019, Full HD Video, 19:19 min

Donald Trump and others like Steve Bannon are hip to cognitive capitalism and the attention economy. They know how to get people to watch something or not watch something. They are experts in attention and disattention. Both are part of a cognitive optimization process, part of cognitive optimization, called cognitive ergonomics. How do you manage to attract someone's attention in an environment consisting of an incredible surfeit of images? How do you get certain images to pop up and be clicked? So-called clickbait is a favorite device of the alt-right. What you do is you work with this distribution of the sensible, but it is no longer on the street, it is in your screen – distributions of the sensible are designed inside computer games and in online commercials. And this is being organized in a certain way, with mind to the optimization of mental labor involved in creating clean data which can then be analyzed by algorithmic intelligence and, as we saw with Cambridge Analytica, used to build voter profiles.

That is what positivist neuroaesthetics is working on. They are connected to this new form of capitalism and the attention economy and are researching the means through which images could capture attention more effectively and sculpt the neural plasticity of the brain. Paul Virilio called these images phatic because they were emphatic even before social media. Positivist neuroaestheticians study artworks and their aesthetic techniques and adapt them to market conditions to produce a more optimized cognitariat. They are participating in what I refer to as cognitive despotism or perceptual-cognitive normativity.

**Huang:** Going back to the current installation *From the Society of the Spectacle to the Consciousness Industry* (2022, Digital Art Festival Taipei), I suppose you chose neon lights also because of the attention economy, or were there other considerations at play?

**Neidich:** Exactly. The thing about the neon lights is that I use them for a number of reasons. The first is what you said. When I started living and working in California, I was affected by them. As you drive along Sunset Boulevard, aka Sunset Strip, and witness all these amazing neon signs, one can't help but be mesmerized. They are essential components of the consumer society that defines the Los Angeles suburbanite. As you drive along in your car, your attention is captured by the moveable feast of this neon spectacle.

The second reason has to do with the marketplace of ideas rather than the marketplace of things. When you are driving on Sunset Strip, the neon lights signal places where you might buy something you need or don't need. They capture your attention and coerce you to go to this or that store. In my neon works, I'm using neon as a way to capture attention, in the hope of drawing attention to important ideas in the marketplace of ideas. My last five neon sculptures elaborated very different conceptual frameworks, such as post-truth society, the future of the enlightenment, digitality, dialectic materialism, and so on.

As for the third reason –Mark Fisher, in his book, *Capitalist Realism*, talks about the fact that there is this huge interest in postmodern anachronistic technologies in which different time periods slip into each other. He suggested that time itself was breaking down. I went to an art fair the other day and saw what I call art covers. A cover is a song written in an earlier time that a young artist reinterprets. Following his lead, we no longer need to produce new things because the past is providing us with everything we need for the future. For example, some people are buying old analog record players and playing vinyl records. There is a desire for the distressed and imperfect, and this is in contradistinction to the perfection of the digital mp4: it is a refusal of modernist linear progression of time and its embracing of change and the new. There is this whole desire for anachronistic technologies. And so the neon to me is something from the nostalgic past that has aesthetic power today because it refuses the digital present.





Photo: Warren Neidich  
*Pizzagate Neon*, 2019, Zuecca Project Space, Venice Biennial, Neon Glass,  
 Installation View, 7 meters high x 4 meters wide, Venice, Italy

**Huang:** So in the neon installation *the Brain Without Organs* and *Pizzagate Neon*, I noticed you use stainless steel mirrors as a means to reflect the hanging neon sculptures. Have you always included mirrors or reflection effects in your installations? What is the idea behind this?

**Neidich:** It is very important that these reflective elements create a virtual illusion or simulation. The neon is reflected in the mirror device in an opposite and reversed way. As you know, in *Pizzagate Neon*, I have created a reflection. It's not a mirror, but a piece of tinted glass. And when you looked inside it at the Venice Biennale, where I showed this piece, the space behind the glass appeared huge. When you looked into the refracted smaller representation of the *Pizzagate Neon* in the glass, it looked like it was 100 feet away, which was impossible because there was a wall behind it which was maybe 15 feet behind it. The effect was a result of the way the optics of the glass bent the light. And that was a powerful and incredible illusion of this virtual space. This illusion formed the foundation for an understanding of the illusions generated by digitality and communication capitalism which create an environment for fake news. In a work I am exhibiting in Los Angeles at the moment I use two curved stainless steel mirrors to reflect my hanging neon sculpture, which is called *The Brain Without Organs*. The work concerns creating an ecocentric brain instead of one that has been formed over 2 million years by anthropocentric technologies. Ecocentric means loving nature and understanding that it doesn't exist only to be used and profited from by humans, but rather that it is important in its own right. The mirrors create a curved illusionistic virtual space that stands for deep time. White vinyl letters of words appropriated from various texts of Timothy Morton, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour are affixed to the stainless-steel mirrors. It is a curved stainless steel wall that follows the path of a Fibonacci Spiral. These words appear suspended intermediately between the real object of this hanging sculpture and the virtual illusion. The sculpture is reflected deep inside the stainless steel, and these words are somewhere in between.

**Huang:** Do you think there's an alternative? And do you think that art can be a form of resistance to change the status quo?

**Neidich:** Yes, I do believe that. Artists can and do redistribute the sensible. This redistribution of the sensible and also the redistribution of affordances are not simply something that takes place in the extracranial milieu of socio-political economic and technological relations; it has effects on the intracranial brain as well. As mentioned, the digital virtual is the new place of the jurisdiction of the sensible and we must also estrange it. These distributions and redistributions have an impact on the architecture of the material brain through their effects upon the brain's neural plasticity. Attention is connected to the capacity of networks of images to sculpt neural networks in the brain. Awakening the tremendous variability contained within the neural synaptic population that makes the brain's neuropile: this for me constitutes the power of art. The power of art is its capacity to emancipate and make more variable the neural synaptic variation of the brain, to keep changing it, to awaken all of its pluri-potentiality and its possibilities, and with it, the possibilities for thought itself. This is why I believe cultural value is more important than market value when it comes to artworks. Artists that cater to the market do so by playing to its concerns in order to produce exchange value, but this is at the risk of relinquishing the power of art to emancipate the neural diversity of the brain and what Deleuze calls the image of thought.

[1]Warren Neidich : I was using the term neuroaesthetics at the beginning back in the 90s, and later shifted to the term

activist neuroaesthetics. The most important of those lectures which became a book was called Blow-Up: Photography, Cinema and the Brain, D.A.P./UCR/California Museum of Photography, 2003

[2]Warren Neidich, Blow-Up: Photography, Cinema and the Brain, D.A.P./UCR/California Museum of Photography, 2003

[3]Quote from Warren's official artist website. Website link: <https://www.warrenneidich.com/>

[4]Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle (1967), thesis 9

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Warren's website :

<https://www.warrenneidich.com/>

<https://activistneuroaesthetics.art/>