

WARREN NEIDICH

TEXT: Nicole Büsing & Heiko Klaas





Did she do it or – or not? One of the 2008 American presidential campaign’s central controversies concerned a dubious list of forbidden books. John McCain’s vice presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, was supposed to have compiled the list in her capacity as former mayor of the small Alaskan city of Wassila. The aim of the compilation was allegedly to remove the listed titles from the local public library. Palin resolutely denied these accusations on several occasions. Her opponents, however, were not convinced. If the accusations were true, it would have been a clear case of censorship. If they weren’t true, then at least the existence of the hit list circulating the Web evidences a canon of disagreeable yet popular books – one that the conservative, evangelical American Right would love to have banished from public libraries.

Exactly this explosive constellation is the starting point for the procedural installation “Book Exchange,” which the artist Warren Neidich – born in 1958 in New York, now working and living in Berlin and Los Angeles – showed last summer at the Horowitz Gallery in East Hampton, on Long Island. East Hampton is not just a prime destination for recreation-seeking New Yorkers; ever since Jackson Pollock settled there, in the 1940s, it has been the artists’ and art-collectors’ colony on Long Island par excellence. Not a bad place to observe “Book Exchange” in real conditions.

The elegantly formed work presented the 102 supposedly Palin-identified books inside a massive rotating steel cube tilted on its corner and clamped-in by a gallows-shaped beam-construction. Among the works are all of the Harry Potter novels, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. Neidich signed all of the books (in best ready-made tradition) and offered them to gallery visitors to take home with them. But one rule had to be observed: Whoever took a book had also to leave one. As well, regardless of the title or author, the book had to be the color red. By the end of this “performance” the entire inventory of books had been exchanged. The work’s initial colorful chaos had transformed into a uniformity of red.

This new work – both sensual and participatory – is indicative of Warren Neidich’s multidisciplinary artistic strategy. It shows how he reacts with elaborate artistic counterstrategies towards attempts at cultural alignment or thought-control by the wielders of political, economic, technological, or media power.

Neidich studied both science and photography in the 1980s. Aside from his artistic endeavors he also practiced, until the mid-1990s, both neurology and ophthalmology. And since that period he has become known not only as an artist but also as an author, curator, theoretician, and a participant in several international panels. In 1998 Neidich founded the website artbrain.org–The Journal of Neuro-Aesthetic Theory, an interdisciplinary platform with contributions from artists, neuroscientists, and communication- and media theorists.

Oben
Extensivity Intensity, 2009
Foto: Dido Baxevanidis

Unten
Modernity and Difference, 2009
Foto: Dido Baxevanidis

For his essay “From Noo-Power to Neuropower: How Mind Becomes Matter,” Neidich received the 2010 Vilém Flusser Theory Award of the Berlin Transmediale. Neidich refers in his art and theoretical texts to recent discoveries in brain research, as well as to post-structural philosophy and aesthetics. He sees himself first and foremost as an artist, however, rather than as an uncommitted, cross-discipline commuter. And he mostly does not want to be put a box labeled “Art + Science.” This point was made explicit in a 2005 interview with the Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, wherein Neidich noted: “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.” Neidich is interested in deterritorializing science in general with the tools and apparatuses of artistic production.

Viewer participation plays an essential role in many of Neidich’s works. In the fall of 2009 he gave one of his “Performative Lectures” in conjunction with the group show “Scorpio’s Garden,” curated by the Danish artist Kirstine Roepstorff for the Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin. With eyes blindfolded, Neidich was led by an assistant through the darkened exhibition. He commented on the works from memory and put them in the context of minimal and concept-art strategies. Then, clearly handicapped by self-inflicted blindness, he explained his own diagrammatic drawings with neuronal models with the help of arrows showing the related terminologies of art, science, and politics. The drawings were projected onto the wall with a beamer. These kinds of drawings are for Neidich the starting point for every larger work. Despite their initial scientific impression, they are better categorized as like those black board drawings of Joseph Beuys as artistic mind-maps than as scientific models. Questions were permitted during the performance; the result was a complex discussion about the mechanism of neuronal perception and information processing. A recurring topic was as well was the external control of the hard-to-define “sovereign powers” of globalized neo-liberalism. But the discussion primarily concerned artistic counter-models and strategies of resistance.

Extensive parts of our consciousness are influenced by the mass-media and by mechanisms of perception borne of new technologies from which we can hardly extract ourselves: the Internet, social networking, virtual reality, and 3-D techno-

logy. According to Neidich these technologies shape and homogenize our inborn or naturally learned patterns of perception. Defense of the marginality of the individual will be lost. Neidich sees art’s great chance in its understanding of the dynamic neuronal and biochemical processes on which these subtle transformations of individual thinking and consciousness are based. In short, to regain lost cognitive abilities; or at least Neidich has not given up hope on the attempt to do so.

What remains, however, is doubt – also for Warren Neidich. “Resistance is Futile” and “Resistance is Fertile” – Neidich installed these two contradictory statements in huge neon lettering on the roof of the Kunsthau Graz in 2006 for the exhibition “Protections,” curated by Adam Budak and Christine Peters. Glowing alternately in red and green into the night sky of Graz, the statements critically counteracted the urban economy of attention normally dominated by advertising and service offers.

A more recent neon work, from 2009, presents a seemingly paradoxical statement: “If It Looks Like Art It Probably Isn’t.” Good art, Neidich says, should not look like art at first glance. If it does, it runs the risk of being immediately absorbed as a phenomenon of mass culture, and as such loses its potential for resistance. The so-called creative industries – branding, neuromarketing, and, not least, the global art market (which declares art a prestige good) – lead to extensively homogenized ways of perception. There is a consensus as to what is “beautiful.” But for Neidich art begins to be interesting when it cannot immediately be detected as such, cannot be mentally filed. The observing subject should first develop the criteria for art’s classification and evaluation.

His performance “In The Minds I,” seen in 2009 and 2010 in Brussels, Athens, Oslo and Los Angeles, reactivates an interlocutor and audience’s passive areas of consciousness. Neidich had a dialog with each participant about an imaginary exhibition created with three objects he had asked them to bring in an imaginary white cube constituted in their minds eye: the place inside ones skull where the cinema of the world is projected for self-inspection. The participants kept their eyes closed during the performance. With well-directed questions and suggestions, he then had them invent artworks and exactly describe the works’ dimensions, colors, and materials. Neidich functioned as a sort of medium who generated his interlocutor’s mind’s eye creative processes. The result was



We're in the Guggenheim now.



I haven't really found a place for it yet.

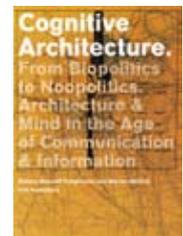
In the Minds, 2010
Video Stills

Cognitive Architecture. From Bio-Politics To Noo-Politics
Architecture & Mind in the Age of Communication & Information

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indeed an “exhibition,” but one made solely of immaterial objects that existed in the form of precise linguistic descriptions and cognitive models. No actual material artwork was ever produced. Instead only sculptures and architectures made of the material facts of memory. As such Neidich was commenting on the new forms of political power that are directed towards memory and attention. He sees a role for art to resist its affects by producing new kinds of memories that compete for the minds space with those institutionally produced. The performance also raised a few other interesting questions: What kind of memory sculpture is the participant left to ponder? Who owns this kind of imaginary artwork? Who has the right to reproduce it in reality? What is the difference between this and an object that exists now in our memory but stems from a real object?

In these as in other performances in the past Warren Neidich employs methods and techniques of conversation that can be compared to those used in neurological, ophthalmological,

or psychotherapeutic praxes. This approach has been part of Neidich’s work from the very beginning. In the 1997 video “Brainwash,” he showed a young male protagonist holding a nystagmus, or optokinetic drum, an ophthalmological instrument that helps to diagnose neurological problems, such as strokes or brain tumors. Neidich was interested in the formal similarity of this instrument with some optical machines from pre-film history such as the phenakistoscope and magic lantern. “Like Jean-Luc Godard, I use different apparatuses,” he explained in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist. “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.”





Resistance is Futile, 2010
Foto: Mira Mixner

Resistance is Fertile, 2010
Foto: Mira Mixner

if it looks like art it probably isnt if you can, 2008

