post-futuristisch.

Kunst in dystopischen Zeiten
Warren Neidich

AKTIVISTISCHE NEUROÄSTHETIK ALS KÜNSTLERISCHE PRAXIS IN DER POST-WahrheitSGESELLSCHAFT

Ein Gespräch von Ann-Katrin Günzel
Ann-Katrin Günzel: Warren, your art work is strongly connected to neuroscience. Can you explain us the relationship between the two (your art and neuroscience)?


Ann-Katrin Günzel: Warren, your art work is strongly connected to neuroscience. Can you explain us the relationship between the two (your art and neuroscience)?

Warren Neidich: The works at the beginning of career as an artist such as American History Reinvented (1985-1991), Cultural Memory/ Cultural Amnesia (1991), and Camp Of (1996), involved with issues of enactment, fictive documentary and the archive. At the end of 1996, I cycled back to my earlier studies in Neurobiology Cognitive Neuroscience in order to estrange and expand the complexity of the products of my art practice. I also realized the power of my art practice to deindividualize neuroscience which felt was at the calling of the military-industrial-media complex. I called this practice Neuro-aesthetics. Today I refer to it as Activist Neuroaesthetics. My www.arbrain.org and the Journal of Neuroaesthetics also emerged from my art practice. Activist Neuroaesthetics which is very different then the form of neuroaesthetics popular in Germany which I call positivist neuroaesthetics. Activist neuroaesthetics focuses on the ways and means with which artists, architects, poets, filmmakers, and other cultural producers using artistic practices rather scientific methods investigate the sensible world in order to create artistic facts. One artwork can change the history of art. For instance one could imagine that works such Marcel Duchamp’s readymade sculpture Fountain (1917), Jackson Pollock’s Blue Poles (1952), Mary Kelly’s Post-partum Document (1976), and Anna Halpern’s Parades and Changes (1965-1967), introduced experimental languages into art discourse that changed the way artists made and continue to make work. This process of artistic estrangement, as we know from the work of Jacques Ranciere, has political consequences through introducing counter strategies to those through which sovereignty polices the distribution of the senses to create an homogenous people which are easy to govern. Political artistic interventions redistribute the sensible and as a result produce changes reflected in the multitude of singarities who can think for themselves and express their differences in the market place of ideas. Activist Neuroaesthetics takes this one step further in understanding, in ways the Catherine Malibou has, that by changing the socio-political cultural milieu one can also alter the neurobiological architecture of the brain which in turn may alter thought itself. In Positivist neuroaesthetics the brain is an unchanging material structure restricted to the bony skull and reduced to the activity of neurons. It is a repository of essences and predispositions which are deposited in various forms in the environment. The activist approach proposes a situated intracranial/extracranial brain complex that is in a constant state of flux. In philosophy of mind this approach follows what is sometimes called the embodied, enactive, extended approach. Activist neuroaesthetics says that we are much more than our neurons. This extracranial brain is composed of technological, artistic and architectural advancements, and linguistic, philosophical and socio-spiritual-communicative transformations which promote material changes in the intracranial brain with which it is entangled. Thus, activist neuroaesthetics understands that this extracranial brain has the capacity to incite social and political revolutions that have consequences for the structure of the intracranial brain. Alternatively we have the power to transform our brain through transforming the political, social, aesthetic milieu if we only had the desire to do so. Neural plasticity, the capacity of the material brain to change, provides the means and mechanism with which this can occur. Like other matter in the world, the material brain is subject to events characterized by dialectical and historical materialism. For
instance, seismic shifts in socio-cultural-political ideological formations characterized by posthumanist and post-Anthropocenic thought might be inscribed first in a multitude of objects and then in the material structure of the brain, especially as a result of attention and salience driven neural modulation. Activist neuroaesthetics also works against positivist neuroaesthetics’ engagement with the industrial/military-mediated components of neural capitalism. Brain-computer interfaces and optogenetics are supported by Darpa and have military uses. Rather, activist neuroaesthetics instigates tactics counter to recent transitions in the neural economy, such neural economic systems and consumerism, and its totalitarian tendencies.

That sounds interesting, but quite complicated for someone who tries to understand your art, so could you explain your thoughts about cognitive capitalism and fake news in these works? – do you see language and communication as something that is coming to an end? To the end of truth for example?

You often use contemporary language in your art (hashtags, sentences from the news, fake news, tweets, etc.) – since we are talking in the context of a publication that concentrates on post-futuristic art and therefore we have a strong emphasis on exhaustion and “the end of...” – do you see language and communication as something that is coming to an end? To the end of truth for example?

As I mentioned in the previous question, the impulse to write the Glossary of Cognitive Activism was a response to, on one hand, the exhaustion you speak about and on the other, the effect of radical changes that have recently occurred in the socio-political-technological field. The forms of resistance, whether they be actions or written texts, created in the analogue 1960s and 1970s are no longer adequate to meet the challenges we face today in the digital age. I realized that in the past twenty years a new vocabulary had emerged of which the general public and artist community was unaware. A language, I felt, could make the sublime conditions of the new authoritarian regime of the net understandable and visible. We are all mental laborers or cognitariats and...
Meines Erachtens kann eine Sprache die außergewöhnlichen Bedingungen des neuen autoritäten Netz-Systems verständlich und sichtbar machen.

In late neoliberal global capitalism an assortment of new platforms for the marketing and sale of artistic products has arisen that has stripped the artist of his or her power. Chief amongst these are the art fair and mega gallery, the rise of the artist consultant class and the Internet art databases. The time and space allotted me here does not allow me the pleasure to explain each of its entirety. Overall their effect is the commoditization of the artwork and the domination of the market place in determining what art is shown, what best way to form and present it as well as which art is bought and exhibited in museums. Museums frequent art fairs and hang around VIP lounges sucking up rumor and innuendo to determine which artist and gallerist is trendy and on this base schedule artists for exhibitions. In the late stage neoliberal global marketplace the artwork becomes a hard investment for future profit and nothing more. “Market value exceeds Cultural value”. The problem is that the neoliberal artist sees themselves as an entrepreneur and his or her production is a calculated attempt to gather the attention of the speculator to increase market share. Time is money and dealers don’t want to be burdened with explanations of conceptual or political art. Under these conditions one can only be disappointed by the assumed power of art. Artists who participate in this space, and not all do so but those that do, are nothing more than high end commercial artists working for the system. But by doing so the artist gives up their most powerful cultural asset. In the next Art Cologne I will exhibit a neon work that says “Cultural Value transcends Market Value.” This work goes to the very heart of your question. The power of art resides in its capacity to estrange the cultural milieu. Art is a necessary component to the marketplace of ideas. Its main function in this regard is to disrupt institutional regimes of distributions of the sensible that normalize and police the alterity of the senses. Art redistributes, for instance, the matrix of gestalts, the networks of affordances and the topological referendum of attention that form designed space. As such it creates a diversity of objects, things, their relations and the memories they excite and script in the memory networks of the brain and their tethering together as narratologies in the mind’s eye. The socio-cultural political milieu forms the extracranial brain that coevolves with the intracranial brain with which it is tethered. According to the neuroscientist Olaf Sporns, while variations in other systems can represent noise and degrade performance the opposite is true for neural systems operating under Darwinian processes. The brain’s disparate population of neural elements with variable characteristics and tuning personalites facilitate differential responses to unknown environments. The newborn can never know the world in advance; human culture and its artifacts are constantly evolving and generate different milieus one generation after another. The brain’s neural plasticity allows it to modify its architectures to accommodate this constantly evolving environment that itself played a role in changing. The famous neuroscientist Gerald Edelman understands culture as the generator of diversity and complexity which in turn generates brains that are diverse and complex. No two brains, even those of twins, are alike. Who and what generates these diverse environments? Art, poetry, cinema and architecture just to name a few. This is the power of art and when artists give themselves up to the market they give their right to shape subjectivity leaving it to instead government agencies who want to maintain the status quo.

Can you explain your thoughts behind the work "equal not equal"?

Equal not Equal, 2015 was first exhibited at LAXART in Los Angeles in a project curated by Olaf Sporns while I was in residence at the Institute of Art, Berlin and my glossary were released. In Los Angeles the art work was installed above the doorway and visitors needed to cross the threshold as they entered the gallery with the work above them. Zuecca Project Space is situated on Giudecca and the neon faced the lagoon and could be seen from across it on Dorsoduro one of the other six sestieri of Venice. The equal sign is in green neon and is always illuminated while the single line that crosses the equal sign as a diagonal to create the not equal sign is red and flickers on and off. Equal not Equal is meant as a question. Is the space you are entering a space of equality where all those entering have the same rights to innovate and create or not? Do all entering have a voice in the contested field of cultural expression? It also expands beyond the artistic bubble to include whether or not we all have equal opportunity to life itself.