

The Neural Battlefield of Cognitive Capitalism

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WHAT IS CULTURAL CRITICISM but a diagnostic of social pathologies? To paraphrase Gilles Deleuze, throughout the history of philosophy — from Kant, who offered a therapeutics of metaphysical thought, to Nietzsche, who portrayed himself as a physician of culture, to Wittgenstein, who wanted to cure philosophers through philosophy — the *critical* has been connected to the *clinical*. The curative function of critical thought, evoked by Plato and even more so by Aristotle (whose father was a physician), are not lost on Warren Neidich. He started his career as an eye surgeon, before he found his way into architecture, philosophy, and critical theory, all of which he appears to fuse seamlessly with conceptual art and activism. Recently, he has begun extolling the therapeutic nature of what he calls “activist neuroaesthetics.” For Neidich, creating alternative ways of thinking and perceiving involves, at its deepest and most profound level, changing the physical brain — protecting and promoting its neural diversity while expanding our existential and functional capacities within the limits of our socio-technological environment.

The 2019 second edition of *The Glossary of Cognitive Activism (For a Not So Distant Future)* is a companion to the three-volume anthology Neidich co-edited entitled *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism* (2013–’17), a highly collaborative project that emerged out of a series of conferences in Los Angeles, Berlin, and London. Drawing upon the wellspring of critical terminologies featured in those books, as well as in his own work,

Neidich's *Glossary* can be enjoyed as a stand-alone text: a timely reference for the perplexed, a navigational tool in the post-truth era, a roadmap for creative radicals, a strategic chart of a mental war zone, and a program of cultural healing. As Neidich's installations of proliferating mind-maps amply illustrate, at the center of the artist's work is the connecting, tracing, and modifying of networks on different levels. The *Glossary* seems to be intended, first and foremost, as an instrument for reclaiming one's mental life at a time when it is being hijacked in ever more sophisticated ways. *The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism* canvassed a wide range of the resultant problems, from attention deficit disorder and insomnia to more opaque forms of maladjustment, alienation, and panic — all the consequence of a new wave of infiltration and colonization of the mind and brain.

For Neidich, psychopathologies are not to be understood in a negative sense — that is, as mental disturbances and deviations from health — but rather as transitions in neural and mental states leading to new modes of becoming. Psychopathologies, in his view, are neural or mental caesuras producing states of fragility and anxiety followed by recuperation. In Neidich's project, the body and soul, the material and the ethereal, are conceptually linked as a part of a larger continuum. Moreover, he defines the brain as composed of an intracranial part (inside the skull) and an extracranial part (in the techno-socio-cultural habitus), thus making room for wide-ranging holistic arguments. His approach establishes a general psychosomatics that engages with the social body and its various stresses, aches, and spasms. While traditional psychosomatic symptoms (such as dissociation and paralysis from deep-seated and unresolved unconscious memories) formed the building blocks of early psychoanalytic therapy, the new psychosomatics emerges from our experience of an accelerating and all-consuming techno-social infrastructure. Not only are we using our brains to invent ever more sophisticated technologies and social forms, but these structures are feeding back into our brains in a continuous process of co-transformation. Sometimes the speed of this process is overwhelming — beyond the capacity of neural plasticity to accommodate.

The brain has become the nexus of an intensified political struggle due to the repercussions of cognitive capitalism. Among several of the promising neologisms in the *Glossary* is the term “neuropower,” coined by Neidich to express this new reality. New techniques of manipulation, in the form of enhanced propaganda and ideology, infiltrate the brain constantly in ways that have been difficult to grasp because we lacked the conceptual tools, but also because the digital platforms we use have become opaque and direct extensions of power, threatening the very possibility of creative mental resistance. We have become

increasingly embedded in a technological environment that so structures our behavior and perception as to make us ever more predictable and manipulable.

Neidich's multifarious works offer a rough sketch of the contemporary gray-matter battlefield in the highly charged and technologically mediated reality that connects our brains to the rest of the world. At first glance, this battle to defend the brain — and with it our free will — seems like a problem transposed from some sci-fi dystopia. And yet to truly understand its relevance and urgency, one need only consider one of the best known of the *Glossary's* key terms: the “attention economy.” As popularized by Thomas Davenport and John Beck, the term refers to the way attention has become a new form of currency in the 21st century. On average, Americans spend around 25 hours per week online, during which time they are subjected to the manifold appeals and manipulations of the digital economy. While this cybersphere is constantly expanding, our attentive capacities remain by and large the same, and the growing demands of the so-called attention economy are taxing our limited abilities. The situation described by Horkheimer and Adorno in their scathing critique of the culture industry seems to be ramping up to a whole new level: not only has the rationality that should be liberating us become an instrument to suppress us, but that suppression is now occurring by means of technologies that creep under our skin and into our minds.

Through its many conceptual forays into the structures of everyday life in late modernity, the *Glossary* makes clear that, even without the next generation of brain-computer interfaces (such as Elon Musk's Neuralink), our brains are already being massively altered by the infosphere and by new modes of power exercised through digital platforms. GPS apps and devices have not only changed the way we navigate the world but have also noticeably transformed the rigging of our brains on a neural level by altering the structure of the posterior hippocampus.

In grasping the consequences of this cognitive overload, Neidich joins intellectual colleagues such as the Italian thinkers of post-*operaismo* (workerism), especially Antonio Negri, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Paolo Virno, and Maurizio Lazzarato. Neidich also engages with French thinkers of the late modern period, such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as with the work of prolific philosophers of technology Bernard Stiegler and Catherine Malabou. Neidich's work is largely diagnostic and therapeutic, but it also has a strong political dimension. Starting with his 2003 book *Blow-Up: Photography, Cinema and the Brain*, Neidich has explored the field of neurobiology (including the work of scientists such as Gerald Edelman and Jean-Pierre Changeux) to chart the ways in which the material brain has been colonized, infiltrated, and manipulated. For Neidich, the idea of “phylogenetic epigenetics” — the capacity of individuals to change themselves on a neuronal level —

provides an avenue for subversive action. Neidich aims to emancipate the insights of positivist neurobiology — for instance, neuroplasticity — in order to use them as tools for what he calls “activist neuroaesthetics.” Activist neuroaesthetics (a field to which the *Glossary* offers a guide) seeks to preserve the brain’s variability and diversity amid the mounting pressures of global and digital capital.

The *Glossary* provides a repository of vital knowledge and conceptual therapeutics, a toolbox for the willing and the needy, formatted as a deceptively simple activist handbook to be taken up by anyone who suspects that they are under mental siege. At the same time, the book is an intellectual project in the making, a kind of syllabus or reading list in the form of an activist canon. Yet Neidich avoids becoming a solitary field medic in a self-declared war. The volume grew out of a collaborative process based on a series of seminars and books, all aiming to analyze our predicament in the age of cognitive capitalism and to explore the liberating potential of novel forms of media, even those that are employed in service of subjugation and control.

While Neidich has designed his *Glossary* “for a not so distant future,” to some extent the dystopia he envisions is already here. The diagnoses he offers point to a creeping paralysis, a radical loss of health and freedom resulting from the processes of colonization and extraction to which our brains are subjected by the capitalist machine. “Effectivization” was a keyword of Fordism’s assembly-line mode of production, a Taylorist optimizing of work processes stylishly satirized in Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936), with its protagonist convulsing in spasms as his arms ceaselessly repeat a monotonous series of movements with a factory wrench. In the post-Fordist era, the mind has become a factory, a unit of production working on “creative” innovations. The harvesting of data through the productive optimization of the mind makes us all into tools in ways less obvious than Chaplin’s spastic proletarian, causing an alienation that is much more profound than that experienced by the first generations of factory workers or pre-digital consumers. Our mental flexibility is now overextended; our capacities for real deliberation and creativity are being replaced by automatic behaviors and compulsions.

Can we resist these processes, carving out a satisfactory place for ourselves in the new digital economy without surrendering to the incessant self-promotion of saturated and commercialized social media platforms? Can we retake control of our attention without withdrawing into private and defensive projects of mindfulness and meditation? Can we somehow turn the brain’s resources against the system and initiate a deliberate counter-offensive?

If we look up the title's key word — “cognitive activism” — in the *Glossary*, we aren't given a textbook definition. Rather, we find an explanation as to why the activism directed against the forms of exploitation characteristic of capitalist industrialism — long hours, monotonous work, low pay, and poor working conditions — is no longer sufficient. Citing the work of Bifo Berardi, Neidich argues that, in an age when work is increasingly done with the mind rather than the body, the proletariat has been replaced by a “cognitariat.” As with early forms of resistance to industrialization, such as workerism in Italy, Neidich's cognitive activism is imbued with a sense of excitement and experimentation: “Strategies include, but are not limited to, hacking, whistleblowing, cryptography, use of the dark web, yoga meditation, artistic and poetic acts which estrange the sensible/insensible distributions, as well as the use of ayahuasca and other psychedelics.”

The brain is plastic and changeable, but plasticity, as Catherine Malabou has reminded us, is not synonymous with flexibility. Flexibility is the expectation of being forever at the disposal of those we've come to depend upon for our livelihood. Plasticity, on the other hand, is not simply a means to earn money or to become more productive; it is, rather, life itself — that is, the life we live before we become rigid, before our brains grow old, before our habits harden or become mechanized through adaptation to the systems that employ and deploy us. Alternative modes of existence — e.g., the types of resistance performed by the activists Neidich has in mind — aim at infiltration, disruption, and the liberation of possibility and potential; they aim to regain the mind and the brain, along with the sphere of external life and social interconnection.

Neuroplasticity, however, is a double-edged sword. While we can liberate and reshape ourselves by exerting new forms of neuropower, the workings of Google-style neuropower can also reshape and subjugate us. What is new here? What sets this epoch and this conflict apart from the religious and ideological battles of the past? The answer is perhaps this: a new level of materiality, or physicality. Neidich's activist neuroaesthetics fuses the role of the critic and the physician, while also rejuvenating the figure of the shaman and making the artist's role as a wounded healer more explicit. In this age of late cognitive capitalism, as Neidich calls it, many of us are attempting to regain our mental balance and independence by withdrawing, by unplugging from the grid, by minimizing our use of social media. And yet, even as the number of deserters grows, the yearning for a lost salubrious paradise outside the “system” puts us on the defensive. Neidich's wager seems to be this: real mental health in our hypertechnological era remains to be invented.