

Warren Neidich: *The Brain Without Organs: An Aporia of Care*

By Anuradha Vikram



In a neurological sense, humans are already biological machines, in that our thoughts and actions are powered by electrical synapses. These countless tiny surges travel through the vast crenulated landscape of the brain, transported by axons that act as conduits to move energy from one place to another. For Warren Neidich, who studied neurobiology before becoming a conceptual artist, the workings of the brain are an endless source of fascination. His exhibition at the Museum of Neon Art, *The Brain Without Organs: An Aporia of Care*, takes a radically deconstructive approach to the brain as a material organ and as an emblem of human intellect, the source of our unique evolutionary advantage.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is a large neon installation, *Brain Without Organs*, that takes the folds (gyri) and grooves (sulci) of the brain's gray matter as its visual starting point. The deconstructed brain exists in this work as a system of gestural marks in white neon tubing, suspended in midair, that fire on and off synaptically. The work is flanked by two curved mirrors that reflect and refract the neon light infinitely. On the mirrors are stenciled words including "vibrant matter," "deep



Installation view, Warren Neidich: *The Brain Without Organs: The Aporia of Care*, at Museum of Neon Art, California, 2022. Courtesy the Museum of Neon Art.

ON VIEW

Museum Of Neon Art
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ecology,” “composting,” “worlding,” “precarity,” “neural plasticity,” and “recuperation,” that gesture to the critical posthumanities and the conceptual integration of embodiment, environment, and information. For Neidich, these are necessarily interconnected concerns that are impacted by the neoliberal embrace of what he terms “cognitive capitalism,” incorporating ever-more sophisticated persuasion techniques drawn from psychology and neuroscience and promoted through the use of artificial intelligence.

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This disembodied, dismembered brain reflects Deleuze and Guattari’s exhortation to “make yourself a body without organs,” a declaration that reflects the authors’ deep disillusionment with principles of order and scientific rationality in the wake of the Nazi-led Holocaust. Logics and logistics can align with an authoritarian bent, as in contemporary cognitive capitalism that uses psychology, psychopharmacology, computer science, and neuroscience to influence and predict human behavior. The danger in such a rationalist view of embodiment and technology is that many of these disciplines replicate bias that minoritizes women, gender-nonconforming,

and subjects of color on a daily basis. Resistance to a regime of eugenic efficiency is here affected by self-negation and self-destruction, resulting in self-recreation.

For Neidich, insights are to be found from looking at atypical subjects. For *Strange Afterlife of Einstein's Brain*, Neidich arranged gyri from a section of Einstein's brain into a dematerialized wall of red and white krypton tubing. Researchers looking at photographs of Albert Einstein's brain have observed that his gyri patterns are markedly different from the typical human brain, in a way that could be classified as neurodivergent today. The brain of Einstein, a widely recognized genius, has been an object of fascination for scientists, including one who absconded with it for a period of time, and others who later dissected and photographed it looking for biological evidence of exceptional intellectual ability. Krypton is a noble gas like neon, however when encased in a tube, it produces a beaded string of light as a result of properties described by Einstein's quantum theory of photoelectric effect. The beads of light traveling through the enclosed tube create a stroboscopic effect, while the atypical gyri found in Einstein's brain are set off from the typical gyri by their red coloration.

A small side gallery contains small blacklight paintings that continue the visual dissection and recategorization of the two neon installations. Neidich considers the medium of blacklight paint to be related to neon, as an inversion wherein the "illumination" is produced by the absence rather than the presence of visible spectrum light. A painting in red, hung as four panels in a square formation, shows external and internal views of both right and left



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hemispheres of the brain. Each of the gyri are numbered, reflecting methods of classification that developed alongside racist systems like phrenology that ascribed personality characteristics to the physical form of the skull. On the opposite wall, these glia are disorganized into new compositions in seven small multicolored paintings. In one, phrases similar to those in *Brain Without Organs* appear, in reverse type as though reflected in a mirror. “Surplus jouissance:” the juxtaposition of a Marxist economic concept with a Lacanian psychosexual one. “Google effect:” the inability to remember simple things like phone numbers, addresses, or directions, because we simply don’t have to anymore. In another, emojis of happy, sad, angry, and surprised faces and praying hands interplay with the gyri. Affect, or collective emotion, is one of the main ways cognitive capitalism manipulates us to make electoral, economic, and social choices.

The Museum of Neon Art is inaugurating a new visible storage gallery alongside the newly built contemporary art gallery that is the site of Neidich’s exhibition. MoNA has been collecting neon sign art from around Los Angeles since 1981, and its collection includes remnants of a Southern California landscape that is changing rapidly. That collection also reflects the importance of prior generations’ entertainment, both mainstream and adult, such as the shift from books and photos to cinema and the internet that has shaped the way we perceive sexual attraction, our cultural values, and the rate at which we process and interpret images. Neidich’s preoccupation with the changing cognitive environment we are perceiving with the internet brings the timeline of that process up to date.

Contributor

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