

An interview with Warren Neidich



by [Fuxus](#) on 28/06/2016

“One could say that it was an early form of hacking and in its own moment a hack-ography,” [Warren Neidich](#) says relating his video work ‘The Search Drive’ (2014) to earlier autobiographical works by James Joyce and the early cinema of Dziga Vertov. The LA and Berlin-based artist and I sit inside his studio, a workshop filled with all manner of neon signage, complex painting apparatuses, junked electronics and conceptual musical scores made of photographic collages and tape. Without being brusque, the term ‘wizardry’ seems to come to mind as one possible way to convey Neidich’s method of transcribing his varied conceptual practice onto many different forms of material presences and abstract narratives, including video work and improvisational compositions. After all, his background in neuroscience has long interrogated the role of the mind in relationship to aesthetics and society.

Considering Neidich’s three decade-long career, his video work is perhaps the best window to introduce his practice. ‘[Brainwash](#)’ (1997) portrays an actor mesmerized by a striped spinning zoetrope that references the perceptual shift brought by the emergence of cinema in the 20th century. In 2012, his video work ‘[Data Murmur](#)’ filmed Italian theorist Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi recite lines of code that link the inextricability of human presence from the machinic and automated field of computing. ‘[NSAUSA](#)’ (2014) involved a group of Russian *echtzeit* musicians improvising a score made of plastic tape and newspaper clippings requiring a wholly subjective interpretation on the performer’s behalf to perform. It is these moves bringing together varying, disparate mediums in which Neidich exposes the mediating power of the mind within contemporary technological, cultural, economic and political spheres. The mind, so to speak, is his laboratory, and much of his work concerns mapping how its cognitive architecture is sculpted upon the world we live in.

Referencing these previous works, *The Search Drive*, according to Neidich, “concerns how on the one hand the internet produces subjectivity which it later regulates, customizes, overpowers and controls and, on the other, through the poetry of releasing the excesses of its code, finds a way out.” The video takes the perspective of an anonymous internet-user making contingent decisions based upon speculative linkages of information on the web, asserting that the internet itself contains an inner subjectivity that can be interrogated.

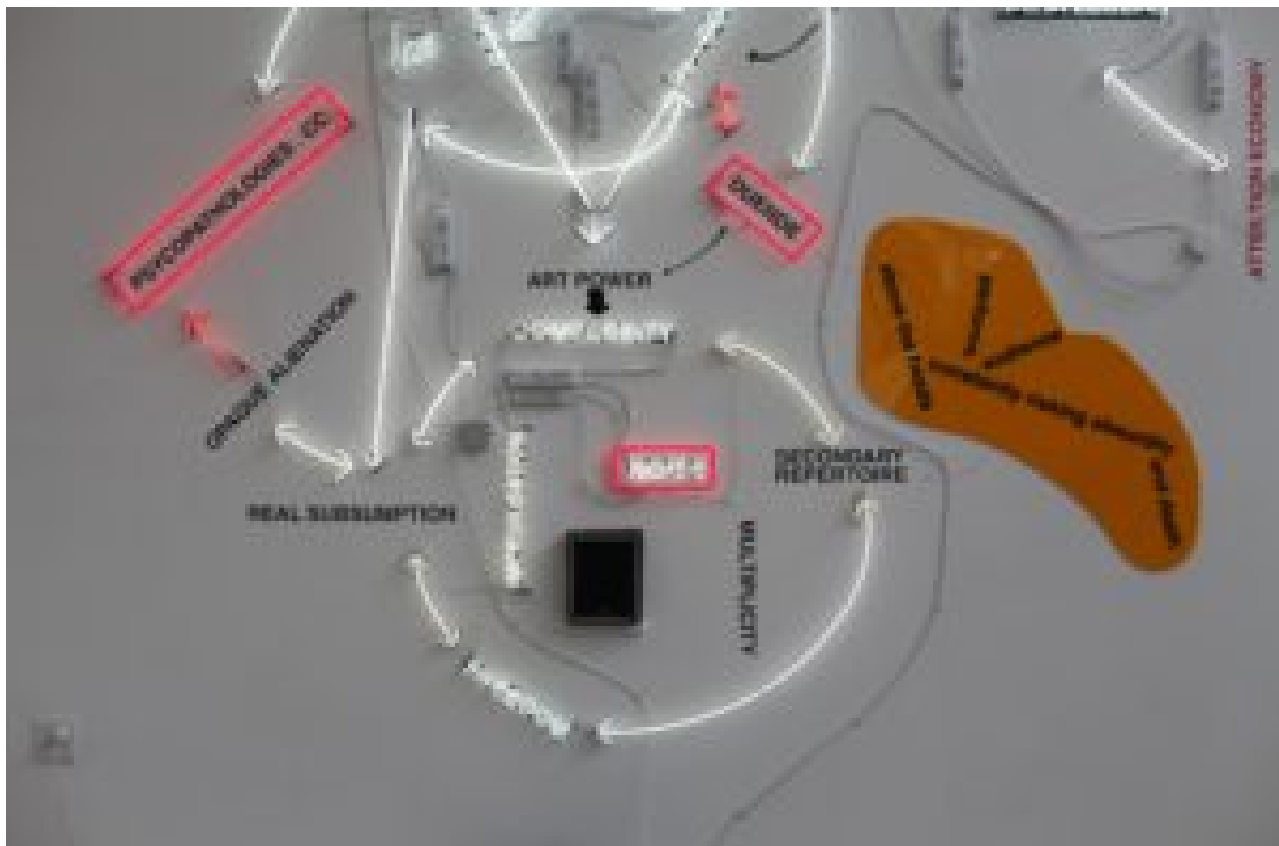
His most recent exhibition at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions ([LACE](#)), [The Palinopsic Field](#), is a further elaboration on his ideas of presence, the mind and perception. In this show, various empty templates of stars are hung along a wall alongside illuminated neon names of blacklisted screenwriters. Dalton Trumbo, Lester Cole, Ring Lardner Jr. and Alvah Bessie glow brightly in red, which, as the viewer looks at the light for a short duration, will continue to see each name as a perceptual afterimage, or 'phantom', upon the empty star. Like the afterimage produced when staring at the lighting, our conversation gradually departs from these neon works and begins to address the neurobiological and cognitive realm in which so much of Neidich's practice is based.

aqnb: In 'The Search Drive' it seems like there's a self-reflexivity in the mediated context we find in ourselves on the internet. One thing I was really curious about is specifically how your video 'Brainwash' seems to reference the phase shift brought on by cinema in the 20th century, and it seems really relevant to put it into 'The Search Drive' because there's a second phase shift going on right now.

Warren Neidich: Right, we're in the second phase of production of a new human being.

aqnb: So how would you outline this new phenomenon? How do you use the psychological coordinates of the self in this online expression or mediation, how does that function at a higher level in 'The Search Drive'?

WN: There are three really important things. The first thing concerns 'The Search Drive' as a conceptual artwork and it relates to all the past conceptual projects that I've done and that I'm doing right now. Conceptual artists are not making works about immaterial objects anymore as they were from 1965 to 1972, as Lucy Lippard stated, but they are making work about immaterial labor. The second thing was the financialization of capital, which was really super important and it had two parts of that. One was the fact that the laborers or the proletariats' income and investments in their retirement funds would be in those same things that their bosses' retirement funds were made. As such their bargaining power would be lessened. But more importantly, financialization of capital according to Christian Marazzi is really linked to behavioral or psychology of labor or behavioral economics. The psyche is the starting place where the economy or the market is created. It's how people feel, how optimistic they are, how cynical, how negative they are that really is important. The third is the 24/7, what's called *real subsumption*. Formal subsumption was not as important, we no longer worked at a factory with set hours. Everything in our life was art, or everything in our life was labor. The term to delineate this condition is real subsumption –we're always working no matter what we're doing. We go to a party, we're working. Everywhere is work. So this is really where 'The Search Drive' all of a sudden comes in. It's about this kind of discourse on immaterial labor. Attention and its networks are very strong neural modulators. Data files are a virtual record of sensory, perceptual and cognitive interaction with the matrix.



Warren Neidich, *Duende Neon* (2015). Installation view. Courtesy the artist + Mana Contemporary, New Jersey.

aqnb: I was really interested in talking about how you've structured the piece and how the beginning and how the latter part relate to each other. I also wanted to talk about this idea of the deficits of attention in the internet, in how we go from one thing to the next online. How does the contingency and potentiality of these ideas inform the work and lead to an ultimate conclusion in the piece?

WN: Well, first of all, I think it's important for me to discuss attention deficit and the psycho-pathologies of cognitive capitalism, through the idea of the phantom, which is the person who's hacking me. On one hand there is this phantom that's doing all the searches. It may be the CIA or it's simply a fiction. There's a whole series of fictions that are evolving. The Keytracker is completely fictitious software, it does not exist. We made it, we made that for the piece and I should add that [Ashiq Khondker](#) is the assistant producer here and he did a lot of the programming. So getting back to this idea is that this phantom is always in the background and the phantom is the bridging concept that connects the relationship between the pleasure principle and the death drive. Today we have attention deficit disorder, we have panic attacks, and we have obsessive compulsive disorders. These are the new disorders of the 21st century. The world is changing from a narrative, analogue, linearly arranged configuration to one which is non-narrative, intensive, networked and distributed. These changes have significance for how the neural architecture is sculpted.

In answer to the second part of your question, I think it's obvious that we now live in what has been referred to as an attention society or economy. But there has been a shift as this kind of economy has come to dominate all others in our age of communicative capitalism. Think for a moment about a world cup soccer match. The revenue generated is dependent on estimates on how many people will watch the game. In an attention based economy, attention as an attribute of the nervous system becomes more and more and important. In some cases this requirement outstrips the perceptual system to perform up to the task.
aqnb: When I was reading some of your writings, you were talking about the idea relating to things cannot be directly mediated or controlled and

which must be transcribed directly into the aesthetic realm. Is that what you're sort of trying to do, to locate a lot of practices within your work? That being said, would you ever say there is a risk of these 'outsider' realms being exploited by the ability to harness it?

WN: Well, in response to the first part of your question concerning the role of the general category of the psychopathologies as a medium or platform with which to investigate freedom, politics and aesthetics I would rather say that I am interested in is the concept of alienation. Alienation as a place of power and of possibilities for renewal. In a Marxian sense, the idea of alienation is linked to the transition from artisan to industrial production and its effect upon the laborer whose feelings of self-worth were degraded. Now, situated on an assembly line in which his or her labor has been abstracted to a move or series of moves he or she is no longer in touch with the production of a whole object.

What I am trying to say is that the production line 'assembles' the worker in a continuum of abstracted labor, in which their role is to assemble parts of wholes, and he/she experiences forms of alienation as a result. His or her soul is never recuperated in the endless repetition of abstracted acts of non-identification. Importantly, the perceptual qualities and feedback loopings are now constituted between man and machine and the machine is designating the task. The worker is a passive cog in the wheel of production. This whole problem that we're seeing here, this demagogue Donald Trump, is to a certain extent created as a collective alienation of a whole group of middle class white blue collar workers who no longer have a place in the economy. The disparity between what is inside the head and outside is a condition of this contemporary alienation.



Warren Neidich, *Duende Neon* (2015). Installation view. Courtesy the artist + Mana Contemporary, New Jersey.

aqnb: There's this great quote where you are talking about art production as a counterbalance to neoliberal global capitalism. Are you trying to preempt the emergence of a world based on cognitive labor in the sense that you're staging the parameters, context, behaviors in presently existing neural networks,

and pushing them all to their fullest potential?

WN: Well you know, first of all, I'd like to say that some of my work is made with new technologies and new labor systems but other ones are very anachronistic. Using for instance this neon as an example. Neon is something from the 50s. Of course it's coming back –people are losing their interest in LEDs and I'm using very un-technological systems to create works about new technology. Some people don't understand this about my work. Old media can talk about new media in very sophisticated way. Especially its critique. But I do believe that this piece represents as much as a comment on new technology as anything I could make with a computer on the internet with software. Art has the capacity to deterritorialize neuroscience because many of its subjects like sensation, perception, cognition, performance and emotions are interesting for both fields.

On the one hand I am awed by the incredible discoveries that are resulting from research in neuroscience; for instance the possibility of a cure for Alzheimer's disease or the possibility of people who have experienced spinal injury to walk again. I'm also aware of research being carried out by DARPA, like the cortical implants and neural dust. They are fantastic and yet scary. Today it seems that the good that they are presumed to be made for is really a cover-up for their real intention, which is ultimately about control and power. The usurping of the power of the internet is a case in point, and its use in surveillance is a key issue of 'The Search Drive'.**

Warren Neidich's *The Palinopsic Field* is on at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), running June 15 to August 14, 2016. Header image: Warren Neidich, *Duende Neon* (2015). Performance view. Courtesy the artist + Mana Contemporary, New Jersey.