



vector [e-zine]

## Neuroaesthetics: a series of conferences

Inês Rebelo \*

texto em português >>>>

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Ago.05

**NEUROAESTHETICS**

CONVENED BY WARREN NEIDICH ACE-AHRB FELLOW AT  
GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE AND CHARLIE GERE

ART IS INCREASINGLY SOUND UP WITH KNOWLEDGE  
PRODUCTION AND INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION AS PART OF  
THIS TREND. ARTISTS HAVE BEGUN TO INVESTIGATE THE BRAIN  
AND NEUROAESTHETICS IS A MEANS BY WHICH THEY ARE  
DOING IT. NEUROAESTHETICS IS A DYNAMIC PRACTICE  
THROUGH WHICH QUESTIONS OF NEUROSCIENCE ARE MADE  
"TEAM-MADE". CONCEPTS SUCH AS SENSATION,  
PERCEPTUAL MEMORY AND RECENTLY NETWORKS, PLASTICITY  
AND SAMPLING OPERATE WITHIN PHILOSOPHICAL, CULTURAL,  
SOCIOLOGICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, HISTORICAL AND ECONOMIC  
MILIEUX AND ARE CONCOMITANTLY INJECTING ARTISTIC  
EXPERIMENTATION. NEUROAESTHETICS DESCRIBES NEW  
CONCEPTS FOR THE PRODUCTION OF A NEW POPULATION OF  
OBJECTS, OBJECT RELATIONS AND NON-OBJECTS WHICH IN THE  
END CAN BE DIFFERENTIALLY SAMPLED BY THE PLASTIC BRAIN  
PROVIDING A MEANS BY WHICH CULTURE MAY PLAY A ROLE IN  
SCULPTING NEURAL NETWORKS. AS SUCH, THE APPROACHES  
OF ART IN LARGER AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS SHOULD NOT BE  
OVERLOOKED.

THIS COLLOQUIUM, CREATIVE BRAIN 2, PRESENTED BY  
GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE AND SUPPORTED BY ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND WILL FOCUS ON THE ARTISTIC, CURATORIAL AND  
CRITICAL ISSUES FURTHER NEUROAESTHETICS.

TOPICS INCLUDE:  
BRAIN ARCHITECTURE  
BRAIN CULTURE  
BRAIN STATES AND TRACES  
CURATING THE NEURO-SENSORY  
PROJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE OPTICAL TECHNOLOGIES  
SAMPLING THE BEING-ENVIRONMENT, THE ROLE OF THE DJ

**PLENARIES:**  
**PAUL BACHY-RITA**  
**DIEDRICH DIEDRICHSEN**  
**OLAFUR ELIASSON**  
**JOSEPH KOSUTH**  
**SARAT MAHARAJ**  
**BRIAN MASSUMI**  
**PAUL MILLER AKA DJ SPOOKY**  
**MARCOS NOVAK**  
**BARBARA MARIA STAFFORD**

**20-21 MAY 2005**  
**GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**  
**NEW CROSS, LONDON SE14 6NW, UK**  
**IAN GULLAND LECTURE THEATRE**

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION SEE [www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cultural\\_studies/](http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/cultural_studies/) OR [www.artbrain.org](http://www.artbrain.org)  
TO REGISTER, PLEASE EMAIL: THERESA BRUNIA, CONFERENCE ADMINISTRATOR AT [neuroaesthetics@gold.ac.uk](mailto:neuroaesthetics@gold.ac.uk)  
OR CONTACT THE CENTRE FOR CULTURAL STUDIES ON 020 7919 7989  
REGISTRATION FEE: £20

On the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of May 2005 a series of conferences were held in London. On the black and white poster one could read the title, *Neuroaesthetics*, and the names of Warren Neidich and Charlie Gere as the organizers of the event.

This occasion aimed to establish a broad and dynamic context of debates. Questions arise in practices and discourses that operate and develop themselves through the contamination between the scientific sphere and the artistic field. This contamination is far from being pacific or unidirectional and these conferences underlined it.

Thus, this is a possible reading of the interventions' content based on a selection of the main axis that came to form during the event.

The complete conference program is available at <http://www.artbrain.org/program.html>

Brian Massumi proposed to think about the relation between the political mechanisms of power exercise and the current profusion of technological devices. This relation was built upon Michel Foucault's text "Right of death and power over life" (1976) and the recent mediatic case of Terri Schiavo.

According to Michel Foucault, the postmodern societies power does not reveal itself as a sovereign exercise as it used to be. The power used to be grounded on the right to decide over life and over death and it adopted the sword as its primordial symbol. Presently, one finds a shift in its mechanisms, which has happened progressively since the XVII century. The power of death and the sword, which was carried out on the right to take or to spare life, has been replaced by a bio-power carried out as a means to administrate life and to organize it. The exercise of power connected to the development of capitalism does not appear to manifest itself through any constraint or inhibition of action. On the contrary, power operates and manifests itself to the extent to which it is capable to generate forces, to make them grow and organize them.

For Brian Massumi, this seems to happen in the recent Terri Schiavo case, which was substantially amplified by the media. Terri Schiavo was in hospital for several years with serious brain damage due to an accident. The case triggered a huge debate concerning the rights that patients on these circumstances have. When should their life end if there are no records or written instructions about their intentions?

George W. Bush mentioned his desire to build a life culture where all Americans are welcomed, valued and protected. For Bush, the essence of civilization is that the strong have the obligation to protect the weak and, everytime we encounter uncertainties and questions, the benefit of doubt should be given towards life[1].

Brian Massumi continued to weave a web of complex relations between political power, its mechanisms of action and Michel Foucault's definition of bio-power on the particular case of Terri Schiavo. This lecturer also pointed out that the media apparatus (TV, newspapers and Internet) worked as an important way to amplify the Schiavo event. This is the reason why this event reached such a high political scale of debate. Nowadays, the power exercised in terms of bio-power is indissociable from the technological media mechanisms. Through them, one enlarges the singularity of some events just as happened on the September 11<sup>th</sup> where even before the towers had collapsed the incident became a global event.

On Kodwo Eshun's presentation one could not avoid to notice his interest in science-fiction imagery. For him, this interest does not rely on this genre's supposedly capacity to predict the future but, on the fact that it significantly distorts the present. It hyperbolizes it. And that is the moment when this genre presents its sharp critical capacity.

Therefore, it did not seem strange that, for Kodwo Eshun, K. W. Jeter's science-fiction book *Noir* (1999) was a magnet as powerful as the text "The death of an Author" of Roland Barthes (1968). These two sources allowed our speaker to think about the implications of the usages, through the Internet, of Napster devices and even to understand the role of the DJ. The users of Napster operate in the same way as Paul Miller (DJ Spooky), who was also a participant on this series of conferences. Their activity comprehends sampling and appropriation.

Between 1999 and 2001, around 58 million Napster users shared gigabytes of audio information. Thus, fragments of culture were appropriated, hybridized and recombined, according to their own will. And one might ask: What are the impacts of the creation of this temporary "off-shore" where, with total freedom and free from charges, it was possible to obtain and share sounds from personalized music archives? Where does the meaning remain between combined collections of different interests in a culture of connections?

In the black world of K. W. Jeter any author's copyright violation is considered crime and is exemplarily punished. Therefore, Napster users and DJ's would be punished. The appropriation of other people's creation is unbearable for this author. That is why the death penalty is not enough for K. W. Jeter, who prefers to inflict one of the most violent punishments to the usurper. The thief's central nervous system is removed and is offered as a gift to the author whose intellectual property was stolen. But this is not enough yet. The gift, the cortex of the thief, is implanted on a random commodity, such as a toaster or a telephone. Only now, Jeter is pleased. It is, definitively, an extreme punishment.

Jeter's vision (ethical?) manifested on the punishment of the thief has nothing to do with the post-structuralist idea of Roland Barthes, where he sustains that a fragment of culture does not belong to its creator. For the French author, a text, or an audio track we might add, is in itself a fabric of quotations made possible only through hundreds of previous resources of culture. In addition, for him, the role of the author should be emptied until its omission in order to allow, dialectically, the birth of the reader.

The following presentation was carried out by Diedrich Diedrichsen. He chose to focus on the usages of drugs and the cultural utilizations of the left-wing and right-wing authors of this altered state of consciousness.

Walter Benjamin and Ernst Jünger, leading left-wing and right-wing personalities of the German panorama, made it possible to understand the different usages of experiences under drug effects.

On the literary description of Walter Benjamin, such as "Hashish in Marseilles" (1932) one finds a mixture of fear and attraction when the nature of his encounter with drugs is to be explained. Between 1926 and 1934 Walter Benjamin experiences drugs. He is interested in studying the physical effects and the psychological intensity of those experiences (alone or with company). And that is why he experiments on himself and uses the self-observation method.

Ernst Jünger, on the other hand, describes his experiments with several drugs as conquests of the unknown, as special moments that allow him to access deeper levels of analysis. This is present in several of his books and in sparse notes of a special friend. I am referring to Albert Hofman, the inventor of LSD, with whom Jünger carried out a few experiments. It is the heuristic character of the experience that is important for him, as a means to grasp a truth hidden behind the objects, just as in Dr. Bowman's odyssey to touch the black monolith and to conquer the unknown[2].

Drug usages can also be understood in a close relation to the usages of technological devices. However, there is a significant difference of scale: the drugs affect us on the molecular and microscopic level whereas technological devices act in the macroscopic level. As Steve Shaviro noted in "Remix / Remodel" (2003), hashish, LSD, high-speed trains and images in TV screens have a lot more in common if we release them from their scale.

In fact, as the scientist Martina Wicklein explained in her response to Diedrich Diedrichsen's talk, drugs interfere with the central nervous system's neurotransmitters and receptors affecting our perception and interpretation of the world that surrounds us. But, as it was clear, different drug families trigger different changes in the nervous system.

Isabelle Moffat used her presentation to expand the impact that scientific models and theories of perception had in the development of the project *The Fun House Exhibit* held in the exhibition *This is Tomorrow* in London on 1956.

This was a presentation subsequent to her text "A horror of abstract thought: postwar Britain and Hamilton's 1951 *Growth and Form* exhibition" published in the October magazine.

The exhibition *This is Tomorrow* took place on the Whitechapel Gallery and gathered thirty-six artists and architects divided in twelve groups formed by a painter, a sculptor and an architect. Each group worked in close collaboration to produce an environment where different disciplines were integrated.

This exhibition, frequently associated with the birth of Pop Art, emphasized the idea of collaboration and contamination between different practices as a means to disrupt certain theoretical discourses grounded on specialized and pure investigations on one, and only one, specific medium (Greenberg, 1987).

Subsequently, the result of this event was more of a chaotic quotidian city environment than a purist universe. However, as Anne Massey wrote (1995), one of the texts published on the catalogue pointed towards an ambiguity regarding the exhibition programme. On a clear contrast to Lawrence Alloway and Reyner Banham's texts, David Lewis sustained that it was possible to adapt the modernist dogmas to the reality of the post-war era. These ambiguities in the discourse echoed divergences on the participants' group. It also reveals the hybrid character of the event and its resistance to impulses of theory illustration or abstract thoughts.

It is in this context that the group formed by Richard Hamilton, John McHale and the architect John Voelcker created the *Fun House Exhibit* project.

The *Fun House Exhibit* aimed to appeal to all senses at the same time and to disrupt the emphasis on the visual perception as the privileged sense in an aesthetic experience. Thus, the spectator was confronted with a juxtaposition of familiar images deriving from mass-culture and a disrupting demonstration of perception's ambiguities.

Based on these concerns, the *Fun House Exhibit* environment was divided by Voelcker in two distinct rectangular parts that generated a few closed areas. The left and right rectangular areas correspond to two different subject matters where the usage of representation is necessary: the field of imagery and the field of perception itself. In the closed areas both aspects of the two thematic fields were combined.

In the catalogue, one could find the collage / poster of Richard Hamilton *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* and a copy of the diagram *The enigmas of perception and buried isomorphism: perceptual illusion*. The collage was made from cut out fragments of magazines according to a specific list of categories and the copy of the scheme directly refers to the Gestaltian theory of Wolfgang Köhler (1947), which attempted to explain the perception of phenomena through the activity of the central nervous system.

Through the context of these series of conferences, the relationship between scientific models and the conception of an environment such as the *Fun House Exhibit* seems to be present in some recent events. This is the case of the exhibition *Synaesthesia: A Neuroaesthetics Exhibition* curated by Chloe Vaitsou for the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Arts) in London and the first scientist in residency, Daniel Glaser, at that institution where the word art is inscribed.

In his talk, Olafur Eliasson chose to present previous works and to discuss his recent work, which is being developed in collaboration with scientists from the University of Leeds.

Presently, this artist is interested in the scientific experiments of colour matching, which are being conducted on the Psychophysics Department of that institution.

The specific experiment that is the object of his concerns is carried out with two colour scales (Pantone). They are separated from each other because they are positioned on each of the selection devices' limits. Then, the scientists approach different people to choose the colour that matches the other one in the opposite side. The choices are different between different people. What happened is that a discrepancy on the colour matching occurs when each person is submitted to the process of decision making.

As Olafur Eliasson pointed out, the scientific aspect does not interest him as much as the fact that an individual and subjective dimension is revealed through this laboratory research. This individual dimension exists in our relation with the exterior world of phenomena. The phenomena that surround us are not static entities and colour is not an objective property. For this artist, there is a negotiable dimension in the process of apprehension that is frequently overlooked.

As Susan May (2003) pointed out, the interest in the colour phenomena as it is read by the eyes of a participant spectator appears in several installations, such as *Room for one colour* (1998), *Your orange afterimage exposed* (2000), *Your blue afterimage exposed* (2000) and *360° room for one colour* (2002).

Throughout the projects that Eliasson builds, in particular on those in which the colour phenomena was and is at the core of his research, one notices a particular movement.

The relationship between the scientific experiments on the colour domain and the experience presented to the spectator in each installation resembles a relationship that Bruno Latour (1993, 2003) described. For this author, the space of the laboratory and the exterior world seem to merge and their limits are blurred. What is happening in the laboratory is getting close to what happens in the social and political sphere. As an example, the impact of a device such as the GPS (Global Positioning System) provides rigorous locations in and out of the circumscribed space of the laboratory. Or even, a schizophrenic sense possibly experienced by the soldiers in Iraq when they saw many decisions being taken on the battle field and in private rooms full of digital simulation devices.

A monograph was recently published about Olafur Eliasson. On one of its chapters we can access the artist's choice, where some of his favorite elements are gathered. That is where extracts of Bergson's book *Creative Evolution* (1907) are presented. And, curiously, this reference was also chosen on another occasion, which is linked with the event in analyses.

I am referring to the series of conferences entitled *Creative Evolution*, which worked as another platform to discuss ideas. This series of debates were also held in London just three months before *Neuroaesthetics*. Thus, in this casual relation, the dynamic character of our event is highlighted and the persistency on the contents direction is evident. In fact, *Neuroaesthetics* was not a static or isolated event.

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