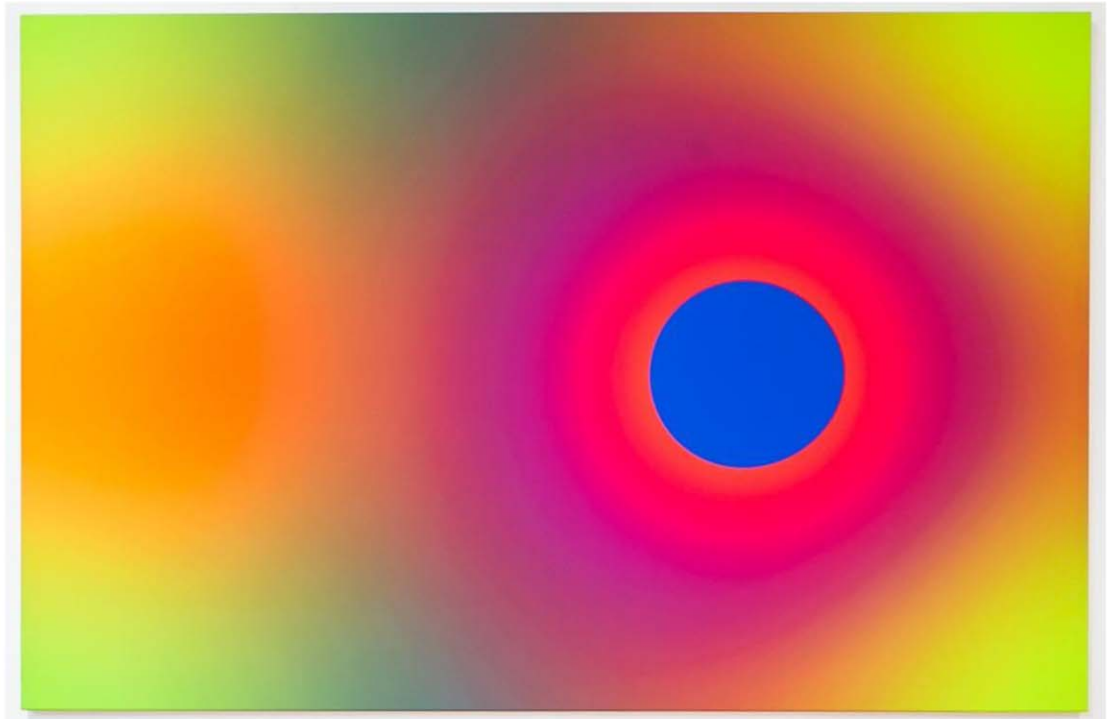


Sleuthing the Mind: Exhibition Review

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Hans Beder, “Opsis I”. Photo by M. Alexander Weber.

In the concluding line of her catalogue essay for [Sleuthing the Mind](#), a neuroscience-infused art exhibition at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery this fall, curator Ellen Levy asks the golden question of interdisciplinarity: “Might art and art exhibitions add new paths into the understanding of intuition, insight, and attention?” Beyond the multitude of reasons why we go see art in a gallery or museum, is there a way that experiencing art can add value to categories usually reserved for scientific insight, or create altogether novel mental categories? In addressing this question, it’s all to tempting to run headfirst into [the revisionist trap](#), the retrospective view of artists as having intuited future insights from neuroscience and inscribed them into their most luminous works. While the aim appears to be a utopian union between art and science, the result is always the opposite: artists are held to be mysterious, intuitive creatures, and eventually scientists will make the rounds to tidy up their intuitions into facts.



Sleuthing the Mind, at Pratt Manhattan Gallery.
Photo by M. Alexander Weber.

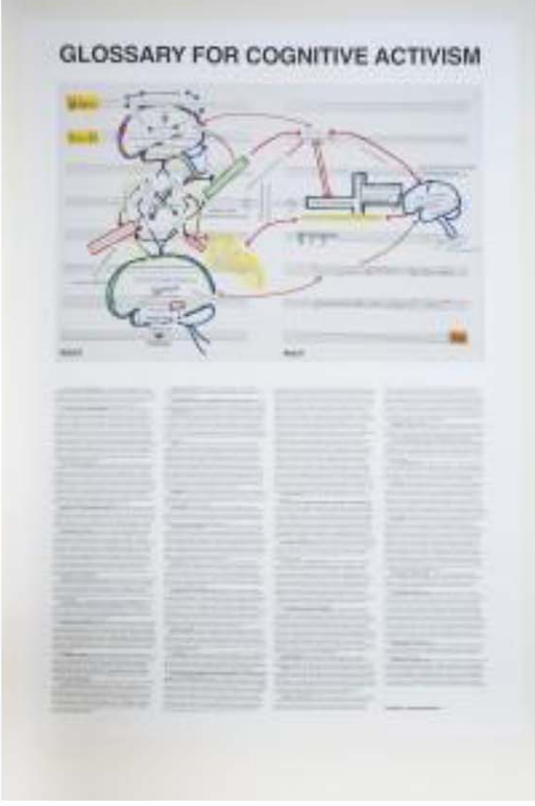
What Levy appears to be after— and what her show at Pratt exemplified— is a genuinely forward-thinking synthesis that guides us towards new perceptions of the self and the other in the uncanny, inexpressible way that only experiencing art can. This is not about ascribing science onto art, where the former is the Truth and the latter is the exotic other; this is about probing, prying, and poking at the realms of perception and consciousness, searching for what Levy calls “new paths” forward. It’s not what I do, and what you do, speaking to each other nicely at a dinner party. It’s *what can we do together that is categorically new?*

The question of the value of this newness— of what the scientific unspooling of the brain actually yields for everyday life, and how its insights are absorbed and packaged by our culture— carries renewed relevance in light of a [study](#) released last week by researchers at UCL, who conducted in-depth interviews with 48 British citizens, and found that

People mostly feel that neuroscience is irrelevant to them... a particular feature of the interviews was the participants’ initial bemusement and discomfort about the topic. People said brain science is interesting, but 71 per cent thought it wasn’t salient in their lives... the brain for many was a source of anxiety – an organ that was usually ignored but which becomes suddenly salient when it goes wrong. For these people, brain research was essentially seen as a branch of medicine. Indeed, they used terms like brain science and brain surgery, and brain scientist and brain surgeon, interchangeably. There were particular fears about dementia, brain cancer and stroke. (via [WIRED](#))

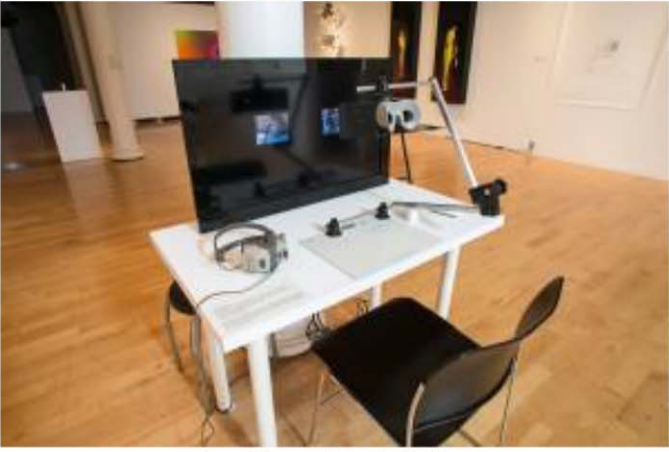
If we trace this thread of brain-related anxiety a bit further into the current cultural landscape, the permutations of neuro-capitalism begin to pop up like a string of targeted adverts: train your brain, stimulate your brain, control your thinking, and then: [farm your cognitive skills](#). This is the unfortunate reality of much of the contemporary cultural relationship with cognitive science: either there’s something wrong with it (anxious worrying ensues), or we’re not doing enough to optimize our human potential (anxious worrying ensues), like they do [in the movies](#). But maybe even more generally, above and beyond the cultural relationship with brain science, [we live in anxious times](#).

So how to acknowledge the anxiety, but then do something productive with it, or despite it? Warren Neidich’s brilliant [“Glossary”](#) (pictured) is for me the embodiment of an approach that teems with creative life. In “Glossary,” we’re given a toolkit of terminology for approaching cognitive capitalism in the 21st century: Duende, Degeneracy, Opaque Alientation, Hebbinism— there is plenty of despair here, but the despair is in dialogue with the hope, for in the same glossary we find Neidich’s definition of “cognitive activism,” which “understands the emancipatory potential of neuroscience research, especially as it pertains to epigenesis and the brain’s neural plasticity.” Neidich is a [deep thinker on these issues](#) (his critical writing on these topics is well worth checking out), and his contribution to *Sleuthing the Mind* hums with conceptual heft and intellectual rigor, springing into visual form in the collaged illustration above the text, which locates some of the glossary’s terminology in diagrammatic space— a delightful splintering of textbook images of the brain into its present-day social and political realities.



Warren Neidich, “Glossary”.
Photo by M. Alexander Weber.

Greg Garvey’s special installation for *Sleuthing the Mind* is similarly dazzling: in its form as well as its content, Garvey’s [piece](#) (pictured) manages to capture the absurdity and irrationality of a well-known, newsworthy moment— the 1991 Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court— and deliver it in two parallel streams via a split-brain interface (classically developed and used by neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga) that offers the viewer (or perhaps more accurately, the participant) conflicting audiovisual information of conflicting audiovisual information, the bizarrely contradictory testimonies in that classic hearing. This is meta-cognitive dissonance, a statement that uses the brain’s own bilateral architecture to offer a new aesthetic experience, breathing critical life into an otherwise mindless, droning affair.



Greg Garvey’s installation.
Photo by M. Alexander Weber.

Throughout the Pratt Gallery space, Levy’s curation offers a multiplicity of new perceptual experiences, each one tugging at the idea of a unified, top-down self: Nicole Ottiger’s “Third Person No. 1” is a self-portrait drawn while wearing an Oculus Rift virtual reality headset; Jane Philbrick’s sound installation is a sublime deconstruction of “Song of Solomon,” with partial and whispered readings sent into each ear, so that only a dim approximation of the piece is available by wearing both earbuds; Suzanne Dikker and Matthias Oostrik’s *Mutual Brain Machine* lights up only when participants “synchronize” their brainwaves, asking questions about the neural basis of true mutuality and interpersonal connection.

Like the wound that can only be healed by the spear that struck it in Wagner’s *Parsifal*, Levy’s show provides an antidote to the brain-anxiety nexus by absorbing those fears into the gallery space itself, and then pointing to the radical potential of new paths of experience and engagement.