

post-futuristisch.





# Warren Neidich

AKTIVISTISCHE NEUROÄSTHETIK  
ALS KÜNSTLERISCHE PRAXIS IN DER  
POST-WAHRHEITSGESELLSCHAFT

Ein Gespräch von Ann-Katrin Günzel

Warren Neidich, *Pizzagate Neon*, 2018, Neonglas,  
4 m × 5 m; links im Bild: *The Thunderous Cloud*, 2019,  
Neon und pulverbeschichteter Stahl, 4 m × 40 cm,  
Installationsansicht „Zuecca Project Space“, Venedig,  
2019, Courtesy: Galerie Priska Pasquer, Köln





Warren Neidich, Portrait, Eröffnungsperformance *Rumor to Delusion*, Foto: Karolina Sobel, Courtesy: Galerie Priska Pasquer, Köln

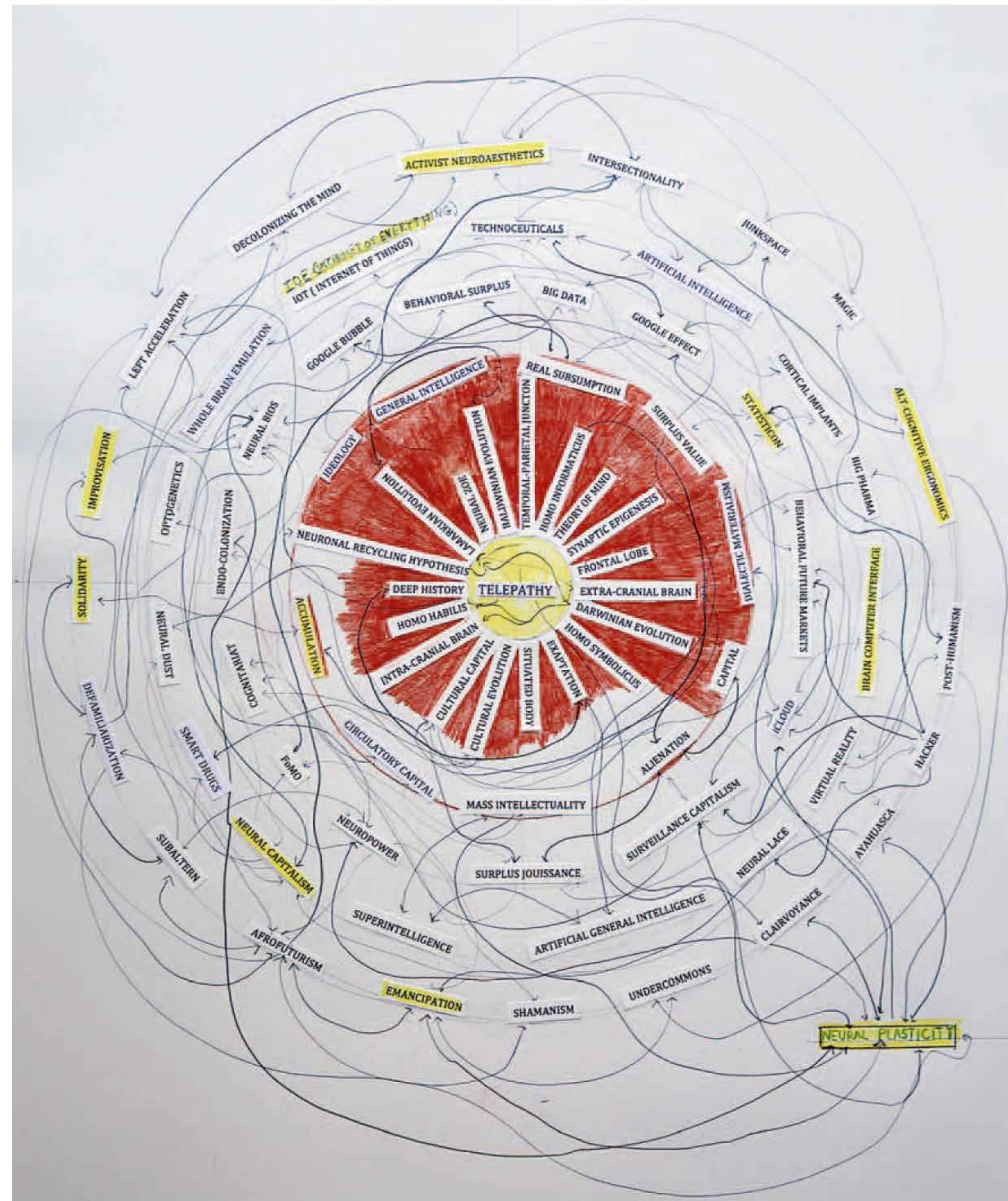
Der Autor, Theoretiker und postkonzeptuelle Künstler Warren Neidich (\*1958, New York), arbeitet interdisziplinär zu aktuellen Fragestellungen. Dabei untersucht er die Verbindung von Kunst und Neurowissenschaften und fragt in seiner künstlerischen Praxis nach Prozessen der immateriellen Arbeit in der Wissens-Ökonomie und in unseren Köpfen. In dem vorliegenden Interview erläutert er seine Theorie der aktivistischen Neuroästhetik und des kognitiven Kapitalismus, nach denen die materielle Plastizität des Gehirns durch die – vor allem kulturelle – Veränderung unserer Umgebung ebenfalls Transformationen unterworfen ist.

**Ann-Katrin Günzel:** Warren, your art work is strongly connected to neuroscience. Can you explain us the relationship between the two (your art and neuroscience)?

**Warren Neidich:** The works at the beginning of career as an artist such as *American History Reinvented* (1985-1991), *Cultural Memory/ Cultural Amnesia* (1991), and *Camp OJ* (1996), involved with issues of reenactment, fictive documentary and the archive. At the end of 1996, I cycled back to my earlier studies in Neurobiology Cognitive Neuroscience in order to estrange and expand the complexity of the products of my art practice. I also realized the power of my art practice to deterritorialize neuroscience which I felt was at the calling of the military-industrial-media complex. I called this practice Neuro-aesthetics. To-

day I refer to it as Activist Neuroaesthetics. My work artbrain.org and the Journal of Neuroaesthetics also emerged from my art practice. Activist Neuroaesthetics which is very different than the form of neuroaesthetics popular in Germany which I call positivist neuroaesthetics. Activist neuroaesthetics focuses on the ways and means with which artists, architects, poets, filmmakers, and other cultural producers using artistic practices rather scientific methods investigate the sensible world in order to create artistic facts. One artwork can change the history of art. For instance one could imagine that works such Marcel Duchamp's readymade sculpture *Fountain* (1917), Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* (1952), Mary Kelly's *Post-partum Document* (1976), and Anna Halpern's *Parades and Changes* (1965-1967), introduced experimental languages into art discourse that changed the way artist made and continue to make work. This process of artistic estrangement, as we know from the work of Jacques Ranciere, has political consequences through introducing counter strategies to those through which sovereignty polices the distribution of the senses to create an homogenous people which are easy to govern. Political artistic interventions redistribute the sensible and as a result produce changes reflected in the multitude of singularities who can think for themselves and express their differences in the market place of ideas. Activist Neuroaesthetics takes this one step further in understanding, in ways the Catherine Malibou has, that by changing the socio-political cultural milieu one can also alter the neurobiological architecture of the brain – which in turn may alter thought itself. In Positivist neuroaesthetics the brain is an unchanging material structure restricted to the bony skull and reduced to the activity of neurons. It is a repository of essences and predispositions which are deposited in various forms in the environment. The activist approach proposes a situated intracranial/extracranial brain complex that is in a constant state of flux. In philosophy of mind this approach follows what is sometimes called the embodied, enactive, extended approach. Activist neuroaesthetics says that we are much more than our neurons. This extracranial brain is composed of technological, artistic and architectural advancements, and linguistic, philosophical and socio-spiritual-communicative transformations which promote material changes in the intracranial brain with which it is entangled. Thus, activist neuroaesthetics understands that this extracranial brain has the capacity to incite social and political revolutions that have consequences for the structure of the intracranial brain. Alternatively we have the power to therefore transform our brain through transforming the political, social, aesthetic milieu if we only had the desire to do so. Neural plasticity, the capacity of the material brain to change, provides the means and mechanism with which this can occur. Like other matter in the world, the material brain is subject to events characterized by dialectical and historical materialism. For

Im kognitiven Kapitalismus sind Gehirn und Geist die neuen Fabriken des 21. Jahrhunderts.



Warren Neidich, *Telepathy Drawing*, 2020, Bleistift auf Papier, 45,2cm x 60,96cm, Courtesy: Galerie Priska Pasquer, Köln





Warren Neidich, *Double Jeopardy* (Detail), 2017, Acrylfarbe, Leinwand und Neonglas, Kunstverein Rosa-Luxemburg Platz, Berlin, Courtesy: Galerie Barbara Seiler, Zürich

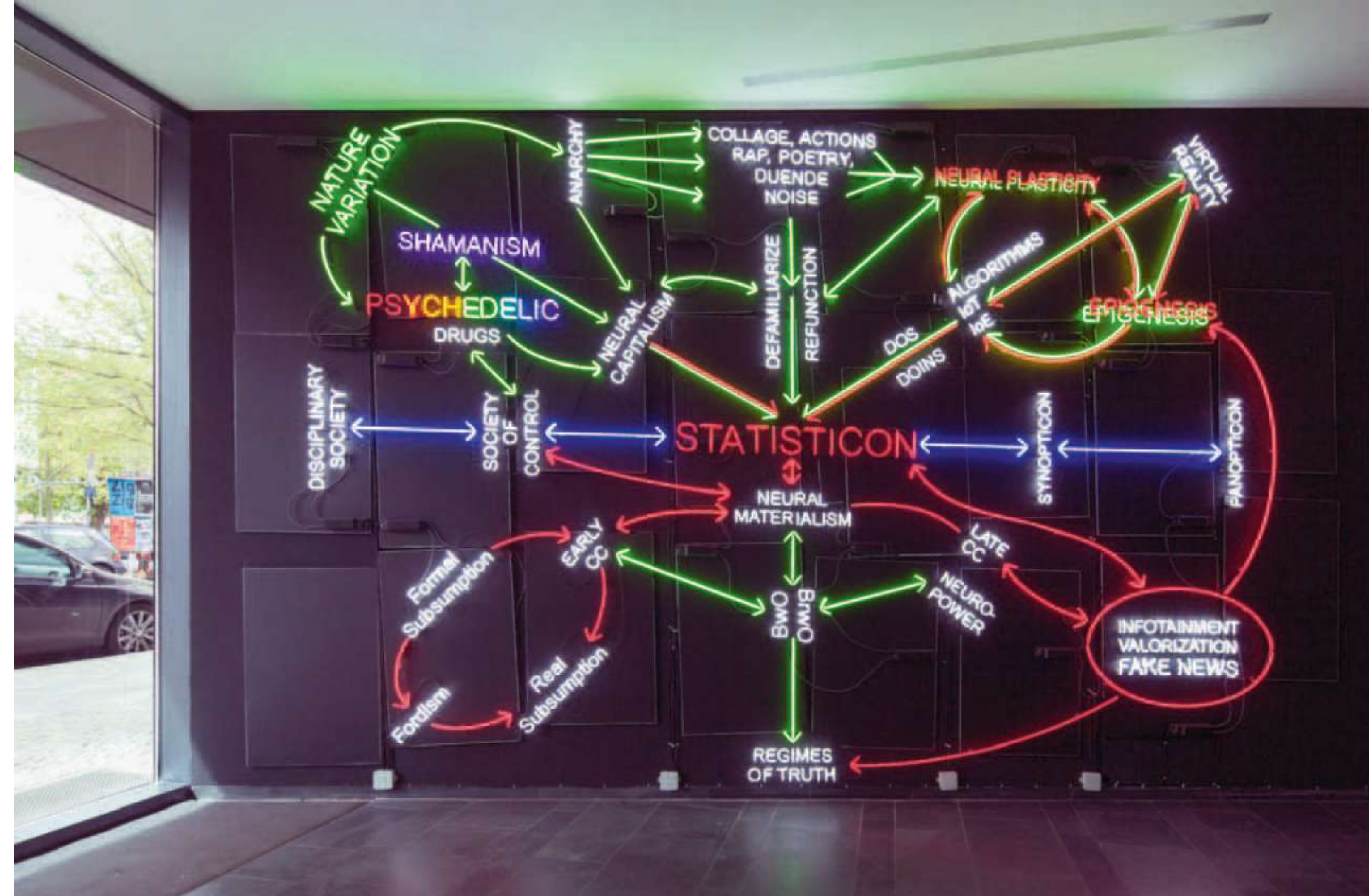
instance, seismic shifts in socio-cultural-political ideological formations characterized by posthumanist and post-Anthropocenic thought might be inscribed first in a multitude of objects and then in the material structure of the brain, especially as a result of attention and salience driven neural modulation. Activist neuroaesthetics also works against positivist neuroaesthetics' engagement with the industrial/military/mediated components of neural capitalism. Brain-computer Interfaces and optogenetics are supported by Darpa and have military uses. Rather, activist neuroaesthetics instigates tactics counter to recent transitions in the neural economy, such neural economics and neural consumerism, and its totalitarian tendencies.

That sounds interesting, but quite complicated for someone who tries to understand your artistic point of view. You just had an exhibition at Venice during the Art-Biennale 2019, called "Rumor to Delusion". There you showed the neon-installation Pizzagate Neon and also a film entitle Pizzagate: From Rumor to Delusion. Those are two visible examples for your theories and for the capacities or the power of art in reality. To make it clear for someone who does not know a lot about neuroscience – could you explain your thoughts about cognitive capitalism and fake news in these works? In cognitive capitalism the brain and the mind are the new factories of the 21st century. We are no longer proletariats physically working on assembly lines making things but cognitariats using mental labor in front of screens with the world at our fingertips creating data with our searches and reactions on social media. The data we produce is not simply collated and analyzed to predict our shopping tendencies but actively engaged in shaping our subjectivities through acting on our brains malleability. Cognitive Capitalism emerges from Italian Operaismo and Post-Operaismo and is divided into an

early phase and late phase. The early phase is characterized by precarity, working 24/7, valorization, the financialization of capital and herd behavior, communicative capitalism and immaterial or performative labor. The later stage, in which we find ourselves today and which is important for my Pizzagate neon and video, subsumes its earlier phase but adds an additional layer. Its focus of power is now concentrated on the material brain, especially its neural plastic potential, normalizing its inherent variability and in the process homogenizing the neural diversity across a diverse population of brains and minds.

The Pizzagate Neon was a work that first and foremost described the convoluted and complex events that delineated the Pizzagate fake news story. For those not familiar with the account, it described a now debunked conspiracy theory that went viral at the end of 2016 American Presidential race between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump. It asserted that Hillary Clinton and some of her top aids were part of an international child sex ring run out of the Clinton Foundation and located in the basement of the Comet Ping Pong pizza parlor on Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington D.C. The alleged proof of these accusations came from the illegal hacking of Clinton's campaign manager, John Podesta's, personal emails publicly displayed on WikiLeaks, and through trawling the Instagram account of James Alefantis, searching for sexually lewd and explicit images.. As absurd as this story was many people believed it. One such person was Edgar Welch, a young man from North Carolina, who was convinced that the story was true. So much so that he was compelled to drive up to the nation's capitol in order to rescue the abused girls incarcerated in the basement of Comet Ping Pong pizzeria. On arriving he entered the restaurant and shot an assault rifle fortunately, injuring no one. The Pizzagate Neon and the film Pizzagate: From Rumor to Delusion together attempt to investigate the socio-political and technological conditions that make this and other events, in what is now appreciated as the post-truth society, possible. These two projects were accompanied, during the exhibition, by my latest book, *The Glossary of Cognitive Activism*, which acted as a guide or libretto.

The neon itself was a suspended text based work connected by a network of white neon arrows that acted together to form a cloudlike structure which stood in for the iCloud on the one hand and the connectome on the other. The CONNECTOME is the data set describing the connection matrix of the central nervous system. The iCloud, as many of you know, is a cloud storage computing service from Apple. The idea was that in late stage cognitive capitalism the iCloud and connectome form the elements of the intracranial/extracranial brain complex. Many of the terms expressed the major players in the drama of this conspiracy like Hilary Clinton, James Al-



Warren Neidich, *Statisticon Neon*, 2018, Neonglas, Holztafeln, Kreide, 4m x 4m, Installationsansicht Kunstverein Rosa-Luxemburg Platz, Berlin, Courtesy: Galerie Priska Pasquer, Köln

fantes, Edgar Welch and John Podesta as well as less central figures like the collector Tony Podesta, Johns brother and Marina Abramovic who became entangled in the opera through email streams uncovered on Wikileaks. Especially significant were emails shared by John and Tony Podesta which concerned attending a performance of Marina's called Spirit Cooking. The rest of the terms described the new apparatuses of late cognitive capitalism like the Attention Economy, Click Bait, Fake News, Meme Magic and Google Bubbles as well as the new methods of their transmission and distribution such as Instagram, Danger and Play, and 4 Chan. Also included were the terms Epigenesis and Neural Plasticity in order to invoke the new roles these apparatuses play in not only describing the new technological ecosystems at play in the virtual worlds we are in constant contact with but to understand the logic of their power to sculpt the brains architecture. This is also played out in Pizzagate: From Rumor to Delusion where an underlying theoretical disposition is that we have transitioned from the Society of the Spectacle to a Society of Data and now to the Society of Neurons. The spectacle is the ultimate attention grabbing form of media theater which in today's world evolves into a definitive form of memory factory. As is mentioned in the film Fake News on bogus Internet sites engages attention 25 percent more than real news and compels clicks which form data

sets on what Shoshana Zuboff refers to behavioral future markets. Attention has been shown to be essential for long-term memory consolidation.

You often use contemporary language in your art (hashtags, sentences from the news, fake news, tweets, etc.) – since we are talking in the context of a publication that concentrates on post-futuristic art and therefore we have a strong emphasis on exhaustion and "the end of..." – do you see language and communication as something that is coming to an end? To the end of truth for example?

As I mentioned in the previous question, the impulse to write the Glossary of Cognitive Activism was a response to, on one hand, the exhaustion you speak about and on the other, the effect of radical changes that have recently occurred in the socio-political-technological field. The forms of resistance, whether they be actions or written texts, created in the analogue 1960s and 1970s are no longer adequate to meet the challenges we face today in the digital age. I realized that in the past twenty years a new vocabulary had emerged of which the general public and artist community was unaware. A language, I felt, could make the sublime conditions of the new authoritarian regime of the net understandable and visible. We are all mental laborers or cognitariats and



as such are especially susceptible to the effect of data on the brain and mind. As I mentioned above that regime is at the heart of the post-truth of post-factual society in which fake facts engage with the material brain more effectively than real facts and bias the memories we form our opinions with. Importantly I believed that the basis for this new lexicon could be built through a new consideration of the writings of the Italian Operaist and Post Operaist political philosophers especially their ideas concerning cognitive capitalism. They were the first to understand the implications of the coming cybernetic society and, as such, their incites into immaterial and mental labor and the affective economy were adequate predictions of what we are now facing. My Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art, Berlin and my glossary were reactions to the need to disseminate this new vocabulary broadly. I hoped that by educating an army of artists a new wellspring for creativity across disciplines would emerge.

What about the "power of art"? There are voices of scientists getting louder, proclaiming the need of images to convince the people of facts. Obviously, there is a lot of information about the climate crisis and the Anthropocene, but very little change in the behavior of the people (that keep flying, cruising, buying SUVs and even more plastic than before...). Do you think art could have the power to change that?



Warren Neidich, *Equal not Equal*, 2015, Neonglas und bemalter Stahl, 2,5m x 1m, LAXART, Los Angeles, Courtesy: Galerie Priska Pasquer, Köln

## Meines Erachtens kann eine Sprache die außergewöhnlichen Bedingungen des neuen autoritären Netz-Systems verständlich und sichtbar machen.

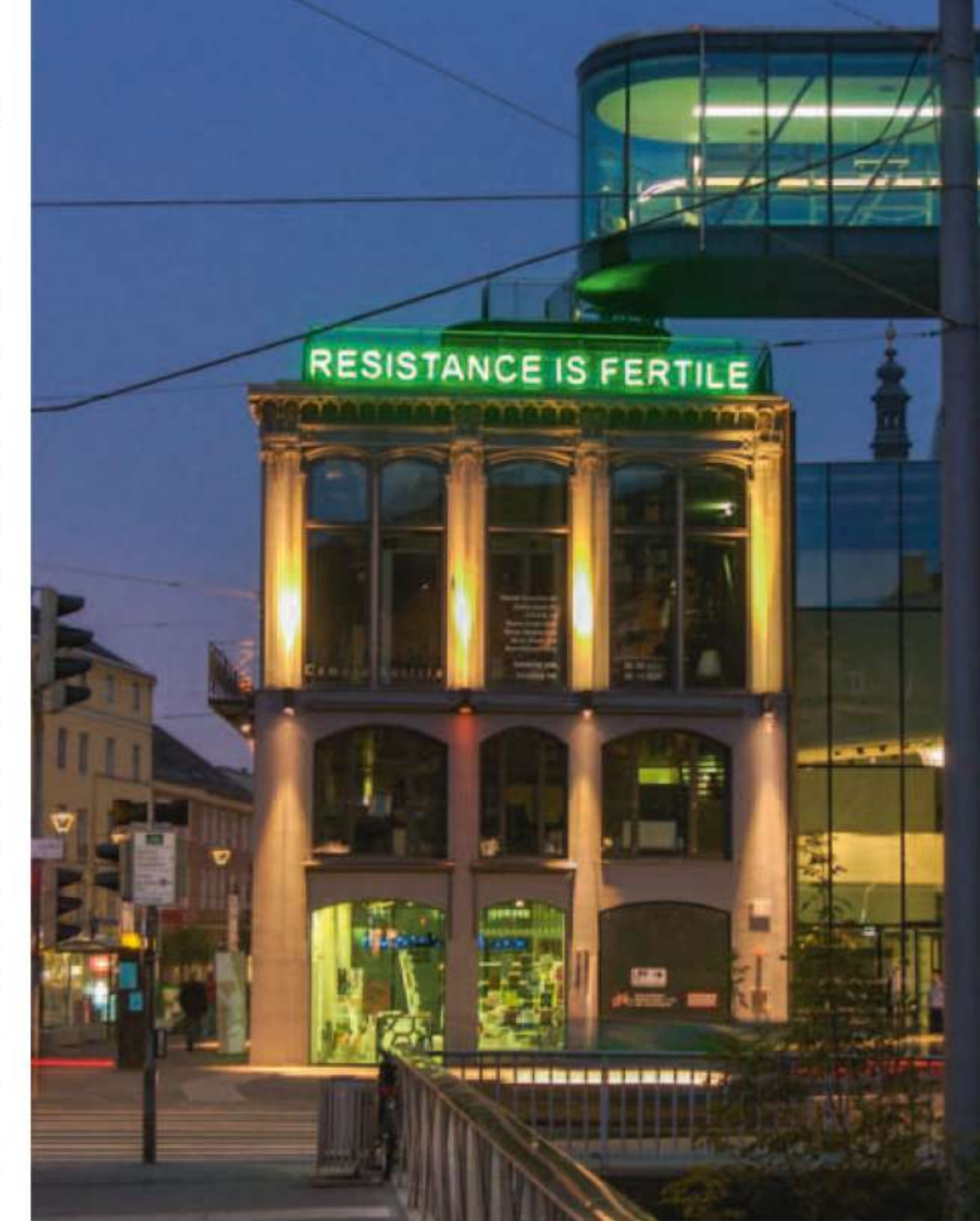
In late neoliberal global capitalism an assortment of new platforms for the marketing and sale of artistic products has arisen that has stripped the artist of his or her power. Chief amongst these are the art fair and mega gallery, the rise of the art consultant class and the Internet art databases. The time and space allotted me here does not allow me the pleasure to explain each in its entirety. Overall their effect is the commoditization of the artwork and the domination of the market place in determining what art is shown, what best way to form and present it as well as which art is bought and exhibited in museums. Museum groups frequent art fairs and hang around VIP lounges sucking up rumor and innuendo to determine which artist and gallerist is trending and on this base schedule artists for exhibitions. In the late stage neoliberal global marketplace the artwork becomes a hard investment for future profit and nothing more. "Market value exceeds Cultural value". The problem is that the neoliberal artist sees themselves as an entrepreneur and his or her production is a calculated attempt to gather the attention of the speculator to increase market share. Time is money and dealers don't want to be burdened with explanations of conceptual or political art. Under these conditions one can only be disappointed by the assumed power of art. Artists who participate in this space, and not all do so but those that do, are nothing more than high end commercial artists working for the system. But by doing so the artist gives up their most powerful cultural asset. In the next Art Cologne I will exhibit a neon work that says "Cultural Value transcends Market Value." This work goes to the very heart of your question. The power of art resides in its capacity to estrange the cultural milieu. Art is a necessary component to the marketplace of ideas. Its main function in this regard is to disrupt institutional regimes of distributions of the sensible that normalize and police the alterity of the senses. Art redistributes, for instance, the matrix of gestalts, the networks of affordances and the topologic referendum of attention that form designed space. As such it creates a diversity of objects, things, their relations and the memories they excite and script in the memory networks of the brain and their tethering together as narratologies in the mind's eye. The socio-cultural political milieu forms the extracranial brain that coevolves with the intracranial brain with which it is tethered. According to the neuroscientist Olaf Sporns, while variation in other systems can represent noise and degrade performance the opposite is true for neural systems operating under Dar-

winian processes. The brain's disparate population of neural elements with variable characteristics and tuning personalities facilitate differential responses to unknown environments. The newborn can never know the world in advance; human culture and its artifacts are constantly evolving and generate different milieus one generation after another. The brain's neural plasticity allows it to modify its architectures to accommodate this constantly evolving environment that itself played a role in changing. The famous neuroscientist Gerald Edelman understands culture as the generator of diversity and complexity which in turn generates brains that are diverse and complex. No two brains, even those of twins, are alike. Who and what generates these diverse environments? Art, poetry, cinema and architecture just to name a few. This is the power of art and when artists give themselves up to the market they give up their right to shape subjectivity leaving it to instead government agencies who want to maintain the status quo.

Can you explain your thoughts behind the work "equal not equal"?

Equal not Equal, 2015 was first exhibited at LAXART in Los Angeles in a project curated by Lauri Firstenburg who would become the curator of my exhibition in Venice. The sculptural neon work is made up of two intermittent signs. One denoted by the equals or equality sign and the other the not equal sign denotes inequality. A site specific Equal not Equal similar to be not the exact replica of the original work was fabricated for the façade of the Zuecca Project Space. As in Los Angeles the work was installed above the doorway and visitors needed to cross the threshold as they entered the gallery with the work above them. Zuecca Project Space is situated on Giudecca and the neon faced the lagoon and could be seen from across it on Dorsoduro one of the other six sestieri of Venice. The equal sign is in green neon and is always illuminated while the single line that crosses the equal sign as a diagonal to create the not equal sign is red and flickers on and off. Equal not Equal is meant as a question. Is the space you are entering a space of equality where all those entering have the same rights to innovate and create or not? Do all entering have a voice in the contested field of cultural expression? It also expands beyond the artistic bubble to include whether or not we all have equal opportunity to life itself.

Vielen Dank!



Warren Neidich, *Resistance is Futile, Resistance is Fertile*, 2006, 7m x 1m, Neonglas und Stahl, Kunsthau Graz, Graz, Österreich, Courtesy: Galerie Priska Pasquer, Köln

### WARREN NEIDICH

Der Theoretiker, Filmmacher, Komponist und Installationskünstler Warren Neidich, der zwischen Los Angeles und Berlin arbeitet, erweitert jede künstlerische Produktion um eine einzigartige interdisziplinäre Position, die er „Trans-Thinking“ nennt. Dieses Modell untersucht die Art und Weise, wie Erkenntnis vermittelt und umgesetzt wird durch ko-extensive kulturelle Inputs, die aus einem sich weiterentwickelnden sozio-kultur-politischen Milieu bestehen, in dem sich verschiedene ungleich verteilte und umstrittene diskursive Felder versammeln und mit dem plastischen Gehirn verwickeln. Seine Werke wurden international ausgestellt, u. a. Museum Ludwig, Köln, Whitney Museum, New York City, PS1 MOMA, Long Island City, ICA London, LACMA, Los Angeles, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis und vielen anderen. Seine Einzelausstellung „Rumor to Delusion“ feierte im Zuecca Project Space während der Biennale in Venedig 2019 Premiere und wird im Mai 2020 im Wolfsburger Kunstmuseum in einer Ausstellung mit dem Titel „Macht! Licht“ zu sehen sein. Er ist Gründer und Direktor des Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art in Berlin und hat verschiedene Auszeichnungen erhalten, u. a. den Vilem Flusser Theory Award, Transmediale, Berlin, AHRB/ ACE Arts and Science Research Fellowship, Bristol und das Fulbright Scholarship. Darüber hinaus war er Tutor in den Bereichen Bildende Kunst, Informatik und Kulturwissenschaften am Goldsmith College, London sowie zuletzt Professor für Kunst an der Kunsthochschule Weissensee, Berlin. Sein neues Buch „The Glossary of Cognitive Activism“ ist kürzlich bei Archive Books, Berlin und seine Publikation „Neuromacht“ ist 2018 bei Merve erschienen. Er wird vertreten durch die Galerie Priska Pasquer in Köln, sowie durch die Barbara Seiler Galerie in Zürich.