MEMORY MAPS

On the other side of the glass from a bank of computers, all that was visible of Greg Siegle were the soles of his shoes. The rest of him was firmly ensconced in a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machine in UPMC Presbyterian. The computers collected data in real time and were creating a map of his brain at work.

Siegle wasn't a patient, however, and no doctor was planning to review the images generated by the scan. Rather Siegle—a PhD professor of psychiatry in the School of Medicine—slipped into the fMRI to help California-based artist Deborah Aschheim, whose work has long focused on the brain and notions of how the organ creates and organizes memory and emotion.

Aschheim, recently an artist-in-residence at the University of California, San Francisco, began to collaborate with Siegle in 2006 after he and other neurologically inclined faculty saw Aschheim's installation art piece called "On Memory" at the Mattress Factory museum on Pittsburgh's North Side. In the piece, she recreated maps of her own memory-related neuronal activity in plastic, light, and electronics.

As Siegle lay supine in the fMRI, he was being shown images from Aschheim's old family movies. (He would also view his and those of two colleagues on the project.) Aschheim hopes to use the resulting scans as the basis for an as-yet-undetermined artwork.

"People respond to my movie, and you can see that the movie triggers memories of their own," Aschheim says. "It's interesting to see which areas of the brain light up. In a way, science and medicine might be able to help you understand your feelings differently than you do yourself."

—Joe Miksch

—Photo by Owen Smith