

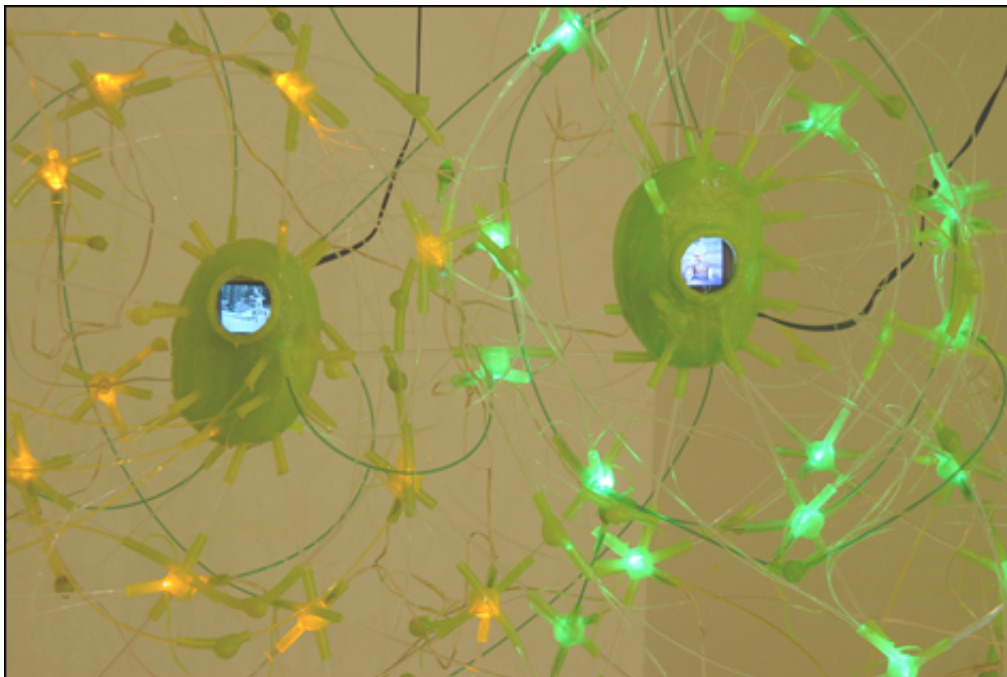
# THE PHOENIX

## Mapping the mind

Deborah Aschheim's deep cartography

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**NEURAL NETWORK: Dreaming in color + black-and-white.**

Consider the countless processes your body is performing in order for you to read these words. Autonomic signals coursing through your body at electric speeds allow you to focus your attention on the printed word instead of your regular breathing and the beating of your heart. Your five senses are receiving enough information right now to fill something like Borges's Library of Babel, containing every book that ever was and ever will be, and yet your brain decides that the sound of the heating duct does not serve the present moment as much as your cell phone's ringtone. This entire epic adventure of sensory awareness and conscious involvement exists every moment within you and is miraculously stored in your brain as memory and identity, continuity and history.

USM's visiting artist-in-residence Deborah Aschheim has an innate interest in this subject of memory and its universal applications, along with a healthy dose of fear of its ephemerality. Her voluminous show, entitled "The Forgetting Curve," at the USM Gallery in Gorham, requires the artist to face the undeniable history of Alzheimer's disease in the branches of her family tree. Aschheim seeks to externalize structures of memory by creating associative networks on paper and in sculptural video installations. Fueled by an investigation of the mind as both biology and psychology, she performs research experiments on her own recollections in an effort to strengthen cognitive connections and map out a sense of dendritic solidity. Aschheim takes out an insurance policy on remembering by placing her "knowing" outside of her consciousness.

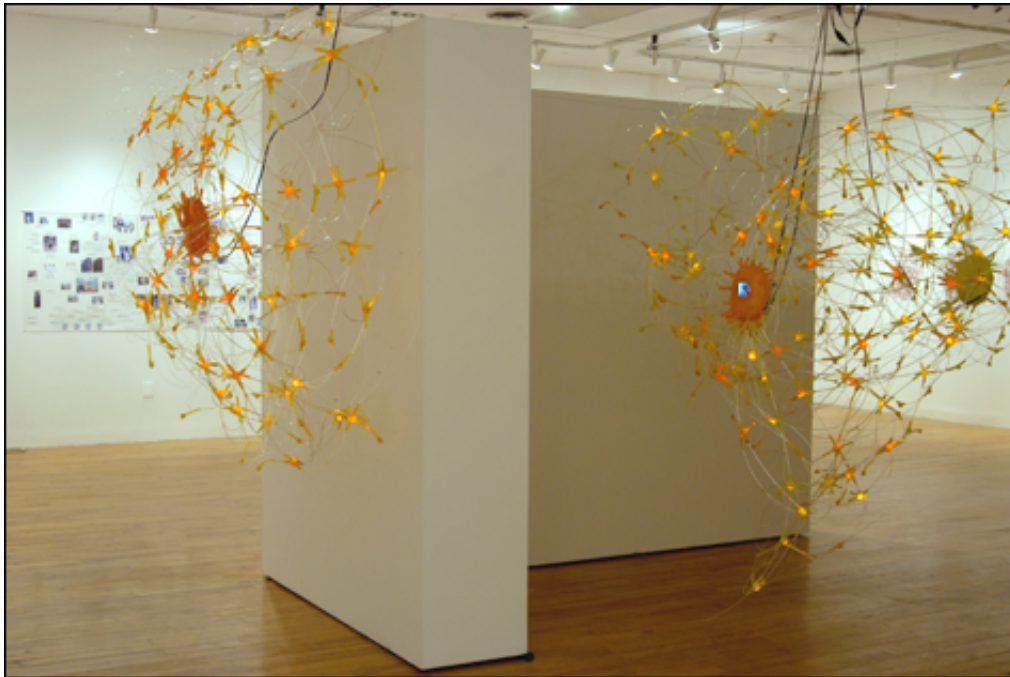
Aesthetic value commingles with the artist's mining of the self because this quantitative research data forms patterns and meta-patterns when displayed visually. An entire web of psyche is formed such that walking into the gallery gives a sense of pulsing vitality between the pieces. The parts become one.

The first piece that greets the gallery visitor is entitled "The Forgetting Curve," a term used by cognitive psychologists to describe the way memory decays or is distorted with the passage of time. A matrix of data cards is mounted on the wall. Each card features

a small photo in a muted inkjet-color palette and a description of the thoughts and actions of the artist whenever and wherever she was when a beeper she carried randomly sounded. What forms is a voyeuristically inviting account of the artist's life, specifically during the nascent stages of the show itself.

What is called into question, though, is where this externalized construction of memory falls on the timeline of the forgetting curve. When the artist documents "7:26pm : We're getting ready to go to dinner" meaning is transmuted by the process of documentation, much like in the brain's systems of memory. Patterns of meaning develop in cultural forms, supplanting individual experiences in the field of time, only to be experienced individually again as culture or memory in the present moment.

This intricacy is beautifully manifested in Aschheim's mind-mapping works, rendered by hand with acrylic and ink on polyester film paper. "Allies" begins with a central node representing the artist and spirals out to show the interwoven social fabric of her friends and enemies represented in smaller nodes of red and green. Her anthropological research of a personal past yields many other recollected individuals, eventually dismissed as "neutral" and literally whited-out with bulky brushstrokes in the process. "Allies" and the exhibit's many similar pieces are enriched by an understanding of the statistical back-story, but nevertheless stand on their own as colorfully expressive and carefully patterned forms.



**SPACE EXPLORATION: Aschheim's installations have strong physicality.**

Another example is "Daniel and Annie," representing two architect friends of the artist who live together and collaborate on projects to the point that they joke about "sharing a brain." Aschheim muses on this to literal ends and maps out aspects of personality for Daniel in green and Annie in red. The shared brain, in yellow, connects the two in a visual representation of love and cooperative coexistence. The piece suggests in its revelation of the interconnectedness of the self that we are all potentially drawn together. In addition to the traditional mystical suggestions of oneness, the metaphors delivered to us by neuroscientists imply a totality based not simply on faith but on shared biology and perceptual processes.

It's difficult to ignore the large neural-network installations that seem to grow out from the walls of the gallery. Interlocking clear vinyl tubes join together in nodes of colored resin encasing LED lights. The organic lattice bends around itself and ultimately joins together at two larger nodes containing a glassed-in monitor displaying old 8mm footage. The color of the resin and the lights modulate from yellow to green, echoing the shift of black and white footage in one monitor with the colored scenes displayed on the other. Another piece hangs from the ceiling like a bunch of grapes or mental monkey-bars. Three neurons with monitors provide focus. Two monitors contain the same footage, images of a couple in their youth. The wife smiles brightly and displays a string of pearls. The husband makes a funny face and wiggles his fingers to show his rings. The third monitor reveals this couple decades later, recreating the actions of the earlier footage. Documentation is embedded in the neurological metaphor of memory.

The final element of the show leaves you with insight into the artist's hybridization of anthropological, artistic, and scientific methodology. "Eyes on Christine" is credited to Greg Siegle, director of the program in cognitive affective neuroscience at the

University of Pittsburgh, and Lena Gemmer. The two scientists conducted an experiment with Aschheim as the subject. The position of her gaze was measured sixty times a second for approximately two minutes as she observed her own drawing entitled "Christine." The data is relayed in simple line with color as a representative variable for time to display a constellation of conditions. This information is superimposed on the drawing to suggest several layers of unpackable meaning. The viewer is confronted with a realization of his or her own mental processes, understanding that the time spent in the gallery has yielded an infinite number of mappable data points.

Metaphor is the real backbone of Deborah Aschheim's artistic practice. The artist acts as seer by attempting to restructure both personal and societal modes of perception. Buckminster Fuller was adamant, in regards to the blossoming progress of space exploration, that we discontinue use of the phrases "up" into space and "down" to Earth and replace them with "out" and "in." The semantic use of linguistic signifiers bears so much weight, he felt, that our turn to a new direction of description would literally restructure our conception of the universe. We sail around the world, not to its farthest corners. A similar reevaluation is necessary for our map of consciousness, to alter our perception of memory as a mechanistic and linear archive to a relative, organic, and constantly evolving process. Aschheim is exploring this new cartography by starting at the beginning, her self.

"The Forgetting Curve" | works by Deborah Aschheim | through March 3 | at the Art Gallery, USM, Gorham | Tues-Fri 11 am-4 pm; Sat 1-4 pm | 207.780.5009

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