

NASHVILLE

Deborah Aschheim

Frist Center for the Visual Arts

Over the course of three years, Deborah Aschheim has continued to evolve her installation *Neural Architecture*, a series of structures representing a futuristic nervous system that imitates the function and appearance of human brain cells. Each successive exhibition reveals the system's increasing ability to interact with its environment. Constructed of clear plastic bath mats with suction cups, tubes, wiring, and what appear to be small magnifying glasses, these neuron-like structures hang from various components of the host building to form neural nodes in which small electronic devices are nested. In the initial exhibition, these transparent pods contained motion-sensitive lights, which activated when visitors entered the room. In the next four exhibitions, the installations gradually acquired mechanisms for recording and replaying sounds as well as sights. Aschheim's most recent installation in the series, *Neural Architecture no. 6*, reaches the highest level of sophistication and pervasiveness yet, stretching physically and virtually beyond its allotted two-gallery space.

Pods containing baby monitors lurk surreptitiously in vantage points above the museum's ticket booth, at the entrance to the gift shop, on stairways, in emergency exits, and even just outside of a concurrent painting exhibition. The baby monitors relay snatches of conversation to those stationed in other parts of the museum. They hang gracefully yet invasively from clear tubes dropping from the ceiling or coiling around the building's Art Deco ornamentation. Finally entering the exhibition, in two galleries tucked away at the back of the museum from which the six main clusters conduct their surveillance, feels akin to discovering a secret security headquarters. Here, pods are strung from the ceiling, which remains open to reveal ductwork

and the intricacies of lighting, persuading the viewer's perception to merge the artwork with the workings of the building itself. The electrical cords and plugs are left visible. Simultaneously organic and mechanized in appearance, Aschheim's structures adhere to the interior like parasites, with their tentacle-like tubes punching through the gallery walls and claiming territory.

The pod clusters dominate the space, alternately illuminating and emitting noise, presumably captured by the reconnaissance pods in other rooms. Their crystalline delicacy and intricate lines appear merely decorative at first, until one focuses on the activity within each cluster. Two clusters of pods contain six small cameras each, displaying a live feed of the viewer's face from different angles. They resemble a carnivorous plant, with their alluring peculiarity drawing the viewer in to be observed

and documented. Another cluster of pods spies on visitors in other galleries of the museum, making the viewer complicit in the machine's voyeurism. Cameras in a fourth cluster reveal the artist setting up the current installation, representing memory and possibly the machine's awareness of its own creation, while those in two other clusters display views of previous incarnations of the installation, perhaps indicating recollection of its more primitive ancestry.

Neural Architecture resembles medical life support systems: camera footage of previous installations even displays blood-red tubing, inviting speculation on the vulnerability inherent in relinquishing control to increasingly complex technology. The structures actively react to the stimulus of the viewer's presence in an unsettling imitation of consciousness, while the viewer

remains static. Aschheim's incorporation of devices designed to protect infants suggests the additional theme of innocence subjected to an invasion of privacy (nominally to ensure safety), an association that endows her installation with topical significance.

—Laura Dillon



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