# Art and Cognitive Activism

Organized by Warren Neidich in collaboration with UCLA Art|Sci Center, Getty Research Center, Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art and the Museum of Neon Art.

**Friday, September 23, 2022, 9am to 6:30pm**
UCLA California NanoSystems Institute (CNSI)
Building 114 – Presentation Space, 5th Floor
570 Westwood Plaza – Los Angeles, California
This event is free and open to the public.

This symposium endeavors to describe the role of art and artists in cognitive capitalism in which the brain and mind are the new factories of the twenty-first century. We are no longer only proletariats working on assembly lines to create objects but cognitariats (mental laborers) working on screens to produce Big Data which is sold to governmental and corporate entities. This has led authors such as Byung-Chul Han (for example, in his book *Psycho-politics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, 2000) to understand that in our moment biopower (Foucault's power over life as a form of the granular management of life) has transitioned to psychopower, or psychopolitics, in which the mental laborers or cognitariats gladly give up their freedoms without direct coercion—to labor incessantly and overtime to interact with digitality. Han calls this "smart power."

Yet, we are now on the doorstep of another transition almost as important as that which transformed the agricultural/manufacturing economies into knowledge/information economies. In this coming neural-based economy the material brain and its neuroplasticity become the focus of capitalist commodification—both directly and indirectly; directly through technologies like brain-computer interfaces, nootropics and cortical implants, and indirectly with Big Data, neuroeconomics and neural consumerism. In this neural economy, psychopower has further transitioned to neural power where the material brain is put to work. In psychopower and neuropower, the body's importance is reduced and subsumed by the brain and mind. The brain, as understood here, is not restricted to the bony carapace of the skull (as cognitivists would have us believe) but is a situated complex that extends into the socio-political-cultural-ecological milieu with which it *coevolves.* Changes in the external milieu are mirrored in the architectural composition of the brain through a process that Bernard Stiegler referred to as exosomatic organogenesis, a process in which technical rather than genetic evolution is at the core of the liberation and perfection of organ systems, especially the brain. In this model, the brain is a diverse, variable, rhizomatic, intensive, becoming entity in constant transformation. Consciousness is no longer understood as something restricted to, and most elegantly formed in, humankind, but rather is traced into the deep history of inorganic matter and shared with plants and animals in non-hierarchical alignments.

From this starting point, "Art and Cognitive Activism" features artists, architects, art historians, and philosophers using their own practices, materials, histories, and apparatuses to unveil the mysteries of this becoming brain model. In fact, the power of art is its special alliance with the sensory, perceptual, and cognitive as a source of emancipation, magic, and diversity in contradistinction to cognitive neuroscientific models of aesthetics in which the brain becomes a map or model of data points subject to forms of institutionalization, normalization, and demystification. Here, cognitive activism becomes evident as a reaction and form of dissensus against these conservatisms. Key to this conference is Catherine Malabou's entreaty that the brain is our work and we have the capacity to make our own brains if we have the fortitude to do so. As Victoria Pitts-Taylor writes in her book *The Brain's Body* (2016); "Although it is not framed as such in scientific accounts, the plastic, social brain also reveals neurobiology to be political—that is, capable of change and transformation, and open to social structures and their contestation."

**Speakers include: David William Bates, Arne De Boever, Anders Dunker, Igor Galligo, Katie Grinnan, Karen Lofgren, Warren Neidich, David Rosenboom, Victoria Vesna, Anuradha Vikram, John C. Welchman, and Pinar Yoldas.**

## SCHEDULE

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| **9:00am** | Arrival + Coffee |
| **9:30am** | Introductory remarks by **Warren Neidich** and **Victoria Vesna** |
| **10:00am** | **John C. Welchman** |
| **10:30am** | **Pinar Yoldas** |
| **11:00am** | Q&A (15 minutes) |
| **11:15am** | BREAK (15 minutes) |
| **11:30am** | **David Rosenboom** |
| **12:00pm** | **Karen Lofgren** |
| **12:30pm** | Q&A (15 minutes) |
| **1:00pm** | LUNCH (1 hour) |
| **2:00pm** | **David William Bates** |
| **2:30pm** | **Anders Dunker** |
| **3:00pm** | Q&A (15 minutes) |
| **3:15pm** | BREAK (15 minutes) |
| **3:30pm** | **Arne De Boever** |
| **4:00pm** | **Anuradha Vikram** |
| **4:30pm** | Q&A (15 minutes) |
| **4:45pm** | BREAK (15 minutes) |
| **5:00pm** | **Igor Galligo** |
| **5:30pm** | **Katie Grinnan** |
| **6:00pm** | Q&A + closing remarks (30 minutes) |

**David W. Bates** is Professor in the Department of Rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his PhD in European History from the University of Chicago. His research and teaching is focused on the relations between technology and cognition, and the history of political and legal thought. He has published two books on early modern thought, edited (with Nima Bassiri) a volume on plasticity and pathology, and written articles on topics such as cybernetics, AI, and 20th-century intellectual history. His forthcoming book is entitled *An Artificial History of Natural Intelligence*, which ranges from Descartes to Deep Learning.

**Arne De Boever** teaches American Studies in the School of Critical Studies at the California Institute of the Arts (USA), where he also directs the MA Aesthetics and Politics program. He is the author of *States of Exception in the Contemporary Novel* (Continuum, 2012), *Narrative Care* (Bloomsbury, 2013), *Plastic Sovereignties* (Edinburgh, 2016), *Finance Fictions* (Fordham, 2018), and *Against Aesthetic Exceptionalism* (Minnesota, 2019). His most recent book *François Jullien's Unexceptional Thought: A Critical Introduction* was published by Rowman & Littlefield (2020).

**Anders Dunker** is an independent scholar and writer living in Los Angeles, focusing on ecology, technology and the planetary future. He is a regular contributor to *Le Monde diplomatique* and *Modern Times Review* as well as *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Dunker and editor and board member in the Hong-Kong based journal *Technophany - A Journal for Philosophy and Technology*. His latest book in English is *Rediscovering Earth - 10 dialogues on the Future of Nature* (O/R Books).

**Igor Galligo** conducts research on ecology of attention, design of attention, relationships between attention and aesthetic experience and contributory research. From 2013 to 2015, he directed three international seminars with Bernard Stiegler at Centre Pompidou in Paris on the transformation of attentional capacities in a digital milieu alongside work with the territory of Plaine Commune. In 2022, he founded AUTOMEDIAS.ORG, a platform that brings together researchers, software developers, and political actors, notably from the Gilets Jaunes movement, for the development of a news contributory media. From September 2022, he will be a Visiting Student Researcher at the University of Berkeley (USA) under the supervision of David Bates.

**Katie Grinnan** (b. 1970, Richmond, Virginia; lives and works in Los Angeles) received her MFA from University of California, Los Angeles in 1999 and her BFA from Carnegie Mellon University in 1992. Grinnan has also had solo exhibitions at Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2013); MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles (2008); Aspen Art Museum (2005); and Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria, New York (2003), among others. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions including the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Grinnan's currently solo exhibition is on view at Commonwealth and Council from September 17th - October 22nd.

**Karen Lofgren** is a Los Angeles-based artist working primarily in sculpture and artist books from a feminist and decolonial perspective, and holds an MFA from CalArts. Her research centers on ritual, history, mythology, and the construction of consciousness over time, forming relationships between cultural systems and other wild systems. She is a 2022 Canada Council Grantee; a 2021 Guggenheim Fellow; a 2019 Pollock-Krasner grant recipient; and was Fulbright Core Scholar at UAL, Central St. Martins College in 2017/2018.

**Warren Neidich** uses written texts, neon light sculptures, paintings and photographs to create cross-pollinating conceptual works that reflect upon situations at the border zones of art, science, and

social justice. He is founder and director of the Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art and has had numerous solo and group exhibitions include the Venice Biennale, Whitney Museum of American Art, P.S.1 MOMA, Walker Art Center, MIT List Visual Art Center (Cambridge, MA), Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, National Museum of American Art (Washington, DC), ICA London, Palais Tokyo (Paris, France), among others. His work has been the subject of over 150 magazine and newspaper articles. Neidich currently works between New York City and Berlin.

**David Rosenboom** (b. 1947) is a multifaceted composer-performer, interdisciplinary artist, author and educator known as a pioneer in American experimental music. His multi-disciplinary, post-genre composition and performance has traversed ideas about spontaneously evolving musical forms, languages for improvisation, new techniques in scoring, cross-cultural and large-form collaborations, performance art and literature, interactive multi-media and new instrument technologies, generative algorithmic systems, art-science research and philosophy and extended musical interface with the human nervous system. Rosenboom was Dean of The Herb Alpert School of Music at California Institute of the Arts from 1990 through 2020, where he now holds the Roy E. Disney Family Chair in Musical Composition. He regularly performs and speaks in international venues, and his work is widely recorded and published.

**Victoria Vesna**, Ph.D., is an Artist and Professor at the UCLA Department of Design Media Arts and Director of the Art|Sci Center at the School of the Arts and California NanoSystems Institute (CNSI). Her work involves long-term collaborations with composers, nano-scientists, neuroscientists, evolutionary biologists and she brings this experience to students. Victoria has exhibited her work in 20+ solo exhibitions, 70+ group shows, has been published in 20+ papers and gave 100+ invited talks in the last decade. She is the North American editor of *AI & Society* journal (Springer Verlag, UK). Currently she is working on a series Art Science & Technology based on her online lecture class and the Hox Zodiac cookbook in collaboration with neuroscientist Siddharth Ramakrishnan.

**Anuradha Vikram** (born 1976, New York, NY; lives in Los Angeles) is a writer, curator, and educator. Vikram is co-curator (with UCLA Art|Sci Center director Victoria Vesna) of the upcoming Pacific Standard Time: Art x Science x LA exhibition *Atmosphere of Sound: Sonic Art in Times of Climate Disruption* (opening 2024). Vikram's book *Decolonizing Culture* (Sming Sming Books, 2017) helped initiate a global movement to decolonize arts institutions and monuments. They have written for art periodicals and publications from Paper Monument, Heyday Press, Routledge, and Oxford University Press. They are an Editorial Board member at X-TRA and an editor at X Artists' Books. Vikram is faculty in the UCLA Department of Art.

**John C. Welchman** is Distinguished Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism at the University of California, San Diego and Chair Emeritus of the Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts. His recent and upcoming books include *On the Last Afternoon: Disrupted Ecologies in the Work of Joyce Campbell* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2019); *Richard Jackson* [monograph] (Zurich and New York: Hauser & Wirth, 2020); *Joseph Kosuth's* The Second Investigation (*1968-72)* and *Public Media* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2022-23); *Orshi Drozdik: Adventure in Technos Dystopium* (Ghent: MER. Borgerhoff & Lamberigts, 2022/23); and *Royal Book Lodge* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022).

**Pinar Yoldas** is an infradisciplinary architect and an Associate professor at the University of California, San Diego. Yoldas is a Guggenheim fellow, a Macdowell fellow, a Hellman fellow and a Creative Capital Awardee. Her work is exhibited globally in highly prestigious museums and biennials. She holds a BArch from Middle East Technical University, an MA from Bilgi University, an MS from Istanbul Technical University, an MFA from UCLA, and a Ph.D. from Duke University in Neuroscience and Computational Art.