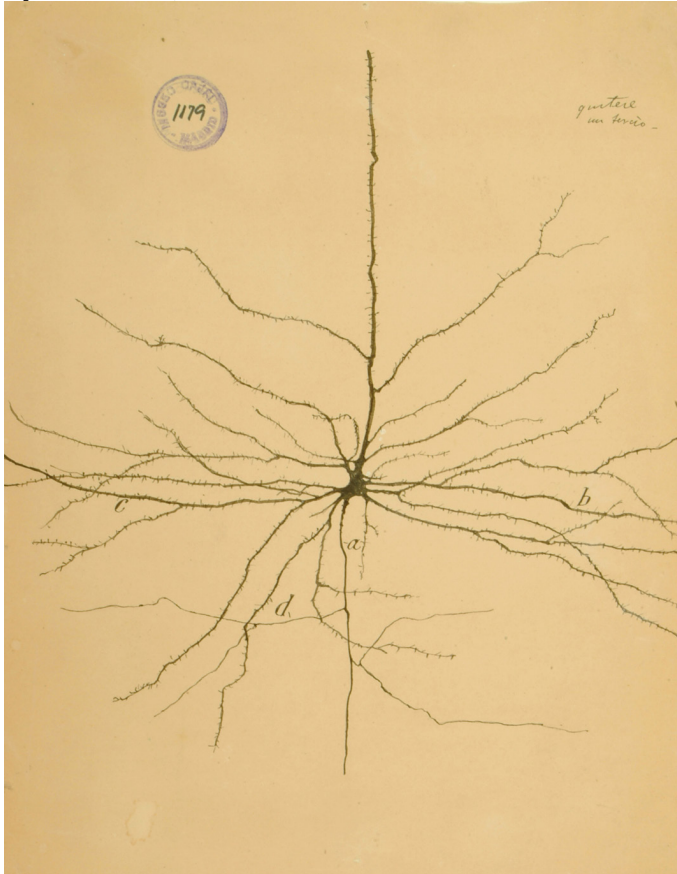


Art Forum

Thought Experiment: Ken Okiishi on “Human Brains: It Begins with an Idea” at Fondazione Prada

By Ken Okiishi, June 2022.



Santiago Ramón y Cajal, Pyramidal cell of the human motor cortex, 1899, ink and pencil on paper, 8 5/8 × 6 7/8".

IF THINGS NAMED ARTWORKS exist primarily to stuff the void of being rich with interchangeable forms of reactionary narcissism, then some of us have to look elsewhere if we want to experience or make anything resembling an exhibition. And by exhibition, I mean a sequence of material encounters or a set of sequential arrangements that ignite questions in our brains about multiple possibilities of affecting the existing state of things—a category of encounter that things named artworks seem unable to spark, given the current confluence of flimsy vested interests and our reliance on social media’s cheap dopamine hits. As the “end of the world” as perceived by humans is made to seem imminent, I am reminded of the brilliant yet still undervalued words of sociologist Colette Guillaumin, writing at a different moment when the reactionary Far Right had made its chaotic practices seem inevitable:

There is a terrifying mechanism by which obsessional imaginings and fantasies to do with evil, corruption, betrayal, sickness, apocalypse . . . are foisted onto real human beings without their having any power to prevent it. A murderous form of collusion is thus produced which allows one group of people to transfer their worst nightmares onto the bodies of others. . . . In the fragile minds of the dominators, the slightest sigh of impatience by a dominated person triggers visions of the most apocalyptic turmoil—from castration to the end of the earth’s rotation.

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We are now force-fed apocalypse from all angles, and eating shit is getting old. Making agile and bold yet precise decisions against the grain of endless chaos strikes me as oddly revolutionary. And while the posthuman leanings of a contemporary Left lead to some interesting reading, we will unfortunately have to continue dealing with humans until we become extinct. The decision by the humans in charge of the Fondazione Prada in Venice to commit the resources of a space dedicated to the production, exhibition, and collection of art to the development and exhibition of thinking—especially as the institution’s main exhibition concurrent with the Biennale Arte—is a welcome antidote to a human brain that can no longer process endless “feasts for the eyes” without getting a migraine.



View of “Human Brains: It Begins with an Idea,” 2022, Fondazione Prada, Venice. Center: Suzanne S. Stensaas, Introduction to the Human Brain, 2015. Photo: Marco Cappelletti.

As a way of counteracting an infinite horizon of burnout generated by the misery of cognitive violence, in 2018 the Fondazione Prada began hosting a series of conferences that counterposed scientific approaches to the brain—including “neurobiology, philosophy, psychology, neurochemistry, linguistics, artificial intelligence, and robotics”—in a cultural space, and for a cultural audience that does not normally encounter current scientific research in the moment of its production but more likely reads about it in filtered form, years later, via whatever catches the highest amount of controversy, makes the best metaphors, or develops enough consensus or sudden relevance to be popularized through the op-ed or science sections of the news. The institution’s nonmetaphorical treatment of hard-science research in the moment of its most experimental “prepublic” phases, though inevitably challenging for audiences, generated significant outcomes. The experimental processes put forward in those four years proved, counterintuitively, much wilder, more infused with rigor and care, than what is ordinarily found in the art-world context, and, as such, they have conditioned some tired art-world brains to take greater risks.

The central horror is not a human body in process of dissection but scientific and political discourses undergoing formation and deformation.

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“Human Brains: It Begins with an Idea” is the first successful attempt that I have seen at fully reconfiguring what becomes of the space of exhibition, including its processes of formation, via a nexus of theories rooted in hard-science research. And while each contributor in what appears to be a truly collective endeavor deserves equal acknowledgment, the development of the exhibition’s exquisitely intermeshed pathways can be credited to the specific collaboration between curator Udo Kittelmann and artist Taryn Simon. A sequence of enclaves plays host to a selection of more than 110 cultural artifacts spanning thousands of years that chronicle efforts by human brains to understand their own functioning, destruction, and repair. These range from a 3D copy of the 2120–2110 BCE terra-cotta Cylinders of Gudea to a 1772 book of the “complete notes on the dissection of a cadaver” by physician and surgeon Shin-nin Kawaguchi to histologist and neuroscientist Santiago Ramón y Cajal’s ethereal 1895–1921 drawings of nervous systems, accompanied by descriptions such as “Giant pyramidal cell of the human motor region” and “Granular neurons of the olfactory bulb of 20-days-old cat.” The exhibition’s display architecture conjures an uncanny aesthetic overlap between the hospital and the natural-history museum: two sites where we confront the emotional pain of death and bodily trauma, the history of ideas of nature, and the psychologically shattering suggestion that the human body, including the brain, is simultaneously utterly mysterious and objectively no more and no less than an assemblage of cells and chemical reactions that can be cut open, like a sausage.



View of “Human Brains: It Begins with an Idea,” 2022, Fondazione Prada, Venice. From left: George Guidall reading Chloe Aridjis’s *Four Topographies*, 2022; model of the University of Padua anatomical theater, 1932–33. Photo: Marco Cappelletti.

All of this is allowed to flow rather freely within the Venetian Baroque drama of Ca’ Corner della Regina, but a few objects in particular underscore the leitmotif of the exhibition’s architectonics: an eighteenth-century model of the anatomical theater of the Archiginnasio in Bologna, where, in the sixteenth century, public dissections of human bodies within the context of scientific teaching and research became popular; and a 1932–33 scale model of the anatomical theater of Padua, built in 1595, where the general public gathered to watch such educational spectacles by candlelight. In this 2022 version of scientific research as spectacular theater, the public, as at the dissections of five hundred years ago, is not intended to understand in totality what is being presented, and may be intended to have a spiritual experience. The central hor-

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ror is not a human body in process of dissection but scientific and political discourses undergoing formation and deformation. In one of the more brilliant, and successful, curatorial decisions I have witnessed in recent years, the hundred-plus objects that “encode centuries of attempts to understand the human brain” are not treated as one-to-one containers of meaning that can flatly transmit information to the brain but instead are mediated by literary texts. These texts, commissioned from authors as different as Katie Kitamura, Alexander Kluge, Ayòbámi Adébáyò, Maria Stepanova, and McKenzie Wark, are read by the (subconsciously) familiar star audiobook reader George Guidall, filmed by Simon as he stands at a microphone, the video playing adjacent to the objects of inquiry on multiple screens in each room. The effect is astonishing; the comforting grain of Guidall’s voice, in combination with the aleatory timing of clips from room to room, gives the sense that the viewer is absorbing in fragments a continuous, collectively written epic text. The brain weaves these words together, and the objects resonate as questions.

The implicit suggestion that agreement and disagreement are simultaneous neurological processes in a world of discordant stimuli becomes explicit in the central “theater” of the exhibition’s top floor. Thirty-two screens bring thirty-six simultaneous neuroscientific and philosophical positions into one room. As if at a conference, each person speaks individually, but, thanks to the care of editing, timing, and spacing offered by the art-exhibition context, we experience multiple fragments of each speaker’s talk in rapid succession and get to watch the faces of the others in close-up while they think in frequently conflicted silence. The fragments of speech are edited to bring out dissension and aporia, and the multiple and extreme differences among scientific positions push the viewer to think both with and against this prismatic display of “live” thinking. A psychologist asks the philosophical question of how one reconciles the pain of hearing a human dealing with the death of a loved one with the register of language she is required to use, such as “glucose metabolism”; a neuroscientist talks about how certain memories remain encoded in a pure form until they are simplified by the retrieval process of speech; a neurobiologist suggests that her research shows that the effects of social media on the brain are chemically similar to drug addiction and wonders how to treat and repair these effects on a massive scale; a philosopher offers that the brain’s radical plasticity is related to moments when it receives demands for too much plasticity and shuts down and that violence must have a biological, chemical relation to action rather than a purely ontological one, since humans do not seem to learn progressively or advance over time in the ways that many philosophers have suggested we do; a different neuroscientist asks what happens when large masses of people, such as a nation, experience stress at the same time and the sources of support that help rewire or repair a brain, that create “countervailing forces of resilience, start to wear thin”; the psychologist chimes in again and proposes that people who are “metabolically encumbered” tend to gravitate in an authoritarian direction because “simple single causes, or even having somebody else telling you what’s right and wrong, reduces uncertainty at a time when your brain really needs it”; the second neuroscientist breaks down in tears and can no longer continue when relaying a war case study in which a bomb explodes, a daughter’s phone is thrown in the air, and the father catches it and sees that his daughter is dead and he has survived; another neuroscientist asserts that the scientific professions have a blind spot when it comes to certain chemical effects in the brain in relation to addiction and proposes the experimental use of opioids on human subjects; a psychologist who puts ethical value on the reparative duty of her profession to treat patients who are suffering walks out of the discussion. It is a fascinating—but, remarkably, not overwhelming—series of conflicted discursive encounters.

Facing this constellation of screens, a rectangular gap in a wall opens out to a cropped view of a fragment of a 1656 painting by Rembrandt. According to the wall label, the painting, damaged in 1723 by fire, depicts a lecture-autopsy on the body of a tailor “executed for robbing a textile store and threatening those present with a knife. . . . Dr. Deijman is portrayed as he lifts the *falx cerebri*, showing the pineal gland. . . .

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considered the seat of the soul, and therefore the event marked a crucial moment in the public spectacle of the dissection.” As we view the scene through the aura of the damaged painting’s complex historical and material patina, we are asked to wonder critically about claims to enlightenment in relation to science as spectacle, both in the past and in the present, while also calling into question, following Catherine Malabou’s thinking, the inherited and persistent poststructural dogma that “science” is a priori involved in legitimating disciplinary power structures in a society of control. We cannot think critically if we refuse to consider that how the brain works might affect what is thought and done in the world; the recent admission by many leading critical theorists that they have no framework for understanding contemporary crises suggests we have been barking up the wrong tree for a very long time. “Human Brains: It Begins with an Idea,” as an exhibition-making process, exposed people who act mostly within cultural institutions, in roles such as curator, artist, and writer, to prolonged contact with vanguard scientific-research methods and presentation, and the result is a remarkable combination of clarity and agility, with entirely different paradigms held open to the possibility of activation.



View of “Human Brains: It Begins with an Idea,” 2022, Fondazione Prada, Venice. Photo: Marco Cappelletti.