

Laguna Beach, California

Deborah Aschheim

Laguna Art Museum

In recent years Los Angeles-based Deborah Aschheim has explored the relationship between the human body and its environments. Her newest installation, *Neural Architecture*, interprets buildings as biological extensions of the body. Using light bulbs, bubble wrap, transparent medical tubing, motion sensors, and security devices, the installation filled the Laguna Art Museum's basement galleries, exploring themes of surveillance and privacy. Transforming ordinary materials gathered from outlets such as The Sharper Image, Babies R Us, and Home Depot, the work reverberated with reminders of the heightened security that defines our environment today.

Elegant yet eerie, the installation's component parts simultaneously resembled medical acute-care apparatus, ultra-baroque chandeliers in a commercial showroom, and sea plants slowly oscillating in underwater currents. Hanging from the ceiling, defining corners, and creeping around walls like ivy growing from one space to the next, the loopy, organic tubing-lines connected and supported globular cluster forms of monitors and lights. The sameness of the 15 focal points suggested a continuum without beginning, climax, or end, creating a sense of ennui and displacement.

In the basement's center room, an installation-within-the-installation presented a vast suspended network of tubing distinguished by eight cluster focal points. With similarities outweighing differences among these forms, the composition as a whole conceptually mimicked the homogeneity of commercially replicated objects. Conversely, individuality, which had formerly functioned as a validating marker for art objects, was here replaced with a sign of material replication, suggesting that the installation's rubric was the example of industrial forms.

In the museum context, where handmade objects have for centuries been granted the highest

regard, the consequent formlessness of the installation sounded a disquieting note that intoned the imperiled fate of art when it is defined in terms of formal distinctions. Playing on the profusion of replicated objects and surveillance systems in American society, Aschheim's visual field of sameness militated against classical conceptions of form, giving instead an abject, trance-like space of formlessness. Such themes were reinforced as visitors meandered through the work, moving from one component to the next, for each focal unit lit up in succession when approached while those left behind faded into darkness. Following in the footsteps of Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, and Judy Pfaff, Aschheim explores artistic qualities that Minimalism tried to repress, such as a slowed pulse, entropy, and disarray.

The installation's basement location nudged viewers to note things hidden in plain view. Literally spying on visitors by quietly recording their approach, comments,

conversations, and departure, Aschheim's *Neural Architecture* scrambled assumptions that once privileged the spectator over the artwork. As their bodies became the material essence that activated the installation, viewers became voyeurs. In the process, the inevitable symbiosis between the empirical art experience and subjective, material reality became evident, providing a new path for reconsidering life and art.

—Collette Chattopadhyay

Below: Deborah Aschheim, *Neural Architecture*, 2004. Plastic, lights, sensors, and monitors, installation view.

Deborah Aschheim, *Neural Architecture* (detail), 2004. Plastic, lights, sensors, and monitors.

