

It's Time For A New Beginning

Deborah Aschheim transforms the ephemeral into the physical in *Reconsider*

By Malcolm Gay

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Mike Venso/Laumeier Sculpture Park

Deborah Aschheim and *Neural Architecture*.

Details:

Deborah Aschheim: *Reconsider*

Opens February 9 (reception 5-7 p.m.) and runs through May 11 at Laumeier Sculpture Park Museum Galleries 12580 Rott Road, Sunset Hills; 314-821-1209

(www.laumeiersculpturepark.org since 2006).

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Fri., noon-5 p.m. Sat.-Sun.

At 3:21 p.m. on what had been an unseasonably warm day in January, the balmy air was just yielding to a rapidly approaching cold front. The sky darkened as the first snowflakes arrived on Laumeier Sculpture Park's grassy campus, whose outdoor sculptures proved ready perches for the falling snow.



Inside the park's galleries, St. Louis artist Brandon Anschutz quietly soldered LEDs in one corner of the main gallery. In a room off to the side, one technician installed a glass corner cabinet while another stood high on a ladder, drilling into a wall and speaking on his cell phone. Meanwhile, sculptor Deborah Aschheim described *Node*, the massive suspended instrument of memory, sound and sculpture that lies at the heart of her upcoming exhibition: **Deborah Aschheim: Reconsider**, a show that seeks to externalize the fragile ephemera of memory.

Then her beeper went off.

"I have to take your picture because the beeper's gone off," Aschheim explained somewhat apologetically as she pulled a slim digital camera from its case. "We're all a little tired of it."

Set to vibrate randomly, that beeper has accompanied Aschheim ever since 2006, when she embarked on *The Forgetting Curve*, a ten-year art project intended to record chance moments in her life. Each time the beeper goes off, Aschheim documents the moment by photographing whatever it is she's doing and writing a brief description of the moment, which she then files away.

"All the information in my head is mutable. It's going to change and be rewritten; a lot of it is going to be forgotten. But I have these shoeboxes that I store them in. Those will never change," Aschheim, who lives in Pasadena, California, says. "My work often starts out as something I'm anxious about and becomes something I'm interested in."

As with *The Forgetting Curve*, Aschheim's current body of work stems from a fear of losing her memories. Several members of her family have succumbed to Alzheimer's disease, and Aschheim's inquiry into the nature of memory began as a defense against forgetting.

"Unlike cells and neurons, which are complicated but can be represented, memory is so much more of a complex cortical process. There isn't a 'place' where it occurs. It's where the subjective personal narrative, the autobiographical dimension of existing in the world, coincides with this machinelike structure — that can break. To me that is irreconcilable — the idea that all of my experiences are held in fragile cells that will die or get wiring problems," says Aschheim. "The tragedy of this disease is watching the whole meaning of someone's life be erased. You have all of these things that happened to you, but if you can't retrieve them at will, then the whole life becomes something else."

Working from the research of neurologists such as Oliver Sacks, Aschheim, a petite woman with short brown hair and a seemingly boundless reserve of energy, began exploring the notion that the neural pathways that conduct linguistic memory differ from those that channel auditory memories. In other words, if she could somehow form linguistic memories non-linguistically — more experientially, that is — her memories might withstand the assault of age.

"All the facts that I know are in books. Most of the stuff I know other people know," says Aschheim. "It's the personal experiences that I've had, and the things that have had emotional and autobiographical significance to me and are personally relevant: Those would be lost, and those were the only ones that seemed important to my relatives at the end."

For the current show — which also features a refined version of *Neural Architecture*, an earlier project that explores the nature of surveillance — Aschheim began by giving a handwritten list of 25 words she didn't want to forget — tarmac, node and palimpsest among them — to Lisa Mezzacappa, a Bay Area musician who, along with several other musicians, created a series of songs inspired by the words.

"When they started recording these songs, I immediately thought: I have to make instruments to play them," says Aschheim. "Each sculpture is based around one song, which is based around one word."

The result is a series of boldly colored sculptures suspended from the gallery ceiling. Made of funnels, plastic tubing, copper wire, LEDs, monitors and speak-ers, the pieces create tentacular networks that are reminiscent of the body's nervous system. But whereas nerves are geared to respond to external stimuli, Aschheim's sensory-immersive networks of twisting cords, pulsing LEDs and indelible sounds are maps to individual memories, intended to transmit information rather than receive it.

"At first they were about my information being encoded, but then they started to take on a life of their own, and in a way I think that is what's going to make them stay in my head," says Aschheim. "One of the things that really interests me about memory is that there is no archive. Every time you remember something you rewrite it, and the memory is tagged with all these new experiences."

In an act of supreme extravagance, each sculpture acts as an instrument whose singular purpose is to play the one song that inspired it, thereby giving physical shape to the otherwise ethereal.

Tarmac gets a catchy pop tune with a strong hook. Its twisted blue arms, made up of several lighted LED "nodes," extend downward to form a headphone-like structure that plays a song

about Aschheim's first computer password. A more ambient soundscape is created in *Redundant*, whose repeating curved form extends down from the ceiling — again in blue, again animated with LEDs — and transmits a multilayered recording in which the word *redundant* is repeated.

Allowing other people to interpret her words — and responding in turn to their new auditory renderings by creating a physical structure — has changed the words' meanings for the artist, and has also altered the scope of the project.

"The project has become much more poetic and more of a discussion about things than a literal 'this is what we need to do [to back up Aschheim's memory]," says Mezzacappa, who was on hand last week sculpting the exhibition's sound.

Many of the sculptures play portions of their songs through different speakers that come to life only as the song progresses, altering the song — and even the room — as they progress.

"It's coming from this idea in jazz and improvisational music of repetition with a difference," says Mezzacappa. "It's this idea where something is repeating itself, but each time you have to rethink what you thought it was."

Not, Aschheim adds, unlike memory.

The show's most ambitious piece is *Node*, a huge suspended sculpture whose combination of tubes, funnels, LEDs and sixteen separate speakers are devoted to playing a one-minute sound piece. Starting from the outer speakers, *Node*'s abstract sound moves toward the sculpture's center, where it begins to distort as it crescendos. The sculpture commands the largest room in the gallery, and, like the other pieces in the show, will play its song only intermittently, allowing viewers to discover it anew as it comes to life.

"We really tried to balance the whole room so that people could really walk around and discover all the parts of the sound instead of just this flat thing," says Aschheim. "It's not the most cost-effective or efficient way to listen to sound, but there's something in the gesture. I don't really make things that have a comfortable relationship to the market. And this is hard to prioritize: The real estate of this room, and it holds this transient experience. Here you have the main gallery in the show devoted to this sculpture that plays a one-minute song."

Then the clock turned 3:22. Aschheim's beeper buzzed. Time to log another moment.