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ART

## Rework, rebuild, recycle

■ Tech-savvy installations by Deborah Aschheim evolve from each other and even bespeak a watchful time. Some look back -- at you.

By Scarlet Cheng, Special to The Times

Tech-savvy pieces by Deborah Aschheim evolve from each other. A tangle of transparent vinyl pods and tubes falls from overhead, and sections light up as you pass. It's as though you're underwater, swimming through a swarm of incandescent jellyfish. Heads light up; tendrils sway. At the core of this spiraling mass, you notice 2 1/2-inch LCD monitors flickering — and realize it is yourself you're seeing, from different angles. You look for the cameras but see more screens, and on these the heads and tendrils are multiplying.

For many installation artists, the dismantling of a work can feel like a funeral. For Deborah Aschheim, taking down "Panopticon (Neural Architecture No. 4)" in Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design is almost a celebration. That's because the end of the project is also the beginning of her next work. Literally.

For the last two years, Aschheim has gone from installation to installation, linking themes and reiterating motifs, as many artists do, but also reusing hardware: tubes, pods — "cells" is what she calls the transparent, sack-like constructions — lights, cameras, monitors and sensors. And then there is something more ephemeral: the ghost in the machine, the video echo of the previous installation that lives on in the new one.

The multiplying heads and tendrils in "Neural Architecture No. 4" are the sped-up videotape of the takedown (shown in reverse) of "Neural Architecture No. 3 (A Smart Building Is a Nervous Building)," which was at the Laguna Art Museum last year.

And the ghost of "No. 4" will be present in "Neural Architecture No. 5," which will be part of "Art in Motion VI: Technological Pervasions" at Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts.

### Photos



'Neural architecture'  
(Ricardo DeAratanha / LAT)



Who's watching?  
(Ricardo DeAratanha / LAT)

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The annual festival begins Feb. 27 and is organized in conjunction with the USC School of Fine Arts.

### Technology and culture

On a recent day, four assistants are videotaping the takedown at Otis. Aschheim plans to edit the pieces together — although she hasn't quite figured out how. "I like the fact that this project evolves the way an organism would," she says.

Assembly of "No. 4" took three weeks, but Aschheim dismantles its 6,000 feet of clear vinyl tubing in a day and a half. Although her installations appear high-tech, they are put together in low-tech fashion. She cuts tubes to length as she installs each work. The cells, which contain bundles of cameras, monitors and transmitters, are covered with clear plastic bathmats, their edges crudely sewn together by hand with nylon wire.

"I want to interpret the changing culture we're living in because of technology," she says. "I think it's absorbed into our lives without our considering the implications.... Even though my work is kind of sci-fi, it's really tied to culture."

Meg Linton, director of exhibitions at the Maltz gallery, says the work can seduce with its beauty but, she adds, "We're accepting technology so quickly because it's fun and beautiful, but we're not accepting the ramifications of it."

As an undergraduate at Brown University, Aschheim double-majored in anthropology and studio art. She later earned a master of fine arts degree from the University of Washington and in 2000 moved to Los Angeles, where she teaches in the studio art department at UC Irvine. Art won out over social science in part, she says, because of its open-ended nature, where ambiguity "could be a point of departure toward more questioning.

"I like all the multiplicity of voices I could have, including my own," Aschheim says.

### Our branching world

A month after taking apart "Neural Architecture No. 4," Aschheim is in her studio in a warehouse near Chinatown. She has decided that some parts of this next installation will be red, and so she is painting them with acrylic thinned with a polymer medium, to control the depth of color.

Sept. 11, 2001, marked a turn in her work. "There was suddenly the sense of the secret enemy, of something that could attack us from within," she says. "We've used the language of epidemiology to talk about terrorism — like sleeper cells — and we've used medical technology to look for threats; we X-ray our baggage." These ideas are channeled into "Neural Architecture," in software and in hardware form.

Tyler Stallings, chief curator at the Laguna Art Museum, says Aschheim's earlier works "really responded to the aesthetics of biology." Now, he says, they "respond to the site. The works are suggestions about the neurology of

the building, how they might be wired to the nth degree."

For "No. 5," Aschheim will take over the facade and lobby of the Armory Center. She plans to trace tree branches in front of the building with plastic tubing and have it flow into second-story offices. Filaments will light up as pedestrians walk by, and cameras outside will relay images to monitors inside. The outdoor tubing will be blood red, to allude to the human circulatory system. "The project in the trees came out of this idea of arborization," she says, "which is the neurobiology term for the branching of cells as they look for other cells to synapse with."

She notes that L.A.'s spreading streets and highways also parallel arborization. "I want to make a connection between this microscopic branching, this macroscopic branching and transportation branching."

There's entertainment value in her work, she admits: lights going on and off, and monitors in which visitors can see themselves. But the idea of surveillance is present too, with its darker connotations. Some who see her work question whether their images are being watched elsewhere.

"I hope to catalyze critical thinking," Aschheim says. I want to "stop time for a moment and have viewers ask how we feel about how we live.... Essentially, I'm interested in taking ideas that are invisible and making them transparent."

\*

### **'Art in Motion VI': Technological Pervasions**

**Where:** Armory Center for the Arts, 145 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena

**When:** Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays

**Ends:** Feb. 27 through May 29

**Price:** Free

**Contact:** (626) 792-5101

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