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THE JOURNAL OF MEDIA ARTS AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

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The Chainletter Tapes  
Conversation with Anne Doran  
Photographing Neoliberal Conflict in the United States  
Nene Humphrey's Multisensory Enactment of Empathetic Entanglement

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## PORTFOLIO

Ellen Lesperance

VOL. 44, No. 6



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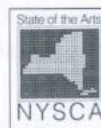
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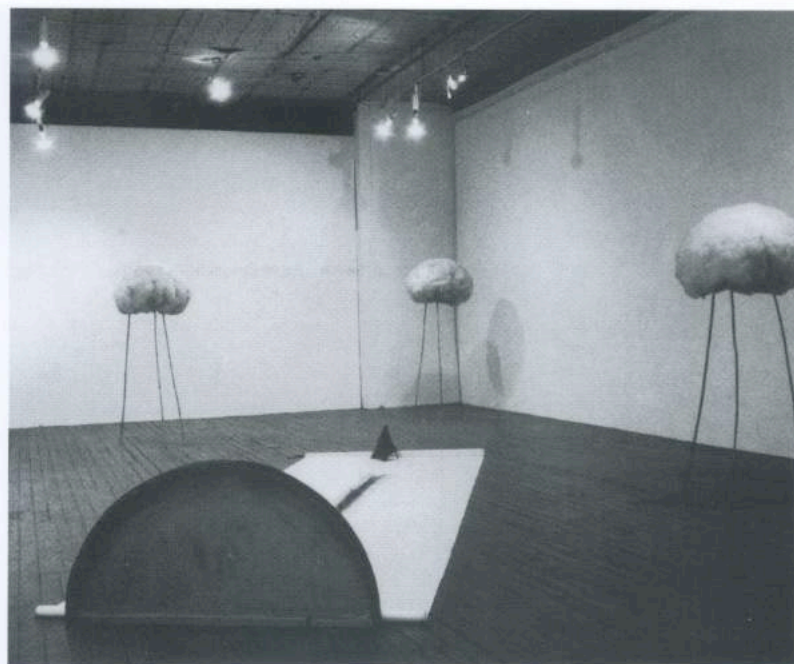


# Modeling the Psyche: Nene Humphrey's Multisensory Enactment of Empathetic Entanglement

By Cristina Albu

Since 2005, Nene Humphrey has been artist-in-residence at Joseph LeDoux's laboratory at the Center for Neural Science at New York University (NYU). As neuroscientists at this lab have been trying to untangle the synaptic relations that underlie emotion, Humphrey has been hard at work entangling lines, wire threads, and wool fibers in order to render neural communication perceptible. Through her drawing and sculptural practice, she has sought to make sense of incommensurable experiences such as pain or loss. While engaging in interdisciplinary inquiries, Humphrey found observing neural connections under the microscope intriguing, yet insufficient for grasping the dynamic qualities of experience and its deep, long-term imprint on the psyche. Hence, she has transitioned from focusing primarily on drawing the dense texture of neural fibers to enacting multimedia performances that convey the transformations undergone by synaptic relations over the course of time.

Humphrey's art practice has pivoted around several major poles of interest, including questions concerning the precariousness of matter, the fragility of memory, and the significant role of tactility in our interaction with the world. Hence, it should come as no surprise that she challenged neuroscientists at the NYU lab to take part in a somewhat atypical mode of inquiry into the materiality of the brain. She asked them to use Plasticine to model the shape of the amygdala—the widely acknowledged center of emotion located in the temporal lobe. This modest act may appear inconsequential, but it actually serves as a key reminder of the visceral materiality of the brain at a time when most neuroscientists focus extensively on mapping mental activity based on functional magnetic resonance

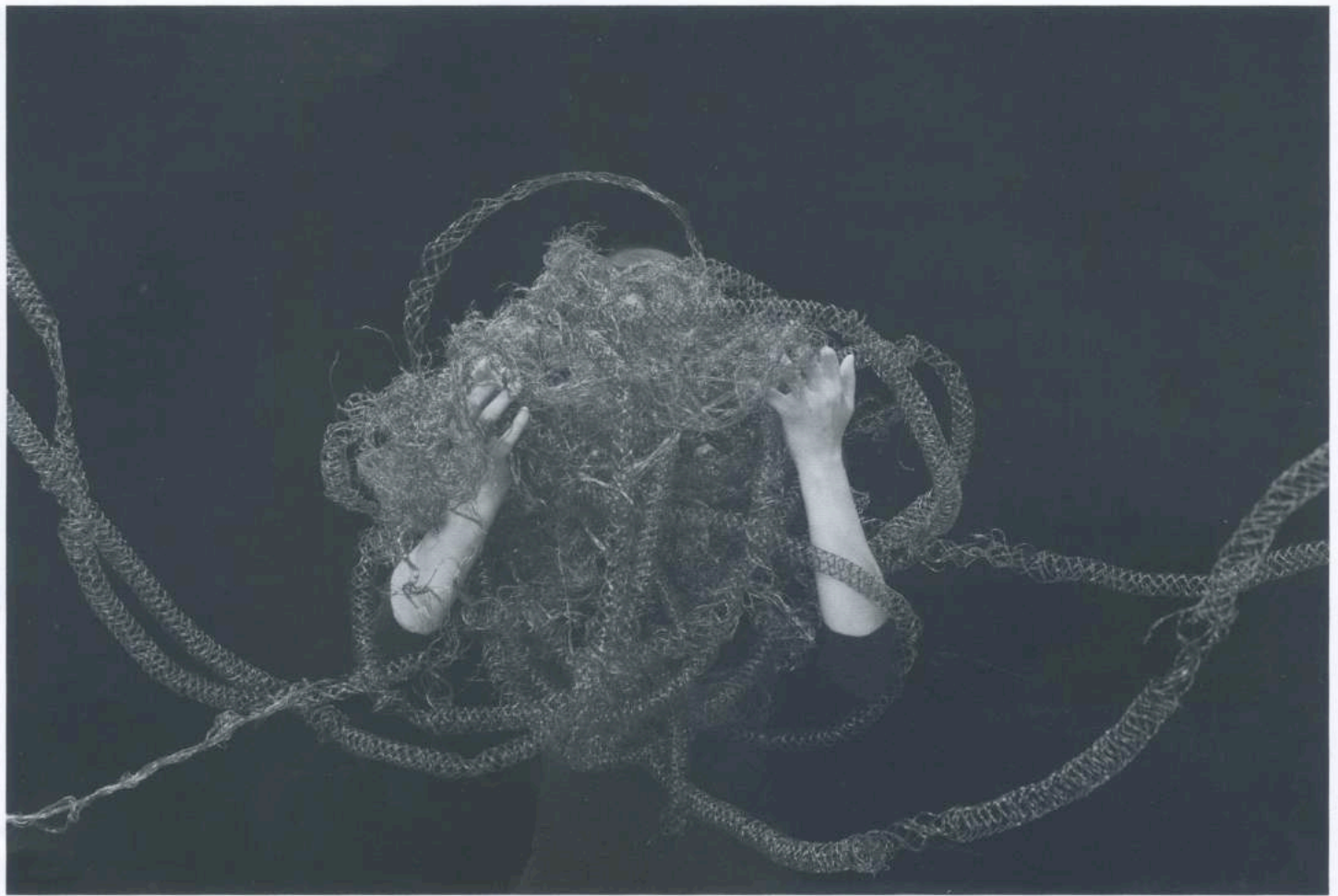


*Medieval Landscape* (1979–81) by Nene Humphrey; courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Workspace Gallery, NY

imaging (fMRI) technology. Through such material exchanges of knowledge, Humphrey tries to get one step closer to understanding how experiences take shape in the embodied mind.

Starting with the early stages of her artistic career in the 1970s, Humphrey was fascinated with creating material representations of imaginary worlds composed of abstract shapes. *Medieval Landscape* (1979–81) is a mixed-media installation evocative of a journey to a remote time and place. Fluffy clouds made of cotton and supported by long bamboo stalks guard a seemingly deserted terrain, marked by the presence of an imposing semicircle evocative of the sun and a relatively modest pyramidal shape connotative of the desire for shelter. This perfectly balanced tableau conveys a sense of mystical order, referencing both a cyclical time of perpetual return and a potentially irretrievable connection to the experience of time of a long past civilization. From an initial interest in conceiving minimalist topologies inspired by her interest in cosmology, Humphrey gradually shifted her attention to an exploration of the complex inner landscape of psychic experience. Her *Double Dream* series (1989–90) comprises precariously balanced abstract shapes made of plaster and wire that suggest liminal states of mind. This migration from sculptures evocative of the environment to objects reminiscent of the malleable architecture of the human body brings to mind Anish Kapoor's art practice, which underwent a somewhat similar transition from the late 1970s onward. Humphrey's works have an intimate quality because of their relatively small scale and highly plastic materials (e.g., wax, plaster, wire), which showcase the imprint of the human touch. Throughout the 1980s, her sculptural and drawing practice abounded with references to states of bodily entrapment. Compressed plaster





Detail from performance of *Circling the Center* (2015) by Nene Humphrey, at the artist's studio in Brooklyn, NY; courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Workspace Gallery, NY; photograph by Rudolf Costin

spheres, wiggling wires streaming out of small ovoid shapes, slightly irregular geometric forms on the verge of collapse or growth—all these elements alluded to physical and psychic change.

Over the past two decades, Humphrey's works have focused on pain and loss as part of a persistent exploration of the role of impermanence in human existence. Since working in the NYU lab, she has used a *camera lucida* to transpose on paper what she sees under the microscope lens. Concomitantly, she has employed embroidery, silk, pins, and wool threads to develop mixed-media works that unveil the intricate texture of the eye and the brain. Emphasizing the fuzzy differences between what we perceive as two-dimensional and what we sense as three-dimensional, Humphrey discloses the material fragility of neural connections while simultaneously underscoring their robust role in transmitting information. Her construction of tactile assemblages resembling neural circuits acquired an additional dimension once she embarked on staging multimedia performances that disclose the dynamic processes of the embodied mind.

In 2013, Humphrey collaborated with musician Roberto Carlos Lange and the Cantabile Youth Singers of Silicon Valley to stage *Everything that happens*, a multimedia performance presented at the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, California. Under the artistic

direction of Elena Sharkova, the choir formed out of twenty teenagers engaged in poetically dismantling and reconstructing a statement made by neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux during a conversation with Humphrey on the neural basis of memory. LeDoux's statement reads: "Everything that happens to us and gets recorded in our brains and stored is transcribed in a way by synaptic events."<sup>71</sup> Through articulating phrases, words, and syllables from this sentence, the choir members repeatedly affirmed and seemingly interrogated the validity of the statement.

As the performance begins, choir members wait on stage in front of a screen, on which is projected a video showing the mouths of two girls repeatedly uttering words that cannot be heard. It immediately becomes apparent that the girls in the video are articulating entirely different sounds (most likely "synaptic" and "our"). The rhythm at which they are pronounced is disjunctive, challenging the viewer to imagine syncopated sounds. As the affective impact of the two girls' gestural communication intensifies, white typed letters appear on the screen. Arranged in sets of consonants and vowels, they first appear to be meaningless. Gradually, more letters appear, eventually allowing the viewer to intuit words and sentences that are part of Virginia Woolf's reflection on the vitality of the brain



and its ultimate material dissolution.<sup>2</sup> While inferring meaning based on fragmented words and mouth movements, one senses that interpreting information in human communication does not rest only on the possession of a well-stored code, but also on a wide range of affective exchanges and meaningful associations.

Once the video projection dims at the back of the stage, the members of the choir gradually pick up the mics and vocalize more or less disparate sounds—some are complete words, others are sibilants or breathing patterns. They form a mesmerizing asymmetrical composition that fluctuates in unpredictable ways. Sharkova conducts the choir with wavy gestures that indicate different degrees of acoustic intensity or cultivate call-and-response patterns between the performers. In Humphrey's words, she has the role of "tuning" the vocal signals rather than controlling them. In an interview about the performance, Sharkova explains: "There is such a strong improvisational part to it that the outcome is unknown."<sup>3</sup> The breathing and letter patterns accumulate, their intensity increasing or decreasing at different rhythms.

This reverberating environment makes one think of the mind as an acoustic chamber in which synapses between different parts of the neural system are activated synchronously or asynchronously. The arabesque of sounds acquires more meaningful content as the choir members start uttering words, sometimes repeating the same term in different tones. Words such as "synapses," "recorded," and "stored" stand out from the rich acoustic texture, which eventually turns melodious once the choir members start singing them one by one. There is no sense of a unitary composition, since rising tonalities intermix with lowering ones. This dynamic unfolding of contingent sounds giving way to new acoustic patterns is the embodiment of *emergence*, a process that, in philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's view, goes beyond the deterministic relations between the components of a system and can only be "explained through recourse to the reality of duration and its forces of (self-) differentiation."<sup>4</sup> Since the voices of the twenty choir members follow different tonalities, the resulting sound texture becomes somewhat unruly. The sounds depend on a multitude of subtle contrasts that develop organically and create the potential for variations that cannot be anticipated by individual singers or by the conductor.

As the murmur of voices slowly subsides, video images appear again on the screen, directing viewers' attention to an accumulation of visual stimuli. Spectators watch with increased expectation as the video shows the statement by LeDoux that inspired the performance being written out on a chalkboard by the hand of an otherwise invisible scribe, who is in fact Nene Humphrey, the conceptual originator of the piece. In the meantime, two girls from the choir stand up and asynchronously pronounce it. They slow down its delivery by repeating small sections of it and only gradually add more words to the phrase until the full statement can be heard. The slight disjunction between the tempo of their utterances evokes the parallel processing of information in the brain, or more precisely, the imperceptible delay between the moments when stimuli reach different parts of the neural system as individuals attempt to make sense of what they experience.

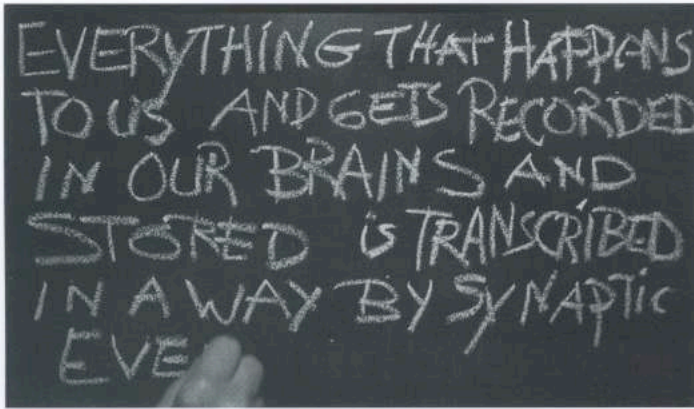
LeDoux's statement on synaptic relations is quite specific, but also leaves room for interpretation. It points out that everything we

experience is registered in the brain, whether we are conscious of it or not. Yet this registration at the level of synaptic relations also seems somehow liable to transformation because the information is ultimately "transcribed in a way." It is precisely this variability that Humphrey underlines as part of the linguistic content on the chalkboard starts to be removed, first by using the chalk to cut through the letters she has just inscribed, then by employing black ink to cover up the full sentence, which nonetheless continues to echo in the spectator's mind. Her use of the chalkboard for highlighting transformative processes is reminiscent of Joan Jonas's performances in which meaning mutates as visible traces of one's thoughts undergo variations. Any act of transcription, be it related to the recording of a personal memory or the deciphering of a statement such as the one written out on the board, ultimately implies some degree of differentiation. As LeDoux persuasively affirms in his book *The Synaptic Self* (2003) and as the asynchronicity of the voices pronouncing his statement suggests, the self is neither "static" nor "unitary,"<sup>5</sup> being perpetually subjected to processes of differentiation influenced by genetic, social, and biological factors.

Through both visual and acoustic stimuli, *Everything that happens* enacts several of the well-known metaphors used to describe the mind: the chalkboard corresponding to the more or less *clean slate* on which information accumulates, eventually allowing for higher-order cognitive processes; the *projection screen* on which glimmers of experience unfold, being brought into the limelight or cast into shadow based on attention mechanisms; and the *theater hall* in which events are orchestrated through carefully planned acts for a public audience. Nonetheless, none of these metaphors are fully enforced by Humphrey. They are mere lenses through which the audience can consider different views on the complexity of the brain. *Everything that happens* evokes the performativity of the embodied mind, as well as its modulations in relation to oscillating stimuli and interpersonal relations that do not necessarily follow predictable patterns. As Lange explains, this piece purposefully undermines representation, corresponding to "something happening that cannot be described as it is happening—like being electrocuted."<sup>6</sup> In this sense, one cannot help but be skeptical about the notion that "everything"—literally "everything that happens"—can be transcribed in one's mind. And even if it can, perhaps it is high time we leave behind the analogies between experience and recorded pictures or encoded text, embracing instead a more dynamic view of how we make sense of the world.

Humphrey found an additional impetus for exploring the plasticity of the brain while she was striving to come to terms with the death of her husband, artist Benny Andrews, in 2006. This experience of personal loss led her to become immersed in an aesthetic inquiry into how synaptic relations enable us to acquire a sense of self, accumulate memories, and build connections to others. While conducting research on mourning rituals, Humphrey became interested in Victorian braiding, a nineteenth-century set of techniques involving the intertwining of hair threads for the design of small objects or jewelry items, which served as mementos of the departed ones. The braiding process conferred solace to the mourners due to its therapeutic





From performance of *Everything that Happens* at the Carriage House Theater, Montalvo Arts Center (2013) by Nene Humphrey; courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Workspace Gallery, NY; photograph by Zoe FitzGerald

qualities. By dedicating long stretches of time to creating floral or geometric patterns out of hair threads, they reconnected to a sign of the corporeal presence of the deceased and gained some sense of relief through the construction of a more lasting symbol of their existence. Humphrey adopted this Victorian technique and used wool, wire, beads, and epoxy to create multilayered braided structures. *The Plain Sense of Things* (2008–2009) is a mixed-media series that features these heavily intertwined networks that resemble a neural landscape. Its components are hung against the wall, serving as a vivid display of fragile materiality. Intensely red threads protrude from entangled black and gray braids, signaling deep psychic wounds or, in more literal terms, nuclei such as the amygdala situated underneath dense layers of neural fibers. In its allusion to the precariousness of mental and bodily unity, this series reminds one of Sheela Gowda's and Ranjani Shettar's installations, which are also evocative of fragile biological networks that have the potential to develop or collapse.

Humphrey decided to open up her practice even further by engaging other participants in the act of braiding, with the aim of sharing this Victorian craft and creating empathetic connections to other people who have faced the challenge of traumatic loss. Since 2009, Humphrey has created installations and performances that emphasize the importance of communal creative acts for overcoming suffering. At Sheridan Art Gallery at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania in 2010, she invited visitors to learn the braiding technique and add their own sculptural components to a round metallic scaffolding. The gradual accumulation of spiraling wire became symbolic of a world in perpetual formation, encapsulating a rich texture that concomitantly alludes to harmony and tension. Four years later, Humphrey relied on a somewhat similar communal sculptural practice in the context of the performance *If you were to peer into the mourner's skull* (2014), enacted at the BRIC House gallery in Brooklyn, New York. The work merges an audio recording of a poetic reflection on remembrance with video projections and a live enactment of different Victorian braiding techniques. Performers stretch red wire with weights across braiding tables and attentively

proceed to intertwine the threads, at times reciting the mantra of instructions they follow to maintain the integrity of the patterns. The habits needed for crisscrossing the wires correspond to the repeated desire to reminisce in order to consolidate dissipating memories of the departed ones. The recorded lines from Tom Sleigh's poem *Circling the Center* (2014), play in the background and convey the difficulty of finding a meeting ground between a deeply personal experience and the physicality of the neural processes underlying its emergence: "If you were to peer into the mourner's skull . . . what you'd see are nerve fibers, / long strands of tissue that look like dead people's hair . . . spikes, / no interpretation, no allegory, / no one listening to music in a room / the not-there listener sits inside."<sup>7</sup>

The poem also alludes to the fragmentary quality of memories that appear to fail to coalesce unless one reenacts them in imaginative ways. In *Pieces of Light* (2013), Charles Fernyhough argues that even though it appears quite counterintuitive, "a memory is more like a habit, a process of constructing something from its parts, in similar but subtly changing ways each time, whenever the occasion arises."<sup>8</sup> Humphrey hints at the same idea by pairing the braiding process with lyrical lines that dwell on the pain of recollecting the departed. Both acts require repetition and prolonged duration in order to consolidate the integrity of the cognitive patterns required for maintaining the unity of the braid or the vividness of long past experiences. The analogy becomes even more powerful when one considers the plastic qualities of the wire coils shaped by the performers and the modulations of the synaptic relations that permit communication to occur in the brain in the presence of neurotransmitters. What is paradoxical in considering memory in view of habits is that the repeated act of reminiscence can bring both happiness and suffering to a mourner. The ritual of braiding in the performance appears to suggest that a new habit can take away the pain associated with another and eventually return the individual to a more cohesive connection to the present world.

In the 2015 staging of *Circling the Center* in the artist's studio in New York, Humphrey took the audience one step closer to the experience of the mourner by combining images, sounds, materials, and motifs that have accumulated since the beginning of her quest to find comfort for her loss. This performance is more theatrical than earlier versions of it in the sense that it makes more complex use of the *mise-en-scène* and light effects. It opens with a symmetrical tableau, with a cellist on one side and a performer sitting in front of a braiding table on the other. The middle of the stage is occupied by three women engaged in a communal braiding ritual that can be seen only on the other side of a scrim, as through a glass, darkly. The symmetry of the setting is only gradually revealed as dim light pivots from one area of the set to another, giving the audience a chance to take in the scene at a slow pace.

Both acoustic and visual stimuli are evocative of prolonged duration: the vibrato string sounds, the assemblage of wire braids arranged against the back wall, the meticulous gestures of the performers. The performance purposefully intensifies the sensation that time is stretching in order to attune viewers to the experience of the mourner. Drawing on the psychoanalysis of grief, Esther Dreifuss-Kattan notes that "issues of temporality are inherent to



mourning and loss, as the meaning of death gives meaning to time.”<sup>9</sup> Humphrey’s works translate the extended temporality experienced by the mourner into spatial terms by encapsulating a great density of material layers that correspond to the subtle gradations of suffering.

Multisensory strata persistently accumulate throughout *Circling the Center*, hinting at the interweaving patterns of neural connections and the inevitably mediated character of experience. Just as attention brings into awareness the objects of perception, so light introduces the audience to the multiple figures that perform the drama of mourning. While initially the three central female performers appear to epitomize the Moirae in Greek mythology spinning and apportioning the thread of human destiny, they eventually turn out to be as vulnerable to the experience of loss as all other individuals as they move the wire threads across the braiding table in a seemingly vain attempt to recapture a past memory.

The affective potential of the performance is enhanced by a vivid awareness of tactile sensations, as viewers observe the gestures of the cellist on the left applying extended pressure on the strings, and the rhythmic movements of the performer on the right stretching the wire. These sensations are further heightened by the mediating function of the fiber screen, which first acts as a window onto the communal act of braiding taking place at the center of the stage, and subsequently transforms into an interface for video projection. The images that appear on it acquire a palpable quality due to the perceptible texture of its surface. They range from animated drawings of neural fiber and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans to video recordings of the braiding process and a spherical wire assemblage that alludes not only to the maze of synaptic relations, but also to the heavy web of interconnections between different areas of the world.

The concept of absence is at the heart of this performance. It is powerfully conveyed by its very title, which indicates an impossible convergence with a perpetually elusive center. The mourner orbits the space of memories without being fully able to relive past moments with the departed. Similarly, the performers orbit the center of the braiding table while spinning the wire, yet once they remove the braid, its center turns out to be a gaping aperture. This emptiness does not have only negative connotations; it alludes to the space needed for communication. Once detached from the central axis of the table, the braids resemble umbilical or spinal cords, essential material channels for transferring nutrients or information. The images in the video projections also emphasize energy transmission and empathetic dialogue. They provide a much-needed affective interval between the moments when viewers’ attention is channeled via light to the performers located on different parts of the stage.

The screen serves as an instrument for catalyzing a sense of ambiguous simultaneity, in particular when it acquires more transparent qualities as images are playing across its surface, or when it stays illuminated as light is still directed to one of the braiding performers. While watching images of the braiding table seen from above, viewers cannot help but wonder whether the projection is a live broadcast or a recording. Disjunctions slowly become perceptible, and the notion of a possible coincidence of the viewer’s vantage point with that of the individual actually braiding the thread is perpetually deferred. The purposeful

absence of Humphrey as a performer in her works also indicates that the experience of loss is highly personal, and while it can definitely be shared at an empathetic level, it is never to be fully replicated in the same manner in someone else’s consciousness. Whether having experienced similar losses themselves or not, the performers pivot around a center of emotion with which they can never all converge in exactly the same way. Examining a plethora of phenomenological and psychological interpretations of empathy, philosopher Dan Zahavi reaches the conclusion that this emotional connection is an “experience of the embodied mind of the other, an experience which, rather than eliminating the difference between self-experience and other-experience, takes the asymmetry to be a necessary and persisting existential fact.”<sup>10</sup> *Circling the Center* similarly reveals that even if we were to see things through the eyes of the mourner, as the camera angle at which the projected images were filmed invites us to do, our experience would never coincide with hers. This gap is not equivalent to a loss or a failure, but an absence that renders communicative exchanges possible and opens up the potential for caring about others.

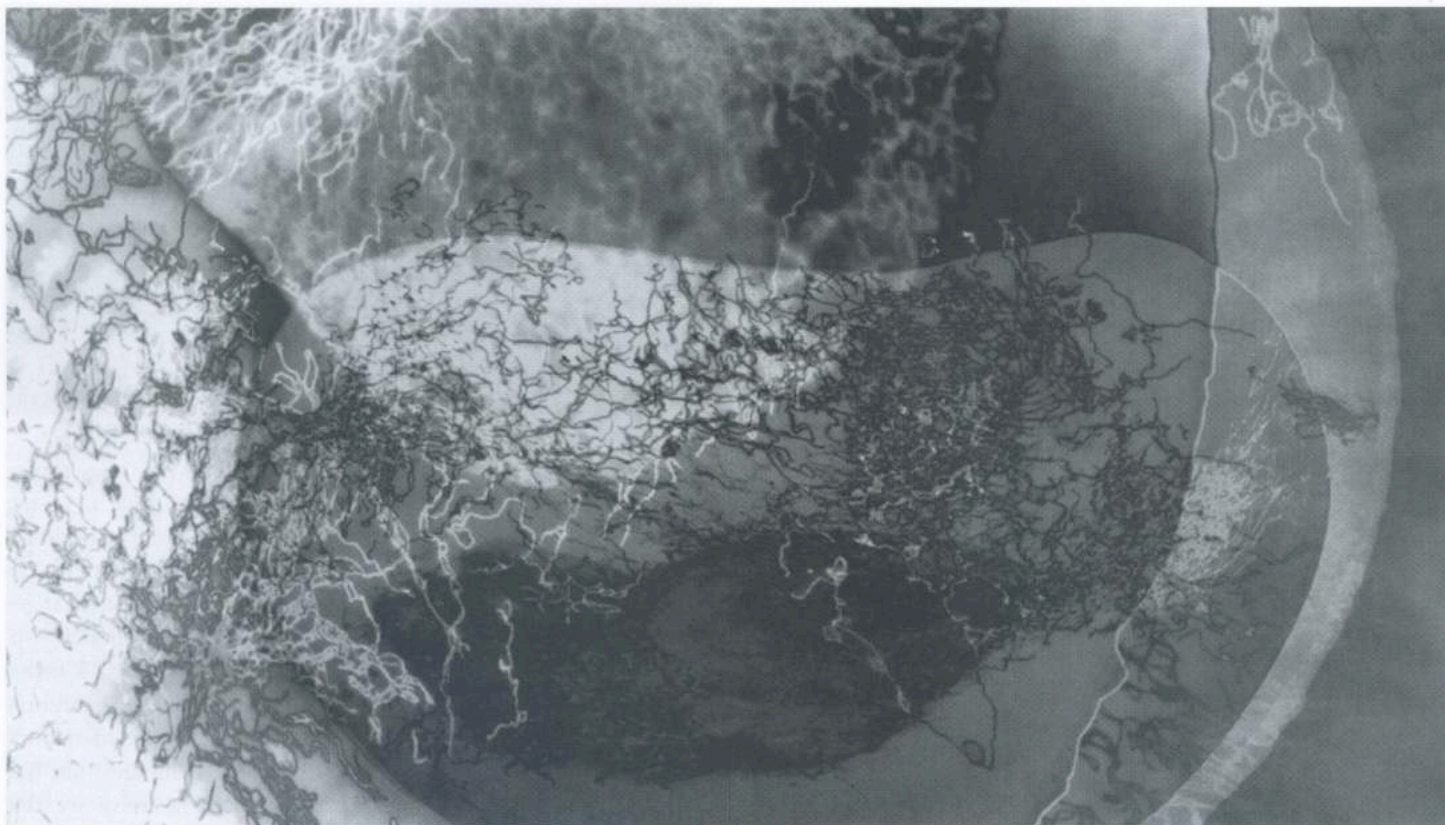
The elusive center in this performance can also be taken to epitomize the complexity of consciousness that continues to mystify neuroscientists in search of empirical evidence of its source. Humphrey’s projections of MRI images are far from the scientific visual evidence of brain activity we are generally accustomed to seeing. They are not still pictures with highlighted areas of intense activity. Instead, they appear to pulsate on the screen, shifting from distanced to close-up axial views of the cortex. This pulsation enhances the impression of a living structure that can undergo plastic changes. Far from an isolated unit processing information apart from the body, the brain appears permeable and embodied in these poetic images. Humphrey masterfully overlaps images of a blinking eye with the MRI pictures in order to underscore the fluidity of seemingly seclusive physical boundaries. In a climactic yet subtle visual sequence, she shows two hands coming together to protect the brain and give comfort to the mourner. The virtual impossibility

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From performance of *Everything that Happens* at the Carriage House Theater, Montalvo Arts Center (2013) by Nene Humphrey; courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Workspace Gallery, NY; photograph by Zoe FitzGerald







From performance of *Circling the Center* (2015) by Nene Humphrey, at the artist's studio in Brooklyn, NY; courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Work-space Gallery, NY

of touching someone's mind in a literal manner is a powerful metaphor of the mourner's desperate need for interpersonal connection, which ultimately can constitute one of the sources of healing for those immersed in a grieving process. The communal act of braiding opens the way for empathetic sharing even in the absence of verbal exchanges. The lament that ends *Circling the Center* echoes a similar attunement of states of mind, which may never be perfectly in sync with each other, but can tentatively oscillate with comparable intensity.

Never a performer in *Circling the Center*, Humphrey does not place her own experience of loss at the center of this multimedia performance, preferring instead the role of hidden orchestrator of a drama that transcends individual tragedy. In recent years, she has woven a web of relations to filmmakers, performers, musicians, and neuroscientists. These collaborations permit her to create multisensory works, which grow over time as new visual, acoustic, and fiber layers are added to them. Thus, Humphrey designs a comprehensive and dynamic landscape of the embodied mind and reveals its deep entanglement in the social world. As noted in *Everything that happens* and *Circling the Center*, the performers become involved in communal artistic acts expressive of both similar and contrasting mental states that communicate the transformative potential of matter—be it associated with the neural cells, the vibration of the vocal cords, or the open-ended braid assemblages that can unravel or entangle over the course of

time. Humphrey avoids using neuroscientific evidence as central scaffolding for her practice. Pondering key questions concerning emotion, emergence, and healing, she branches out to other artistic areas that offer poetic interpretations of the workings of the embodied mind. Her multimedia practice suggests that the key to decoding the mysteries of human experience may subsist in reciprocal knowledge exchanges across disciplines. Such exchanges could take us one step further toward a holistic understanding of the more or less easily visible material systems in which we are deeply entangled.

**CRISTINA ALBU is an assistant professor of art history and theory at the University of Missouri–Kansas City. She is the author of *Mirror Affect: Seeing Self, Observing Others in Contemporary Art* (2016).**

NOTES 1. Joseph LeDoux, unpublished transcript of a conversation with Nene Humphrey, New York, 2012. 2. Virginia Woolf, "Letter to Ethel Smyth," in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 5, 1932–1935, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann Banks (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 140. 3. Elena Sharkova, "Interview with Nene Humphrey and collaborators," Vimeo video, 8:37, January 8, 2014, [www.nenehumphrey.com/everything-that-happens](http://www.nenehumphrey.com/everything-that-happens). 4. Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 42. 5. LeDoux, *The Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 29–31. 6. Roberto Lange, "Interview with Nene Humphrey and collaborators." 7. Tom Sleight, "Circling the Center" (2014). Sleight wrote this poem specifically for Nene Humphrey's work, available at [www.nenehumphrey.com/if-you-were-to-peer-into-a-mourners-skull](http://www.nenehumphrey.com/if-you-were-to-peer-into-a-mourners-skull). 8. Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light: How the New Science of Memory Illuminates the Stories We Tell about Our Pasts* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 6. 9. Esther Dreifuss-Kattan, *Art and Mourning: The Role of Creativity in Healing Trauma and Loss* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4. 10. Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 151.