

The Place of Memory

John Hope Franklin Center, room 240 – 24th April 2009 (08.50 am -16.00 pm)

This one-day symposium will explore themes relating to the neurosciences and the re-visualization of scientific knowledge through art and digital media/technology. The focus of the symposium will be memory.

Advances in our understanding of brain function and its relation to behavior are regularly being made within the Neurosciences, yet very little of it passes into the public imagination. Ideas are either too complex or too abstract, often being so far removed from daily experience that they are rendered alien with regards to both their content and their relevance. Yet there is value in communicating these ideas to a wider audience (i.e. non-specialists), to give both an insight into the inner workings of the brain as well as drive the spirit of scientific investigation; to challenge people on what they experience every day as seemingly automatic and implicitly natural; to reveal the complex mechanisms and processes that lie beneath. The desire, therefore, is to reconnect the science of the brain with the experiences that the brain engenders. The key will be to find the ‘common ground’ of understanding that spans between them.

Drawing such a link between the ‘scientific process’ and the substrate of its investigation through art is far from novel. After the explosion of interest in the natural world in the 16th century, the properties of real-world objects became as valid an object of inquiry, and a subject of artistic exploration, as more traditional mythical or allegorical subjects. From the lavish botanical encyclopedias recording the discoveries of the “New World” and Asia to the foliated column capitals of many of the finest 19th Century Natural History museums, the beauty of our world as observed through science has always found ways to access our imagination and experience. Even today, the Wellcome trust offers over £3 million per year in support of their Engaging Science program, aiming to educate and inspire the public about biomedical sciences and their social contexts through art. Thus, in this symposium we will be continuing a long tradition. With the ever-widening gap between the immediately observable and the hidden world of the Sciences, perhaps this form of engagement is more prescient than ever before.

The subject of the symposium will be an exploration of themes relating to memory, unquestionably one of mankind’s defining characteristics. Only through the flexible encoding and storage of experience/knowledge over time are we able to establish an understanding of the world around us and act in accordance with what we know. Only with memory can we have history. But what do we know about memory formation? What do we understand about its coloring by emotion? Why is it that we forget? Through the Neurosciences, we can begin to understand the mechanisms that underlie memory, from the oscillatory brain network states that parse and encode incoming information, to the roles played by emotion and trauma in the sculpting of these memory processes. Through the course of the symposium, participants will explore cutting edge ideas within the Neurosciences as well as extant examples of Science-Art cross-fertilization. They will then be asked to draw from their own experiences and areas of expertise to approach this most challenging of subjects.