

Michele Barker and Anna Munster's *Struck*

Andrew Murphie

The lines between science and art are increasingly blurred in the uses of images to explore our most personal organ - the human brain. Michele Barker and Anna Munster's *Struck* explores the at times beautiful strangeness of images of "our" brain. In that these images that are meant to reflect our psyche, they often have a disruptive relationship to our thinking about "human nature". However, the tensions played out in *Struck* are not just those surrounding the general "human". *Struck* is also concerned with lived experience. Indeed, the installation stages the gap involved between the intensely impersonal nature of these images (images of *the* brain) and the just as intensely personal (images of *my* brain). In *Struck* an individual is "struck" with a serious medical condition involving the brain and nervous system. Medical institutions come into play, with their use of neurological image systems. There are truth claims made about both the "human" and the individual.

The difficulties that lie between scientific imaging and the hidden depths of human psychology have a history. This history is subtly folded into the contemporary dilemma of *Struck*. Here Barker and Munster animate the sketches of the nineteenth century French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot's sketches become precursors for the ambiguities of contemporary medical imaging. Animated in *Struck*, the sketches also give life to the physical and mental pain of facing a neurological disorder.

Charcot was precursor of modern neuroscience as well as a major influence upon Freud. The most famous point at which Charcot and Freud's work converged was found in their work on on the disorder of "hysteria". This came to form the basis for many of their more general psychological theories. And at the basis of the scientism of "hysteria" is series of compelling images, often of women. Charcot was fascinated with the power of drawing from his youth, and this was carried into his neurological work, in which he made many sketches and photographs of his "hysterical" patients. It is these sketches and photographs – the way they ground the ideas – that carry all the ambiguity of science's ambitions regarding the brain.

Art has often been involved with science, providing visual "evidence" that can - rightly or wrongly - be foundational. Echoing Charcot's sketches, what is often called the "decade of the brain" of the 1990s was based on the development of more refined imaging technologies for the processes of the brain - such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which could record the activity of the brain in close to real time. Scientists could now watch parts of the brain "light up" as someone looked at something, meditated, grew angry or afraid. This is of course valid science, yet it also comes the temptation to misinterpret what is actually being seen - or not seen. *Struck* draws attention to the succumbing to this temptation. This is reflected in the deliberate reproduction of the style of what is appropriately called "stop motion animation" – which freeze frames living movement in order to first to capture it, then only secondarily to reanimate it. Here *Struck* references the more general history of the attempt to use images to discover the essence of the human - for example in Eadweard Muybridge's famous use of multiple cameras to record human and animal motion. In *Struck*, the stilted motion of such images is contrasted with images of a smooth, often abstract complexity, perhaps the human thought or experience that elude any attempt to capture them. In *Struck*, human life is not a question of a perfect picture but of a balance between the apparent and the hidden that is always precarious.

The sound in *Struck* is integral to the sense of this precarious balance. A machinic pulsing suggests the repeated passing of a medical scanner as it segments the brain into image slices. This pulsing unifies the work, is comforting in the manner of contemporary electronica, but in its very machinism is also somewhat troubling.

Lyrical piano from the past fades away into an increasing distance in the face of this recurrent machinic pulse. Any remaining sonic relation between past lyricism and present machinism is itself “struck” repeatedly - interrupted by a cough, a cry, the uncanniness of an old horn. Nothing, it seems, is easy, in the new relations to machines.

At the same time, *Struck* is far from dismissing either science or the technology of imaging. It rather reflects the passionate relation the contemporary world has to science, and particularly to scientific imaging. The work is critical of science’s temptation to simplification. Yet it also desires what science has to give in its exploration of the material complexity of human thought and life. *Struck* is art asking passionate questions of science. It wants to know what these images really tell us about our own experience. What relation does the power of these images, and of the medical institutions involved, have to our own personal quirks?

The medical diagnosis - as one interpretation - is telling in this respect. *Struck* replays the diagnosis of this particular event with both frustration and humour. Note here the American doctors’ “diagnosis” of the Australian accent. It seems to have taken some time to decide that this accent is not pathological. Perhaps, like the central figure in *Struck*, the diagnoses contemporary neuroscience make of human nature mean that we all suddenly feel “a long way away from home”. As in *Struck*, this might also make for a strange homecoming in which everything has changed.

In the face of this the blurred central figure of *Struck* - particularly in her balanced and careful movements - gives a strong sense of patience and determination. She has been triply “struck”. There is the initial onset of the symptoms. There is the existential fact of being “struck” by the diagnosis - the sudden enforced relation to medical institutions, drugs, the fragility of the current state of scientific knowledge concerning the brain. Thirdly, there is the sense of being “struck” over time, over the strange duration of coming to terms with the condition of one’s nervous system. It is a question of a whole style of living.

This style of living is not just a matter for science, but perhaps for science and art together. There is a peculiar beauty to medical imaging of the brain, one that no doubt influences our response to it. At the same time, if art exists in the relation between our senses and our thoughts, the challenge that neuroscience provides in rethinking the nature of sensation and thinking, is profound. *Struck* responds to this challenge. It suggests art that fully acknowledges the gaps that riddle our attempts to represent the very material essence of our sensed engagement with the world. It also suggests art concerned with the new relations to the world that science brings. Ultimately this is art providing a new view of the intensities of science itself, *as lived*. This is not just a question of what we can now see, but of how images can capture the unseen. Indeed, in that there is much that is inevitably and powerfully invisible within neuroscientific images, they have often been compared to religious images. In this respect, *Struck* gestures towards our inability to think basic aspects of ourselves in purely material terms, along with the contemporary urgency of doing so. It is this that troubles us in *Struck*, and also gives the work its luminous intensity.

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