

1 **BiPOLES: a tool for bidirectional dual-color optogenetic control of neurons**

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17

18 **Abstract**

19 We report BiPOLES, an optogenetic tool for balanced excitation and inhibition of neurons with
20 light of two different colors. BiPOLES consists of the blue-light-sensitive anion-conducting
21 channelrhodopsin GtACR2 fused to the red-light-sensitive cation-conducting
22 channelrhodopsin Chrimson in a single, trafficking-optimized tandem protein. BiPOLES
23 enables multiple applications including potent dual-color spiking and silencing of the same
24 neurons *in vivo* and dual-color optogenetic control of two independent neuronal populations.

25

26 **Main text**

27 To prove necessity and sufficiency of a particular neuronal population for a specific behavior,
28 a cognitive task, or a pathological condition, it is desirable to both faithfully inhibit and activate
29 this exact same population of neurons. In principle, optogenetic manipulations should allow
30 such interventions. However, excitation and inhibition of the neuronal population of interest is
31 commonly done in separate experiments, expressing either an excitatory or an inhibitory opsin.
32 Alternatively, if both opsins are co-expressed in the same cells, it is essential to achieve equal
33 subcellular distribution and a defined ratio between excitatory and inhibitory action at the
34 respective wavelengths, so that neuronal activation and silencing can be precisely controlled
35 in all transduced cells. This is particularly challenging when AAV-transduction of the
36 optogenetic actuators is required *in vivo*.

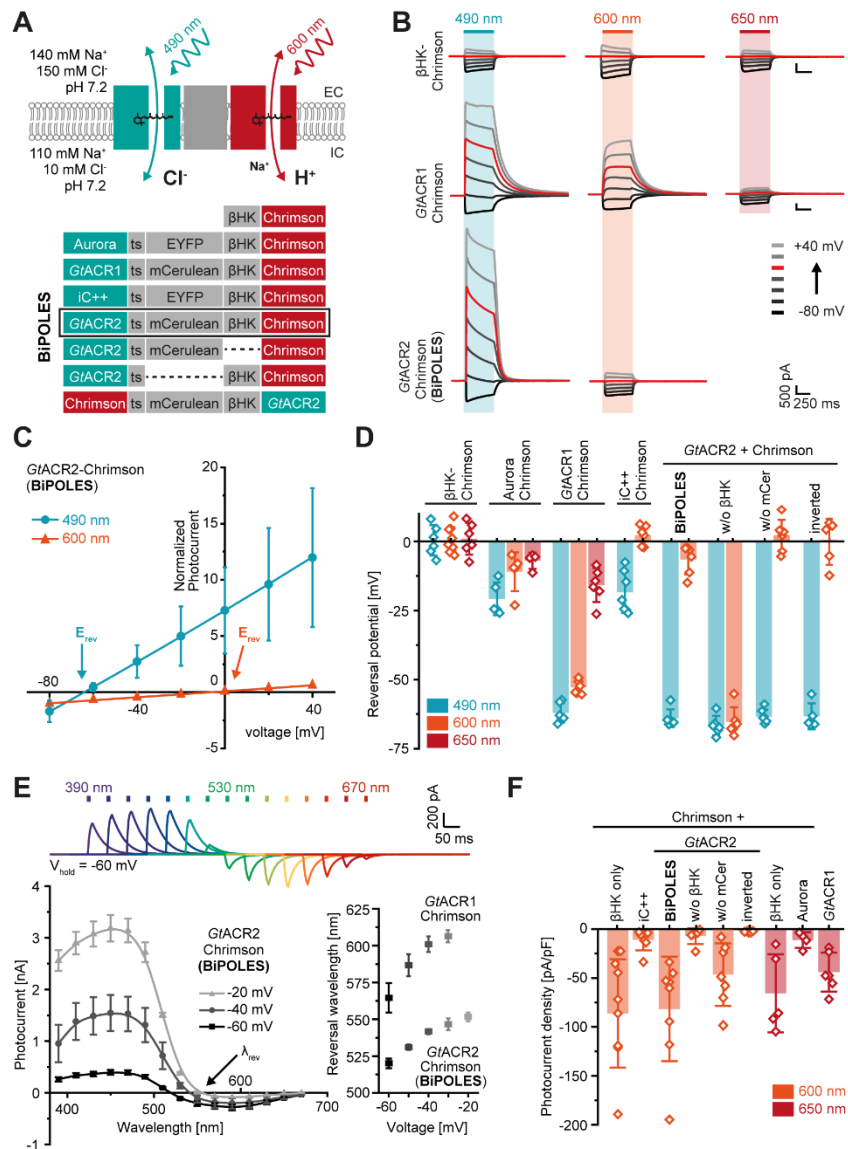
37 A second, long-standing challenge in neuroscience is the independent activation of two defined
38 neuronal populations. Although two spectrally distinct opsins have been combined previously
39 to spike two distinct sets of neurons¹⁻⁴, careful calibration and dosing of blue light is required
40 to avoid activation of the red-shifted opsin, as all rhodopsins are activated to a certain extent
41 by blue light. This typically leaves only a narrow spectral and energetic window to activate the
42 blue- but not the red-light-sensitive opsin. Thus, dual-color control of neurons is particularly
43 challenging in the mammalian brain where light intensities decrease by orders of magnitude
44 over a few millimeters in a wavelength-dependent manner^{5,6}.

45 Capitalizing on the recent advent of anion-conducting channelrhodopsins (ACRs)⁷⁻⁹ and a
46 tandem gene-fusion strategy¹⁰, we generated BiPOLES, a Bidirectional Pair of Opsins for
47 Light-induced Excitation and Silencing. First, BiPOLES enables potent, light-mediated
48 silencing and activation of the same neurons *in vivo* by a single optogenetic tool and second,
49 dual-color control of two distinct neuronal populations without cross-talk at light intensities
50 spanning multiple orders of magnitude, when combined with a second blue-light-sensitive
51 Channelrhodopsin (ChR).

52 As a general strategy, we fused the red-light-activated cation channel Chrimson with various
53 blue- or green-light-activated ACRs. This approach aimed for colocalized and balanced hyper-
54 and depolarization with blue and red light starting from a physiological membrane voltage as
55 well as restriction of the depolarizing light spectrum to a narrow, orange-red window as the
56 ACR compensates the blue-light-activated Chrimson currents. The opsins were linked by
57 sequences composed of the Kir2.1 membrane trafficking signal (ts)¹¹, a cyan or yellow
58 fluorescent protein, and the transmembrane β helix of the rat gastric H⁺/K⁺ ATPase (β HK) to
59 maintain correct membrane topology of both opsins¹⁰ (Fig. 1A).

60 All ACR-Chrimson tandems were evaluated in human embryonic kidney cells (HEK) under
61 matched experimental conditions. In all constructs, except the one lacking the β HK-subunit,
62 blue-light-activated currents shifted towards the chloride Nernst potential whereas red-light-
63 activated currents shifted towards the proton Nernst potential (Fig.1B-D, S1). Reversal
64 potentials varied strongly for the different tandem variants indicating considerable differences
65 in the wavelength-specific anion/cation conductance ratio (Fig.1D). At a defined membrane
66 potential between the Nernst potential for chloride or protons, blue and red light induced
67 outward and inward currents, respectively. The specific wavelength of photocurrent inversion
68 (λ_{rev}) depended on the action spectrum of the ACR, the relative conductance of the ACR and
69 Chrimson, and the relative driving force for anions, cations and protons defined by the
70 membrane voltage and the respective ion gradients (Fig.1E).

71 *Gt*ACR2-ts-mCerulean- β HK-Chrimson – from here on termed BiPOLES – was the most
 72 promising variant, showing first, the largest difference in reversal potential upon blue- or red-
 73 light excitation (Fig.1D), second, equal inward and outward currents at -60 mV, which is near
 74 the resting membrane voltage (Fig.1E) and, third, the highest red-light-activated photocurrents,
 75 comparable to those of Chrimson expressed alone (Fig.1F).



76

77 **Figure 1: Development of BiPOLES and biophysical characterization. (A)** Molecular scheme of
 78 BiPOLES with the extracellular (EC) and intracellular (IC) ionic conditions used for HEK293-cell
 79 recordings. The blue-green-light-activated natural anion channels *Gt*ACR1 and *Gt*ACR2 or the
 80 engineered ChR-chimeras *iC*++ and Aurora were fused to the red-light-activated cation-conducting
 81 Chrimson by a transmembrane spanning linker region consisting of a trafficking signal (ts), a yellow or
 82 cyan fluorescent protein (EYFP, mCerulean3) and the β HK transmembrane fragment. The fusion
 83 construct termed BiPOLES is indicated by a black frame. **(B)** Representative photocurrents of β HK-
 84 Chrimson-mCerulean (top), *Gt*ACR1-ts-mCerulean- β HK-Chrimson (middle) *Gt*ACR2-ts-mCerulean-
 85 β HK-Chrimson (BiPOLES, bottom) in whole-cell patch clamp recordings from HEK293 cells at 490,
 86 600 and 650 nm illumination. **(C)** Normalized peak photocurrents of BiPOLES at different membrane

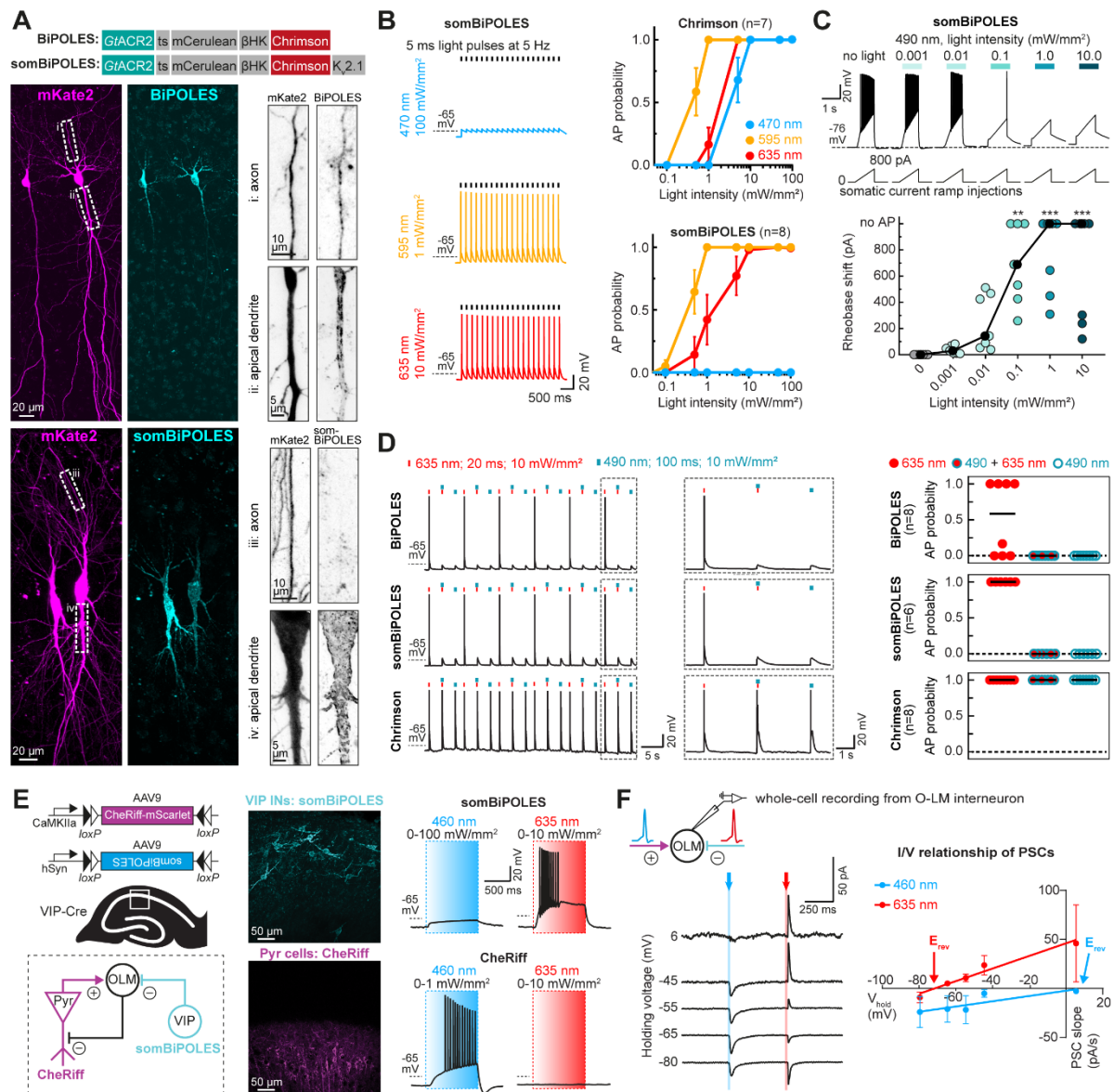
87 voltages evoked at either 490 or 600 nm (see panel B, mean \pm SD; n = 6 - 8; normalized to the peak
88 photocurrent at -80 mV and 600 nm illumination). **(D)** Reversal potential of early peak photocurrents
89 during 500-ms illumination with 490, 600, or 650 nm light as shown in (B) (mean \pm SD; n = 5 - 8). **(E)**
90 Top: Representative photocurrents of BiPOLES with 10 ms light pulses of different color and equal
91 photon flux at -60 mV. Lower left: Action spectra of BiPOLES at different membrane voltages (λ_{rev} =
92 photocurrent reversal wavelength, mean \pm SEM, n = 4 - 9). Lower right: λ_{rev} of *GtACR1*-ts-mCerulean-
93 β HK-Chrimson and BiPOLES at different membrane voltages (mean \pm SD; n = 3 - 9). **(F)** Peak
94 photocurrent densities at -80 mV and 600 nm or 650 nm illumination as shown in (B) (Mean \pm SD; n =
95 5 - 8).

96

97 Next, we validated the bidirectional action and the applicability of BiPOLES as an optogenetic
98 tool in CA1 pyramidal neurons of rat hippocampal slice cultures. We observed membrane-
99 localized BiPOLES expression, most strongly in the somatodendritic compartment (Fig. 2A).
100 Illumination triggered large photocurrents with biophysical properties similar to those observed
101 in HEK cells (Fig. S2). To enhance membrane trafficking and to avoid axonal localization of
102 BiPOLES, we generated a soma-targeted variant (somBiPOLES) by attaching a C-terminal
103 Kv2.1-traffic sequence¹². somBiPOLES showed improved membrane localization (Fig. 2A,
104 S9A), enhanced photocurrents (Fig. S3) and higher light sensitivity compared to BiPOLES
105 (Fig. S4). In current-clamp recordings orange and red light reliably induced action potentials
106 (APs) in somBiPOLES expressing cells with a similar efficacy as Chrimson (Fig. 2B, S4).
107 Notably, blue light up to 100 mW/mm² did not trigger APs due to robust shunting by *GtACR2*,
108 whereas Chrimson alone induced spikes also with blue light above 0.95 mW/mm² (Fig. 2B,
109 S4). Next, we tested the silencing capabilities of BiPOLES and somBiPOLES by measuring
110 their ability to shift the rheobase (see Methods) and suppress APs with blue light. Both variants
111 significantly shifted the rheobase towards larger currents at intensities above 0.1 mW/mm²
112 (Fig. 2C, S5), with somBiPOLES showing complete spike block in some cases. We further
113 demonstrate the potent silencing capacity of somBiPOLES and BiPOLES by combining blue-
114 and red-light pulses showing that red-light-evoked spikes were reliably inhibited with a
115 coinciding blue-light pulse (Fig. 2D). Moreover, simultaneous illumination with blue and orange
116 light at varying ratios enabled dynamic clamping of the neuronal membrane voltage (Fig. S6).
117 Taken together, BiPOLES and somBiPOLES enable efficient, bidirectional control of neuronal
118 activity.

119 Since BiPOLES permits neuronal spiking exclusively with orange-red light, this opens new
120 possibilities for two-color excitation of genetically distinct but spatially intermingled neuronal
121 populations using a second, blue-light-activated ChR. To demonstrate this, we expressed
122 somBiPOLES in CA1 VIP interneurons and CheRiff, a blue-sensitive ChR (λ_{max} = 460nm)¹³ in
123 CA1 pyramidal neurons (Fig. 2E, see Methods for details). CheRiff-expressing pyramidal cells

124 were readily spiking upon blue, but not orange-red illumination up to 10 mW/mm² (Fig. 2E, S4).
 125 Conversely, red but not blue light triggered APs in somBiPOLES-expressing VIP neurons (Fig.
 126 2E). Next, we recorded synaptic inputs from these two populations onto VIP-negative
 127 GABAergic neurons in stratum-oriens (Fig. 2F). As expected, blue light triggered EPSCs
 128 (CheRiff) and red light IPSCs (somBiPOLES), evident by their respective reversal potentials
 129 at 8.8 ± 10.4 mV and -71.4 ± 13.1 mV (Fig. 2F).



130

131 **Figure 2: Excitation and silencing of hippocampal neurons with BiPOLES and somBiPOLES. (A)**
 132 Molecular scheme of BiPOLES and somBiPOLES as used in neurons and maximum-intensity projection
 133 images of 2-photon stacks showing expression of BiPOLES (top) or soma-targeted BiPOLES
 134 (somBiPOLES, bottom) co-expressed with mKate2 in CA1 or CA3 pyramidal neurons of organotypic
 135 hippocampal slices. Magnified views of axonal or somato-dendritic compartments are shown as inverted
 136 gray-scale images. Note absence of somBiPOLES in the axon. **(B)** Current-clamp (IC) characterization
 137 of somBiPOLES and Chrimson in CA1 pyramidal cells to determine light-evoked action potential (AP)-

138 probability at different wavelengths. Left: Example traces. Right: quantification of light-mediated AP
139 probability at indicated wavelengths and intensities (mean \pm SEM, $n = 7 - 8$). **(C)** IC characterization of
140 somBiPOLES-mediated neuronal silencing. Current ramps (from 0–100 to 0–900 pA) were injected into
141 somBiPOLES-expressing CA1 pyramidal cells to induce APs during illumination with blue light at
142 indicated intensities (from 0.001 to 10 mW/mm², black circles: medians, $n = 7$, Friedman test, ** $p < 0.01$,
143 *** $p < 0.001$). **(D)** IC characterization of bidirectional optical spiking-control with BiPOLES and
144 somBiPOLES. Left: Voltage traces showing red-light-evoked APs, which were blocked by a concomitant
145 blue light pulse in (som)BiPOLES expressing cells. Right: quantification of AP probability under indicated
146 conditions (black horizontal lines: medians, $n = 6 - 8$). **(E)** Independent dual-color control of two neuronal
147 populations with somBiPOLES and CheRiff. Left: strategy to achieve mutually exclusive expression of
148 CheRiff-mScarlet in CA1 pyramidal neurons and somBiPOLES in VIP-positive GABAergic neurons.
149 Both cell types innervate O-LM interneurons in CA1. Middle: Maximum-intensity projection images of 2-
150 photon stacks showing expression of somBiPOLES in VIP-interneurons (cyan) and CheRiff-mScarlet in
151 the pyramidal layer of CA1 (magenta). Right: IC-recordings demonstrating mutually exclusive spiking of
152 somBiPOLES- and CheRiff-expressing neurons under red or blue illumination (see fig. S4 for details).
153 **(F)** Postsynaptic whole-cell voltage-clamp recordings at indicated membrane voltages showing EPSCs
154 and IPSCs upon blue- and red-light pulses, respectively. Right: quantification of blue- and red-light-
155 evoked PSCs and their reversal potential (mean \pm SEM, $n = 7 - 8$).

156

157 Next, we used BiPOLES to control cholinergic motor neurons in *C. elegans*. BiPOLES-linked
158 mCerulean was visible at the nerve ring in the head part indicating correct expression and
159 localization of the tool (Fig. 3A). Illumination with red light resulted in body-wall muscle
160 contraction and effective body-shrinkage, consistent with motor neuron activation. Conversely,
161 blue light triggered body extension, indicative of muscle relaxation and thus, cholinergic motor
162 neuron inhibition (Fig. 3B). Maximal body length changes of +3% at 480 nm and -10% at 560-
163 600 nm and reversal of the effect between 480-520 nm were consistent with the inhibitory and
164 excitatory action spectrum of BiPOLES (Fig. 1E, 3B, S7) The light effects on body length
165 required functional BiPOLES as light did not affect body length in the absence of all-*trans*
166 retinal (ATR, Fig. 3B).

167 To extend the applications of BiPOLES, we generated various conditional and non-conditional
168 viral vectors, in which the expression of the tandem protein is regulated by different promoters
169 (see Methods, Figs. S8-9). Conditionally expressed in noradrenergic neurons of the Locus
170 Coeruleus (LC) in mice, orange illumination of somBiPOLES reliably triggered pupil dilation,
171 indicative of LC-mediated arousal¹⁴ (Fig. 3C-E, S10). Light-mediated pupil dilation was
172 reverted immediately by additional blue light during the orange-light stimulation or suppressed
173 altogether, when blue-light delivery started before orange-light application (Fig. 3D,E),
174 suggesting that orange-light-induced spiking of noradrenergic neurons in LC was efficiently
175 shunted. Thus, LC-neurons were bidirectionally controlled with somBiPOLES.

176 We hypothesized that targeting BiPOLES to GABAergic neurons enables bidirectional control
177 of excitation/inhibition (E/I) balance. Thus, we generated a viral vector using the minimal *Dlx*

178 promoter¹⁵ (mDlx), verified mDlx-BiPOLES functionality *in vitro* (Fig. S8) and expressed it in
179 GABAergic neurons in ferret secondary visual cortex to modulate E/I-balance during sensory
180 processing (Fig. 3F).

181 Intracortical data obtained from linear probes and under isoflurane anesthesia provided
182 evidence for modulation of cortical activity by shifts in E/I balance (Fig. 3G,H). Blue light led to
183 an increase in baseline activity, consistent with deactivation of inhibitory neurons (Fig. 3G,H).
184 Activation of GABAergic cells by red light did not further decrease the low cortical baseline
185 activity, but significantly reduced cortical responses triggered by sensory stimuli (Fig. 3G,H).
186 Although activating effects of blue light on evoked spiking were not significant in the average
187 data, we obtained clear evidence in individual recordings that blue light could enhance late
188 response components (Fig. 3G), confirming a disinhibitory effect. Overall, these data suggest
189 that BiPOLES is efficient in bidirectional control of inhibitory mechanisms, demonstrating its
190 applicability for the control of E/I shifts in the cortical microcircuit *in vivo*.

191

212 each indicated condition. Gray area: laser-on epoch; black vertical line: visual stimulus onset. Black
213 horizontal lines indicate the 200 ms pre- and post-stim analysis epochs to compute the results in (H).
214 Note the rate-increase after the onset of the blue laser before the onset of the visual stimulus and the
215 reduced answer after red laser illumination. **(H)** Spike-rate ratio of pos-t vs pre-laser-stimulus epoch.
216 Left: quantification of laser-mediated impact on baseline spiking rate (no visual stim.). Right:
217 quantification of the spike-rate change of the same units during only visual and laser+visual stimulation.
218 (n = 46 contacts showing visual responses from 3 animals, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001).

219

220 In conclusion, BiPOLES is a tandem of a cation- and an anion-selective ChR that serves as a
221 new optogenetic tool for balanced excitation and inhibition of the same neurons with red and
222 blue light, respectively. Unlike strategies based on an internal ribosomal entry site¹⁶ or self-
223 cleaving viral 2A peptide bridges¹⁷, BiPOLES displays a fixed 1:1 stoichiometry and
224 colocalization of excitatory and inhibitory currents, featuring several advantages. First, it allows
225 for optically clamping the membrane voltage with a defined ratio of red/blue light. Second,
226 since BiPOLES-expressing cells are not excitable with blue light of any intensity, scale-free
227 and independent spiking of two neuronal populations is possible in combination with a second,
228 blue-light-sensitive ChR. Third, BiPOLES can be used to spike or inhibit the same population
229 of neurons *in vivo*, which allows addressing a number of previously inaccessible questions.
230 For example, during extracellular recordings, BiPOLES may be useful for optogenetic
231 identification (optotagging) with red light¹⁸ and optogenetic silencing of the same neurons.
232 Aside from bidirectional control of motor neurons, noradrenergic signaling in LC and
233 GABAergic activity in neocortex, as demonstrated in this study, additional applications for
234 BiPOLES could be bidirectional control of engram neurons¹⁹ to test both necessity and
235 sufficiency of a particular set of neurons for memory retrieval or switching the valence of a
236 particular experience by inhibiting or activating the same or even two distinct populations of
237 neuromodulatory neurons.

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248 **Author contributions**

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