

***“You may feel a little unusual”:
Andrew Carnie’s Works on the Cultural Imagination of the Heart***

By Tammar El Sheikh

The spaces that the artists have created in response to the PITH team’s findings are highly metaphorical. In their hands, the figure of the heart is passed from the biomedical or clinical context into a darkened space for dancers, an acoustic space for narratives of lost love, and a photographic space for loaded tokens of gratitude. The artists’ responses to the narratives of transplant recipients are, at the same time, critical examinations of the heart’s symbolism in our cultural imaginary – from science-fiction, to art history, to Christian iconography. The PITH team and the artists show how a cultural reservoir of meanings of the heart, as an impersonal mechanism, or a highly personal, even spiritual source of moral attributes contributes directly to processes of identity formation, and mitigates, to some extent, experiences of identity disruption for transplant recipients.¹

In a darkly comedic moment at her PHI Centre presentation, Dr. Heather Ross alluded to this mingling of science and culture in the biomedical imagination. With a still from the sci-fi thriller *The Terminator* projected behind her, Dr. Ross noted that mechanical heart transplant recipients “may feel a little unusual” after their surgery.² The artist Andrew Carnie, perhaps more insistently than the others in the group, takes up this iconography of non-normative bodies in our visual culture. He indicates a wide range of sources for both the art-historical and popular imagination of such bodies. In doing so, Carnie invites us to reimagine our inherited standards of able-bodied normalcy. As Michael Davidson notes in his study of disability aesthetics and the “defamiliar body”, the curriculum of the humanities, with its figures of the ideal human, may be rewritten through an “armless Venus de Milo, a crippled Oedipus” or an alternate view on “Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man who has, after all, four arms and four legs.”³ Taking up themes and motifs from architectural and military history, Dutch and Italian traditions of anatomical drawing, and the noir films of the Cold War era, Carnie’s work contributes to this critical revision of our cultural and philosophical history.

Carnie, not unlike Leonardo, enlists drawing, and its *projective* aspect in particular as a mediator between art and science.⁴ He has a long-standing interest in science, in zoology and psychology

¹ This aspect of the PITH team’s inquiry is guided by the work of the cultural theorist Margrit Shildrick. In a talk at the PHI Centre she notes the cultural resonance of transplant narratives. She asks a provocative question about the relationship between the lived or embodied experience of transplantation, and the “cultural stories” that help “mitigate social anxiety” about such experiences. The PITH team and the artists locate the recipients’ narratives – their words and images for very real experiences of transplantation, against a background of cultural reference points for “hybrid bodies”. Dr. Margrit Shildrick, PHI presentation, Montreal, 2013.

² See Dr. Heather Ross, PHI presentation, Montreal, 2013.

³ Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 4 – 5.

⁴ Carnie’s drawing practice is projective in a couple of senses. He connects with the Renaissance tradition of the perspective construction – a mathematically correct projection of physical objects in space. But he also engages in a more psychologically inflected kind of projection, in the tradition of the surrealists automatic drawing. His drawing practice straddles this divide between projected physical and mental objects.

in particular.⁵ But Carnie's method of drawing between art and the sciences has more immediate roots in his training at Goldsmith's and the Royal College in London during the late 70s and 80s. At first glance, Carnie's work from this heady time in contemporary art history – a time that produced such *enfants terribles* as the Young British Artists, is markedly different from the rather more sober art-science collaborations that have occupied him since.⁶ Nevertheless, a practice of drawing, and a consistent focus on problems of identity formation connect the two phases in the artist's career.

While at Goldsmith's and the Royal College, Carnie seemed keen on exploding the sacred, two-dimensional boundaries of the picture plane. His paintings, combines and installations from this period and throughout the 80s are wildly imaginative, and often surrealist in attitude, presenting strange views of everyday spaces, and surprising uses of crude, everyday materials. In the series *Under-Canvas Paintings* (1988), we are drawn into a topsy-turvy architectural space made from painted images of the backs of stretched canvasses. In *Large Bridge Works* (1987) the same disorienting effect is achieved as the artist snatches parts of bridges out of their pastoral or urban contexts, and recombines them in his paintings as psychologically charged design elements. Bent metal and pavement are rendered as so many movable lines, unfolded in two dimensions on the surface of the canvas, or built up as protrusions into the viewer's space. These abject views of the artist's studio and materials, and of public spaces recall the projective aspect of our sense experience – our ability to see what we choose in what is given. But they also remind us that in doing so we are exposed. Like Rorschach tests, Carnie's designs hover somewhere between the fantastic and the psycho-clinical.

A series of works on and with suitcases produced throughout the 90s, provides a thematic bridge from the early surrealist-inspired work, to Carnie's later art-science collaborations. His *Suitcase Works* (1990 – 97) are cut and arranged into geological, architectural, photographic and digital spaces as icons for the problem of identity disruption. They are images of psyches on the move, in flux and under pressure. In one of the later works in this series, Carnie simply cuts a hole in an old, found suitcase into which he inserts a small flight of crooked stairs. The work is a powerful metaphor for isolation, or existential dread. But it is a lighter, playful mediation on such serious themes as well. We imagine a descent into the darkened space of a haunted house, to an encounter with 'The People Under the Stairs'.⁷

Carnie's work since the 90s has become increasingly concerned with the limits of clinical descriptions of the body and brain. In particular, he has worked closely with researchers to better understand conditions such as Autism, Epilepsy, Huntington's Disease, and Achondroplasia.⁸ In a series of manipulated self-portraits titled *Things Happen* (2005) and in *I Am Through The Day* (2006), Carnie appears nude, with missing limbs, with scales, and shortened or stretched from

⁵ Andrew Carnie's PHI Centre presentation. Montreal, 2013.

⁶ Carnie noted in an interview that the London art scene of the 80s was dominated by critical reactions to color-field and abstract painting. These techniques had "less sway intellectually for artists around Goldsmiths then", partly as a result of the influence of teachers like Michael Craig Morton and Richard Wentworth. Carnie describes his figurative or representational work, then and now, as part of an "unapologetic" recovery of the empirical tradition – from the work of Renaissance masters like Leonardo Da Vinci to Damian Hirst of the Young British Artist group. Interview with Andrew Carnie. (Feb. 2016)

⁷ See the horror film *The People Under the Stairs*.

⁸ Check spellings of these – and list Carnie's works on these topics, and his collaborators.

head to toe.⁹ This work makes a subject out of illness, and chillingly shows how illness, when identified with outward appearances, produces its own uncanny subjects. Carnie's inscription of the artist/researcher within the research material in this work is consistent with the PITH team's approach to the interviews with transplant recipients.¹⁰ The PITH team's arguments for empathetic looking and listening as a part of the research process are supported visually in this work.

But Carnie does not narrowly prescribe an artist's or a researcher's point of view in a fixed visual model for art-science collaborations. For his images of the body as a site of projected identity, Carnie has chosen an appropriately dynamic form. His move toward art-science collaborations in the late 90s is marked by a change in his working materials. In this period the artist moves away from painting, found object and sculpture installation and drawing, to digital and photographic projection – from illustrations of projection to instances of projection. In his *Dark Garden: Wired in a Different Way* (2010 – 2012) works Carnie uses a stop animation technique to visualize the experience of Autism. A wandering, nude male figure is shown in a tangle of flickering plant-like forms against a black background. For a version of the work titled *Dark Garden: Told in a Different Voice* (2013), the artist added an ambient soundtrack. It includes brief musical passages, disjointed field recordings, and extracts from interviews with Prof. Francesca Happé and Prof. Uta Frith.¹¹ The voices of these scientists experts in the field of Autism provide us, however tentatively, with a point of access to the overwhelming sense experience of those living with the spectrum- disorder. Here we see Carnie setting up a dialogue that he would later pursue in his work with the PITH team – a dynamic exchange between the artist, researchers, and embodied medical subjects. In this dialogue Carnie acknowledges the epistemological limits of both artists and researchers, and explores the projective powers of each.

Carnie's works for this exhibition emerged from drawings and notes made while viewing the PITH team's interviews, and hundreds of photos of one nude, male model taken afterwards.¹² The images generated out of these materials called up a range of art-historical and pop-cultural associations for the artist. His variations on the motif of human frailty are a result of two encounters – one with the PITH team, and the other with various images of the infirm, the embattled, the filmic or the athletic body. Carnie's research into these aspects of our visual culture draws on a range of sources, from Medieval and Renaissance anatomical drawings, to Dutch Baroque paintings, to the choreography of Busby Berkeley's films, and the artist's impressions of the fleetingly held patterns of synchronized swimmers.¹³ Out of this array of sources, Carnie produced five works in various mediums, from projected images, to sculpture

⁹ Carnie offers a couple of reasons for his use of his own body in such works – a humorous, pragmatic reason and a serious ethical or philosophical one. Using his own image is cost-effective since he doesn't have to find models, but it is also an empathetic technique. When dealing with such profound experiences of identity disruption as a subject for his art, it seemed important to “see things happening” to himself. As the artist notes, “when looking at a disease or condition, I wanted to come as close as possible to experiencing it.” Interview with Andrew Carnie. (Feb. 2016)

¹⁰ See Heather Ross, Susan Abbey et al, “What they say vs. what we see: Hidden Distress” *JHLT* (2010)

¹¹ This work was exhibited in Winchester Guildhall as part of Ten Days: Winchester Creative Collisions in 2013. The sound element was designed by artists Matt Grover and Steve Bayley.

¹² Andrew Carnie, PHI presentation. Montreal, 2013.

¹³ Andrew Carnie runs through these and other references in his Phi Centre presentation of 2013. The works made for the exhibition call up references from Mantegna's *Limitations of Christ*, to Manet's *Dead Matador*, to Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lessons*. Andrew Carnie PHI Centre Presentation. Montreal, 2013. (Check dates and titles)

and sound installations, to drawings and watercolours. A consistently dark, even a gothic atmosphere lends coherence to this range of images of the body. In the synchronized double-video projection titled *A Change of Heart* (2012), we are confronted by a theatrically rendered, morphing male body.¹⁴ For Carnie the figure quietly conveys an insight heard repeatedly in the PITH team's interviews: the body, ours and those of the transplant recipients equally, is constantly changing. Divided, then blurred, then disintegrated, or tentatively rendered whole with over-drawings and photographic effects, the model's image holds a shifting ground of personal identity, for brief seconds, before passing back into the darkness of the screen on which it is projected.

Yet another gothic image, set against a black background is given in *Lacuna* (2012). The same model's ghostly pale image reappears here, but in a cylindrical formation at the center of the screen. The boundaries of the figure are put into question by Carnie's careful layering and overlapping of the image. It is a stark and simple picture, rich with associations from histories of media technology, art and popular culture. Carnie pays homage here to the nineteenth century chrono-photography of Edward Muybridge, and to state of the art MRI imaging technologies. We readily see in the composition of the image a riff on the familiar but wondrous close-view of the iris. But for the artist, it is a military as well as an anatomical picture. Modeled on the Roman foot soldier's formation called the "tortoise" – a defensive formation involving twenty to thirty soldiers standing with their backs to each other and their shields pointing outwards, *Lacuna* is an allegory of strength in vulnerability. For Carnie, the image offered a way of dealing with the testimony of male interviewees from the PITH team's research in particular, who were not accustomed to describing their emotional and physical pain.¹⁵ Open and vulnerable, or closed, focused and pensive, the group describes a range of gendered attitudes at play in the scenario of transplantation. The imagination of masculinities in early to mid-twentieth century film culture, ranging from the highly functional cyborg or detective figure, to the dysfunctional war veteran is called forth by this image. Carnie mentions *Metropolis*, that classic text on the odd and inescapable coupling of men and their machines in this connection, but the list of references could be extended¹⁶ The work's main value for Carnie, however, consists in the metaphorical or

¹⁴ The composition for this work recalls that of Carnie's self-portrait series, *I Am Through This Day*. The installation of *Change of Heart* recalls another of Carnie's earlier projected works titled *Snapshots* (2004). The atmosphere in *Snapshots* however, differs from these other projected works. The models used for *Snapshots* are diverse, in age and in appearance. They are clothed and seem to dwell in the projected space and in their natural space at once – between worlds, but comfortably. They are nostalgic, richly colored images, frozen in lived time. In this way they contrast with the isolated, almost clinical views of the nude body, out of context in *I Am Through This Day* and *Change of Heart*. Homely and unhomely possibilities for, or prosaic and objectifying uses of the projected image are explored in Carnie's work.

¹⁵ Carnie noted that these patients were struck by their vulnerability after seeing themselves under a medical gaze. Interview with Andrew Carnie. Feb. 2016. The work takes up this theme of vulnerability, and a specifically gendered kind of vulnerability, in the PITH team's research. Carnie's treatment of the boundaries of the model's body especially recalls the cultural theorist Margrit Shidrick's work on challenges presented by the PITH team's research to the Cartesian concept of the bounded and sovereign self. See her "Corporeal Cuts: Surgery and the Psycho-social", in *Body and Society* 14:31 (2008), pp. 31 -46. The arrangement of these figures recalls Carnie's earlier work as well, before the collaboration with the PITH team, on symbolically charged architectural forms such as bridges. One sees in the cylindrical shape of *Lacuna* an echo of the precarious tower of Babel.

¹⁶ Carnie notes that many of the patients' descriptions of the violence of their surgery - the opening of their rib cages with chrome equipment, and of the "macho" heroism of their surgeons who wield this equipment, recall conventional gendered roles from science fiction films. On these and other tropes of male disability or dysfunction in cold war-era noir films see Michael Davidson's chapter "Phantom Limbs: Film Noir's Volatile Bodies" in

projective space it provides for those struggling with identity disruption in the wake of an experience of transplant surgery. For such viewers, *Lacuna*'s image of vulnerability says plainly what they labour to say, or can say only indirectly with mechanical metaphors or what the PITH team calls "downgraded" expressions of distress.¹⁷

How is this experience to be described? What language is appropriate for an experience that lies so far beyond any single text or utterance? The philosopher Margrit Shildrick is summoned by Carnie to begin an answer to this question in the audio installation *The Beat Goes On* (2013). In this work, Carnie presents a soundscape emanating from two very small speakers, nestled in black serge wool hearts. A collage of hospital sounds, drum beats and broken, natural and synthesized voices pass from the looming nine-foot wide, wall-mounted sculpture into our acoustic space. Shildrick's voice cuts through the noise to clarify the philosophical stakes of the PITH team's research and of her own previous work on the phenomenon of conjoined twins: "the cutting apart of con-corporate bodies is paralleled in its theoretical implications by the stitching together of previously separate body parts. In both instances, the verb 'to cleave' would be appropriate, for its double meaning of 'to divide by force' and 'to closely unite'.¹⁸ Carnie's work seems focussed on just this tension, or on what Shildrick later calls "the sense of hybridity, of in-betweenness... and of the body which is not one".¹⁹

A great sense of responsibility pervades the works of Carnie, Bachmann, Wright and Richards. In their distinct but co-ordinated ways, these artists aim to bring to sound and vision what Shildrick and the PITH team work so carefully to render in the language of science and scholarship. As Carnie noted in an interview, "art is all too important to be left to artists."²⁰ We might add, in light of the contribution of the artists to the PITH team's study, that science as well, is all too important to be left to scientists, as Carnie first iterated in the Observer Newspaper article back in 2002.

Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008) pp. 58 – 80.

¹⁷ H. Ross et al, "What they say vs. what we see: Hidden Distress" *JHLT* (2010)

¹⁸ The presentation by Shildrick that Carnie excerpts here is titled "Hybrid Bodies: The Psycho-social Significance of Heart Transplant Surgery".

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interview with Andrew Carnie, "Disenchanting the Artworld" Yale University (podcast). This was Carnie's response to a question about why he pursues art-science collaborations.