

## Chapter Eleven

### A Nonagenarian Virago: Quoting “Carrington” in Contemporary Practice

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Leonora Carrington’s *œuvre* regularly prompts commentators to cite an abundance of source texts and morphological likenesses (as Gabriel Weisz cautions in Chapter Eight of this volume), ranging from Victorian and Edwardian book illustration to Catholic iconography and Mayan archaeology. A vast library of literary touchstones can be readily identified and found permeating every facet of her work.<sup>1</sup> Reading was a necessary *practice* for Carrington; the resulting visual as well as written work is certainly rich in narrative content, and has proven stylistically and thematically fertile as well. What’s surprising is that her own effect on these sources—her alteration and manipulation of them—is hardly ever taken into account, as if the authorial stamp alone were enough to secure an understanding of the semantic and intertextual complexities at play in her work. A similar tendency can be found in surrealism’s articulation of itself through its heritage of black humour, fantastic imagery, and literary nonsense. As Renato Poggioli complained long ago in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1962):

Surrealist painting is wrong when it seeks to justify itself by invoking such extraordinary precedents as Hieronymus Bosch, whose fantastic world is based on an abstruse but always systematic allegory [...] These errors are not only practical but theoretical; it is not just avant-garde art which is to blame for them, but its criticism as well.<sup>2</sup>



11.1 Lucy Skaer, *Harlequin is as Harlequin Does*, Murray Guy, 2012. Silk screen photograph. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

His complaint transports us from the primary “text” to secondary interpretation. Not only does this highlight the problem of decontextualisation in the process of appropriation, it also suggests a historiographic fault in the way in which such borrowings are represented. However, in doing so, Poggioli highlights the scholarly emphasis of surrealism and its commitment to anachronism. Cultural theorist Mieke Bal proposes a more nuanced methodological distinction:

Iconographic analysis generally avoids making statements about the meaning of borrowed motifs, since visual artists may borrow motifs without borrowing meaning...By contrast, the concept of intertextuality...implies that the adopted sign necessarily comes imbued with meaning...By reusing forms taken from earlier works, an artist both carries with him the text from which the borrowed element has broken away and constitutes a new text with the debris.<sup>3</sup>

A magpie for such “debris” herself, Carrington reaches us “imbued with meaning,” an aftereffect of the historical coincidence of her development alongside that of postmodernism. No longer the primary author or artist in this process of cultural recycling, Carrington has rather become a “medium” to be worked in and through.

Another challenging aspect of Carrington scholarship to date has been the repeated insistence on her biographical episodes and her marginalisation in both geography and gender. Striking though her personal mythology may be, especially to newcomers, the repetitions often amount to a sensationalism that has arguably obscured some of her more necessary contributions to the avant-garde as an intellectual in her own right. As this volume has indicated, Carrington’s association with the avant-garde continued long after, and far

beyond, her engagement with surrealist activities. It is my contention that Carrington's longevity has tended to historicise her output rather than accommodate it within the language of twenty-first century contemporary practice. (This is true too of feminist movements; what were once grassroots projects are now apotheosised to the level of "official" histories, too often inaccurately positioned against younger, more emergent incarnations).

Writing on similar problems with reference to the work of Carrington's contemporary nonagenarian, Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), Bal displaces the focus from passive artistic intention to the contemporary viewer's active understanding of the artwork in the present, towards the notion of an "art that thinks."<sup>4</sup> Bal has done so persuasively in her studies of "Rembrandt" (1991) and "Caravaggio" (1999), putting their names into quotation marks in order to demarcate our focalisation of them as "cultural text[s]."<sup>5</sup> Mimicking Carrington's own multicultural borrowings, I therefore ask: is it possible to "quote 'Carrington'"? Such a model is perhaps long overdue, both in terms of her appropriation by contemporary artists and writers, and our "readings" of her work from our own cultural standpoints. By examining contemporary artworks and literary texts made in response to "Carrington," can we understand her position within the international avant-garde better? Focusing on the legacies of "Carrington," which are interpreted below as multiple, intermedial and feminist in attitude, I would like to explore select examples of historically recent visual and literary "replies" to her work, those who embody "Carrington's" anachronistic habits.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, I aim to develop a broader critical framework for rethinking the relationship between avant-garde movements and contemporary practices—namely that we can understand the avant-garde more thoroughly through its disruption and creative quotation in the unfolding present. The first section of this chapter offers a brief survey of the intermedial sphere of text/image dynamics within which Carrington herself worked, before moving on to discuss, in greater detail, alternative media with which to represent the possibility of "Carrington" and her work,

namely performance and sound installation. Significantly, my chosen examples have occurred within the last decade, many eclipsing “Carrington’s” death and reflecting upon her nonagenarian status in a variety of ways.

In order to rethink the legacy of a feminist avant-garde, I use the hybridised term “nonagenarian virago,” not only to characterise the reception of “Carrington” to a younger generation of contemporary artists and writers as both embodied and cerebral but also to emphasise her own position as a contemporary avant-gardist—someone who lived through avant-garde history into the twenty-first century “contemporary” moment. Indeed, Carrington surely demonstrates the futility of such periodisation. A “nonagenarian” is someone in their nineties, while “virago,” re-gendered from the Latin *vir* meaning manly or virile, means “wild woman.” It is significant that Carrington’s writings were brought to the attention of the English-speaking world through the London-based feminist publishing house Virago Press Limited, which, as Natalya Lusty has rightly pointed out, contributed substantially to “Carrington’s” iconic status within the feminist revisionary literary canon as well as her more widely accepted role within the historical surrealist movement.<sup>7</sup> Virago recently celebrated its fortieth birthday in 2013 having been first inaugurated in 1973. In the anniversary e-book, the current commissioning editor Lennie Goodings puts it thus:

The name instantly signalled Virago’s attitude. Virago means ‘heroic warlike woman,’ or, as the thesaurus has it a particular kind of woman: biddy, bitch, dragon, fire-eater, fury, harpy, harridan, hussy, muckraker, scold, she-devil, siren, spitfire, termagant, tigress, vituperator, vixen, wench. Here was a cheeky upstart, happy to shock and tease.<sup>8</sup>

“Carrington,” and the characters that infiltrate her art and literature, no doubt embody this uncompromising figure. Such heated forms of hybridity were initially used to deliver “Carrington” to public knowledge (e.g. the manly-woman virago or even the centaur alter-ego). This chapter seeks to revise methods of representation by exploring how the historicisation of feminist movements has arguably bequeathed contemporary cultural practitioners with a quieter legacy upon which to reflect. In importing and appropriating the political pyrotechnics of the early 1970s, a younger generation of emerging aesthetic practices have both responded to, and made room for, figures such as “Carrington” using a range of strategies from the intermedial to the conceptual, film, sound and performance-based installation.

### **“Carrington” as Intermedial Practice**

The combination of Carrington’s own medial intersection between words and pictures has made her and her *œuvre* an interesting source text in its own right for contemporary illustrators and graphic artists. Recent trends in contemporary illustration offer different perspectives on Carrington’s literary and artistic worlds. The Belgian illustrator Emilie Seron (b.1978) and Swedish artist Niklas Nenzén (b.1970) have both contributed cover images for new editions of Carrington’s writings; Seron was commissioned by Penguin to design a cover for the 2005 edition of *The Hearing Trumpet*, while Nenzén produced a cover for the Swedish translations of ‘Down Below’ and ‘Little Francis’ published in Stockholm by Sphinx Bokförlag. Both images are stylistically consistent with Carrington’s disruptions of scale and break with the traditions of linear perspective. Seron’s is episodic, consolidating snippet moments from the novel, zoning in on the residents of the nursing home in one communal bed (the latter detail, an interpretative quirk). Nenzén’s is similarly collage-like constructing a



11.2 Emilie Seron, *The Hearing Trumpet*, 2005. China ink, watercolour and Ecoline. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.



11.3 Niklas Nenzén, *I Underjorden: Lille Francis & Där nere*, 2012. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist and publisher.



microcosm of Carrington's personal imagery, including the ubiquitous white horse and semi-nude portrait of "Carrington" donning a majestic cloak, and visually quoting the psychosomatics of her account in *Down Below*. Both illustrators have clearly researched their subject and the literary contents therein, producing imagery that faithfully reproduces avant-garde techniques, and thus loyally quote "Carrington."

The "non-illustrative" quotations of "Carrington" are even more provocative. Indeed another, more seamless, route to quoting her intermediality has been achieved by two Mexican novelists, both close acquaintances of Carrington: Elena Poniatowska (b.1932) and Chloe Aridjis (b.1971). Carrington herself illustrated Poniatowska's short story collection *Lilus Kirkus* (1954), and later starred in Poniatowska's fictional biography *Leonora: A Novel* (2011) which was recently translated into English (2015)—surely a "truer," more authentic portrayal than many of the repetitive, "official," academicised accounts. Although the second half of "Carrington's" life is compressed in contrast to the lengthier material on her youth, some of the most interesting observations from Poniatowska's novel are the protagonist's thoughts on feminism, contemporary art, and death. Visiting an art museum in her later years, "Carrington" is disappointed to find contemporary installation art in place of older artefacts:

Leonora, who had only caught the word 'museum,' anticipates visions of sixteenth-century Flemish paintings: the temptations of St Anthony, and the gardens of delight; triptychs by Hans Memling and Roger van der Weyden, Hieronymus Van Aken or Hieronymus Bosch, only to find herself suddenly blinded by green, amber and red traffic lights flashing on and off and criss-crossing the space like flashes of lightening. The noise magnified through a massive sound system is infernal.

'What is this?'



‘An installation. Do you like it?’

‘It is horrible,’ Leonora cringes.<sup>9</sup>

Her younger companion then tries to justify the exhibit, claiming that the surrealist activities themselves were previously dismissed this way, but “Carrington” remains dubious to the merits of installation art. A conservative aesthetic preference for the historical over the experimental and the contemporary may initially strike one as the stereotypical viewpoint of an older audience, but this would be to overlook the quieter transgressiveness “Carrington” no doubt observed in the content and technique of Flemish painting. Her self-alignment with Bosch, *et al*, could alternatively be read as a rebellious *historiographic* gesture in its own right. In quoting Bosch, does she knowingly shatter, as in Poggioli’s aforementioned comment, and become an embodiment of Bosch’s own disrupting force? Moreover, “Carrington’s” fictional response to the contemporary installation is as warranted as any other form of engagement; as a piece of endurance art it was no doubt assembled precisely with a view to exploring the audience’s aesthetic limitations.

The novels of the Mexican-born, London-based writer Chloe Aridjis, a long-term family friend, revive Carrington’s visual writing and literary paintings in an ekphrastic and embodied gesture. “Carrington” makes a brief cameo in Aridjis’ first novel *Book of Clouds* (2009) during a rare exchange between the protagonist Tatiana and her employer the historian Doktor Weiss:

‘I was once there, in Mexico City, many years ago. 1967. I had a good friend, a photographer from Budapest named Chiki Weisz. Ever come across him?’

‘No.’

‘He was married to Leonora Carrington.’

‘I don’t know them.’<sup>10</sup>

In this passage the real-life figures of “Carrington” and “Weisz” are enrolled within the fictional domain of Aridjis’ story, an authenticating gesture which endows the ageing character Doktor Weiss with greater credibility as a historian. Bal has described such a technique as “the glamor of historical reference, the historical ‘reality effect.’”<sup>11</sup> However, in doing so, Aridjis excuses herself from direct autobiographical association with her protagonist—as the Aridjis family were, in fact, well-acquainted with Carrington in Mexico City.<sup>12</sup> Carrington uses a similar intertextual device in her novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (1976), where her nonagenarian protagonist Marian Leatherby borrows the author’s real-life backstory of artistic rebellion, moving between Lancashire, London, and Paris. The protagonist of *The Hearing Trumpet* goes on to note the downfall of the surrealist movement, detaching herself from association with it in the process:

Art in London didn’t seem quite modern enough and I began to want to study in Paris where the Surrealists were in full cry. Surrealism is no longer considered modern today and almost every village rectory and girl’s school have surrealist pictures hanging on their walls. Even Buckingham Palace has a large reproduction of Magritte’s famous slice of ham with an eye peering out. It hangs, I believe, in the throne room. Times do change indeed (66).<sup>13</sup>

Carrington wrote this in the 1950s when surrealism as an avant-garde movement was by many accounts on the wane, and had not yet undergone its secondary, scholarly revival. Retrospectively for us, as well as for the nonagenarian Leatherby, this demonstrates her shrewd awareness of “contemporary” trends. The flux of modern life juxtaposed with key historical moments is a narrative device similarly utilised in Aridjis’ *Book of Clouds*, where Adolf Hitler makes a startling, hallucinatory cameo to the protagonist in the guise of an

elderly woman on a Berlin U-Bahn.

Carrington's magpie-like commitment to the reassembly of borrowed fragments (her practice of quoting and secondary quotability) pervade Aridjis' second novel *Asunder* (2013) which fictionalises the legacy of the suffragette Mary Richardson's iconoclastic political gesture of defacing Velásquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647-51) in The National Gallery, London. Aridjis looks with art historical eyes from the perspective of a present-day gallery attendant invigilator named Marie whose grandfather, also a museum guard, was unable to prevent the attack at that fateful moment. Here the topographical attention to painterly surfaces, known by conservators as "craquelure,"<sup>14</sup> begins to preoccupy Marie's imaginative inner life, mimicking the fragile egg shells Marie decorates with the delicate wings of moths at home. "Carrington" is unmentioned by name in this novel, but again the links between the past (avant-garde iconoclasm) and the present (postmodern contemplation) are multiplied in a manner consistent with Carrington's own gestures of historical distance and reflection. Moreover, the art historical setting, and the topographical nature of the egg-tempera medium would not have gone unnoticed during Aridjis' recent guest curation of an exhibition of Carrington's work at the Tate Liverpool (featured in Chapter Twelve). Here "Carrington" was exhibited adjacent to the work of Glasgow School of Art-educated, site-specific, contemporary artist Cathy Wilkes (b.1966), producing a provocative visual, textual, and thematic dialogue on feminist interventions into domestic spaces.

The intermedial "Carrington" is a transgressor, someone whose ability to fuse both text and image is best reimagined through a shifting, remote or indirect embodiment as a form of appropriation without influence. In its interrogation of the image in favour of a more cerebral approach, recent examples of conceptual art surely import this task.

### **“Leonora” in Conceptual Practice**

In 2006 the Glasgow-based contemporary artist Lucy Skaer (b.1975) embarked on a trip to Mexico City following the unanswered correspondence she had sent to Carrington.<sup>15</sup> For anyone familiar with Skaer’s conceptual reflections on the nature of visuality and mixed-media approach to interrogating “the image,” her pilgrimage to a visual narrator like Carrington came as a surprise. Skaer’s meeting with the older artist is documented anecdotally, almost as if this epic journey occurred merely by happenstance, extracting the chance encounter from the surrealist repertoire of techniques while simultaneously undermining the self-mythmaking of one of surrealism’s chief auteurs. As Skaer writes:

The ongoing practice of Surrealism seemed suddenly radical to me when thought about as current: a strategy of living by the irrational. However, when I arrived unannounced at Carrington’s shuttered house (the address of which I had been given by a Texan collector), I was questioning the wisdom of my self-funded trip, based on a whim and some late-night internet booking. My romanticised idea of a quest to meet her seemed more than a little rash. I began to think that Carrington probably did not live at the address anymore, and even if she did, why would she see me? It felt like I had a lot at stake when I banged on the door. Which then slowly opened.<sup>16</sup>

Here the corporeal figure, the “real” life behind the celebrity image, is surely the one holding the handle, directing the possibility of this narrative. Meeting “history.” Yet “Carrington” is still absented from Skaer’s account, a fantasy figure in an unbelievable encounter.

*Leonora* consists of two small sculptures, a short film, a large, curved drawing, and a

mahogany table inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The installation was first shown at Galerie Elisabeth Kaufmann in Zurich (2006), subsequently at *Art Statements* in Basel in 2006, and finally acquired by the Hunterian Art Gallery in Glasgow in 2009.<sup>17</sup> As Skaer explained during her Fruitmarket Gallery exhibition of 2008 in which *Leonora* was included:

In the installation that I made I'd been wanting to break the logical links of my work. As you make a body of work a logic emerges that you are using and I think at some point you have to disrupt that in order to move forward or move sideways, and I needed a way of doing that, so my visit to Leonora Carrington became a kind of backbone for me being able to disassemble the logic of my own work while citing it within the historical context of her, not of her own work but of the existence of her.<sup>18</sup>

The last clause, “not of her own work but of the *existence* of her,” is of special significance to the continued presence of “Carrington” in the contemporary, her *actualité*. In doing so, however, Skaer disrupts “Carrington’s” authorial influence in favour of a more elusive model that detaches itself from its referent in order to take on a new and infinitely more various existence. In invoking “Carrington” at several removes, Skaer undoes the notion of allegiance and the master/apprentice structure of mainstream art history, maintaining anachronism while questioning the notion of origins. Skaer’s quotation without influence could be read as an implicitly feminist move as well as a highly conceptual reinterpretation.



11.4 Lucy Skaer installation view at The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2008. Mixed media. Photo: Ruth Clark.



11.5 Lucy Skaer installation view at The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2008. Mixed media. Photo: Ruth Clark.

Turning to the working process of the artwork itself, *Leonora (The Joker)* (16mm film, silent loop, 45 seconds approx.) (2006) features “Carrington’s” hands interspersed with short clips of a washing line, paint cabinet, and “Carrington” herself wrapped in a shawl and holding a notebook. Attention is drawn to minor, though not entirely insignificant, details. “Her” hands are either poised mid-gesture as if holding the void or flat on the table next to a biscuit and envelope. “Her” nails are neatly filed, and a silver ring adorns her middle finger. “Her” hands are spotted with age but not emaciated. Strong and articulate, they represent a lifetime of art making. “Her” fidgeting suggests an inner restlessness while being filmed as if eager to get back to the studio. The film offers a micro-portrait of “Carrington” as encountered by Skaer; an established “late” surrealist being filmed by a younger, emergent conceptual artist who looks at the world in a necessarily different way due to her own cultural background, and through an alternative lens which inevitably shifts the focus. The title is significant of course. A joker is a playful and unruly figure, one who seeks to turn ideas on their head. *Leonora* is often referred to as “the wild card” in Skaer’s *œuvre*, an anomaly or disrupting force that helps viewers rethink their visual categories.<sup>19</sup> The shift from artists and artworks to the primary role of viewing and the viewer is interesting here as it returns to Bal’s emphasis on the present moment of engagement and its effects on the exhibit. Furthermore, “Carrington” becomes a kind of avant-garde medium for Skaer, both technically and as a soothsayer or shaman. As Lizzie Carey-Thomas points out, Carrington is “treated as a kind of living relic” as Skaer works through their historical “overlap,” “to comprehend her as a real presence in the here and now and to reconcile Carrington the myth with Carrington the mortal.”<sup>20</sup> Reviewing the Fruitmarket exhibition, Nikos Mantzios noted how the rare instance of a figure in Skaer’s practice meant that “Carrington” automatically became an auratic presence (even before her death).<sup>21</sup> Katharine Conley’s retrospective notion of “surrealist



ghostliness” is also useful here, particularly Conley’s emphasis on doubling found in the optical illusion of anamorphosis.<sup>22</sup> Apply this thesis to Skaer, and “Carrington” herself becomes “anamorphic,” best approached from a “slanted” or unconventional viewpoint. Or, as Bal might say, Skaer’s visual interpretation becomes more genuine and more accurate than any scholarly reading.<sup>23</sup> Where scholarship is second-hand, the visual can embody, perform or re-enact in ways that more liberally transgress the conventions of referencing and elude straightforward articulation, thus capturing the more honest ambivalence of the encounter.

The film’s sculptural companion piece, *Leonora (The Tyrant)* (2006), comprises a mahogany table that has been inlaid with mother-of-pearl, abalone shell shaped claws, mirroring the wrinkled hands encountered in the film. Like the “joker,” a “tyrant” at first appears to be a pejorative label, suggesting someone whose lofty position maintains authority long past its prime. Combined with the sculpture, however, the title takes on a slightly different aura of persistence and strong will, a doggedness and resilience that drives one to their practice in spite of the presumed weariness associated with great age.<sup>24</sup> As a piece of anthropomorphic furniture, akin to those that might appear in one of Carrington’s own visual narratives, it initially ingrains “Carrington” as an invested art world “heirloom” but on critical reflection represents, if indeed anything, a more stubborn, corporeal being. Jane Miller claims that for some artists, writers and thinkers, old age may in fact: “releas[e...] a new transgressiveness and defiance, which make possible the enacting and recognition of an ‘anachronistic heroism.’”<sup>25</sup> In Carrington’s case, Edward Said’s critical pessimism is perhaps more accurate: in his view creative old age does not guarantee developmental mastery but rather an ambivalent unruliness which may involve decline, frustration and alternative and unlikely avenues of interest. Skaer’s impersonal disconnection embodies such ambivalence, opting out of any definitive answers on the question of status in old age and how it should be more accurately represented.

Other documentary pieces by Skaer based on the “existence” of “Carrington” continue to probe the minutiae of her domestic practices and auratic traces. The objectifying sensationalism of “Carrington’s” grand age is undercut by Skaer’s impish insistence on the banality of her daily human habits and creature comforts. “Carrington” becomes a tangle of behaviours, a way of making rather than an author or person *per se*. As Jonathan P. Eburne notes in an essay on the archival prerogative in Carrington’s practice: “Visitors to Carrington’s house have [...] been surprised by its general lack of ornamentation,” and he thus embarks on a more “virtual” understanding of her collecting habits as evidenced in the multitude of iconographic layers found in her painterly imagination.<sup>26</sup> Skaer may have initially set out to adopt the surrealist strategy of locating the marvellous within the everyday but produced something much more disorientating that gets to the kernel of Carrington’s complexity of processes and principles within her art and literature, many of which go beyond surrealism both historically and strategically. We return to Poniatowska’s episode about Carrington’s aversion to installation art, with Skaer channelling a similar disengagement with the surrealist movement as precursor.

Candid photographs taken by Skaer include *Leonora Carrington’s Kitchen, Showing a Postcard of Tate’s Painting ‘The Cholmondeley Ladies’* (2006), detailing the decorations of “Carrington’s” lived-in larder. In contrast to the prolific scholarly fascination in the alchemy, witchcraft and taxonomy of “Carrington’s kitchen,” here Skaer attempts to capture the magical in the mundane as well as the uncanny experience of being in a famous artist’s space. Viewers can perceive the tiny details of certain postcards pinned to the cupboard doors. Many depict the monarchy of her English birthplace—Princess Diana and jubilee imagery being the most apparent from this vantage point. In *The Hearing Trumpet*, Marian similarly mentions



11.6 Lucy Skaer, *Leonora Carrington's kitchen*, showing a postcard of Tate's painting 'The Cholmondeley Ladies,' 2006. Photograph. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

postcards of Buckingham Palace sent from her supercentenarian mother's valet (3). In Skaer's image, these souvenirs of English royalty are juxtaposed with postcards of magical beasts, prehistorical monsters, ceramic artefacts, and a map of what appears to be Iceland. On the left-hand cupboard are more art historical references in the form of Tate collection reproductions, again serving as staples of "Carrington's" English heritage, including a reproduction of Turner's painting *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory): The Morning After the Deluge—Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* (1843), and *The Cholmondeley Ladies* (c.1600-10) attributed to the seventeenth century British School. In her essay 'The Transcendence of the Image,' Skaer ponders the latter image at length as "a document of coincidence" (again much like her own passing contemporaneity with Carrington) portraying twins who were married on the same day and each gave birth on the same day, which "to a contemporary eye [...] resemble two frames of a film curiously inhabiting the same, rather than consecutive instants."<sup>27</sup> Beneath the cabinets are biscuit tins and a sliced loaf of bread in a basket echoing Skaer's bid to endear herself to the older expatriate by gifting her a homespun present of English tea and Chorley cakes.

After Carrington's death from pneumonia in 2011, Skaer's *Leonora* installation and related documentation from their meeting have adopted a more haunted valence, a 'death of the author' in biological rather than Barthesian terms. In this instance, the "death" is a departure from capitalist authority towards a more conceptual, if ambivalent, engagement with the very existence of the image, or, in Bal's view, a shift from author to artwork as the "site" of attention.<sup>28</sup> Aware of this transformation, Skaer returned to Mexico City and took a series of photographs outside the late artist's house with focus on the door and nearby trees lining the street. These photographs were then worked up into a series of silkscreened images comprising veiled, overlaid shapes (crescent moons and traditional harlequin diamond



11.7 Lucy Skaer, *Harlequin is as Harlequin Does*, Murray Guy, 2012. Silk screen photograph. Reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

patterns) for her solo exhibition *Harlequin is as Harlequin Does* at Murray Guy, New York (18 February—24 March 2012).

Again one may find it almost impossible not to read the aura or trace of “Carrington” in these images, but the eccentricity, novelty, and banality of their content keeps them suspended in the limbo of ambiguity. As with Skaer’s wider practice, she gifts her viewers a

perplexing series of images to contemplate; their referent skewed but thought-provoking in “her” disjunction. Here Skaer’s alter-ego as a harlequin seems to fold back onto “Carrington” as a trickster, witch or virago (see Weisz’s Chapter Eight). Skaer’s art thus mimics “Carrington” in character however distant they may be in terms of artistic style, media, geography and generation. The function of “Carrington” for Skaer is an unruly found object that activates rather than historicises an encounter between artistic temporalities. Questions of analogue communication and tangibility are also paramount, and are played out in interesting ways in the next example which continues these threads of longevity and persistence versus loss and distance.

### **“Carrington” in Performance Installation**

For Samantha Sweeting (b.1982) and Lynn Lu (b.1974), Carrington’s novel *The Hearing Trumpet* served as the conceptual and thematic starting point for a two-part narrative performance exploring intimate personal memories. Rather than a straightforward reprisal of the novel’s narrative, their version honed in on its central motif, deploying Carrington’s instruments instead of her “work.” *The Hearing Trumpet* was first shown at *2Nights with 2Gyrlz* at Performance Space in Hackney, London (14-15 October 2011),<sup>29</sup> and survives through documentary photographs taken by Marco Berardi on both nights, as well as short



11.8 Lynn Lu and Samantha Sweeting, *The Hearing Trumpet*, 2011. Performance. Photo by Marco Berardi edited by Samantha Sweeting. Reproduced with kind permission of the artists and photographer.



text-based accounts from the perspective of each artist.<sup>30</sup> The diptych performance included an interactive game of Chinese whispers (a playground or parlour pastime of secret messages shared between a chain of participants, typically resulting in very different end narrative from what was initiated), recorded on the first night then played back through the static installation on the second night.

In the first act, Sweeting collected previously untold childhood secrets from the audience before whispering these tales from memory through a brass hearing trumpet held up to Lu's ear. Lu then breathed onto a glass pane in front of her (which also served as a framing device, linking back to Carrington's visual output). With her index finger, Lu then transcribed the stories into the condensation which visually hovered for a climactic moment before evaporating. In Sweeting's account, viewers were able to briefly decipher fragments of their own memories and those of other people before they vanished. The second act completed the dialogic circuit, replaying the tales exchanged on the first night back to the audience through the hearing trumpet now installed as a spot-lit, wall-mounted readymade with a concealed audio sound-piece.

The combination of low-level lighting, murmuring sounds, and the raw immediacy of the artistic duet in this performance space appear to have served as the ideal environmental factors for a public confessional. The 18 anonymous, guilt-ridden micro-narratives related by members of the audience were revealing in their frank brevity, tragic tones and psychoanalytic content, for example:

...I used to read my sister's diary and cry over the bits about her sexual explorations with her boyfriend. She would find me curled up sobbing, and would try to comfort me. I never told her why I was crying. I was so afraid of losing her...

...I stole from my grandmother's purse. Everyone thought she was going senile because she kept declaring that she was missing cash...<sup>31</sup>

The combination of revulsion and desire is paramount. Many of the tales involve violence, humiliation, voyeurism, unrequited love, and fetishistic content. They echo the anecdotal asides and inner monologue of Marian in *The Hearing Trumpet*, for instance:

I had a faint idea of stealing one or two chocolates from Muriel which she hides behind the bookcase. Muriel is very mean about sweets and she wouldn't be so fat if she were more generous (7).

The suggestion that Marian has dementia is further taken into account through the partial loss of message between audience and performers and its creative reconfiguration, though, as far as we know, the biographical "Carrington" did not experience a dementia-related illness despite her extreme age. As "Carrington's" story is told from Marian's point of view, even as an unreliable narrator, there is logic to her situation and experiences rendering the rest of the world and its characters as the true arbitrators of the nonsensical. Susan Suleiman, among others, has elucidated on the dynamics of empowerment, rewriting and shifting perspectives within the novel: "Only by having the old 'senile' crone tell her own story is the contradictory effect achieved. Marian's sharp wit counteracts her 'decomposing flesh' and her dependent status is belied by her narrative mastery."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the polarity between youth and old age is dramatised and counteracted, reminding us of the fact that "Carrington" was only in her thirties when she was writing about the "surrealism" within this particular nursing home.

For the 2011 performance, audience members were invited to assist Sweeting and Lu in “writing” and shaping the event by means of transference and intersubjectivity. As with the chance encounter, and well-known surrealist parlour game of consequences or the exquisite corpse, here the initial game of Chinese whispers created an oral/aural communicative chain in which, inevitably, some of the narrative content and detail got lost, transformed or misheard in the process. This led to a reconfiguration and variation of the source tales, which, I would hazard, is surely equivalent to “Carrington’s” sketchy representation in contemporary scholarship. Thus, the performance quoted “Carrington” in a lively and resourceful manner, actively embodying and reimagining the novel rather than merely imitating it. The generational split of emerging artists and grand matriarch is bridged through the processes of embodied acting and adaptation. One could easily interpret Lu and Sweeting as performing the roles of the well-documented historical friendship of “Carrington” and her surrealist contemporary Remedios Varo (1908-1963) who, in turn, appear in “Carrington’s” novel as the fictional characters Marian and Carmella. Lu and Sweeting’s minimal twinned costumes of black dresses, evening gloves and red shoes further characterised them as participants in the iconographic universe of “Carrington” and “Varo,” and provided a uniformity and contemporary edge to their visual tale-telling remote from the original “script.”

Turning to analysis of the performance object itself, the very process of oral storytelling is transferred from the speaker (she who quotes) to active listener; Carrington prefiguring the dynamics of sound art. As the title of her novel suggests, Marian is gifted an antique hearing trumpet, an *objet trouvé* or found object from a surrealist flea market, by her friend and contemporary Carmella. This gift is an antique-like heirloom or art object in its own right, described by Marian as follows:

The trumpet was certainly a fine specimen of its kind, without being really modern. It was, however, exceptionally pretty, being encrusted with silver and



11.9 Lynn Lu and Samantha Sweeting, *The Hearing Trumpet*, 2011. Installation. Photo by Samantha Sweeting. Reproduced with kind permission of the artists.

mother o'pearl motives and grandly curved like a buffalo's horn. The aesthetic presence of this object was not its only quality, the hearing trumpet magnified sound to such a degree that ordinary conversation became quite audible even to my ears (1).

The reader then learns that Carmella is clairvoyant, and foresees that the hearing trumpet device will enable her friend Marian to eavesdrop on some significant conversations such as her younger family's intentions to move her to a nursing home. Later it allows Marian to overhear a murderer's plans and intervene. For the purposes of Lu and Sweeting's performance, Lu acquired the brass prop from a specialist instrumental shop called Phil Parker Limited in Marylebone, London. The owner sawed the horn off an old battered trumpet and fitted a mouthpiece into the end. As an ad-hoc, assisted readymade, the item used in the performance was a second-hand reinterpretation, a musical trumpet instead of the more prosthetic hearing aid used in the novel. Again this detail is consistent with the story; when Marian is gifted the item, she is at first somewhat confused about its true purpose before Carmella demonstrates its application. As Lusty expands, metonymically the ear, or hearing more generally, is fetishised within the novel via the trumpet apparatus. Lusty goes on to use the device to make a convincing argument about the position of the souvenir in surrealism as in the found object or *objet trouvé* procured from the flea market.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, in the introduction to the 2005 Penguin edition, fiction writer Ali Smith suggests that: "Fundamentally, *The Hearing Trumpet* is a book about profound disconnection; at its centre are people unable to hear each other, or unwilling to."<sup>34</sup> The novel is concerned with the prejudices and short-sightedness related to cultural views on ageing and dementia, and, less pejoratively, the empowerment and therapy associated with trust and friendship. Lu and Sweeting's performance and sound installation thus detailed the themes of secretive

communication, audibility and lucidity, or lack of, that are so vividly highlighted in Carrington's novel. Moreover, for Lu and Sweeting, the presence of the reinvented hearing trumpet was vital to their performative interaction as a dialogic bridge, connecting both halves of the performance and installation as a visual *and* audio experience as well as a historical bridge linking past with present, namely the avant-garde practices of "Carrington" with this contemporary happening. Made in 2011, the year of her death, the performance installation incidentally became a kind of homage. By this logic, the trumpet also turns into an art historical heirloom, conceptually "passed down" the creative generations.

### **Embodied Anachronism**

As an overall strategy, the practice of quoting "Carrington" has become a political gesture of feminist reengagement with the historiography of the avant-garde. The virago is a volatile subject requiring extra care. Each of the examples included in this chapter have been used to explore active rethinkings of "Carrington" as a contemporary icon, and the variety of innovative routes to achieving this demonstrates "her" reach, pertinence and versatility as a living avant-garde phenomenon. Quoting "Carrington" is a dialogic process of translation between media. Her intermedial techniques may be straightforwardly reproduced, conceptually adapted, or, in the cases of Aridjis and Skaer, iconoclastically detonated and reassembled from scratch as meaningful "debris" which, as Bal proclaimed, can be used to conjure entirely *new* cultural texts. It is notable that the most successful of these appropriations are those made in recognisably contemporary, conceptual and/or experimental media that Carrington herself did not deploy: performance, film, and sound installation. "Carrington" herself has become a medium to be practiced within and through. Moreover, the embodied anachronism inherent to the female protagonists in examples by Aridjis, Skaer,

Sweeting and Lu, represent both continuity with, and a temporal slippage between, the historical avant-garde and the contemporary cultural sphere which collapses the teleology of influence in favour of a more incomplete and fragmentary process of dialogism which seeks to dissect, reconfigure, converse or, more accurately, whisper in multiple, subversive ways. In conclusion, the profusion of recent engagements with “Carrington” as an unreliable medium not only reasserts her importance within clusters of avant-garde activities and within the language of twenty-first century contemporary practice, but highlights some of the ways in which marginalised narratives might come rapidly to the fore through detached re-presentation and stark re-embodiment.



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The author would like to express her gratitude to Chloe Aridjis, Lynn Lu, Niklas Nenzén, Emilie Seron, Lucy Skaer, and Samantha Sweeting for their lively correspondence. Stacy Boldrick, Louise Warmington (The Fruitmarket Gallery), and Marco Berardi also deserve acknowledgement for their support in obtaining image rights.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Marina Warner who grounds “Carrington” in the English tradition of John Tenniel, Mervyn Peake and Monty Python, ‘Leonora Carrington’s Spirit Bestiary; or the Art of Playing Make-Belief,’ *Leonora Carrington: Paintings, Drawings and Sculptures 1940-1990*, Andrea Schlieker (ed.) (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1991), 11-12. See also Susan Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004), 14-15; 79. Far from concurring with all of Alastair Sooke’s recent exhibition review, it is refreshing to rethink the minute narrative detail and overall content of her artwork, and the way in which her practice may or may not stand up to her biography, ‘Mystery Masks Meaningless,’ *The Telegraph* (9 March 2015): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/11452384/Leonora-Carrington-Tate-Liverpool-review-mystery-masks-meaningless.html> Accessed 15/05/2015

<sup>2</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 161.

<sup>3</sup> Mieke Bal, ‘Dispersing the Image,’ *Looking In, The Art of Viewing: Mieke Bal: Essays and Afterword*, ed. Norman Bryson (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, The Gordon and Breach Publishing Group, 2001), 68-9. See also Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: The Architecture of Art Writing* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), xiv; Bal makes a similar argument in *Quoting Caravaggio*, 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Mieke Bal, *Reading “Rembrandt”: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 8.

<sup>6</sup> For reasons of space, this chapter cannot consider other interesting examples such as work by filmmaker Lucero González.

<sup>7</sup> Natalya Lusty, *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 49.

<sup>8</sup> Lennie Goodings, ‘Virago at Forty,’ *Virago is 40: A Celebration* (London: Virago Press Ltd., and Little, Brown Book Group, 2013), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Elena Poniatowska, *Leonora: A Novel*, trans. Amanda Hopkinson (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2015), 446.

<sup>10</sup> Chloe Aridjis, *Book of Clouds* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), 41.

<sup>11</sup> Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> According to artist and curator Viktor Wynd, the Aridjis family were considered close friends of Carrington, and saw her almost every week for a period of twenty years. Grateful thanks to Wynd for confirming this fact.

<sup>13</sup> See also Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 177; and Lusty, 70.

<sup>14</sup> Chloe Aridjis, *Asunder* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2013), 60.

<sup>15</sup> At the time Skaer was conducting a Scottish Arts Council Studio Residency in New York.

<sup>16</sup> Lucy Skaer, ‘The Transcendence of the Image,’ *Tate Etc.* issue 14 (Autumn 2008): <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/transcendence-image> Accessed 23/05/2015

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<sup>17</sup> The work was acquired from doggerfisher, Edinburgh, for the sum of £35,997.50 with £13,000 assistance from The Art Fund (2009): <http://artfund.org/news/2009/06/24/the-art-fund-helps-hunterian-acquire-work-by-turner-prize-nominated-artist-lucy-skaer> Accessed 23/05/2015

<sup>18</sup> Lucy Skaer in *Lucy Skaer*, DVD (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Skaer cited in Lizzie Carey-Thomas, 'Garlic and Sapphires in the Mud,' *Lucy Skaer* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2008), 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Nikos Mantzios, 'Review: Lucy Skaer,' *Kaput. 03* (2008): <http://www.kaput.gr/gr/03/lucy-skaer-the-fruitmarket/> Accessed 23/05/2015

<sup>22</sup> Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press), xiv.

<sup>23</sup> "[W]riting *about* art is not a substitute *for* the art [...] Instead of being a substitute, a good text about art is a *supplement* to it," Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider*, xii.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Jane Miller, *Crazy Age: Thoughts on Being Old* (London: Virago, 2010), 158.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan P. Eburne, 'Breton's Wall, Carrington's Kitchen: Surrealism and the Archive,' *Intermédialités: Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques*, No. 18 (2012), 31; 33 Eburne cites Sylvia Chereum's description of Carrington's "garage"-like kitchen which includes further examples of postcards and foodstuffs, 32. See also Chereum, 'Eternally Married to the Wind' (Mexico City, April 1998 and October 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Skaer, 'The Transcendence of the Image,' n. p.

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author,' *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 147.

<sup>29</sup> 2 Gyrلز Performative Arts is the collaborative brainchild of Lisa Newman and Llewyn Máire.

<sup>30</sup> These are available on their respective websites: Samantha Sweeting, 'The Hearing Trumpet' (2011): <http://www.samanthasweeting.com/performanceinstallation/hearingtrumpet.html> Accessed 23/05/2015; Lynn Lu, 'The Hearing Trumpet' (2011): <http://www.lynnlu.info/projectItem.php?Pid=125&PP=8&NP=10> Accessed 23/05/2015

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous members of the audience cited in Lynn Lu, 'The Hearing Trumpet' (2011): <http://www.lynnlu.info/projectItem.php?Pid=125&PP=8&NP=10> Accessed 23/05/2015

<sup>32</sup> Suleiman, 170. See also Whitney Chadwick, 'Muse Begets Crone: On Leonora Carrington,' *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory and Criticism*, eds. Susan Bee and Mira Schor (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 419.

<sup>33</sup> Lusty, 64

<sup>34</sup> Ali Smith, 'Introduction,' *The Hearing Trumpet* (London: Penguin, 2005), xii.