An exhibition of the work of artists
Susan Aldworth
Andrew Carnie
Karen Ingham

Exploring how personal identity has become embedded in a new landscape of anatomical imagery
19 April – 30 June 2012
Monday – Saturday 1.00 – 7.00pm
Inigo Rooms
Somerset House East Wing
Kings College London
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Exhibiting together for the first time, and working with neurobiologist Richard Wingate from the MRC Centre for Developmental Neurobiology at KCL, artists Susan Aldworth, Andrew Carnie and Karen Ingham present works that explore emerging and enriched images of the Self.

Susan Aldworth’s work engages with neuroscience and philosophy to develop an understanding of human identity. Her films and Reassembling the Self lithographs, made in collaboration with Stanley Jones at the Curwen Studio, consider the relationship between the physical brain and our sense of Self. http://susanaldworth.com

Andrew Carnie uses time-based media to reflect the evolving nature of our sense of Self, as we construct an identity through the acquisition of knowledge and the challenges of medical disorders. Seized uses projection to explore how the experience of epilepsy impacts on the sense of being embodied. http://andrewcarnie.co.uk

Karen Ingham’s works juxtapose the narratives behind scientific objects, language and images conferring new meaning onto the notion of embodiment. The films exhibited include Narrative Remains, made in collaboration with The Hunterian Museum and Variance with The Francis Galton Collection. Vanitas: Seed Head and the Piece of Mind Mask were made with the assistance of the Cardiff Neuroscience Research Group. http://kareningham.org.uk

Biomedical Sciences have been transformed in the last twenty years by visualisation techniques that have harnessed optical physics and the genome to give a dramatic window into living cells and functioning systems. How much is this imagery now informing our sense of Self?

Advances in imaging technology are the currency of scientific exploration and improved medical diagnosis. Our ability to manipulate, render and threshold vast volumes of data have generated a new biology in digital form. Anatomy and physiology can be visualised and modelled within the computer in four dimensional datasets that that are almost tangible embodiments of what lies beneath the surface of cells and bodies.

Our new-found mastery of the genome has seen an explosion in molecular techniques through which cells and tissue are engineered to make them reveal their form and function. Genetic methods have shuttled naturally occurring biofluorescent proteins from jellyfish and coral into the microscopic domains of cell interiors. The same approaches that reveal microscopic anatomy also allow the activity of brain cells to be controlled. Together, the machinery of visualisation and the power of molecular biology have made biological tissue increasingly transparent to both examination and manipulation.

These technological interventions have altered the material stuff of biomedicine and human anatomy, from the slab of dissected material or collection of glass slides, to a three-dimensional, digital theatre of the spectacular, interpreted through computer-generated palettes of reds, purples and greens. These crafted and stylised forms are complemented by an industrialised production of online databases and digital atlases, which collectively confront us with new perspectives on biological form.

What effect does the mechanics and aesthetic of visualisation have on our sense of being embodied? Is the self embodied in the material substance of our cells and tissues, or is our identity best captured or imagined in the rendered, stripped-back and ultimately immaterial digitisations of scientific imaging? This exhibition is the manifestation of these questions, arising from science, but posed by artists, to be explored by the subject – ourselves.

Dr Richard Wingate, KCL

THE GAP
Susan Aldworth, Andrew Carnie and Karen Ingham draw upon the figurative traditions of Western art, whose historic task has been to make the human body meaningful. Since the body was, according to classical poetic theory, the main vehicle for visual communication, artists were expected to move their audiences by mastering the depiction of its expressions, poses and gestures. According to doctrines established by Renaissance theorists such as Alberti, the human
figure was to be read for its emotional content, preferably as part of some grand, edifying narrative from history or mythology. The study of anatomy helped in this task, but not for the most part using dissection as a method; rather, the dynamics of expression were to be grasped by the emulation of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture, usually presented to art students in the form of plaster cast reproductions. Under this longstanding regime, which stood until centuries later.

Attempts to manage the moral health of the people went alongside increasing research into the effects and treatment of sickness within the individual body. From the sixteenth century onwards, medical practice - for centuries in hoc to a mixture of ancient doctrine and folk remedy - began its gradual move towards an empirical scientific basis. Ancient restrictions on human dissection were loosened as anatomy theatres in a few university cities such as Padua and Leiden were established, attended by both medical students and curious members of the public, and liberally supplied with cadavers from gallows by the noble intent to alleviate suffering, mindful of the final equality of all bodies. And while much biomedical imagery has been readily absorbed into popular culture as a kind of shorthand for mortality and interior mystery, profoundly symbolic meanings are not properly its business. Scans and X-rays are not designed to communicate what it means or feels like to suffer disease, or even to have a mortal body. That is the job of art. Thankfully, it has been the calling of Susan Aldworth, Carnie and Ingham to fill the gap between such nevertheless fascinating imagery and its poetic implications, sympathetically reassembling selves and kicking out against the delimiting of life by social attitudes and the vagaries of nature.

Thus the mysteries of the human body were unveiled and offered up to a literate few – the bodies of unnamed and unremembered criminals dismembered and embellished with token elements of respectable narrative. Sometimes, pictures of dissections likened the recumbent cadaver to the figure of the dead Christ, as, for example, in Rembrandt’s Anatomy Lesson of Jan Deijman (c. 1656, Amsterdam Museum). Indeed the very term ‘embodiment’ highlighted by this exhibition has associations of human fallibility, which, according to Christianity, God shared when he incarnated his son Jesus. In Christian culture, and not least in the art of the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation, abject, mortal suffering only became meaningful in comparison to the crucifixion and humiliation of Christ, the ultimate sacrifice.

More prosaically and effectively, by the nineteenth century, dissection had become the norm for the study of pathology, and teaching hospitals amassed large collections of diseased organs and body parts, usually preserved in glass jars. Here, the original owners of these organs are identified only by their names and diagnoses, reduced to the grisly remains of their downfalls, disembodied from any of their human achievements. It was only in 1895, with Roentgen’s invention of the X-ray, and various scanning devices such as CT and fMRI succeeding more than 80 years later, that structures and traces of physiological processes could be revealed within the living body. But how to interpret these compelling, often ghostly images of an invisible world, which seemed almost to hint at electro-chemical, implicitly spiritual, animating forces, became the subject of speculation and debate which lasts to this day.

The effectiveness of these technologies in understanding and often treating disease is undeniable; anatomy quite properly takes the unientimentially objective approach while, at best, being motivated by the noble intent to alleviate suffering, mindful of the final equality of all bodies. And while much biomedical imagery has been readily absorbed into popular culture as a kind of shorthand for mortality and interior mystery, profoundly symbolic meanings are not properly its business. Scans and X-rays are not designed to communicate what it means or feels like to suffer disease, or even to have a mortal body. That is the job of art. Thankfully, it has been the calling of Aldworth, Carnie and Ingham to fill the gap between such nevertheless fascinating imagery and its poetic implications, sympathetically reassembling selves and kicking out against the delimiting of life by social attitudes and the vagaries of nature.