

TITLE

'Something Quite "Other"': the 'machina carnis' art/science collaborative project

ABSTRACT

Framed within the matrices of an innovative, collaborative art/science research model the 'machina carnis' project interrogates the implications of contemporary biomedical engineering for expressions and representations of corporeality. The pioneering first-person research, during which the artist also becomes a "human guinea pig", is theoretically and visually articulated throughout this paper. Concerns integral to the project research are discussed with reference to nineteenth century attempts to quantify essential components of the human being itself through scientific experimental processes. It is germane to the research that while biological scientists justify their research into human genetic engineering on the grounds of its "therapeutic" potential, art - particularly the genre of science fiction (whose origins can be traced to Mary Shelly's famous tale, Frankenstein) - has acted on the social through culture to alert us to the perilous repercussions of usurping the role of the "Creator of Life." Now, at the dawn of the new millennium, the scientific project of mapping human DNA seemingly complete, the plight of the genetically-engineered human has become an intense focus of cultural critique.

The stages of the 'machina carnis' project, outlined in this paper, take the form of practical and theoretical investigations into cellular responses and exploratory research discursively located within the system/environment paradigm. This allows for boundaries between the philosophic and scientific disciplines of: ethics and aesthetics, epistemology and biology and technology to become nodes in a relational network associated with: living and non-living, sentience and consciousness and conceptions of humanness. To gauge the impact of the technological advances of the latter half of the 20th Century on the arts and sciences patterns of knowing in these disciplines are explored; thus fostering an understanding of the historical relations between the "work" of art and the "work" of science in culture and society. The role of Feminism in broadening the epistemological status of science is also discussed here. The inquiry highlights issues relating to interpretation and representation, objectivity and subjectivity, the natural and the artificial, the limitations of an androcentric worldview, sentience, consciousness and self-creation (autopoiesis). The latter reflects a shift in social scientific thought toward a "living systems, feedback-loop" or "ecological" worldview normally associated with the biological sciences, but more recently, with computing sciences' attempts to understand the operations of self-organising systems and artificial intelligence.

In the 'machina carnis' interactive installation the artist-researcher recontextualises time-lapse digital videomicrograph image data of beating cardiac cells which were cultured from adult stem cells taken from her blood. Through her use of this scientific image data in an immersive interactive installation format the implications of the issues raised by the biomedical engineering procedures are expressed as a very physical, tactile encounter. The artwork is structured to engender a multi-sensory experience for the individual viewer who; when immersed in the aesthetic, corporeal, interactive installation as a participant; completes the work through their engagement. Thus, in summary, the significance of the 'machina carnis' project lies in its re-privileging of the aesthetic experience of corporeality in the discourses surrounding genetic manipulation.

BIOGRAPHY: Trish Adams

Trish completed her Doctor of Visual Arts at Griffith University in 2005. Her thesis explored the impact on expressions and representations of corporeality of experimental techniques in biomedical engineering and involved a cross-disciplinary collaboration with a biomedical scientist at the University of Queensland. Stem cells from her blood sample were changed to beating cardiac cells 'in vitro'; creating an innovative model where Trish became at once both artist/researcher and "human guinea pig". Her use of human tissue and the subsequent immersive installation format in "machina carnis" also encouraged empathy between the viewer and the artwork; posing questions about what it means to be human in the twenty-first century, and the ways in which our understanding of ourselves will be changed by contemporary developments in biotechnology. The research produced three installations: 'Temporal Intervals' and 'machina carnis', shown at the Brisbane Powerhouse and 'Wave Writer', shown at the International Symposium of Electronic Art, Tallinn, Estonia in 2004.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

Dr. Trish Adams is currently an independent artist & researcher. She is in the process of brokering a new art/science collaborative project at the Queensland Brain Institute, The University of Queensland, Brisbane Australia. Information about her research etc. is available at: <http://www.wavewriter.net>

AREA OF DISCUSSION

Bodies, Cultures & Scientific Metaphors