

Did you spot the Gorilla? Engagement and omission in Sigune Hamann's Art Work

Sigune Hamann's body of work owes as much to that which is omitted as to that which is included in the images and installations. Omission to add meaning is a staple of Hamann's work. She has never been interested in producing standalone photographs but in creating a dialogue across exhibition, artist, images and audience as each agent merges into the next. The focus shifts from the artist to the image to the audience and interacts to create a changing experience and emphasis dependent on the audience engagement as variable. The work is not intended to be read in one particular way with a single meaning. At any one time, a viewer will read the work differently dependent on the focus of their attention. By presenting images that are open ended while inviting viewers to engage with the subjects represented, Hamann adeptly leads the viewer to reach varied readings and interpretations. The audience and their relationship with the work becomes of paramount importance to giving the work its meaning. The audience are performers who make conscious decisions to participate or detach themselves from the scenes and groups presented just as people do in interactions with each other.

Earlier works by Hamann such as *Nothing but the Truth* (online project, 2002)¹ and *Dinner For One* (4 channel video installation, 2005)² used omission to look at truth and fiction. At the time Hamann was interested in what has now become known as 'fake news'³ and the possibility of merging fact with fiction. In *Nothing but the Truth* she used the non-linear qualities of the internet to create a project that allowed the viewing of over 100 films, photographic stills, and sound clips in different permutations and combinations to trace a range of versions of the circumstances surrounding the famous bombing of the Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura in Piazza Fontana Milan, 12 December 1969 which killed 17 people. The intrigue around the attack was further compounded by the political climate in Italy at the time and continues to baffle researchers with the incident never having been solved definitively. Over the decades the incident has been variously blamed on left-wing anarchists, right-wing pressure groups, and the CIA with no conclusion. Hamann was able to play on this confusion using the fabric and non-linear quality of the internet to encourage the audience to create their own narrative from her fragments of press features, news footage and newly created imagery, speech, sound and text.

In *Dinner for One*⁴, Hamann used one actor (Hayley Carmichael) in the video pieces exhibited simultaneously to portray one side of four two-way conversations. The

¹ <http://www.nothingbutthetruth.org.uk> *Nothing but the Truth*, online docufiction, interactive flash movies with photography and sound commissioned by Lighthouse Brighton 2002

² *Dinner for One*, four channel video installation with sound, 15 minutes each, actor Hayley Carmichael, *Transmediale*, The British Council Berlin and Goethe-Institut London, 2005

³ The term 'fake news' was originally coined in 2016 in relation to the observation of a series of made-up political stories from a town in Macedonia. It turned out that the stories had been created by young people who had discovered how lucrative social media and an internet presence could be. The term was later appropriated by Donald Trump and the mainstream media (Sources: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-42724320>; https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/A%20Short%20Guide%20to%20History%20of%20Fake%20News%20and%20Disinformation_ICFJ%20Final.pdf)

⁴ Hamann called the piece *Dinner for One* after the 1963 film featuring British music hall stars Freddie Frinton and May Warden which portrays an old woman hosting a dinner party on her own with imaginary guests of

conversations reflect Hamann's interest as a German living in United Kingdom and combine fictional works with real life interviews or cross-examinations. In the four channels the actor remains neutral in her delivery while reciting one person's part in the fictional play *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde (1892); the cross-examination from the judge of Oscar Wilde in his real-life trial, 1895 three years after the play was premiered; the interview of Princess Diana on the Panorama programme in 1995 by Martin Bashir; and the inquiry into the Iraq War by the parliamentary foreign select committee specifically of David Kelly (who went on to commit suicide following the inquiry) in 2003. While dealing with Britishness as a stated interest of Hamann's in this context, the work also marked the beginning of concerns that firmly implicate the audience as performer in the work. By absencing or omitting one half of a conversation or dialogue, the audience is asked to consider filling the gaps and to bring their own version of events to the work both factual and fictional. The neutrality of the actor further asks the audience to overlay the emotional response that might be expected in the four contexts. The videos with soundtracks were shown simultaneously meaning that it depended on where the audience was standing as to which interview was dominant and could be heard most clearly.

Throughout Hamann's work she plays with the effectiveness of the use of still and moving images to implicate the audience. In 2010, she curated and organised a conference at Tate Modern entitled *Stillness and Movement* which was well received by critics and audience alike. A review of the conference stated 'This is new ground and, as some of the panellists suggested, it may be time to call in the expertise of the neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists to contribute to this emerging interdisciplinary debate on the fundamental perception of still and moving images'.⁵ It is this approach and thinking that Hamann had already been applying to her work with the two early pieces outlined together with her *film-strip* series that she started in 2003 and continues to develop to date. Hamann's interest in the presentation of imagery that guides the viewer while giving them choices based on their own individual difference and preference in a situation became paramount in her work. Hamann's fascination with subject, viewer, photographic object and artist and the interplay between all these agents makes it no surprise that she began collaborating with the Department of Experimental Psychology at Oxford University in 2016 as artist in residence until 2018 and in particular with Anne C. (also known as Kia) Nobre.

Did you spot the Gorilla? an exhibition at Barn Gallery, St John's College Oxford Jan/Feb 2019 showed a number of projects that were developed or initiated during Hamann's residency.⁶ The presence and yet anonymity of the subjects and their character in Hamann's work lends itself to the concerns of psychological research across a broad spectrum including Individual Differences, First Impressions, Intergroup Behaviour, Perception and Attention. Hamann mostly inadvertently touches upon these areas of research in her work but in the focus on Kia Nobre's work on attention and temporality, and on 3D perception of images studied elsewhere in the University, Hamann has found strong parallels. Specifically, Kia Nobre's work focuses on the study of brain activity during attention

long disappeared suitors played by her butler. Regularly screened in Germany on New Year's Eve, the film is almost unknown in the UK in spite of the British origin of its stars.

⁵ Phoca, Sophia, PhotoFilm: Stillness and Movement, *Art Monthly*, no 336, May 2010

⁶ The exhibition ***Did you spot the Gorilla?*** Barn Gallery, St John's College Oxford Jan/Feb 19 was curated by Gill Hedley

processes and also looks at how temporality exists and is represented by and/or in the brain.^{7 8}

The interest to connect her work with psychology has been further reinforced by Hamann through looking at the audience relationship and engagement with photo-based images that are not contained, that have multiple and changing meanings for the viewer, and that deliberately project narrative from outside of the 2-D frame. Hamann cites the essay *The Gaze in the Expanded Field*⁹ by Norman Bryson as an inspiration for and consolidation of her artistic practice. Written in 1988, as discourse on post-modernity came of age, this text traces its way through the concept of The Gaze referencing Jacques Lacan and Jean-Paul Sartre and expanding on the Western model through the Kyoto School (who drew from Friedrich Nietzsche) and in particular Kitaro Nishida and Keiji Nishitani. Bryson argues that in analysis of images to that date it was accepted that the viewer had a finite relationship with the presentation of an image contained within the frame and that in each image was a vanishing point in which the viewer could no longer exist – that was the point at which the viewer lost connection with the subject of the image. Bryson argues that it is not as simple as this and that an image has multiple vanishing points and it is the way in which the viewer inhabits those points that forms the richness of engagement with the image. He goes on to suggest that while Sartre writes about subject and object distinctively, Lacan begins to question that relationship and with Nishitani the subject and object merge until there is no distinction. At that point the ultimate field of ‘nihility’ or ‘emptiness’ is reached and meaning re-emerges from that encounter in its position as the centre of the experience. The meaning shifts and is created by the historical, cultural and social context. At that point, the viewer is no longer self-aware and is subsumed into the image. It is this state that Sigune Hamann plays on in her work of multi-viewpoints, compression and expansion of time, presentation of different formats and the deliberate encouragement of the viewer to be a part of the image as a performer.

Both Hamann and Nobre, using very different approaches, are looking at the way in which a person engages and attends to something using a combination of meanings and responses. In Hamann’s case she seeks to use multiple viewpoints, meanings, representations of time, and the varied response of the viewer to suggest different ways of reading the same work. In Nobre’s case she is imaging the brain to illustrate her theory of a network of attention (as opposed to the single model theories of attention that have been presented previously in psychology)¹⁰ that also implies combination of neural activity in a network involving other models such as memory, experience and language working together. Nobre’s work visualises and theorises what happens in the brain during experiments that involve various tasks focusing on different conditions of attention. In respect of the call from Hamann’s *Stillness and Movement* symposium, it asks the question of whether the conditions could be created to look at attention in the context of neuroscience and brain imaging while engaging with work such as Hamann’s that encourages multi-viewpoints.

⁷ Nobre, A.C & Mesulam, M.M, Large-Scale Networks for Attentional Biases in eds. Nobre, A.C and Kastner, S, (2014), *The Oxford Handbook of Attention*, Oxford, Oxford University Press pp105 - 151

⁸ Muller, T and Nobre, A.C, Perceiving the Passage of Time: neural possibilities, *Annals of The New York Academy of Sciences Issue: Flow of Time*, Wiley, New York, 2014 pp 1 - 12

⁹ Bryson, N (1988). *The Gaze in the Expanded Field*. In Foster, H (ed.) *Vision and Visuality*, pp86 -113. New York, The New Press (Number 2 in the Dia Art Foundation’s series of books *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*)

¹⁰ Nobre, A.C and Kastner, S, (2014) *op. cit.*

In response to Nobre's work¹¹, Hamann is developing a new work *Helmholtz Box* which is a reconstruction of the device made to investigate the scope of perception without ocular movement. Helmholtz worked with participants to illuminate fragments of text at very short intervals (milliseconds). Using his apparatus, the participants in his experiment could not move their eyes, so they were only able to see fragments of text at each viewing. In normal visual processing the eyes move across images and text to read them fully. By keeping the eye still using his apparatus, the only way to see the full text was by repeating the experiment. Through repetition, participants were able to localise their gaze in different places and piece together the text. In this way Helmholtz conducted early and basic experiments on how the brain and the eye process visual information. Hamann intends to use a reconstruction of this apparatus to use for images in contrast to text.

During her residency in Oxford, Hamann exhibited her work at Ashmolean Museum, March 2017.¹² One element of her exhibition, which was distributed through the galleries in the museum was a reworking of her piece *Heimlich*, 2007. This work is made up of a series of 19 photographs which were taken as landscapes from reflections in the river Lahn in Germany. The photographs are inverted as part of the work to make them look like images of landscapes rather than a scene reflected on water. Exhibited in the Landscape Oil Sketches Gallery in the Ashmolean, these photographs were juxtaposed with works by nineteenth century painters that were sketches for dedicated landscapes or sketches for landscapes in larger paintings. The placing of the photographs in the *Heimlich* series in this context provided a reassessment of a gallery that has been largely untouched for decades, to inspire discussion about the longstanding works in the gallery in relation to the contemporary images. The painterly quality of the landscape photographs of *Heimlich* gave them an immediate connection with the oil sketches. Hamann and the curator (Jim Harris) have referenced art historian Aby Warburg in the ideas behind the exhibition relating to the Ashmolean's displays in expanding the meaning of an image through time due to different and layered cultural references. This in turn also suggested fluidity and movement in the reading of the images. Harris and Hamann further referenced the similarity and recurrence of imagery and themes through time in this context.¹³¹⁴

The way that these works were hung as well as the way the brain processes visual information were the inspiration for a series of talks programmed by curator Jim Harris and neuroscientist Chrystalina Antoniadou to coincide with the exhibition.¹⁵ The inversion of the imagery, their painterliness, and their artifice as reflections in water had an impact on the

¹¹ Nobre, A.C & Mesulam, M.M, Large-Scale Networks for Attentional Biases in eds. Nobre, A.C and Kastner, S, (2014), *The Oxford Handbook of Attention*, Oxford, Oxford University Press p106. Nobre and Mesulam illustrate the apparatus used by Helmholtz in his experiments to give historical background to their chapter.

¹² *Face to face upside down*, Photographic Interventions

Landscape Sketch Gallery, Renaissance Galleries and Sir Francis Chantrey Staircase
Ashmolean Museum Oxford 2017

¹³ Sigune Hamann and Jim Harris (Andrew W Mellon Teaching Curator, Ashmolean University Engagement Programme) in conversation during the artist's public tour of her exhibition 15/03/17

¹⁴ Michaud, P-A & Didi-Huberman, G., trans. Hawkes, S., (2007), *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, Zone Books MIT Press, Cambridge MA

¹⁵ *The Upside-Down Brain: Art and Neuroscience at the Ashmolean*, series of talks, workshops and presentations organised by Jim Harris and Chrystalina Antoniadou, Ashmolean Museum, March 2017. Sigune Hamann's tour of her exhibition was part of this series, as well as complementary lectures by Hamann and Nobre in the Headley Lecture Theatre

way that the gallery was viewed. It has been discussed that not only did the context have an impact on the way all the works were read but that the inversion of the images in *Heimlich* encouraged the brain to compensate across all the works in the gallery – to ‘flip’ and move the photographs as they are viewed suggesting movement and stasis in the way that the images are processed. In the broader context of all the works shown in the gallery, the mind changes viewpoint and considers the works collectively in the way that they are read as a suggestion of fluidity and connection across them. The images broke the horizon line in the paintings with the photographs above and below it. In doing this, *Heimlich* ruptures this long-term static gallery environment housing works that are intended to be viewed individually by both the juxtaposition of the contemporary with the historical and with the juxtaposition of recurrent themes, alternative viewpoints, and merging of media.

The title of the Barn Gallery exhibition was taken from the title of one of Hamann’s signature ‘*film-strips*’ made following her introduction to the film used in the Invisible Gorilla Experiment by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons¹⁶. This much replicated experiment tests our ability to observe an unexpected event while focusing on an observational task and is very relevant to Hamann’s work. The discussion around the experiment marks one of the first meeting points between Hamann and Nobre’s practice during the residency. Hamann photographed the video used in the experiment as a series of her ‘*film-strips*’ (titled *film-strip Did you spot the Gorilla? (2018)*), three of which featured in the exhibition on lightboxes. The large-scale *film-strip (20.10.18)* in the exhibition was shown as a 1m x 30m photograph hanging in the gallery and was photographed at the March for the People’s Vote, London, October 2018. Hamann has been making the ‘*film-strips*’ since 2003 and the commonality in each of them is that it has been shot using a stills camera as a movie camera. Using a roll of 35mm film continuously exposed in a rewinding movement, while Hamann is moving or turning her body, a continuous image is produced from 360° perspective. Although the image is static, it contains the indexical traces of movement – of the film, of the camera and the person holding it and everything moving within the optical field. The hand-held camera as an extension of the body and the performative process allow for elements of chance within the work. The ‘*film-strip*’ format enables the viewer to consider the temporal part of the image either side of the strip – what happened before and after shooting the image. Viewers can engage with the characteristic ‘*film-strip*’ format of the image as a piece in its own right or they can track and trace the single images as they are recorded and as the artist moves or there is movement in the scene.¹⁷ The ‘*film-strips*’ can resemble abstract images, landscapes, or very directly represent figures moving in a scene. The viewer remains conscious of the artist’s presence and the ambivalence for the viewer is drawn from their three options to trace the performance as the artist, to become part of the dynamics of the scene represented by the image, or to decide to remain as detached observers of the art work. The reality of the viewer experience is that they will engage with these three options to varying degrees as they look at the piece. They will omit and commit to engage and be part of the image and its performative quality to varying degrees as they look at the piece.

Freshers was made in the first week of first year students attending Oxford University; Camberwell School of Art, University of the Arts London; and Waseda University Japan, in

¹⁶ Chabris, C.F and Simons, D.J., (2010). *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuition Deceives Us*. New York, Crown. This famous experiment conducted at Harvard University in ‘inattention blindness’ asks participants to view a video of people playing basketball and to record how often one team passes the ball. About half the participants fail to see the person dressed as a gorilla who crosses the play area during the video.

¹⁷ See artist’s website <http://www.sigune.co.uk>

2016 and 2017. Hamann took images of groups of students, who had given permission to be photographed, during Freshers week with all subjects interacting in the same space. Hamann then cropped the images so that each individual photographed formed a single image and then reformatted the images as triptychs. These were shown as the second piece in her exhibition (alongside *Heimlich* mentioned earlier) at the Ashmolean Museum.¹⁸ In the ***Did you spot the Gorilla?*** exhibition she re-presents this work as a large wall display of single images cropped from the original groups taken at the Freshers week at the universities. The key to the reading of these images is that they were separated from their groups and then regrouped in small intimate triptychs at the Ashmolean Museum and as a large wall piece of people presented at the Barn Gallery. The work has also been produced as an artist book work that allows people engaging with the work to reorder and reconfigure the groups, further diversifying the format of engagement with the images. In all these iterations, Hamann is asking the viewer to consider how they interact in groups, how they have experienced first meetings and engagements and how they form impressions of people and groups. Each presentation format asks the viewer to think about the point at which the viewer stops being 'intruder' to the image and merges into the scene of the group of students to reach the point of nihilism and merging with the image activity as previously discussed. The anonymity of the students further reinforces this point of selflessness (or self-awareness) and transference for the audience¹⁹.

Wave, an earlier work from 2012, also looks at the ways in which people interact with each other through the gesture of waving. Hamann collected found and staged photographs and videos showing people waving and put them together in an installation shown at the Wellcome Collection Galleries. She looked at the notion of interpersonal ritual defined by sociologists²⁰ and how these related to waving. The final installation consisted of 50 still photographs and 5 video loops duration 41 minutes that presented, represented, sped up, slowed down the gesture in a number of contexts. With further research Hamann was able to think about waving in certain categories such as waving and salutes, and emotional reactions to the gesture. She covered the use of the wave gesture from the point in history that still and moving image was universally available and was able to look at the context of everyday encounters with friends and family, immigration, transportation of people to camps, separation of war, emotional and romantic encounters, and migration through war and natural catastrophe. Furthermore, through her collection of imagery she was able to demonstrate the cultural differences of the gesture. For example, waving goodbye, waving to a crowd, waving down a taxi and waving to attract attention. Through the use of imagery both still and moving, Hamann was able to interrogate the most universal of gestures and its use within different groups of two or more people. The exhibition has only been shown in the United Kingdom but it has been discussed how it might be received in different cultures and countries. The installation approaches the different meanings of the gesture with both exhaustive detail and moving results.

Continuing the theme of Intergroup behaviour and personal interaction, the book work *Fair's Fair* is a series that began in 2015 and has run each year to date. Every year Hamann has visited Frieze Art Fair and photographed audiences and participants engaging with work

¹⁸ *Face to face upside down*, Photographic Interventions

Landscape Sketch Gallery, Renaissance Galleries and Sir Francis Chantrey Staircase
Ashmolean Museum Oxford 2017

¹⁹ Bryson, N *op. cit.*

²⁰ See the work of Erving Goffman and Adam Kendon

at the fair. As with the *Freshers* series, she has cut up and/or fused the images so that two different scenarios within the Fair have been connected. The results can be thought provoking and are often humorous but crucially the images often look as though they are connected by more than just the virtue of being shot at Frieze Art Fair. These works are presented as book works as if a catalogue of the art fair. While the focus of Frieze Art Fair is usually to document, sell and commentate on the art works, Hamann approaches the complex social networks and relationships of the audiences and participants in the fair. Hamann has inverted the emphasis from art work to the relationships and group behaviour at the fair further emphasising commonality and difference by fusing different scenes together as one image. As a significant event in the arts calendar, Hamann invites the viewer to assess their relationship to large social events, the art world, and their role within them. As with most of Hamann's work, the audience is implicated in the work through their engagement with the subjects of the images, the choice made by the artist in constructing and shooting the images, and their own role in the group behaviour suggested by the images.

Hamann extrapolates the audience inclusion further by presenting the *Fair's Fair* project as *Seen Being Seen, Loops*, an immersive installation of photographic cylinders of various scales, some larger than life. Using cylindrical images in a 3-D space Hamann extends the visual affect of the 'film-strips'. The 2-D 'film-strips' are intended at points to be viewed beyond the frame of the image in the expanded field, and the cylinders extend this through looped/circular images in a space all of which form part of the work. Quoting Bryson, '*The viewer who looks out at the object sees only one angle of the global field where the object resides, one single tangent of the 360 degrees of the circle, and of the 360 degrees in all directions of the radiating sphere of light spreading out from the object into the global envelopment.*'²¹

In *Seen Being Seen, Loops* the images are presented in a 3-D format but are facing outwards simultaneously inviting the viewer to join the group while rendering it very difficult for them to join the loop made by individual freestanding photographs. This creates a tension between the suggested scene (a circle of people speaking to each other) and their facing outward to the audience. In using this device, Hamann seeks to replicate the characteristic short-term attention of sub-groups at gatherings and to implicate the challenge to the viewer of where they will place most attention. She further makes the engagement with the image/installation more challenging for the viewer to reach that previously described point of nothingness, merging of themselves and image, and ultimate self-awareness as being part of the work itself. Placing the images in a 3-D context while asking similar questions as her previous work marks a shift in Hamann's work to think about the 3-D perception of images.

²¹ See Bryson, *N op.cit.* p100

Fair's Fair, Freshers, Wave and Seen Being Seen, Loops all interrogate the viewer's and the subject's interaction in groups, their attention to people and how long they choose to spend in the situations shown. The work in the exhibition connects to the research of Kia Nobre²² focusing on the neural processing of attention and how time is represented in the brain²³. Hamann has acknowledged existing overlap in her discourse and practice with Kia Nobre's research around attention and time. However, as has been discussed previously, Hamann's is different producing a visual discussion of attention and perception in human interaction.

Our perception is highly limited; we derive only a few elements/objects/items from the environment/surroundings at each moment, which we stitch together into cohesion and carry forward into the fabric of our cognition. In counterpoint, our perception is highly adaptive, picking out the elements that matter to us in a given situation. This selective guidance of perception, which we call 'attention', involves signals from our goals, expectations, memories, motivations, and emotions proactively and dynamically shaping what we come to perceive and remember.²⁴

Hamann's work offers much scope and example of how photography and psychological experimentation could influence each other in both directions. In the project *Shared Language*²⁵ presented as a website, Hamann and collaborator Jonathan Kearney worked with a mixed group of students from a fine art digital & design and a neuroscience background to look at the relationship and possible overlap across imagery in arts and neuroscience. The project was successful for both sets of students and each discipline acknowledged the importance and revelation of juxtaposition of image, context and disciplines.

The collaboration between Hamann and Nobre has the potential to go much further. A possible question might consider what happens to attention and brain activity when the viewer of an artwork reaches the point of 'nothingness' described by Nishitani or the point at which engagement with the image and viewer self-awareness merges. This is the relationship between work and viewer that Hamann strives for in her work merging the social, cultural and historical context of the images and artworks created with the viewer engagement and response. The work *Seen Being Seen Loops* puts images in a new 3-D context in Hamann's practice and adds to the compelling set of questions and devices that she applies to her beautiful, exacting and engaging body of work.

Helen Sloan April 2019

Helen Sloan has developed and pioneered artistic practice as a curator, writer and researcher using digital techniques and interdisciplinary approaches since 1989. She has worked internationally presenting over 250 exhibitions, events and conferences at institutions such as Venice Biennale, ISEA 2011/Istanbul Biennale, V2 Rotterdam, ICA London, Natural History Museum London, Science Museum London, Tate Britain, John Hansard Gallery and Baltic Gallery. Sloan has contributed to and led on collaborative media arts and interdisciplinary research projects with academic institutions and arts organisations and has contributed to a range of conferences and publications on the subject. In 2013, she began to shift her career towards working in psychology and mental health. She works as an Independent Mental Health Advocate, assessor and trainer, and is currently studying to practice in psychology. Sloan continues to work alongside artists and to consider ways in which different disciplines and practices can connect.

²² Nobre, A.C. and Mersulam, M. (2014). *Large-scale Networks for Attentional Biases*, in Nobre, A.C and Kastner, S. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Attention* pp 105 – 151, Oxford, OUP.

²³ Muller, T and Nobre, A.C., (2014). *Op. cit.*

²⁴ Anne C. (Kia) Nobre, quotation from <http://www.sharedlanguage.co.uk>

²⁵ For the full project see <http://www.sharedlanguage.co.uk>