

STIM CINEMA

SEQUENCES:

EYE TRACKING (*Note - this test scenario acts as the sentinel sequence for the artwork as a whole*)

SAM CHOWN AHERN, a member of the Neurocultures Collective, sits in a clinic room taking part in an eye-tracking test. SAM is being shown a series of short film clips. The feel is much like being at an optician test. An off-screen voice, barely audible, instructs Sam on how to use the apparatus, and how to relax and feel free to look anywhere across the images. First, Sam sees images of faces, some emoting, smiling, scowling, others deadpan. Heat traces appear, the imprint of where Sam's eyes have fallen on and around the features of the face. The eye tracking test shifts to clips which, we later learn, are the sequences we'll view and return to across the duration. These include: a clearing in a woodland area; a tree blown by the wind; people lifting weights repetitively in a large gym; an audience in a micro cinema; a family dinner; a deserted supermarket; a crowded pub; an open plan office...

THE BUG IN THE OFFICE

The expanse of an open plan office. Employees move back and forth, type at their desks, mumble on zoom calls. There's the repetitive light of a photocopier. We hear the ambient sounds of background chatter, machine hum, air conditioning, all competing with each other, along with the insistent noise of a clicking pen. Deep in the shot is an office worker - it's the young woman in the green coat, also known as the Bug, aka Collective member Georgia Bradburn. The Bug looks up from her desk. Another office worker is staring at her. The shot suddenly enlarges, honing in on a tiny part of the frame, where, in ultra close-up we see that the Bug is micro-stimming, **clicking a pen with repeated finger movements**.

TABLE TENNIS

The repetitive clangour of the pen clicking syncopates with the acute sound of a ping pong ball. This is a super fast, super skilled, highly repetitive game of table tennis. The game is being played by Damian Milton, autistic scholar, activist, and ping-pong wizard, against an equally sharp opponent. Arms stretch and flick. It's hypnotic. **The ball clicks back and forth rapidly**, making a percussive sound. The camera circles 360 around the thwack-tick-puk of the ball.

PUB

A crowded pub filled to the brim. The camera watches, observing people drinking, laughing, scraping chairs, eating crisps, knocking into and pushing past each other. The dirge of multiple conversations is audible. It's a zoo, a human wildlife film: this is an anthropological study of neurotypicality. But if you look carefully, **in the background to the edge of the frame it's possible to catch sight of a lone female figure in a distinctive green coat, unsure where to stand**, overwhelmed by the throng.

EYE TRACKING

We return to the clinic room and the eye-tracking test. Sam pulls back from the image, takes the eyeglass headgear off, rubs his face. Sam then returns to the sequence...

PUB

The crowded pub again. On the other side of the shot, should you notice, is a back room, and in that distant room **two people are playing table tennis**.

ELECTRIC PALACE CINEMA

We're in the Electric Palace cinema in Hastings. The entire cinema audience, 50 or more, looks back at the camera, everyone waving and flapping their **hands silently in the air, clapping without sound**. It's as though they are the audience to the table tennis game. Around them, the faded red decor of this glorious movie fleapit. The wide shot resizes, blowing up a section of the frame, discovering a particular figure in the audience - Collective member Robin Knowles. The image closes in, so that we see **Robin is munching on some pink and blue flying saucer sweets**.

SUPERMARKET

A huge deserted supermarket, it's the middle of the night. We see, deep in the shot, a person working the night shift, **repetitive movements, stacking shelves**. The shot glides along long aisles taking in the patterns of products on the shelves. There's a whole row of flying saucer sweets. The stock items are like museum exhibits, like sculpture in a gallery. **The image spins in delight from the perspective of inside a supermarket trolley**.

GYM

The previous spinning image blurs, becoming the pulling and pushing of arms and legs shifting and moving in different directions, lifting weights, wheels spinning, limbs working furiously, sweat flying. We're in the gym. Indistinct music is pounding. The camera shifts to a wide, to take in the environment. **The colour trace of the eye tracking apparatus reveals the presence of a figure hidden at the back of the crowd: *The Bug***. The Bug is wearing noise-cancelling headphones. The image starts to rock back and forth, not just in action, but in time. We realise that the sequence is scrubbing back and forth on a QuickTime video in playback. It's cacophonous.

EYE TRACKING

We return to Neurocultures Collective member Sam Chown Ahern taking part in the eye-tracking test. We see the colour trace of eye movements tracing the onslaught. In a giddy, vertiginous moment, we realise that **the eye tracking test clip is a sequence that has been loaded into the eye tracking test**. This creates a loop (reminiscent of the artwork SPACY and also Hollowed Water by Athanasios Argianas)

WILDLIFE SPACES

The environment shifts to the near silent setting of an open clearing in a woodland. Everything is still. Only, **one of the trees in the background is rocking and swaying in the wind**. We know this because, gradually, the colour trace of eye-tracked vision focuses on this part of the frame. This quirk of movement in the background is enlarged (much like the Esper machine in *Blade Runner*), so that the tree is given status by making it larger. It's as though the tree is dancing, stimming. **We see two branches in particular tapping together**.

PROJECT ARTWORKS

This tapping becomes clicking. In close-up, **hands work fast sewing, there's the gentle, rhythmic, highly pleasurable click click of the needles**. The hands belong to a dragon, sat sewing busily in one of the large Project Art Works studios. **The shot rotates around the Dragon**. This is in fact Collective member Lucy Walker in full Dragon costume, with all regalia, stitching, and vivid detail.

STIMMING POOL

A series of figures in the changing room of a disused lido, some **dancing / gyrating**. One of them is **the Bug, swaying, stimming**. It's a radical, free, exuberant sequence. Gradually, the colour traces of the recorded visual interest from the eye-tracking test begin to make their own iridescent dance around the Bug's joyous movements. The traces move on from Georgia aka the Bug to find other figures: Robin, Sam, Ben, the Dragon, Damian Milton...

Like being hypnotised
swirling beer foam
Hands flapping in close-up
Duck walks
Spinning on chair
Super wide, cropping Playground swing, roundabout
Playground see-saw, and corresponding piece of gym equipment

Hair bobbing up and down

The Bug Skipping through audio tracks on an Iphone (night bus)

Casting a leaf on a twig

Foot tapping energetically
The Bug stirring tea
Filming the bug looking at a gif
Westfield, Bug stirring tea, tea

The bug looking at a blade of grass

Bobbing buoy

STIM CINEMA Visual / Formal approach

Although rarely articulated in mainstream cinema, moving images can involve interests beyond and behind the human face, as well as sensory descriptions, affordance to objects, use of gentle repetition, and stimming adopted as the central editing principle (hence the term Stim Cinema). These are forms which have been taken up by the avant-garde, by artist-filmmakers, and, significantly, by autistic filmmakers. In doing so, the artwork shows us a possible world in which people are free to move and stim uninhibited by societal strictures.


The artwork explores a number of recurring themes and motifs:

- Masking/camouflage
- Shapeshifting and meltdown
- Testing and diagnosis
- Stimming, and having to repress stimming
- Challenging environments and quiet spaces
- Pattern recognition, and the form of the swirl and the spiral
- Easter eggs, backgrounds, peripheral details

The co-creation process has taken inspiration from the work of a number of artists and filmmakers who have explored backgrounds and loops in their work. These include Jacques Tati's cinema of micro-actions within the mise-en-scene, as well as the video essay *Visual Disturbances* by Eric Faden which uses eye tracking techniques to explore Tati's work. Another key reference is the Esper machine used in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, an apparatus that scans the image for otherwise overlooked details which, when enlarged, yield new visual interest. Similarly, Eija Liisa Ahtila's installation and single screen film *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* invites the viewer to think of the trees and bushes behind the performer as the principal cast. Each of these examples challenges constructs of attention difference/deficit based on the cinema (and social interaction for that matter) being predicated on looking at human faces. The delight in watching visual repetition is the basis for a great deal of artists' moving image. STIM CINEMA draws on the scratchy, gesture to gesture assemblages of Abigail Child's found footage works, the vortexes in Takahisho Ito's unique video work *Spacy*, the swaying and falling formations in Athanasios Argianas' *Hollowed Water* and *Nightlife* by Cyprien Gaillard, as well as the giddy spinning images in the back catalogue of Tony Hill.

Visual References –

HOLLOWED WATER, ATHANASIOS ARGIANAS

 Athanasios Argianas - Hollowed Water

SPACY, TAKAHISHO ITO

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4ehq6u>

ESPER MACHINE RECREATED, DAVID ADDEY

https://vimeo.com/169392777?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=6473624

VISUAL DISTURBANCES, ERIC FADEN

https://vimeo.com/302106011?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=90982831

NIGHTLIFE, Cyprien Gaillard

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8jthjc>

The Sound Before You Make It \ Jaki Middleton & David Lawrey

https://vimeo.com/157976531?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=2247301

MERCY, ABIGAIL CHILD

https://www.google.com/search?q=abigail+child+mercy&rlz=1C5CHFA_enGB894GB894&source=lnms&tbm=vid&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiFj8bd_8T9AhWBUsAKHc8cAA5Q_AUoA3oECAEQBQ&biw=1419&bih=688&dpr=1#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:b8b496c7,vid:m5Yck5PWRO4

FISTICUFFS, MIRANDA PENNELL

<https://mirandapennell.com/portfolio/fisticuffs/>

YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU, MIRANDA PENNELL

<https://vimeo.com/169364235>

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE WHEEL, TONY HILL

<https://vimeo.com/185513425>

Tony Hill, 'Spin'

[Spin on Vimeo](#)

Studies on the Ecology of Drama, Eija Liisa Ahtila

<https://www.mariangoodman.com/exhibitions/52-eija-liisa-ahtila-studies-on-the-ecology-of-drama/>

PROJECT BACKGROUND

STIM CINEMA began with a grant from the Wellcome Trust for Autism through Cinema, a research project at Queen Mary University London which runs 2018-2023. Autism through Cinema looks at how the cinema has created descriptions of autism and affected our understanding of neurodiversity. The research is structured around two core activities: film archeology, led by Professor Janet Harbord and film practice, led by artist filmmaker and Professor of Film Practice Steven Eastwood.

As part of this grant Steven Eastwood ran a series of workshops which acted as building blocks for the formation of the Neurocultures Collective, formed in late 2020, and comprising neurodiverse artists: Sam Ahern, Georgia Bradburn, Benjamin Brown, Robin Knowles, and Lucy Walker. The Collective is collaborating with Steven Eastwood to co-create STIM CINEMA, as well as a feature-length hybrid film, titled Neurocultures.

STIM CINEMA offers opportunity, inclusion and visibility for a community often obliged to explain their identity to audiences or adapt their behaviour to fit in with a restrictive society. It takes a progressive and inclusive approach to film production, playing to the individual strengths and aspirations of Neurocultures Collective members, with every person contributing to the film's authorship.

The project seeks to create new vantage points into the complex ecologies of filmmaking and cinema to explore how the currently inadequate modes of representation might evolve to include and mobilise neurodiverse artists, audiences, and communities. Actively resisting extractive, harmful, commodifying practices, instead it addresses those who are disinclined to perform their disabilities, enabling them to benefit from inclusive systems, developing a fairer methodology of creativity, collaboration, decision-making, inclusion, and recognition.

The methodology behind the collaboration and artworks makes a principle of avoiding ableism and tropes of victim culture, and steers clear of simulating disability and autistic experience (something autistic activists have fought against). The co-creation method makes it a priority to accommodate different communication needs, different creative processes, and different understandings of collaboration and co-creation.

www.autism-through-cinema.org.uk

Project Ethos

The process of co-creation privileges process and exploration, although boundaries and structure can be very important for some. Unanimous decision making is difficult in any setting. Within a collective,

it won't always be possible for the artwork to incorporate every point of view. It may be necessary for sub-groups or single representatives of the Collective to work with lead personnel (such as the DOP, Editor) to share back and propose content for the artwork. It is hoped that the co-creation methodology will be published by Wellcome Trust and the National Autistic Society on project completion, creating far-reaching impact by making available an innovative co-creation process to others.

As artists and filmmakers, all contributors to the project subscribe fully to the mantra, "Nothing about us without us."

The Invisible Gorilla is part of the popular culture nowadays, thanks largely to a widely-read [2010 book](#) of that title. In that book, authors and cognitive psychologists Dan Simons and Christopher Chabris popularized a phenomenon of human perception—known in the jargon as “inattentional blindness”—which they had demonstrated in a study some years before. In the best known version of the experiment, volunteers were told to keep track of how many times some basketball players tossed a basketball. While they did this, someone in a gorilla suit walked across the basketball court, in plain view, yet many of the volunteers failed even to notice the beast.

What the invisible gorilla study shows is that, if we are paying very close attention to one thing, we often fail to notice other things in our field of vision—even very obvious things. We all love these quirks of human perception. It's entertaining to know that our senses can play tricks on us.