

Short Time Space

The Gallery of Photography in Dublin is designed like a camera. Its large picture window on the first floor, above the entrance foyer, opens to a spacious inner chamber. The width of this aperture, however, resembles less the keyhole function of the traditional lens, more the image screen on the back of today's digital cameras. Old technology gives way to new forms of visualising and recording what the camera sees. Indeed the slight delay in capturing the digital image, as the pixel grid adjusts minutely to the light conditions once the shutter is pressed, coincidentally introduces the element of time so central to Sigune Hamann's art. Duration, the passing of time in the fixing of the image and the passing of still more time in the perception and recollection of the original event is flagged by the length of the photographic montage she has placed within the gallery's picture window. Simultaneously visible from inside and outside the space, it reveals the mechanics of how cameras record images. It also introduces the element of performance that runs through her work and invites an active response from the visitor, breaking down the separate spaces occupied by the work and its viewers. In Hamann's early collaborations working with composers and dancers, her designs framed and supported the dramaturgy originated by and with others. More recently, the separation of the performers' space from the audience at the edge of the stage or by the proscenium arch has yielded to the artist's engagement with art made directly in public spaces, often with the artist herself undertaking actions that define the work as something unfolding, something to be perceived over time in the space we all occupy.

In works of the last decade during which Hamann has shifted her focus to making works as an independent visual artist, rather than in collaboration with others, she has retained an intense involvement with the choreography of the work: where it is placed; what kind of performance produced it or is represented in it; and how the visitor encounters the work. In Dublin we move from the public square to the gallery to encounter the work: it unfolds in multiple ways as we approach it from various points of view. The panoramic picture window shows a different image on the outside than on the inside. Lighting conditions in the darkening of twilight or the coming of daylight

change still further our perception of what is shown. By placing the work at such an interface Hamann achieves something similar to the placement by Beat Streuli in the mid-1990s of his transparencies of passers-by placed in the windows of a ground-floor gallery in Berne. Visible from the outside by day and back-lit from the inside by night, the question of the works' subject matter in relation to its setting is also evoked. By linking exterior and interior in Dublin, Hamann has taken a step further than the grand, 11 metre panorama called 'the moment we knew nothing of each other', installed in 2007 in the foyer of Royal and Derngate Theatres in Northampton. Also depicting passers-by, the mechanics of gradually alternating back and front lighting create the transition between a positive and negative (infra red) image, a surprising enlivening of the tableau. The title evokes the anonymity of myriad worlds brushing past one another in the city: the anticipation of anonymous intimacy in the auditorium combined with an emotional electricity of live performance that will draw the mass of theatre-goers into a unified present moment.

Although fixed as stills taken at a certain moment, Hamann's photographs embody a dramatic sideshow and relate to photography's older traditions, before the chemical fixing of the photographic exposure was achieved in the mid nineteenth century. Even older than the camera as an apparatus for enabling the fixing of images on photosensitive paper, the gallery space could easily function as a camera oscura, capturing a real-time image of the scene before the gallery's panoramic window and reflecting it, as in the camera, upside down on the interior back wall opposite the street. Such an act was memorably captured in 1986 by Steven Pippin in an abandoned house in Clerkenwell, London, in which he stood still for several hours in order to fix an image on light-sensitive paper affixed to the back wall opposite the aperture. The breadth of the window in the Dublin gallery, however, brings to mind a further innovation of the nineteenth century; the diorama. Panoramic in horizontal extension, its main subjects were landscape and interiors. Skilfully staged in a pre-cinematic way and presenting astonishingly realistic moving images, these images were pulled past seated viewers whose field of vision was restricted on either side by curtains. The diorama was dependent on different light sources for its effects. One shone through the image, the other from above on the other side. By changing the intensity

of the light, the image could appear either back or front-lit. At different times of the day, the Dublin gallery naturally provides both sources of light, enabling Hamann to commemorate Daguerre's invention in one of the places in which one was originally installed.

The Dublin image, as seen from the public square outside, shows the arrested movement of people walking. The long exposure time records the movement of their legs and upper bodies as an impressionistic blur. The view from within the gallery, like the tipped-up view within the chamber of the camera itself, pitches the figures upside down and in the negative, but with the image flipped lengthwise to allow each individual to vertically mirror its pallid, negative-impression other. When the daylight fades, the sunny image gives way to the backlit, gallery-illuminated darker tones of the photographic negative. 'Whatever it's doing it's doing it now', 2008, was made specially for this space. With part of the picture window shuttered to leave an elongated slit, Hamann presents an everyday image of stilled life, of people walking across the picture frame. Carrying briefcases and bags, their upper bodies rise and fall above the parapet of a wall in the rhythm of walking, and are framed by a heightened blue sky. Their clothing with accents of blue, beige, white and black take us backwards in time, perhaps even as far back as to the similarly elongated beach scenes painted by Boudin in the late 19th century. In Hamann's work, however, can be seen a purposeful movement of city workers, rather than Boudin's bourgeois society at leisure. The blurring brings to mind more the city-based dynamism of Futurism with movement frozen into juddering repetitions of arms and legs, like the reverberations of sound waves made visual. Hamann's title brings us abruptly to the presence of the image in our own space and time, inviting our participation to experience it less as a static work of art, more as an object changing according to our perception of it. Its actuality as a reflection of life-size street life and its efficacy as an index of time passing in the walked span of the riverside path, supply the theatrical dynamics of the performance in the everyday.

This casual realism of passers-by entwined with the historical forbears in Boudin's beach scenes or, in Futurist images of movement captured in static pictures or, later

still, the contemplative restorers working on the famous Lucerne battlefield diorama as photographed by Jeff Wall, lead us to the theatrical origins of Hamann's early work designing for the performing arts. The combination of live performance and a stage set with illusionistic devices have remained central levers and motors in Hamann's art, even since her redefinition as an independent visual artist rather than one of several collaborators in the realisation of a performance involving sound, movement, lighting and image. In 1994, early in her career, she used image reversal in a film based on pictures by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich which accompanied the performance of 'Allegories of Heavenly Music', a new music commission by the composer Michael Finnessy. The distortions (through raked projection) and elongation of the diorama as a signifier of the passage of time in the unfolding of motion and, through their combination, the development of dramatic tension, appeared in a stage design Hamann created in Graz, Austria, for a performance of Verdi's opera 'Il Trovatore'. Around the same time she was working with choreographer Rosemary Butcher and composer Simon Fisher Turner on a piece called 'unbroken view'. Here Hamann combined lighting, to capture shadows of the dancers in action, and a film of people to fracture the temporal continuity of live performance with the presence of pre-recorded performers projected directly onto the walls.

While Hamann's work since has moved outside the theatre, neither the space for drama nor the duration of its unfolding have been abandoned by this change of direction. Indeed one might argue that her works have been stripped of the choreographic, operatic or theatrical externalities and focused with greater clarity as works of visual art. 'Dinner for One' a recent video installation is a case in point. Most continental Europeans probably know what the mention of 'Dinner For One' means. A 15 minute black and white film, more a sketch, it shows Miss Sophy's 90th birthday party; the comedy lies in the fact that all the guests are absent, all long deceased. Their respective roles are played, and their drinks consumed, by James the butler. The action takes place in the dining room. James's increasing inebriation and tangling with the tiger skin on the floor as he fetches dishes and wine from sideboard to table in his dual roles, make for a certain vaudeville hilarity. The action originated in a skit of the 1920s, commissioned by German television in 1962 with the British comedian Fred-

die Frinton playing the butler. Originally a schedule filler, it is now programmed to get people in a festive mood on every New Year's Eve. This short, anachronistic sketch has been played ever since and now has the status of a minor classic in many European countries: responses to it have become Pavlovian with each step, line and trip pre-empted by the rituals of annual familiarity. In England, ironically, it remains completely unknown, perhaps one of the reasons Hamann selected it for her own work. Its showing is usually framed by studio laughter and an introduction in the native tongue; in Switzerland a new version in colour has been made. However, the film itself is still shown in English as Freddie Frinton, who was anti-German, stipulated that it should never be dubbed.

This innocuous, culturally ambiguous sketch is Hamann's point of departure for a recent video installation of the same title. It consists of four videos, each about 12 minutes long, with each monitor standing on a pedestal at roughly head height loosely linked to the others. We see a woman's face against a neutral ground, frontally, in all but one film. We hear a series of questions, but no answers. Hamann instructed the actress Hayley Carmichael, used for all four films, to treat each text the same. Inevitably, however, the actress began to interpret the material as she performed it. After a couple of minutes we ascertain that some of the questions sound familiar. However, answers which would be even more familiar, are absent. There is merely a consistent progression of question after question. The four films, 'The Trial', 'The Play', 'The Committee', 'The Interview', are transcripts, little modified, of several recent and more distant dramatic interrogations. They are based upon; the 1993 TV interview given by Princess Diana to the journalist Martin Bashir (which included the celebrated comment that 'there isn't room for three in a marriage' - which of course we do not hear as Diana, not Bashir, says these words); the interrogation received by the civil servant David Kelly before the Foreign Office Select Committee investigating press leaks about the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, which led to his suicide and the ensuing Hutton Enquiry; a fusion of the libel and sex trials of the playwright Oscar Wilde; and a fusion of comments about human relationships extracted from a play by Oscar Wilde. In each the type of exchange and its setting - the formality of the courtroom complete with condescending judge, the flamboyance of the apho-

risms in Wilde's plays, the faux-intimacy of the TV interview format with its complicit probing, and the aggression of the committee interrogation - permeate the performance. Carmichael's voice in the Diana tape becomes self-pitying and softly spoken, even simperingly confessional, while her tone sharpens in the Kelly video. The interweaving of factual material into the fictive narratives of the work recalls others Hamann has made which address our perception of events both at the time and in our recollection of them. Like Freddie Frinton's film a certain strangeness, a cultural dislocation, inhabits even the most familiar events, a preoccupation in several other works by Hamann. The precision or vagueness of memory, our mixing of invention with fact, formed the content of an open-ended web project 'NothingbuttheTruth' about the death of an Italian anarchist and the subsequent trial of his killer. Here, as in 'Dinner for One' subjective experience, the individual's encounter with, and memories of events, form the defining thread.

Her filmstrips, an ongoing series of works, are literally descriptive of an unusual technique deployed to create a permanent imprint of a specific action in a particular place. They embody the cinematic element of physical movement, of celluloid moving past a lens, and the implied temporality that is central to Hamann's art. The artist herself provides the movement critical to their making. The Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen are the setting for the most recent and most wispily fluid of the filmstrips. Made by winding an entire 35mm film passed the open shutter while physically turning, this would at first appear a wilfully primitive, even anachronistic use of so sophisticated a piece of equipment. Each resultant strip is a ribbon of unique marks blurred to almost complete abstraction barring the odd recognisable shape or profile resulting from the artist momentarily pausing as she turned, or hesitating while winding the film through the camera. These merest shadows of shapes are enough, unexpectedly, to fix these images as landscapes of real not imaginary spaces, reminiscent of the place the artist stood while generating them. Thus, the temporal landscape shown in 2005 at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston, in northern England, was recognisably an all-round view taken within the local football stadium, the pride and focus of the town. As suggested by the precise context Hamann installed her dioramas in Dublin and Northampton, its presentation in the Preston museum as a contin-

uous frieze around the walls at eye level echoed other, higher placed, bands of friezes that characterise the High Victorian architectural design of the imposingly lofty galleries.

While the photostrips in some ways document the artist's presence in different places, a new group of works titled 'heimlich' reflect with detachment that Hamann, a German artist, has been living and working outside her homeland for nearly two decades. Heimlich (and its negation unheimlich) has occupied a presence in art history of the past decades, building on the linguistic contradictions of meaning and on its application earlier in the twentieth century by Sigmund Freud, based upon his reading of the definitions compiled in Daniel Sanders' dictionary "Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache". Heimlich conveys a sense of homely (literally) security, but is also associated with secrecy. This homely intimacy implies, moreover, an emotional warmth, one of supportive presence in trusted surroundings. Its negation, however, translates as uncanny, with overtones of the supernatural or strangely unreal. The place of the photosensitive strip being wound through the camera is replaced in works relating to this theme by the lazy motion of the river Lahn in Bad Ems, Germany, where Hamann spent time during a recent residency. Taking a series of stills of the water's surface, Hamann then inverts them, so tufts of grass and banks of flowers drip from the top of the image like unruly fringes. Highly reflective and only occasionally a little disturbed by rippling, the water's surface became the carrier of images, drawing the artist reflectively towards sections of a reality she has long since departed. Composed as a series of still photographs of the river, the artist appears to find a patience and precision of observation in this rural setting that eludes her in the comparatively frenetic generation of her (usually urban) filmstrips.

A complementary work, equally contemplative and distanced, but reintroducing an element of movement, is a two monitor video called 'Assmannshausen'. Taking the role of the tourist, in the land of her birth, thus standing outside the intimate, emotional association with place to create the necessary distance between heimlich and unheimlich, Hamann photographed principally the people on the boat, not the landscape, during a cruise down the Rhine, the quintessentially German river and carrier of its

national myths and legends. Their principal activity, moreover, is to experience the river slipping by at one remove; through the lens of their cameras rather than through direct observation. Filming to one side of the boat, then to the other and placing the video images in physical relation to one another in the gallery space, Hamann achieves the sense of illusion found in the early dioramas of Daguerre and other exponents. No middle ground links the near and distant parts of the view, which results in a disjunctive detachment of the foreground scenes on deck, from the background landscape slipping steadily, irretrievably, across the field of vision.

The passing of time, real time, appears contrived, undermining the unity of time and space, central to the emotional bond with place that lies behind the artist's re-engagement with her homeland. Indeed this tying of a life to a location acquires an almost bizarre, but a strangely appropriate, dimension in two of the artist's most recent works. In one, 'Lehmann and Lehmann' an animated conjoining of two photographic stills taken on the riverbanks in the financial centre of Frankfurt am Main (hence one aspect of the title), we initially hear a 1941 radio recording of the singer Lotte Lehmann, still with a heavy accent, after she had emigrated to the United States. The drama of her voice in an alien setting underlines still further the dislocation of the individual distant from home and hearth captured by the expression 'heimlich'. The second new work, 'The walking up and down bit' adopts as its title the casual description given that section of his act by the comedian Max Wall. Taken from the 1951 footage of Wall in 'Mirth and Melody' he acts for camera telling us what he will do. He then demonstrates the funny walks, going up and down the room, as indicated in the title. This had comic repercussions in the celebrated Ministry of Funny Walks performed by John Cleese for Monty Python's Flying Circus some twenty years later. It is, however, under the skin rather than on the surface of the work, that the link to the notion of the 'heimlich/unheimlich' can be found. Hamann discovered recently that the apartment block in London where she lives and works was earlier occupied by music hall performers, including the young Charlie Chaplin and Max Wall himself.

Space and time are here drawn into a tight embrace. Together with Sigune Hamann, Max Wall makes the journey to Dublin for the opening of this exhibition on exactly the

100th anniversary of his birth. Carrying different passports and separated by their mortality in different eras, they nonetheless come from exactly the same address in London which the artist now also calls home. This proximity of echoes and events, the finding of ourselves in the lives of others, evokes a passage in Joyce's 'Ulysses' that serves as a leitmotif. The temporal shifts and dramatic core of Hamann's art constitute experiences, 'in a very short space of time through short times of space'.

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