



Siobhan Coen interviewed
by curator Paul Luckraft,
29 November 2017



Paul Luckraft: The piece *Unknown Knowns* emerged out of an interest in how the brain receives, processes and perceives information – is that right?

Siobhan Coen: Yes. I had been fascinated by how little of the information we receive through our senses makes it into our consciousness. With vision, 10 million bits of information come through your eyes each second, but your conscious brain receives only 40 – a tiny percentage. I read a study by Professor David Nutt, who scanned the brains of people taking hallucinogenic drugs. He expected to see extra brain activity, but actually found less. There is a reduction in information filtering by the unconscious brain. Therefore the conscious mind receives more information from the senses than it’s used to coping with. This seemed a really good metaphor for an aspect of society now. With access to so much data, there’s more room for multiple interpretations and manipulation by those in power.

PL: You’ve mentioned previously that the *Dreamachine* built by Brion Gysin in the 1960s was an influence on your recent projects. What is this machine?

SC: It works by spinning a perforated cylinder around a light source to produce a strobe effect at a certain frequency, inducing hallucinations when you stand near it with your eyes closed. I had always felt a bit short-changed by unconscious information filtering, so was excited by the *Dreamachine* as a way to access all those missing bits of information. I made my own version, using programmed LED lights, that you could put your head inside and view with your eyes open. It was while making this that I noticed the effects of coloured light on different paint colours, and wondered if you could activate this in a sequence to give the impression of movement.

PL: I also want to ask you about the script. Gysin and William S. Burroughs pursued the ‘cut-up’

Dada-ist technique, in which found text is chopped into fragments and rearranged. Is this similar to how you have used existing voice recordings?

SC: This approach began when I made *The Act of Seeing*, where I used the voice of Tony Blair from his audiobook *A Journey* (2011). Blair just struck me as someone who had seen things that weren’t there, and so he was a good figure to talk about these issues. I liked Burroughs’ description of the cut-up technique as a tool for finding truth.

PL: There’s Burroughs’ wonderful phrase: ‘When you cut into the present the future leaks out’...

SC: Yes, it’s a great phrase. Although my process is different to Burroughs’ technique, I do think it’s a way of unveiling something. I try to edit the audio seamlessly, so there is a limit to what I can make people say. I extract abstract statements until they suggest a narrative. It becomes a weird sort of collaboration. The process prevents me from imposing my thinking; it interrupts habitual information filtering; and I think accessing a different set of information shifts attention to see truths that may be hiding in plain sight.

PL: Was it important to you that there was a believable human flow to the voice you edited?

SC: I think the tension between a believable voice and a statement next to the work saying that it’s constructed helps to highlight how form rather than content can determine what we perceive to be true. Also, the constraints of preserving speech rhythms allow truths to emerge from form. After Blair I moved on to working with two audiobooks read by Donald Rumsfeld, the former US Secretary of Defense. While Blair’s book was self-reflective and suggested inward travel, Rumsfeld’s were full of proclamations and advice. They sounded more like self-help manuals

or instructional videos, and had a quality of persuasion or seduction that suggested projection to an outer world in order to change it.

PL: To what degree are you manipulating or indeed adding sentences that you’ve written?

SC: I use unedited phrases as much as possible, but sometimes construct sentences to fill in the gaps, although I have strict rules about what I can change. I like to think that I’m using fiction in the way it’s used in mathematics. There’s a whole set of imaginary numbers based on the square roots of negative numbers – numbers that could never exist. And these are plotted on an axis perpendicular to the axis of real numbers. Many problems are too complex to solve using real numbers but you can rotate them into this fictional space to solve them more easily and then rotate them back. So you have a real problem and a real solution but you can only get there by way of fiction.

PL: And this operates as a metaphor for you in terms of how you make your work?

SC: Yes. I don’t change the underlying nature of what they are saying; I only rotate it into the particular fiction that has emerged, and leave it to the viewer to rotate it back. With Blair it was a premise that he was using the *Dreamachine* to find certainty. With Rumsfeld it was like he was an aesthetic philosopher, trying to change how we see.

PL: Rumsfeld discussing art is fascinating and disturbing. His first line in the piece is ‘Abstraction is the underpinning of civilisation’. How and why did you go about weaving the references to abstract painting into the work?

SC: I feel Rumsfeld suggested these things. He talks a lot about creativity, and believes the military failures of the past weren’t failures of intelligence; they were failures of imagination. It’s all about new ways of thinking and

escaping conventions. These are sentiments that you can notionally agree with in an artistic sense. But when you rotate them back to his reality – of Geneva Conventions – they become less palatable.

PL: This suggested overlap between political spin and experimental art, the sense of both giving access to some higher plane of understanding if only disbelief were suspended, is a rich and complex topic.

SC: Yes, and it can be about changing reality rather than simply understanding it. A key reference for me was the infamous Bush administration language: ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.’

PL: Adam Curtis, in his amazing television essays, has explored the crossovers between cultural imagination and political manipulation. But rather than a punchy video essay you instead chose to make an installation consisting of an abstract image set in a precise articulation of light and space.

SC: Again it stems in part from the Rumsfeld philosophy. If you make a video essay you are speaking pretty directly to the conscious mind. And what he gets is that it’s more powerful to bypass this and aim for the unconscious. Rather than argue a rational case for war, which would be very difficult, it’s more productive to create a visceral environment to achieve your aims.

PL: Did you set out to make a ‘visceral environment’ yourself that would impact people?

SC: I think I’m always exploring these issues through a system of embodied cognition, rather than just intellectually. Playing around with the squares of colour in my studio helped me understand how Rumsfeld operates through language. I was beginning to see all sorts of images, but when someone else pointed out something they had seen it would often stop me seeing anything else. This felt akin to the way that spin works:

naming things strongly, labelling things with emotion, obscuring alternatives by directing attention.

PL: The word ‘collaboration’ you used earlier is key, perhaps.

SC: I think people reveal more when you try to empathise with them and find common ground. A more traditional satirical attack felt like it would yield less insight.

PL: A great strength of your piece is that it taps into different moments of cultural history – not just 1960s psychedelia but also the conditions of contemporary politics and technology.

SC: I think things can be cyclical. Steve Jobs believed that the feeling of connectedness from taking LSD in the 1960s allowed the internet to be imagined. And the internet now seems to be producing a slightly psychedelic effect by reducing information filtering. There’s a looping of cause and effect.

PL: *Unknown Knowns* has two distinct parts, one concretely abstract and one concretely narrative, and you’ve managed to synthesise these into a whole.

SC: I wanted a feedback loop between the audio and visual elements. I think the way we categorise leads us to thinking of things as separate entities, rather than cybernetic processes. In vision for example, much more information travels from your brain to your eyes than from your eyes to your brain. What you know dictates what you see, and what you see dictates what you know. There’s always a circularity. Fact and fiction, reason and emotion – you can’t separate them. They’re always in constant feedback and they don’t make sense on their own.

Reverse: *Unknown Knowns* (detail), 2017. Courtesy the artist.

Artist’s presentation Sunday 25 February, 3pm. Free.
Join us for an in-conversation with the artist, exploring the varied ideas that influence her practice.

Siobhan Coen (b. 1967, Orpington, UK. Lives and works in London) studied BA Fine Art, Slade School of Fine Art, from 2013 to 2017. Selected group exhibitions include *ARTAGON III*, Paris, 2017; *Celeste Prize*, finalists’ exhibition, OXO Tower, London, 2016; *Members’ Show*, OUTPOST, Norwich, selected by Lynda Morris and Chris Rawcliffe, 2016; *Open Film 2016*, OUTPOST, Norwich and a.m. London, selected by Ed Atkins, 2016. Awards include UCL Arts & Humanities Dean’s List, 2017; The Stanbury Prize, 2017; The Herbert Seaborn Memorial Scholarship, 2016; The Slade Prize, 2014.

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