



**From left, Martha Crawford, Rachel Stratton, Cosima Gretton and Mary Osborn**

**Photograph: Damian Halliwell**

# Take four twenty-somethings

How did four young women go about securing £35,000 of funding to stage a groundbreaking art and neuroscience event in Oxford? Denise Barkley finds out

**A**fter two years of mind-blowing slog, the inspiring foursome of Cosima Gretton, 25, Rachel Stratton, 25, Martha Crawford, 24, and Mary Osborn, 23, will see the launch of their month-long event called *Affecting Perception: Art and Neuroscience* on March 2.

As well as an art exhibition at the 03 Gallery in Oxford, there will also be a series of seminars and workshops in local schools — and entry to everything is free.

Organising an exhibition of this kind would be a tall order for anyone, let alone a quartet of 20-something graduates. It involved the most amazing amount of hard work, tenacity, self-belief and a willingness to push the boundaries. Plus considerable support from families and friends — as well as the best-known neuroscientists in the land.

Can brain damage spark creativity? What is the role of memory in art? Is it right to categorise people by their conditions? Which aspects of an artist's skill are affected by dementia, and which ones are preserved? These are just some of the questions that *Affecting Perception* investigates.

It is an undeniably heavyweight subject but one that the four members of the AXNS Collective (which stands for Art x Neuroscience) have fearlessly tackled

because, as the neurosciences forge ahead, they believe it is important to give it a public platform.

The idea for the project came from Cosima, who studied Experimental Psychology at Oxford University and has just completed the third year of a four-year degree in medicine at King's College, London. She hopes to become a psychiatrist, and has taken on a curatorial role with *Affecting Perception*.

She said the initial idea came from her artist mother, Susan Wilson, who teaches art classes in London.

"She has students with cerebral palsy and Down's Syndrome, and they do incredibly beautiful but bizarre drawings. She started to wonder how their brains affected their art, and the idea for the project grew from there," explained Cosima.

The exhibition showcases the work of ten leading artists affected by conditions of the brain and looks at the connection between art and the mind. Inspired by recent discoveries in neuroscience, *Affecting Perception* examines these artists together for the first time.

Unlike other projects of its kind, it avoids mental illness, looking instead at neurological change and visual perception.

Fascinating though it is, this is serious stuff, and not necessarily the kind of subject that might galvanise four young women to

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form a dedicated task force.

But it is quite clear from the infectious enthusiasm of all of them, that they are committed to making a success of their project — and they have been encouraged and supported at every turn, from their families to the elite of both the science and art worlds, including Oxford University's Department of Experimental Psychology. But it is still quite staggering that they were able to obtain a grant of £30,000 from the Wellcome Foundation, and £5,000 from the Wates Foundation.

Martha laughed: "Since Cosima and I formed the AXNS Collective 15 months ago, just a month after we met, we have spent all our spare time on the project. In my case I have a full-time job, and a part-time job, so I am pretty well committed!"

"We had to set up a community interest company— the AXNS Collective — to be able to apply for funding."

Martha, who was brought up in Oxford and has a drama degree, is focused on the community involvement aspect of *Affecting Perception*, and her local knowledge and contacts have been invaluable. She was also the lynchpin for the funding application.

"Writing the application for the Wellcome Trust was the hardest thing I ever had to do — and we are indebted to my dad, James Crawford, for the help he gave us with that. I had absolutely no life for a month-and-a-half, and then we had a massive panic when we came to submit it.

"The Wellcome computer system had crashed and it wouldn't go through, so I had to get up at 5am to try again and get it in for the 9am deadline. It was so nerve-wracking!"

Martha's employers are also backing her by letting her have six weeks unpaid leave in the run-up to and during the exhibition.

Sharing responsibility for the community involvement aspect is Mary Osborn, who has a Masters in Theatre and Performance, and became friends with Martha when they were studying at Exeter University.

"Martha asked me to get involved, and I thought it was a great opportunity to get some experience as I want to get into production," said Mary, who was brought up in Oxford.

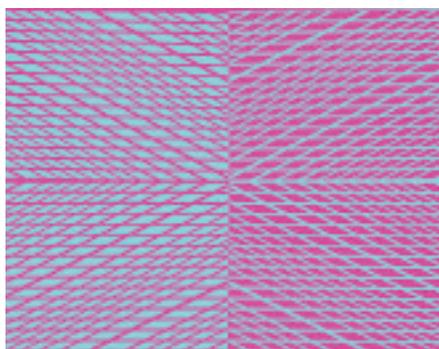
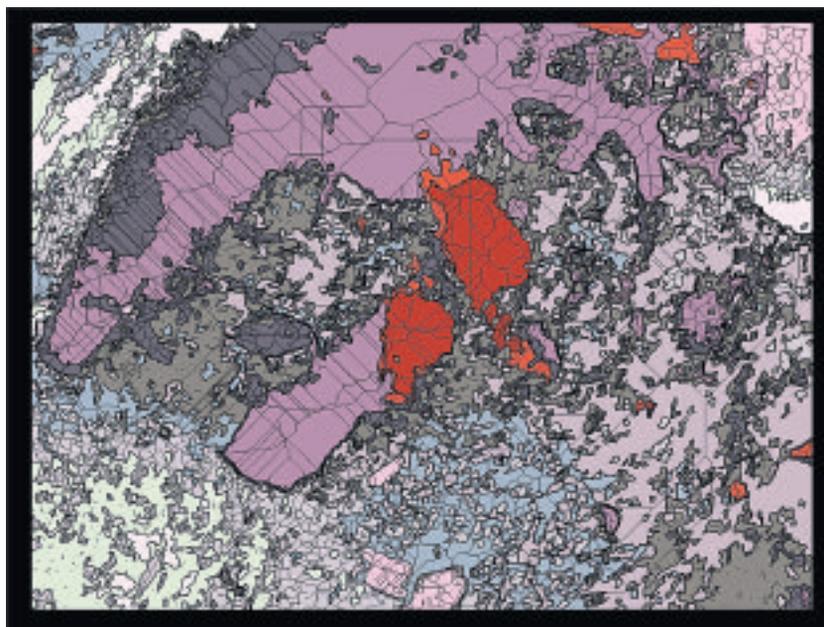
"I am the only one of us currently living in Oxford — and it is useful to have me here to do the running around!" she explained. "I am really interested in the art and science crossover, it reflects my work with a company that do drama workshops in medical schools."

For Rachel Stratton, the fourth member of the AXNS Collective, *Affecting Perception* gives her the chance to prove herself in her chosen career, as a curator. She completed a Masters in European Modernism at the Courtauld Institute of Art and works as a curatorial assistant at Ben Uri Art Museum in London.

She said: "I am really interested in the art and science crossover, and Cosima asked me to co-curate the project with her.

"Our generation have to make their own opportunities. Funding is cut for the arts all over the place, so we wanted to gain experience, and organising *Affecting Perception* allowed us to do that. We are all driven and up for the challenge."

Cosima agreed: "We are from a generation



**Top, 228 — a digitally manipulated image by Jon Adams. Above, Back Propaganda by Nicholas Wade and (right) Little Richard #360 by Jon Sarkin**



that struggles to get work experience and internships. We thought, why not just do something ourselves. I am interested in carrying on doing this after my first few years of being a doctor. It is really interesting to get people to engage with art and science."

Martha said: "Internships are generally just doing admin, and you get all the worst jobs. Doing something like this might be riskier, but you are fully responsible for the project. I would recommend it."

*Affecting Perception* taps into the current interest in the links between the brain and art. Coincidentally, The Barbican in London has a season of events kicking off in March that explore, and are inspired by, the human brain. It is called *Wonder: Art and Science on the Brain*.

"There is lots going on in London, but there has never been anything like this in Oxford," said Martha.

"We feel that through the art exhibition, seminars and working with schools we are reaching the maximum amount of people, and introducing them to a new way of thinking. And we have had nothing but encouragement from just about everyone we have approached."

Rachel added: "What has been so heartening is that people really want to support us. We have neuroscientists who have taken us seriously and promoted our

project. We have had a great response from the artists too."

And now, the formidable foursome are in the last few weeks before *Affecting Perception* opens on March 2.

Rachel commented: "This project has been a massive learning curve for the four of us —but it is all coming together now, and it is very exciting."

Martha agreed: "We are all extremely ambitious for our project — we have not been afraid of taking on the challenge and aiming high. And now it is like Wow!, we cannot believe we have done it!"

But the hard work continues.

Rachel added: "It is a little bit scary, because none of the works of art are in our hands yet, and some are coming from abroad. Also artist Jon Sarkin, whose work is being exhibited, is flying in from Boston, USA, to give a talk at one of the seminars too. We are juggling a lot of balls at the moment!"

■ *Affecting Perception — Art and Neuroscience exhibition takes place at the 03 Gallery, Oxford Castle, Oxford, from March 2 to March 31.*

*A programme of seminars also takes place at several venues around Oxford including Modern Art Oxford, Fusion Arts at East Oxford Community Centre, Magdalen Road Studios and Science Oxford. For the full list of events visit the website: [www.axnscollective.org](http://www.axnscollective.org)*