

Solitude and Company: the films and photographs of Hannah Collins

David Campany

— This text first appeared in the catalogue accompanying Hannah Collins exhibition at CaixaForum in Barcelona and Madrid in 2008-2009

Let us begin in another era, and with a manifesto: One must be of one's time. This was the slogan of the realist artists and writers of the second half of the nineteenth century. For the painter Gustave Courbet and his circle, for example, it represented not just an artistic calling but a commitment to a new way of living, a new way of being, a new way of attuning oneself to the world. The demand was at once simple and multi-layered. Firstly it implied that 'one's time' was significantly different in character from the past, and from times to come. Indeed it was in the nineteenth century that artists and writers first experienced in a deep and unavoidable way the rupture in continuity caused by modernity. Time was inconsistent, 'out of joint'. Time did not simply pass, it had a character that was subject to change. Secondly, it implied that the role of artists and writers was to immerse themselves in this new temporality and allow it to be expressed through them. Their task was not to look back nor to resist the present, nor to predict the future. It was to grasp everyday experience in all its transient particularity. Thirdly, being attentive to the texture and the grain of the present also implied being attentive to one's location in the world. In effect 'to be of one's time' contained a second, unspoken demand that was just as significant: One must be of one's place.

Even in the nineteenth century to know with any certainty the nature of one's time and one's place was not easy. In fact the emergence of a particular desire for such knowledge was itself a response to the difficulty of attaining it. After all, we tend to think we know what is particular about a time and a place only with hindsight. Perhaps we can only 'be' of our time and place without really 'knowing' it in the fullest sense.

In the century that followed the task became increasingly difficult. Histories began to conflict with each other. Populations began to move. Cultures began to mix or clash.

Different orders of time and place began to assert themselves on daily life in ways that could not be reconciled. Even finding a fixed position from which to consider the rapid changes was a challenge. Here in the twenty-first century we are trying to come to terms with the effects of that long period of instability, if only to prepare ourselves for the instabilities to come.

An exhibition of the films and photographs of Hannah Collins presents us with a remarkably subtle and suggestive response by an artist to this condition. Her imagery offers a profound insight into how we might come to know and come to terms with our own times and places.

Panoramas of the Unknown

Through all her searching and experimentation, Hannah Collins has been drawn towards one pictorial form more than any other. It is the panorama. It has shaped many of her photographs and is explicit in her multi-screen films. And even when her artworks do not take this form, something panoramic promises to emerge in the connections between them.

Historically, the panorama was always an ambiguous form. On one level it could foster a gaze that was grounded and surveying, with a certain mastery of the world. The wide expanse of the panorama, coupled with its tendency toward the epic and spectacular, could lend a representation an air of confidence and stability. The viewer and the viewed were centred and lucid, imbued with power and promise. The panorama could allow space and time to be brought under one system of vision and one symbolic order. It also theatricalised that space, presenting it as a heroic stage for future action. Used in this way the panorama played an important part in the establishment of the bold self-image of modernity. At the same time however, the panorama always retained the potential to offer the viewer more than they could really cope with, more than they could contain or encompass. Literally, the viewer faced with a panorama may not be able to 'take it all in'. The camera might aspire to a mastery of the scene but viewers could easily lose themselves in the uncontrollable scope of the image. In the act of looking the viewer may not be able to maintain a sense of control. The panorama could rob the viewer of their safe coordinates in time and space. Despite its

orderly and rational intention, the panorama always had the potential to become a dream-space of unbounded immersion.

Hannah Collins's panoramas have exactly this kind of ambiguity. She is one of very few image-makers who have adopted the panorama as both an epic form and as a subjective horizon of doubt or hesitation. She has arrived at this by way of her interest in the confusing and often contradictory nature of modern time and space. This is the theme that has informed much of her art. It presents her with the challenge of finding ways to picture feelings, attitudes and subjects that are often at the very limit of what is representable.

Other spaces and spaces of otherness

For Collins the panorama is a means of picturing the incoherent consequences of modernity. Her compositions are often unified and have a visual assurance about them, but the signs and meanings they contain swirl and fold in on themselves, tending toward the open and ambiguous. They are inclusive in their scope yet inconclusive in their meaning. They take us to particular kinds of locations, to the sorts of spaces Michel Foucault once described as heterotopias. These are spaces characterised by their unstable relation to historical time and social function. The heterotopia has ill-defined and often overlapping uses. It is a fugitive terrain – fragile, transient, and subject to unpredictable change.

Under international capitalism such heterotopic space has proliferated. Land is becoming expensive, forcing layered uses and denser populations upon our cities, while making other spaces unexpectedly peripheral. At the same time the labour market is becoming increasingly nomadic. The built environment is being formed and re-formed by short-term concerns. The rootedness of communities is being undermined, reshaping our ideas of social ritual and meaningful living. These are the spatial and temporal orders in which, to paraphrase Karl Marx, 'all that is solid' may before long 'melt into air'. The inevitable uncertainty this situation produces has lead Collins herself to characterise it as "a worldwide case of homesickness". To be homesick is to find oneself in one place and one time while longing for another. It is an unfulfilled longing that knows there really is no 'going home'. One must

contend with time and space rather than simply being in it. Either one makes a new home or one gets used to instability and rootlessness. Or one resists in the hope of something better, something as yet unimagined. Any image of this condition is likely to be more stable than the condition itself. Making it visible is not easy. There are no clear paths for those wishing to understand or represent it. The artist must set themselves the task of making their own path.

Monuments and anti-monuments

Almost from the beginning of her artistic career Collins has worked on a monumental scale. Hers are some of the largest photographs and film projections you are likely to encounter in contemporary art. At the same time they are also some of the most intimate. This balance between the monumental and the intimate is very fine. It depends upon a close relationship between the viewers' experience of themselves in the gallery space and the kinds of experience they see pictured or expressed by the image. In other words Collins looks for a consonance between the embodied spectator and the embodied world of social forces that she depicts.

It goes without saying that this kind of scale is not her invention. It is the scale that has been central to the Western pictorial tradition as well as to the history of sculpture and, more recently, cinema. However, this kind of scale did not play a substantial part in the artistic evolution of photography. Modern art photography adopted the dimensions of the page or the small study drawing. It kept to that size, more or less, for over a century. At the start the limits were technical but small scale soon became a preference. Photography, that most public and dispersed of mediums, was something that art photographers felt they needed to rescue through precious small size and privatised spectatorship. Photography, the mass medium that helped to scramble our experience of time and space, had to be tamed and domesticated. Today of course large-scale photography is almost standard in contemporary art, but it came relatively late. It arrived via Pop in the 1960s and postmodern photography in the 1980s, when art engaged with photography not as a privatised world but as a medium of collective consumption, spectacle and entertainment. But there were other ways and other

reasons to work at a large scale that had little or nothing to do with spectacle. Collins was among several artists (including Suzanne Lafont, Craigie Horsfield, John Coplans and Jeff Wall) who came to prominence with bodies of work that were, despite their size, much quieter and more reserved. Grand scale was rediscovered as a means of evoking intimacy. Their works were immersive, inviting viewers to identify with figures and places. There is nothing sentimental in this notion of intimacy. Rather, it is a scale at which the fullest complexity of a subject can be presented to, and represented for, the viewer. In this sense ‘large scale’ is not a very useful term. Collins would describe the scale at which she works as being neither large nor small but simply appropriate.

For many photographic artists, notably Jeff Wall, life scale provided a way for photography to reconnect with ‘the painting of modern life’, the programme of everyday depiction outlined by Charles Baudelaire in 1863. Realist painters, who had taken up the challenge of trying to represent the complexities of their time and place, provided a vital model for photography in the latter decades of the last century. But Hannah Collins’ trajectory was different. Her early photographs evoked something of the scale and presence of monumental sculpture. They played with relations between the tactile and the untouchable, heaviness and lightness, surface and volume, appearance and presence. She began to hang her black-and-white prints less as photographs or even pictures than as vast undulating surfaces bearing images. They were presented to the viewer both as pictures of the world and as physical objects in the world. The irregular surfaces of the prints would take on the elemental qualities of the surfaces they recorded – cardboard, paper, cloth, metal, plastic, stone, brick, wood. They had as much in common with the work of Robert Smithson and Eva Hesse as they did with anything photographic or painterly. For example in the early work *WhereWords Fail Completely* (1986) we see a makeshift bed on the floor of a space that seems to be occupied only temporarily. Plastic sheeting covers the wooden floor as if the occupant is living fugitively, without leaving evidence. This space is not a bedroom and it is certainly not a home as we know it. Moreover the image is split into two sections, forcing us to confront its disunity and it is printed so that the white pillow on the bed appears life-size, emphasising not just what we see in the image but what we cannot – the occupant.

Collins undercuts the monumental presence of her art by making images that seem to be haunted by absences and traces. They are as much about what we cannot see in the frame as what we can. The adjective ‘monumental’ is often used to speak of great size and solidity. In this sense the monumental signals an unarguable presence. But Collins never allows us to forget that any monument marks the absence of something that has passed. The things and spaces to which she is attracted are rarely new or pristine. They have the patina of age, of wear and tear, of other times and other uses. They speak of life lived, of time passing, of history endured. The objects she photographs are often ephemeral while the spaces seem to be in a state of transition. We may glimpse new things (perhaps a steel and glass building, or a shiny car) but they are embedded in the weight of history and subject to the course of time. In Collins’ art, history appears as a force of measure and humility. It tempers the follies of the present while pointing to the follies of the past. Rarely are her images monuments to anything specific that has happened. Instead they are monuments to the more abstract idea of what we might call passingness. It is lived time itself that is memorialised here.

The solitude and company of viewers

Monumental scale allows for the possibility of multiple viewers all looking at an artwork at once. This, it could be argued, is the most significant shift that has happened to photographic and filmic art in the last few decades. The collective viewing of a photograph breaks with the tight relay between the artistic ego, the monocular image and the singular viewer. Instead the image opens itself out to the gaze of many eyes, many potential subjects who are all in the same place, looking at the work at the same time. To gaze at an artwork in the presence of others is to gaze alone and as part of what Giambattista Vico called the *sensus communis* – the collective, social, negotiated consciousness of the informal group.

Such communal looking is something that cinema always tried to deny. This was so despite the fact that in its commercial forms cinema required large movie theatres and mass audiences. The darkened space, the narrative drive of the films and the identification with characters on screen would draw viewers into the film and away from each other. The arrival

of the moving image in the gallery space, particularly in the multi-screen format used by Collins, reintroduced a properly social viewing to the moving image. The gallery space is not a cinema, and in general it does not screen films intended for cinemas. Instead, film in the space of art accepts this notion of viewers who are at once individual and present to each other.

In other words we look at Collins' photographs and films in our solitude and in the company of others. In this way our experience of her art emerges from the subtle negotiation between the two. This would emerge from the subtle negotiation between the two. This would hardly be worth mentioning were it not for the fact that the relationship between solitude and company informs much of Collins' art. This is the condition that her art is attempting to describe.

We cannot attribute a single, stable quality to solitude, nor to company. There are situations in which solitude is involuntary, coming as an awful fate or consequence forced upon a person: alienation, living alone, looking for work, working alone. And yet we all know there are situations in which solitude seems like the height of luxury, indeed the most rare of commodities affordable only by the few. Likewise there are moments when "hell is other people" as they say, and there are moments when it is only company that will save us from the madness of solitude. This double character of solitude and company can be sensed quite acutely in Collins' recent films. While very different in setting and structure *La Mina*, *Current History* and *Parallel* all unfold as searches for the meaning of solitude and company. The settings vary – a community of Spanish gypsies, a remote Russian village, and the fractured geographies of economic migration – but in each situation Collins organises her film around the fragile connections between individuals and social groups.

The art of viewing

Some of the most revealing moments in these films seem to come almost by chance. There are fleeting juxtapositions created not as they are in conventional cinema by the sequencing of shots on a single screen, but by viewers themselves as their eyes switch from one screen to

another screen, assembling for ourselves a picture of what it is we think we are coming to understand. At other moments it is quite clearly Collins herself who is bringing one image into a dialectical relationship with another. Then there are moments when it is the people on screen who unexpectedly offer up their own thoughts on their situation. In this way we viewers find ourselves moving between making our own sense of the films and listening to the sense of others. For many artists the use of more than one film screen has been a way to dismantle or explode the dominant linear narratives of mainstream cinema. Multiple screens offer the possibility of multiple views or multiple plotlines. Here the space of art is used as a kind of operating table for the dissection of narrative cinema into its various parts. There is a long history of art being mobilised to alienate or estrange mainstream culture (from Dada, Surrealism and Situationism to Minimalism and Pop). Hannah Collins' films seem to have little to do with this motivation. She is not trying to estrange or alienate the familiar. In many respects her art attempts the exact opposite. For Collins is interested in the idea that what we often think is familiar is at the same time alienating and estranging. Multiple screens are simply the best way to try and assemble pictures of phenomena that are almost unpicturable. At first glance any multi-screen installation will exude an aura of confidence and control. Multi-screen work always looks assured and spectacular. This is in part because it is bigger than any single viewer.

The viewer cannot take it all in or fantasise that they have a grip on it. To watch a multi-screen film is, by definition, a decentring experience. Decentred experience is a strong theme within Collins' films themselves. So again we find a consonance between the experience of the viewer and the experience of the viewed. Her films offer us the chance to consider people whose identities are somehow in flux. They are in flux because they are confronting their own fragile relation to time and place, caught between one thing and another. That 'thing' may be personal loyalty, economic necessity, a cultural affiliation or something much less easily defined. Certainly there is a confidence and control in Collins' physical construction of these films. We see it in the precise choices of location, subject matter, framing, lighting, cinematography, editing, sound design and so on. As I mentioned earlier all of her art feels highly considered but its meaning is much less fixed. Even so, there is no revelling in

ambiguity for its own sake here. This is an art that is searching, looking for glimpses of something truthful or at least revealing about our experience of a contradictory world. In picking up on this search, the audience finds their own active place in the making of meaning. The composer John Cage gave a word to this active role of the audience. He called it response-ability. It is a beautifully simple marriage of words that gets us close to describing the obligations of the audience. It is not simply responsibility, nor response, nor ability. It is rather an obligation to actively use one's abilities to respond, to accept that meaning will not arise without our participation.

Time and time again

Collins' films make manifest what was often latent in her photographs. They are full of the living presence of people that her photographs only imply. Before she began to make films nearly all of her still images were devoid of human presence. Her subject matter was certainly the lives of people, but she approached things indirectly, photographing their spaces, places, surfaces and objects. Presented alongside her films those photographs are now transformed. Their 'emptiness' becomes even more charged, more infused with the aura of absent stories. It becomes more difficult to refuse the impulse to project narrative upon them. Perhaps this situation has affected all photography in the age of the moving image. Cinema converted the natural stillness of photography into 'stoppedness' or 'arrestedness'. This was why Albert Valentin in 1929 described Eugene Atget's photographs of the outskirts of Paris as resembling images of crime scenes. He could not help but narrate them, seeing their spaces as empty stages.

But there is a more telling comparison to be made that brings us much closer to the tension Collins sets up between the times of photography and film. In 1974 the filmmaker Alain Resnais published a book of photographs titled *Réperages*. It collected together shots of streets and buildings made while he was looking for locations for his films. But Resnais' photos do more than record what was there before his camera. They speak of narratives yet to come. They have the past tense common to all photographs but they also have a future

tense. The promise of the unmade films keeps the photographs alive, looking forward as much as back.

When we were preparing this book and exhibition I asked Hannah if she knew of Alain Resnais' rather forgotten book. She didn't. I took it from my shelf and handed it to her. Looking through his images she immediately saw a connection with her own. It was more than the tactility of the printed pages and the panoramic layout. It was this double relation to time. Hannah stopped at a photograph of a long wall made entirely of re-used doors. This mundane yet surreal image was also a little uncanny because Hannah had already made her own photograph of something uncannily similar – a house made of doors that she came across in Barcelona. Her image of it became a guiding symbol in the preparation of this book and exhibition. It embodies the layering of time and place that runs through so much of her work. It is an image pragmatism, experience and unlikely beauty. But the story does not end here. It continues into the future. As part of the project Drawing on the City the artist plans to reconstruct that house of doors, as a floating monument in the waters of Barcelona. It will be moored as a platform for swimmers to use. From the shore it will be a vision of transience and transcendence – a monument to those who continue to come to Barcelona from across the water, to those who changed the city's sense of time and place. Thanks to Hannah Collins it will have made the transition from object to image and back to object again. The house of doors will reappear.

David Campany