

The Hospitable Universe, Inka Schube,

— This text first appeared in the catalogue accompanying Hannah Collins exhibition at the Sprengel Museum in Hannover in 2015.

*Against the accident of limits, the tree needs you to give it your superabundant images, nurtured in your intimate space, in 'this space that has its being in you.'* Gaston Bachelard <sup>1</sup>

Spaces, it is said, are like covers that wrap themselves around people and testify to them even when they are no longer there.<sup>2</sup> The British artist Hannah Collins seems to have her own special interest in such covers, sheaths and skins. She finds them and translates them into suggestive images: she invites us to 'inhabit' these spaces anew.

In her work, Collins lays trails in the history of this and last century. They often lead to territories that rarely conform to traditional conceptions of hospitality, those reserved for the uprooted and nomadic.

Nevertheless, it would inadmissibly diminish the artist's work if we were to interpret it as being focused on social and political exclusion, as drawing on the preoccupation with and anticipation of the experience of the 'other'. For in Collins' work, a dualistic distinction of one kind or another between 'self' and 'other' does not play a truly fundamental role.

Instead, it is a question of the multiplicity, of the radical plurality of different interests and ways of life, of a comprehensive, reciprocal and perhaps best termed cosmic hospitality of the world – including ruptures, fissures, productive conflicts and differences of all kinds.

Collins' work constitutes an on-going, rhizomatic research project on this subject.

Encountering it means first and foremost entering worlds of images that 'wrap' themselves around the look. There are the delicately protective skins, the studio interiors hosting large-scale performances and installations. There are the equally large, in some cases more than six metres wide pictures of mostly unspectacular but historically highly charged locations – the road leading to Auschwitz, and Nelson Mandela's childhood home. There is the photographic and audio collage on assemblage artist Noah Purifoy (1917–2004) and his

legacy in the Californian desert. There is the strictly photographic and at the same time psychedelically labyrinthine series of over a hundred pictures from the Colombian rainforest that engages intellectually and bodily with the culture of its inhabitants. This list could be continued. Her works always come with an invitation to enter her panoramic pictorial worlds.

Collins' research is tied to experiences in situ, experiences of the physicality of things and situations. Spaces construct themselves from selected perceptions of manmade and natural objects and their interrelations. In doing so, Collins – and it is not only here that we see an affinity to performance – comprehends her own body as a kind of medium: experiences of self and non-self, conscious and unconscious perceptions and knowledge accumulate and distil in this medium and contribute to the development of film and photographic images and their symbolic orders.

Collins often finds her material on her travels, at places momentous for the understanding of history and the individual's place in it – or in situations permitting an extended experience of the self on levels transcending the rational and effable.

In other cases, she brings objects to her studio and asks people along as well. In the sober austerity of these laboratory-like set-ups, she develops vivid models of and for experience and encounters.

Despite all this, Collins' work is peculiarly poetic. Even in those instances where she photographs streets, a public space or a building, it possesses a surreal dimension. As if it were not a question of rendering something visible, but of overcoming customary ways of seeing; as if the images were conversing among themselves; as if they were mounting secret but stubborn resistance to the order that photography and film inevitably install. Concealed in the suggestive tidiness of the large format photographic prints, in the greys of her melancholic black and white, in the films and in the extensive smaller-format picture cycles lies an intractable diversity of voices, a rustling, a murmur and a hum that Collins brings, to a greater or lesser degree, to the surface. In her art, language is of elementary significance, be

it as a picture title, as a sound or as a narrative accompanying the work (as in this and earlier of the artist's publications).

Take, for example, *Solitude and Company*, a film opus dating from 2008. It opens with historic shots taken inside and outside a factory. In a new montage and bathed in broken colours, they mark the start of an almost 60-minute camera tracking shot, cut only three times, through the expanses of a now derelict factory shop. The view changes slowly, very slowly, as we move through the rooms. The delapidated and abandoned Modernist hall of festivities is articulated with columns and dipped in a Rembrandt-esque light tracing the sun's path. Disconnected feed and discharge pipes project from the ceilings, floors and walls as vestiges of various epochs and purposes.

And while we accommodate ourselves to this different way of seeing intensified by the slowness of progress, while our look gauges the morbid beauty of this murky space, we hear water flowing, leaves rustling and birds singing, and we hear voices recounting dreams. Someone is the president and is regulating the world's water requirements. Someone can fly and is gliding homewards. Someone is talking to a gazelle. Someone wants to understand what the evidently taboo word 'harki'<sup>3</sup> means.

The Place we see is the La Tossée wool-combing mill built in Roubaix, France, in 1871. It has been empty for many years when Collins, local guest professor, comes across it. The Lille metropolitan area to which the town on the border with Belgium belongs has a high rate of unemployment, like other European centres of heavy industry. Disused industrial sites and crumbling production installations testify to economic decline. Collins sees the challenge of placing the commemoration of the building and its materiality in a context with those living in the town today.

For the soundtrack, she works together with the Algerian DJ Boulaone and a locally resident Algerian community. It is characteristic of Collins' modus operandi that she asks people not about their real lives and times but about their dreams. So we have, on the one hand, the history-laden one-time production shop in its picturesque beauty, and, on the other, the

disembodied voices of those closely associated with it. Interior and exterior experience intermingle, and the sound adds to the picture the dimension that lies beyond the factual.

What as text, as a level extending the visual, can be heard and experienced in *Solitude and Company* often finds expression in the photographs in the interplay between the picture and its title. An example of this is *Family*, a black and white photograph measuring 275 x 350 cm and dating from 1988. The box-like loudspeakers laconically constituting a fragile studio situation have obviously seen better times, perhaps once part of the equipment of an underground rock or punk band. The kind of sound they produce is left to our imagination, as the photo resonates solely with the title assigned to it and with the ungainly wording 'Sweet Daddy Majestic' emblazoned on several of the speakers, large and small. Like on a stage with dramatic lighting (as if light were admitted through an opened door), they represent a community in which each has its own specific potential, role and possibilities, despite the differences in size and wear. What could be more obvious than to interpret *Family* as a portrait of kinship or of a metaphor of inner-familial structures and their in some cases subliminal but always powerful presence?

Here, as with other pictures taken in the studio, the obvious field of reference for viewers familiar with art history is the tradition of genre and still-life painting. Seen from this point of view, the loudspeakers could be a kind of re-interpretation of the depiction of musical instruments in Dutch painting, for example. There they symbolise the sense of hearing, the allusion to the elusiveness of sound and to impermanence in general. The picture *Grapes* (1989), for example, can be read perhaps as a bacchantic symbol; or, from the Book of Numbers in the Bible, as the Grapes of Canaan that showed the people of Israel their way to the Promised Land after their exodus from Egypt: but the people rebelled and refused to follow this route and were thereupon punished by God with 40 years of wandering in the desert. The salt that can be found in several of the artist's sculptural configurations, such as in *Salt (5)* (1995), has been so richly imbued with symbolism in cultural history that there is no need to even start a list here.

However, the photographs always also lay trails in the debates about picture making, and, with its title, *Family* may refer psychologically and/ or allegorically to a philosophical background. It leads us to postmodern interest in the function and significance of linguistic signs. 'Family resemblance',<sup>4</sup> a concept coined by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) and important in the postmodernism debate, is for the philosopher the ordering principle of the grammar of everyday language.<sup>5</sup> It is the key criterion for the conception of the indefinability, vagueness and imprecision of terms that only ever 'resemble' each other, as they are repeatedly renegotiated in different applications, so-called 'language games', and can never be identical. This in turn is the basis for a fundamental structural openness and mobility of communication and for the social exchange taking place within it. In the resultant paradigm of radical multiplicity and plurality, responsible action formulates itself in directing special attention to the affective, unconsidered, marginal and paradoxical, as it is not 'translatable into computer language'<sup>6</sup> of the high-tech present. This is an approach that Collins consistently pursues in her work.

Guided via the sense of form and structure, *Family* is therefore far more than the opportunity for an engagement with the psychological aspects of family ties or with a contemporary variant of the allegorical motif of impermanence. *Family* refers at the same time to a theoretical and philosophical concept of the social mediated by language: in a subliminal, poetically sensuous, surreal way – in a seemingly paradoxical, productively disconcerting superimposition of real silence and imagined sound.

In her work, Collins not only explores her own biography: a childhood with a Jewish intellectual background in Scotland, in which work with and on language through her mother's job at Penguin Books is just as omnipresent as her father's realities coloured by paranoid schizophrenia. This is followed by her course at the Slade School of Art in London from 1974 to 1978. The artist Rita Donagh (b. 1939) working on the themes of social identity against the background of the troubles in Northern Ireland is lecturing here at the time: Paul Klee, Victor Pasmore, Richard Hamilton, Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol are among the artists who have made their impression on Donagh's own development. Collins' years of study coincide with the period in which London is painfully confronted with the

consequences of its decline as a port and trading centre and with a rapid series of terrorist bombings by the IRA, the period in which inflation and unemployment reach unprecedented levels and squatting is a daily occurrence. These are the years in which Marcel Broodthaers (1924–1976) brings the legacy of Surrealism – extended notably to include institutional criticism <sup>7</sup> – to London, in which the Sex Pistols annoy the British establishment with *God Save the Queen* (1977) and *Never Mind the Bollocks* (1977), and which Derek Jarman powerfully documents with such films as *Jubilee* (1978) in which the semiotic systems of dissident counterculture and history-saturated high culture are interwoven.

It is the period in which the concept of Postmodernism rises to prominence in the cultural debate. Philosophical foundations are laid by such writings as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) by Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998). Attention is now trained no longer on the grand narratives of Modernism legitimising themselves in Idealism, Enlightenment and Reason, but on an endless, non-hierarchical and non-consensus-oriented multiplicity of voices and narratives. Collins' interest in social marginalisation and the shadowy sides of existence can also be interpreted in this connection.

It is possible to discover links with Broodthaers in Collins' work: crustaceans (cf. Broodthaers' *Pot of Mussels*, 1968, among others), the passage (*A Voyage on the North Sea*, 1973) and the inscribed room (*La Salle blanche*, 1975) are common to both. Even the caged bird (*Le Perroquet*, 1974) as tracked down in her image of a gypsy youth with caged bird, *Manu with bird 2* (2007), a single image from her work in and on *La Mina* (2001–2004), a 5-channel video film that concentrates on the culture of Spain's Romani at loggerheads with Modernism. American photography in the tradition of Walker Evans (1903–1975) impresses itself upon Collins during a post-graduation stay in the USA made possible by a Fulbright scholarship. And it looks as if there is indeed a direct line of connection between the pictures of roads, urban spaces and landscapes, her details of the discovered and the found, taken in Poland, Istanbul and South Africa and the photographs of French Eugène Atget (1857–1927). The latter's pictures also reached Walker Evans as a result of the active interest of the Surrealists. In the context of their poetic language games, the photographic archive created

by Atget in Paris at the turn of the century had revealed itself as a projection space for the unconscious and the subconscious, ideal for symbolic, metaphorical and metaphysical interpretations. The reception of this photographer's work is closely tied to the shaping of an understanding of photographic images in the ambivalence of pictorial autonomy and the representation of the real.

Although, or precisely because, Collins' pictures are exact and at first sight unspectacular, they are so extraordinarily open to interpretation and projection. Nevertheless, they are anything but arbitrary. Their symbolic orders are steeped in cultural and social history and their materiality testifies to reality. All the same, within them lies a grandeur that, beyond language, allows the poetic imagination to enter their often frameless 'suchness'.

This catalogue is published to mark the presentation of the »SPECTRUM« International Prize for Photography of the Stiftung Niedersachsen to Hannah Collins. It extends the exhibition accompanying the award to include a range of works affording a deeper insight into the artist's oeuvre.

Not only will this make an encounter with the artist's work possible for the first time in the German-speaking world, but two extensive new works, *The Interior and the Exterior* – Noah Purifoy (2014) and *The Fertile Forest* (2013–14), specially produced for Hannover, are also being presented.

In addition, the volume offers different avenues of approach to Hannah Collins' work: The American born British American art critic Gilda Williams places the artist's work in the context of the cultural theory of the 1980s as a kind of emotional cartography. Resorting to a term coined by John L. Cotter, she regards it as 'above-ground archaeology' and draws attention to relations with the work of artists like Robert Smithson (1938– 1973) and Ed Ruscha (b. 1937). Williams describes the horizon as one of the central features of her output and thus also refers implicitly to the philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1883–1962) and his phenomenology of the imagination proposed in his text *The Poetics of Space*.<sup>8</sup> It is possible also to comprehend Hannah Collins work as archaeological in these contexts.

The philosopher Stephan Günzel approaches the artist's work via the term 'response' which he interprets in terms of 'responsibility'. Günzel encourages us to regard Collins herself as a secular medium who establishes lines of communication between different experiences of time.

The question of responsibility plays a central role in the artist's work at all times. The British philosopher Richard Noble has kindly permitted us to reprint his essay 'Bird Land' in this volume. He deals at length with one of Collins' key works, the film project La Mina. Although this cannot be shown in the exhibition, it occupies such a central position in the artist's work that it should not be passed over here. Noble provides an in-depth analysis of this work whose intricate poetic and documentary complexity can be considered the hallmark of Hannah Collins' oeuvre.

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (French *La poétique de l'espace*, 1958), Boston: Beacon Press 1994 p. 200.
2. Andreas Baur/Bernd Stiegler/Felix Thürlenmann et al. (ed.), *Wozu Bilder? Gebrauchsweisen der Fotografie*, Exh. cat. for Villa Merkel, Esslingen; Cologne: Snoeck 2013, p. 142.
3. Originally a term for Algerian Muslims who sided with the French army during the Algerian War (1954–1962).
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1953, § 66, p. 15.
- 5 See Anat Biletzki/Anat Matar, 'Ludwig Wittgenstein', esp. Ch. 3.4, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/wittgenstein/> (retrieved 2 February 2015).
6. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. By Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (French *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, 1979), ed. by Peter Engelmann, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1984, p. 4.

7. In 1974 Petersburg Press, London, stages the exhibition 'Marcel Broodthaers, Un Voyage en Mer du Nord', and in 1977 the Tate Gallery, London, devotes a posthumous solo exhibition to the artist.

8. Bachelard 1987 (see note 1).