

Hannah Collins

Introduction, Iwona Blazwick

— First published in *Finding, Receiving, Transmitting*, published by Black Dog Publishing in 2007

If art once presented a window onto the world, modern art resolutely created a world in its own right. Whether through an emphasis on materiality and form or through the evocation of a broader social context, this tendency can be understood as an engagement with the real. The viewer has been invited to enter and become immersed in works of art that combine a symbolic reading with a phenomenal one.

While photography lays claim to the real through its documentary and indexical nature, few artists have been able to defy the pictorial limits of the image by dissolving the picture frame, blurring the boundary between the image and the space in which it is viewed.

An important exception has been the artist Hannah Collins. Her photographs can be experienced as an image and as a kind of architecture; as two-dimensional surface and as sculpture.

One of her earliest works pictures a room and is itself room sized. The scale is one on one. *Thin Protective Coverings* (1986) is a giant, canvas mounted black and white photograph of a constructed environment made up of flattened cardboard boxes. The image appears to continue the floor and wall of any space in which it is hung. Yet the solidity of the room's structure is disintegrated into an overlapping mosaic of cardboard sheets. This remarkable image has a powerful sculptural quality. At the same time it evokes the makeshift architecture of the homeless; and the unofficial structures of the *favela*. Imposing in its architectonic scale and imagery the work combines fragility with tenacity; ubiquitous, transitory and disposable,

cardboard is a mainstay of surviving life on the streets. The reference to ‘coverings’ also suggests skin, our own thin, protective covering.

Collins’ evocation of the tactile, sensual qualities of the material world combines with her use of scale to give her photographs a spatial, even phenomenological quality that, to paraphrase Rosalind Krauss, locates her work in an expanded field.

There are some other important features of the photographs and film works gathered together in this book. Collins is interested in revealing the archeology of urban space, showing how the built environment bares the traces of the past and intimations of a future. She also pictures the architecture of survival, documenting places created by those who have been displaced.

Juxtaposed with her photographs of buildings and cityscapes, there is an ongoing engagement with the still life and the beauty and interconnectedness of organic things.

Finally there are portraits; animated and speaking for themselves, through film; or, most recently, brought back from the dead through found negatives or prints.

‘Photography alludes to the past and the future only in so far as they exist in the present, the past through its surviving relics, the future through prophecy visible in the present.’¹

Collins has lived and worked in London, Barcelona and California. She has also made work in India, North Africa, Poland, Russia and Turkey. In each location she documents the omnipresence of a universal modernism and the global features of modernity. At the same time her lens reveals the cracks and fissures through which the ancient and the culturally specific become visible. Her images move between panoramic city scapes bristling with television aerals or festooned with billboard posters; and the marbled texture of a single slab of stone cladding.

The surface of the world becomes itself a kind of photograph, exposed to time, to the light of millennia, recording the deep shift of tectonic plates, or the surface patinas of changing civilizations. The epic sweep of a roofscape or modernist urban facade is juxtaposed with a fragment; it might be the corner of a street, a gate, a brick wall. Collins combines the 'fast time' of technological and cultural change, the dynamo of the modern - with the slow time of geology, forgotten settlements and activities. A building or conurbation may even bare the signs of trauma, such as her pictures of the streets around Auschwitz, or overgrown cemeteries. Her archeology of urban space, with its ravishing textures and intense colours, is also an attempt to confront the present with the past, to show how social history is part of the everyday present.

Collins is also drawn to people who by choice, by virtue of their identity or as victims of circumstance, pursue an existence at the edge of urban space and of legality. Just as her architectural typologies speak of shelter, communal life and labour – she also pictures the structures and topologies that invoke their opposite – homelessness, exile, alienation, unemployment.

Through stills and the moving image, Collins has tracked how groups and individuals can maintain communal rituals and a sense of dignity when they are relegated to the edge of the dominant social order, prohibited from truly occupying the public arena. This existence of contingency finds its expression in temporary habitats and the colonization of those public spaces deemed to occupy the margins. These might be self-built shelters, collaged together from found materials, disorderly and beguilingly sculptural, structures of survival and resistance. Or they might be found spaces that are co-opted for living – a motorway underpass where a gypsy keeps his horses, the no-go concrete zones between public housing tower blocks, a bench in the park. These spaces become co-opted to provide meeting places, areas for negotiation and zones of departure.

Collins has photographed and interviewed gypsy communities who live at the edge of the *polis*; and individual refugees who live among us yet are invisible. This documentation has

been extrapolated into narrative through a series of films where she has given a voice to three exiles. Their parallel lives, where every day is a struggle for survival, lack symbolic representation; they are like ghosts among the citizenry, illegal, invisible, impotent. Collins has sought them out to give them visibility through the lens.

She has also pictured those who have disappeared entirely, their passing marked by gravestones, memorials and of course photographs themselves. Juxtaposed in the pages of this book with an image of an earthy hole in the ground, a waterfall and a giant staircase, are a series of sepia photographs Collins deploys as found objects. Again she moves between the generic and the specific. These works are reprints of 19th century photographs of family groups or individuals. They are anonymous, yet recognizable as part of the genre of portraiture. Collins draws attention to the details – the leaves hand painted on the wallpaper behind a figure that look like fingerprints; a large male hand grasping a tiny female one; two women's heads at the back of a family group; the label on the back of a print with the name of the photographer's studio embellished with a graphic flourish. We will never know anything of the subjectivity, history or significance of the subjects of these photographs which can be understood as 'found objects'. In an important paper where on the readymade and the found object in modern and contemporary art, art historian Margaret Iversen comments: The found object shares with the readymade a lack of obvious aesthetic quality and little intervention on the part of the artist beyond putting the object into circulation, but in almost every other respect it is dissimilar. The difference is attributable to Breton's positioning the found object in a difference space – the space of the unconscious'. By dissecting elements of these generic formal portraits, isolating features such as heads, patterns, gestures, Collins triggers an empathetic sense of recognition. She gives them an emotional and psychic charge by highlighting what Iversen has described as 'the texture of the real'².

Alongside her meditative studies of modern and historic topographies, Collins has always maintained an engagement with the interiority of the still life. Although her exquisitely sensual studies of organic forms and manmade objects can be understood within the genre of

the still life, they are not so much prearranged compositions on a table as sensual moments, oasis of physicality, grasped from the flux of the everyday. The folds of a cotton sheet caress the eye; the crystals of a chandelier dazzle the gaze; a box of dried sardines triggers an olfactory response. They relate to basic human functions such as eating, sleeping; at the same time they offer moments of intense beauty.

This book has been structured by the artist to follow certain themes. The first section, titled *Events and Conditions* offers a sequence of urban and suburban images. The second section, titled *Finding, Transmitting, Receiving* demonstrates how space is transformed into situation. *Ghosts* is a chapter where the 'dead' images of historic portrait photography come to life. *Scripts* documents Collins' recent film projects. The final section *Pavilions*, moves between the great iconic Barcelona Pavilion of Mies van der Rohe, a home-made tent/ shack and the surprisingly baroque interior of a Spanish high rise apartment. These exteriors and interiors leave us with the two polarities in Collins' work - the utopian and the dystopian, folded within one another through Collins' sculptural and architectural photographic practice.

Iwona Blazwick, 2007

1 John Szarkowski, from *The Photographer's Eye*, catalogue essay, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1969

2 Margeret Iversen, 'Readymade to Found Object', lecture, *Big Ideas*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2004