

Bird Land, 2004

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At the beginning of Hannah Collins' new projection *La Mina*, a group of people awake in a sort of temporary encampment on the edge of a vast housing estate. Sleeping bags, lean-tos, the odd table and chair scattered in the open space suggest an encampment of the homeless, or perhaps of Gypsies. Two men bridle an old horse and talk about what to do about the Romanian Gypsies encamped in this space, which they use for their scrap business and clearly regard as their own. The plan they hit upon is to dump as much scrap as they can on the space so as to drive them off (this has the virtue of being within their rights as users of the space and avoiding the financial obligations – petrol, etc. - traditionally involved in helping fellow Gypsies to move on). As they set off in their horse drawn cart towards the main estate to gather scrap, they pass under a motorway. A large bus thunders towards and passes them just at the low point of the road. Neither the horse nor the drivers seem at all disturbed by the size and power of the passing bus; they carry on as if this sort of confrontation between the modern and the pre-modern, town and country, between historic and present time, is nothing out of the ordinary. This brief series of events at the beginning of Hannah Collins' *La Mina* sets up two tensions which recur throughout the work. The scrap dealers are residents of the permanent community of La Mina, working within its political economy and proprietorial about the spaces they've colonised within the community. The Romanian Gypsies are in this sense marginal to the Gypsies of La Mina; still living the ancient, nomadic life, and still regarded with contempt by the town dwelling property owners. Yet equally, the scrap guys are marginal to the main economy and culture of Barcelona. They work within the confines of La Mina, deal only with other Gypsies and their main technological asset is a carthorse.

The cart emerges from the underpass at a leisurely pace, already one can feel the languid heat of the morning pressing down and enveloping the community. Their pace seems

congruent with the heat, but radically at odds with the environment through which they are moving. Ringed by teaming motorways, a vast housing estate of 1960s modernist blocks, thousands of units in each, rises out of a concrete and asphalt field. This is the Gypsy community of La Mina on the edge of Barcelona. La Mina was built by the Franco regime as a typically 'modern' solution to the problem of housing the poor and the marginal in 1960s Spain. It was in this sense also a solution to the 'Gypsy problem', because Gypsies were the poorest and most marginal community in Spain at the time, though it would not have been articulated as such. Architecturally, it has the look of a particularly fascist solution, vast alienating modernist blocks built around huge rectangular plazas; a triumph of rational geometric design profoundly inimical to the development of any kind of organic street life. But of course, it wasn't just the fascists who built such estates; they became central to post-war social housing schemes across Europe, and plague its cities from Moscow to London. La Mina is merely one of many registers of the utopian impulse in architectural modernism gone wrong. Nor were the fascists the only ones who identified gypsy communities as a 'problem'. Nomadic cultures are, to understate the case, incompatible with modernity. There can no longer be any question of large numbers of people with a distinct culture and language travelling from place to place, following work or seasonal patterns of migration through developed modern societies. Nomadic cultures are just too at odds with capitalist modernity. Their general indifference to its most basic values: individual property rights, the self-regulating anxieties of linear time keeping, and perhaps most importantly their refusal to identify with and stay in any one particular place or community, make them problematic from the standpoint of governments and social systems grounded on ownership, enterprise and rigorous self-surveillance. This is borne out by the fact that governments throughout the developed world: in North America, Australia, and Central Europe as well as Spain, have sought to constrain, localise and assimilate nomadic peoples.

La Mina evokes the sense of a community and a culture that is neither nomadic nor wholly assimilated into the modern. It exists somewhere in between, an interstitial ghetto surrounded by motorways, symbolically (and perhaps actually) excluded from the rest of the city by the arteries of economic modernisation; but also by its own cultural solipsism, by its very refusal to assimilate, to submit its own conventions, customs and traditions to the great homogenising forces of the modern.

This complex five screen projection tells three distinct but nonetheless connected 'stories' or narratives over three days. Each narrative unfolds in linear time, but they are projected over the five screens so that they overlap, most of the time two of the narratives unfold simultaneously. This is an immensely complex and subtle narrative technique, which allows the viewer to register the specificities of each narrative (cultural, personal, aesthetic), while at the same time grasping the larger cultural context in which the narratives of others unfold. This seems central to Collins' project. She uses the languages of photography and cinema to construct what might be termed an 'anthropoetical' portrait of this community. We are offered shifting perspectives: sometimes the perspective of the observer, Collins herself, sometimes the perspective of the participants, a judge, a young boy, a man mourning his father. Similarly the camera shifts back and forth between the structural components of the community: its architecture, its judicial procedures, its internal economy; and the lives of individuals who iterate these various cultural forms through the narratives Collins constructs around them.

The shifting perspective is, it would seem, central to the poetics of the piece. Collins creates a kind of multidirectional dialogue which is based on the interplay of three 'authorial' perspectives: the Gypsies who are the authors of their own stories and their own dialogues, Collins herself who has filmed and edited these stories into one work, and the viewer who is offered a series of very detailed and intimate narratives that he or she must interpret from their own very limited knowledge of the situation and culture against which the stories unfold. The Gypsies involved in the project have been asked to represent themselves through a series of narratives, but there is no way of telling from either the narratives themselves or from Collins unobtrusive cinematography to what extent the stories are fictional and to what extent they are based on fact. In the end, it simply doesn't matter, because they are evidently intended to tell us a certain kind of truth about the experience of the people involved, but this is a truth they the audience must participate in verifying or legitimating through interpreting the work itself. Everything is left open, which means one must participate actively in order to understand.

Collins does not attempt a systematic analysis of the community of La Mina, still less a straightforward record of an anthropological exercise in participant observation. We are

offered a plurality of perspectives on different aspects of the culture; these views do not cohere into a logical analysis, nor do they add up to a vision of the whole. Yet at the same time they tell us a kind of fragmentary truth about life in this community. We sense the overwhelming alienation and confinement imposed by its architecture, the depressing lack of opportunity or diversion for its inhabitants; yet we also witness the power of its traditions of social cohesion, the redemptive possibilities of its music, and the strangely unexpected beauty of particular cultural practices, like caging wild birds in order to hear them sing. II

By staging the slightly frightening confrontation between the cart horse and the bus Collins alerts us to a trope running throughout *La Mina*; the tension between the modern and the pre-modern in Gypsy culture expressed in a variety of different forms as each of the narratives unfold. In the first narrative, the two guys driving the cart seem to represent a kind of dionysian chorus on the edges of the mainstream society. They enter La Mina from the outside, from the temporary shantytown of the more transitory, traditional gypsy culture they want to be rid of, and they circle it over the course of the narrative, gathering their stuff, taking their chances. They are members of the community but somehow on the outside, somehow aligned with an earlier or more primal sense of disorder or anarchy which the community of La Mina has apparently left behind. But of course, as both Hobbes and Nietzsche in their different ways have told us, we can never leave this primal impulse to disorder behind entirely; it is always threatening to break out: in children's games, in civil conflict, and in art¹ .

Collins models this tension over the first day by projecting structures of order on the left hand screens, while the travelling dionysian chorus are confined to the right. In effect, the narrative unfolds on the left hand side of the projection. Initially, we encounter images of the architecture; a vast homogenous banality of box-like dwellings stacked endlessly on top of each other, spreading out across the five screens like a sort of demonically expanding Gursky photograph. Collins' sensitivity to architecture is very refined. She finds in it the underlying structures of how we think about the spaces in which we live, and is somehow able to effect an immediate, almost visceral connection between the images she makes of buildings and the viewer's subjective experience of space. What emerges in her initial tour d'horizon of La Mina, and returns at the end of

the first section with the singing of the *Cante Hondo*, is the sense of the architecture of La Mina as a profoundly external and alienating structure. It is in a sense the authoritative presence of the external world, the world of Spanish or Catalan culture and politics which threatens both their political autonomy and their cultural integrity.

This is evoked with a sombre, aching beauty as night falls on the first day of the narrative. A wheelchair bound flamenco singer, Rafael, sings a *Cante Hondo* lament; a sad, solitary song which evinces the pain he feels at the loss of his mother with a directness and power that is both unsettling and moving at the same time. As he sings Collins projects images of the estate that reveal the underlying panopticism of the architecture². Like Bentham's ideal prison La Mina isolates families into discrete, isolated spaces. The essentially communal existence of nomadic peoples fosters a domestic architecture which allows several generations to live together at once. Density and isolation replace the organically communal growth of the shanty town or the temporary encampment. And in addition to this the sheer monumentality of the estate, its heavy, immobile, concrete permanence, constitutes a profound rupture with the community's nomadic traditions. Like Rafael in his wheelchair, the Gypsies of La Mina cannot go back to the way it was before.

Yet the narrative of the first day is not entirely devoted to the alienating effects of externally imposed structures. Within the framework of this static, incarcerating architecture, traditional cultural forms and practices continue to flourish and sustain the community. The survival of these traditional practices is of course central to the community's identity, and Collins' narrative shows us how this actually works. Images of a community patriarch, Tio Emilio, gradually segue into the film as a full blown narrative. He is a judge, what aboriginal communities might call an elder, who is often called upon to resolve civil or criminal disputes within the community. In this case, two young men have had a dispute over a car, and it appears that there was some minor violence or threatening behaviour. The operation of this 'court' is fascinating: spontaneous and popular and thoroughly pre-modern. It shows us how an ancient mechanism for resolving disputes between members of the community can flourish in the present, and also how this practice can be a kind of resistance (that something so spontaneous and transitory, but nonetheless important, could break out amidst the

monolithic architecture of La Mina is at least a symbolic kind of resistance to the colonisers' will).

Tio Emilio approaches the dispute very differently from a judge in the common or Roman law tradition would. He is evidently not the least interested in the rights or wrongs of the case, and takes it for granted that some measure of each is present on both sides. What he seems most concerned with is restoring balance and unity to the community by reconciling the young men, and more importantly their families, to each other. The fathers of the young men are asked to put their respective cases, suggesting it is really the families who are the subjects of this judicial procedure, not the individuals. Tio Emilio then speaks to the respective fathers and their families with a mixture of cajoling intimacy and subtle intimidation: it is a bravura performance. He succeeds in persuading them to reconcile, but he also threatens the boys with banishment if they fight again. Historically, banishment is the severest punishment of all in nomadic cultures, because to be banished meant the loss of everything: identity, family, and very likely life. It is hard to imagine this as a punishment anyone would take seriously in a Spanish or English court, yet here it remains a powerful deterrent to uncivil behaviour. This of course points up a major difference between dominant and marginal cultures; in the former the loss of one's culture is virtually inconceivable, and so plays little or no role in the framing of one's identity. However, in the latter, where the loss of culture is an ever present prospect, sustaining one's links to it takes on a much greater urgency, and more directly frames one's sense of self. In the end the purpose of the proceeding seems to be the health of the community, not the vindication of a moral or legal standard, and still less the upholding of an individual right. The narrative of this particular judicial proceeding ends in a successful resolution of the problem, though it is easy to see that this might not be the case in more extreme circumstances. Nonetheless it illustrates two important dimensions of the way this community sustains itself. First, that it has the internal cultural and political resources for sustaining its own civil society. Second, these kinds of resources allow it to resist assimilation; they are the living or functioning basis of the community's capacity for self-governance.

By intertwining these very complex narratives, Collins has given us a measured and it seems to me quite profound sense of the tensions that frame this community's existence.

She illustrates the nature of their incarceration in the alienating and panoptic architecture of La Mina; an incarceration which is all the more tragic for being to a significant degree self-imposed. Yet at the same time she is attentive to and able to celebrate their day to day strategies of resistance, some of which are extremely effective at stimulating pride and self-confidence in the community. All the while the cart horse and its drivers slowly circle the estate, like witnesses from a bygone era, a time when the entire community might literally have just slipped away into the night. III

The second section of this work opens in the country. Collins' camera again frames this new community with an examination of its architecture. This is a rural, more traditional Gypsy encampment; instead of vast modernist blocks we find a series of single story 'jabollas' spreading horizontally along a dirt track. The houses appear to be put together with waste materials salvaged from here and there. They have a transitory but nonetheless organic feel to them. Collins is here in familiar territory. She has photographed this kind of dwelling before, in Poland and in India. One section of the work *In the Course of Time* (1994) details a cluster of low, A-frame shacks, half dug into the ground and put together with bits of wood, tar paper, plastic and whatever else had come to hand. This is a difficult, complex image; rough, chaotic, evidence of hard, transitory life. Again, Collins uses architecture as a register of the subjectivity of those who build and inhabit them. These shacks are evidently used by hunters, or woodsmen, who appear to have a non-proprietary relation to the place they have chosen to inhabit. They are registers of an economy of marginality, places where the excluded, the damaged, the other are allowed to exist. Yet at the same time they have a kind of beauty, the sensuous detail of the black and white image is almost elegiac.

However, the images here are anything but elegiac. The rural Gypsy settlement contrasts sharply with the monumental urban architecture of La Mina, images of which continue to appear as Collins camera examines the rural settlement. The contrast between them highlights a distinction within the Gypsy community itself, which parallels or perhaps echoes the some of the divisions between the community of La Mina and the broader Catalan and Spanish cultures in which it exists. Life in La Mina would appear to be more urban, in many respects both more sophisticated and more alienating than life in the rural settlement. In the former, children play in the street, families are isolated from one

another in concrete boxes, personal histories seem much more tied up with the larger society. In the latter women and children move in and out of each others' homes easily, talking and sharing their day to day lives. A man openly discusses his worries over his son and the loss of his father, sharing his unhappiness with the head of another Gypsy community, and with his sister, who is (interestingly in this heavily patriarchal culture) the head of his own community. The implication is that despite its marginality and the profoundly self-protected, inward-looking perspective of Gypsy culture, it not one monolithic thing. Differences exist within it, and these are as important to understanding how it works as the defining commonalities.

The narrative of the second day contrasts these two communities in a series of subtle, languid images. The two communities meet and so in a certain sense solidify their differences at a marketplace, which appears to be on the edges of La Mina underneath one of the motorways that surrounds it. This is the point of encounter between two Gypsy cultures; a point at which trade occurs but at a more metaphorical level a point at which each community in a certain sense responds to and fulfils the lack of the other. To know itself each needs the difference of the other. The presence of these two communities mixing together under a flyover puts one in mind of Jeff Wall's *The Storyteller*, which links the marginalisation of another nomadic people to the history of modern painting, and modernism in general. There is however an important difference. Whereas Wall's work is primarily about representation³, Collins' uses the metaphorical potential of architecture to make an essentially anthropological point. Sequestered away under the motorway, the marketplace also becomes a place of otherness and marginality, almost literally nowhere. Yet at the same time it is also a place of cultural exchange and renewal, a place where the dialectics internal to Gypsy culture drive it forward, sustaining and renewing its vitality.

As the second day progresses Collins focuses increasingly on life in the rural Gypsy community. The main subject of the narrative is Nanin, a middle aged man whose son is in prison, and who seems to be in a state of more or less permanent mourning for his father. There is nothing dramatic about his unhappiness, but it would seem to be rendering him in some serious way unable to cope. His family and friends are obviously concerned about him, but perhaps also somewhat impatient with his unhappiness. They

want him to play the trumpet again, something he has apparently not done since the death of his father ten years ago. They tell him that he needs to play it, for himself, and for his son and for the community as a whole. The implication seems to be that music is therapeutic; it offers some sort of release or redemption to the individual, but it is also a way of sustaining the culture as a whole because it introduces new generations (in this case his son) to a defining cultural form. It links the generations together by preserving a cultural form and orienting the living away from the absolute loss of death towards the needs and aspirations of the living. At a certain point someone gives him a trumpet, while all around preparations seem to be made for some sort of party. They urge him to play, which he does quite beautifully; a melody made familiar by the Gypsy Kings, more upbeat than the Cante Hondo sung at the end of the previous day, but nonetheless cathartic for that. As he finishes his song his wife, and then his sister, throw their arms around him, a smile of genuine joy and relief animates his face. This marks the beginning of a bacchanalian celebration by the whole community, suggesting in some sense that the resolution of his unhappiness, however temporary, is ultimately something that must be accomplished communally, as if it were necessary to the restoration of the community's health. The contrast with the ending of the first day, and by extension the character of the two communities, could hardly be sharper. If Rafael's song is one of absolute loss sung out against the alienating and indifferent architecture of La Mina, in a certain sense the trumpeter's song initiates a celebratory return to his community. IV

The third day begins with the arresting image of birdcages hung along a deep red terracotta wall; at first they look a bit like constructivist paintings, but then a certain parallel with the box-like apartments of La Mina becomes inescapable. It is apparently common here to cage wild birds in order to enjoy their song; a practice which must resonate, consciously or unconsciously, of their own cultural condition. We are back in La Mina; the quiet repose inspired by the images of the birdcages gradually gives way to the increasingly intense activities of a dense urban community. The narrative of the final day revolves around preparations for a concert in the evening. The main character is a boy of about fourteen, who is out and about in the community during the day and then prepares for the concert in the evening. Over the course of the day, moving in and out of the boy's narrative, we encounter a large number of individuals. Some of them we've seen before, Tio Emilio, Rafael, the boy himself, but many of them are new, the man in the

bar who speaks to the boy, lots of women wearing gold jewellery, some men in a club, children playing in the plaza. There is a sense of the community unfolding before us in all its multiplicity; after the careful examination of architecture and cultural forms we are reminded that individual specificity is always in excess of our attempts to capture it in generalisation.

The boy's narrative is at root a story of cultural identity; of how this culture links together its past, present and future. The boy is shown listening to Tio Emilio recounting his life as an actor. He evidently had some success in the so-called 'spaghetti westerns' of Sergio Leone; one is shown on the television behind Tio Emilio as he speaks. The boy is clearly fascinated by Tio Emilio's account of his life: he is a figure of authority in the community, someone who commands respect as a wise elder but also someone who has had successes in the world outside. These kinds of stories are central to the oral tradition of the community, they teach new generations about the past, about how it was for their grandfathers and grandmothers, why they left, why they returned. After he leaves Tio Emilio the boy visits a video store, perhaps in search of a 'spaghetti western', but all he seems to find are Hollywood films. In a way this underlines the importance of the oral tradition, without the stories of the older generations La Mina's youth would have only American popular culture and its variants to draw upon.

As on the second day, music comes to the fore as an important part of what links the generations of La Mina together. After the birdcages we encounter a group of flamenco musicians playing or practicing with each other in one of the plazas of La Mina. The music is beautiful, up lifting, and we can see the pleasure on the faces of the musicians as they play. Strains of the melody float across the images in the projection, drawing them together. The camera pans around the square, catching from different angles a statue of Camaron, the most famous Gypsy flamenco singer of the 1970s and 1980s. Camaron is a cultural hero here. One can sense the extent of his influence in the hairstyles of the flamenco musicians preparing for the concert in the evening, who seem mostly to be sporting seventies style mullets. Ten years after his death, he is still the standard of what can be achieved in flamenco. This is underlined by a second conversation the boy has in a bar, this time with a clean shaven Nanin, who has come to the city for the concert. He tells the boy that Camaron was a god for his generation; a hero of their own culture who

was also admired and respected worldwide.

One has the sense that the boy has heard this before, but it nonetheless prepares him for the final cathartic moment of the day, the concert which brings the entire community together around one of its oldest, most vibrant traditions. At one level of course it is just like any other urban community enjoying a concert on a warm summer evening; a mixture of excitement, dressing up, socialising, and having a good time. But it is also the reiteration of an internal structure, a tradition that reaches back before the tower blocks and the static, urban existence that now defines the community of La Mina. The work ends with this reiteration of the community's ties to the pre-modern, not as an offering of hope or redemption or even nostalgia, but rather as an observation about how it endures. Yet at the same time, just as the concert is about to begin, Collins draws us back. We are not allowed to witness the climactic event, and the images are allowed to fade out against the returning image of Barcelona at night. This drawing back is a kind of intentional rupture, it reminds us that what we have witnessed is artifice; that we are not part of this community and that we have only been given the illusion that we might be able to get close to it or understand what is actually going on there. In the final frame, before the distant city reclaims the screen, an image of the cart horse fades gently out focus.

1 See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1949), ch. 13: Hobbes here offers his famous description of the 'state of nature' as a condition of the war of everyone against everyone, 'And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.' He believed all human society to be constantly threatened with the outbreak of civil disorder, and hence valued authority highly; Nietzsche, on the other hand, finds the source of all great art in the primal disorder of life; see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. R. Guess, trans. R. Spiers (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), secs, 6,7.

2 The term 'panopticism' comes from Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1979), pp. 195-225, esp. 201, 209; I do not of course suggest that La Mina is literally like a prison, rather that the effects of isolating families into discrete box-like units marks a radical break with pre-modern modes of existence, and in the process habituates people to a de-personalised and mechanistic form of power which is manifested not in symbols or individual persons but through the self-regulating behaviour of those subject to it.

