

Medium and Response, Stephan Günzel, 2015

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

Hannah Collins' works do not seem at first glance to come from a single artist, but rather from different originators or a group. The outward diversity and at the same time inner complexity of her works are nevertheless the result of a single basic principle: that of a response, as she herself puts it. While embodying both 'reply' and 'reaction', *response* also has echoes of *responsibility*. Collins' works are thus both a reply and a commitment: they are the *response* to events, facts or objects while taking *responsibility* for them at the same time. This is particularly conspicuous in her film project *La Mina* in which she films a Romani community to which outsiders rarely have access.

In view of this, the artist doesn't have to commit herself to a subject at all and certainly not to a medium or material – whose diversity seems to suggest multiple originators. In fact, Collins herself is the medium of what there is responsibility for and which a response is given to. On the contrary: a commitment to a technical medium like that of her favoured film or photography, or drawing as their predecessor medium, would conflict with the basic principle. In fact, 'mediums' (before medium/media was adopted for the book, cinema, television or the computer in the course of the 20th century) used to be human: those thought to have the ability to communicate beyond the here and now with people at a different location or time and mostly with the deceased in the hereafter with whom they established contact for the living. It is not for nothing that she gives an illustrated book of 2007 containing an overview of works the title of *Finding, Transmitting, Receiving*, which succinctly describes the procedure of any medium used for transmitting a message from a sender to a receiver.

But even if Collins' most recent work on hallucinogenic plants of the Amazon might harbour a spiritual dimension for viewers, her way of working is in fact more secular than today's media. For the latter are used for what human mediums were resorted to in former times: contacting the absent in space and time (as facilitated today by the telephone and social networks) or showing images suggestive of other-worldly spheres (as facilitated today by movies and computer games). On the other hand, through her works, Collins is the medium for entirely earthly, this-worldly things, although they could take place in the past – such as her interviews and images on Noah Purifoy's outdoor museum in the Joshua Tree National Park in California, produced specifically

for the exhibition at the Sprengel Museum. Even if this work has pronounced aspects of 'research', a by no means uncommon activity for artists today, the underlying principle is again responsibility. In this case, the responsibility also results in recorded responses: audio tracks of in some cases aged respondents who personally knew the artist that died a decade ago. So it is not so much a case of research as of investigations with an inherent purpose.

The most important medium of her work – this is demonstrated by the named locations where and on which her works are produced – is again not the chosen medium of photography, film or audio recording, but travel. Although Collins has her studio in Swiss Cottage in London, her works are almost always produced with inspiration from a location where she either settles for a certain period (e.g. Barcelona in the 1990s, where she still has a studio today), that she specifically visits (like the above-mentioned Joshua Tree National Park) or that she allows herself to be drawn into (like most recently the Amazon basin). In each case, travel is distinguished by the fact that it cannot be comprehended in terms of dwelling or holidaymaking. But even these concepts are only seemingly antithetical: in fact, holidays imply dwelling and the associated distinction between leisure and work. Travel, on the other hand, stands outside this dichotomy and, strictly speaking, doesn't start anywhere (the home or workplace) or go anywhere (place of relaxation). The point of departure for the journey is instead the quest(ion), and the destination is not the location travelled-to but Collins' elementary responses that, with the quest, form a sounding board for encounters bringing forth responses/responsibilities. (By the same token, the journey doesn't start in time either nor end on a certain date, but is ultimately endless and can, be interrupted.)

Collins herself attributes her *modus operandi* to some extent to the illness of her father who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, which would explain her travelling as the result of an inability to adapt. But whatever the personal and hence existential reasons, the journey is decisive as a structure that manifests itself in the work of art and not as the mainspring of an individual biography. In a certain sense, this is demonstrated by the fact that Collins takes to the road in her imagination before physically embarking on her first trip. This takes her relatively late in life to Istanbul in 1992 before she then sets off into Eastern Europe, newly opened to the West, where she visits her father's home territory in Poland in 1993 and 1994. Her imaginary travels were initiated early on by pictures of plants from Australia that she saw in her grandfather's house (and whose forebear was in turn a botanist with whom James Cook sailed to New Zealand).

Like all mediums, Collins is ultimately not entirely passive, even if responses call for a listening, but bring forth what they show – for which they accept responsibility. It is a profoundly ethical form of research and documentation that renders account of what has happened or is still happening and that was not yet visible or manifested. Rather than moralising, Collins allows the viewer to witness the action. A key motivation for her work is the seemingly simple question: *What does an artist do?* It is precisely this question that she puts posthumously to Purifoy.

However, on closer inspection, Collins' question is highly remarkable since it doesn't seek clarification of *what art is* – clarification that is still outstanding after at least five hundred years of asking. Nor does she ask what an *artist* is but what such a person *does*. This question is crucial, since the answers given so far are tautological and usually end up defining artists with the *activity of producing art*. Although Collins doesn't give any direct information on what (all) artists (always) do, but expresses in concrete terms what an artist does through her ethical position on the one hand and through her resultant responsibility towards events and materials on the other.

The philosophical dimension of this self-reflection thus consists in the performative feedback. And this is why what the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle propounds in his Ethics when he deems theory to be the highest form of practice does not apply to her. The very opposite holds for Collins for whom the highest form of theory is practice, answering the question of what an artist does through her constant action and not with a definition. In a certain sense, this lends expression to a cultural difference between her and the many continental artists working in the tradition known, sometimes confusingly, as 'free art'. By this are meant not the *artes liberales* comprising the general basic course of study, but an art devoid of purpose, i.e. something like what is known in French as *l'art pour l'art* or art for art's sake. Just as in Britain the concept of 'free art' is more likely to suggest free admission to public museums, it would be inconceivable for Collins to devote herself to an activity that brings forth art that has no function other than perhaps aesthetic edification (the definition of the *fine arts*) which has been superseded by art as a commodity and investment in the present day. Even if Collins' first artwork dates back to the heyday of the British Punk movement, her art doesn't aim solely to provoke or agitate (anti-)politically. The response is located in an Inbetween that is opened up by her work as an artist.

In detail, it is above all three openings of such a responsible Inbetween in which her work as an artist literally unfolds: at the same time they also mark stages in the work's development distinguished in parts by the dominance of a technique, although the stages are linked by threads rather than being separated by radical breaks. A work starts with photography that opens up an

Inbetween with the treatment of the materiality of photography and later also integrates the materiality of the photographed objects. At a later stage, these are film experiments that in different ways explore an Inbetween of both space and time. Her current work, finally, is distinguished by a search for clues that applies firstly to the botanical world in its relation to human use and secondly also to her work as an artist.

Structurally, her work is rare in contemporary art in revealing a congruence of form and content without the latter being 'empty'. In a certain sense as a commentary on her own work, she photographed the reconstruction of the pavilion of Bauhaus architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, built for the 1929 International Expo, during her stay in Barcelona. The peculiarity of this and his other architectural designs is the calling-into-question of a millennium-old architectural dogma according to which a building's wall separates an interior from an exterior and which constitutes so-to-speak the ultimate goal and primary purpose of building construction. In Mies' buildings, the partitions essential for this become the linking elements. The interior is no longer separated from the exterior, but the two merge or become interchanged in the light of the experience that projecting roofs create a protective room-like space outside the building while the use of glass as a material for the walls contributes to a sense of being outdoors while indoors. Collins' 2003 pictures of the Barcelona pavilion, entitled *Mies Pavilion*, focus not like other architecture photography on the structure as a whole but on the separating elements. These no longer have a separating function but establish connections and as such are themselves *spaces in between* where content and form become one. Collins thus ultimately not only supplies a commentary on her own work but also shows where the core of the overworked concept of 'form follows function' lies.

1. *Photography: material and metonymy*

Collins' early works consist mainly of photography, although the term in no way captures the specific quality of her work. These are anything but 'light drawings' (photo- = light, -graphy = drawing), but genuine 'material images'. Of course, like all analogue camera photography, they come about optically through the transmission of reflected light through the lens onto the negative, but the work of the photographer only starts here. In sometimes 'monumental' exposures of the positive, the pictures are enlarged back to almost the original size of the original light-reflecting objects. The supposed lightness and luminosity of photography is transformed here into a material whose heaviness is more effort than weight. Despite the oppressive subjects, the black & white renditions of the pictures do not weigh down the viewer but lend detail to the subjects: the gravestones of the Jewish cemetery in Poland, the house façades in Istanbul, the road to Auschwitz – they are *there*. In keeping with Collins' position, their presence is not intrusive but takes responsibility for itself.

What they show are metonymic operations revealing parts of a whole that they represent – with the peculiarity, however, that the whole for which they stand (*pars pro toto*) cannot be seen. This stylistic device differs from metaphor, which refers to something entirely different for representation; and from synecdoche, which shifts meanings into different semantic contexts. Collins thus draws attention to a way of dealing with the unrepresentability of the Holocaust and with the two-fold ban on images: it is neither possible to picture nor symbolise the genocide perpetrated on the Jews. However, photographs can share in it, or rather they can testify *that* the genocide took place and – as shown by Collins' picture *The Road to Auschwitz* of 1996 – *that* the place of the killing *exists*. Showing the route of a road to Auschwitz is thus not solely a reference to the 'banality of evil', as the philosopher Hannah Arendt called the logistics of death, or to an infrastructural prerequisite, but a partial representation of the immeasurable whole that is not a whole but in fact signifies a breakdown of humanity.

Having studied the life of Romani in the surrounding counter-society three years earlier, Collins finally resumes her film work on *Current History* in 2004 by travelling to Central Russia to the city of Nizhny Novgorod where she buys old photographs of strangers in a shop. The purchase of these pictures coincides with the rediscovery of a drawing from her childhood while clearing the house of her mother who died in the same year. This picture shows Collins in the company of a ghost. Even if she has no memory of the context of this snapshot, the resultant constellation says something about the nature of photography: it shows ghosts – living people who are dead but

immortalised in photographs. The undead of photography populate a between-realm which Collins accepts through the appropriation and exhibition of the pictures and which she responds to and accepts responsibility for at the same time.

2. *Film: space and time*

The titles of her large-format photographs already suggest what Collins elaborates on in her film work. The sub- and main title of many of her photographs is 'In the Course of Time' and expounds a far-reaching paradox of photography, which as a technical medium also has the 'ghost-forming' ability to extract a moment from the flow of time – as well as, and necessarily, a chunk of space. But photography also maintains inseparable ties with the moving picture, i.e. film, as the latter is composed of stills, of single images that when viewed together synthesise the illusion of experienced time. 'Time' also of course refers to time in the sense of 'history'.

Photography and subsequently film also have a paradoxical relationship with history since the moment or continuum that they capture that no longer exists although they preserve the past that would otherwise be lost for ever. There exists a dual unreality of the medium that seemingly guarantees the link with reality. Not in the sense of the manipulation or stage-managing of reality, but in the sense of facilitating a mediated perception of the otherwise imperceptible, which is the past in the present and the present in the past *per se*.

Collins' film installation *La Mina* – named after the settlement concerned in Sant Adria Besos in Catalonia, which is known for its modernist and inhumane high-rises of the Franco era – consists of five monitors showing the life of Romani in Spain's northeast from different angles and at overlapping times. In terms of content, the project again demonstrates Collins' ethical position as one of *responsibility* that attempts to enable the film's viewers to understand the basic principles of community life – or rather the differences from a surrounding society that is to a large extent unable to grasp the rules governing jurisdiction or property. To this extent, the film documents not the understanding, but again focuses – paradigmatically for Collins – on the Inbetween of the difference existing between Spanish society and the forcibly sedentary Romani community. It also takes this contrast a step further by highlighting the Inbetween of the sedentary Romani and those still living nomadically who, at the beginning of the film, meet the community living near Barcelona and initiate a discussion on how to deal with those still on the move.

The form of the film resonates with the content in so far as it has a mode of presentation positively spectacular for the date of its production, if the term 'spectacular' weren't wholly

inappropriate to Collins' work. In 2001, however, it was anything but easy for independent filmmakers to synchronise such a large number of sequences. Technically, Collins implements something that can be considered one of the milestones of early narrative cinema: so-called parallel montage. While this is still used in feature films mainly to show spatially separate and periodically independent strands of the plot alternately *in succession* in order to bring them together at the end, Collins uses the actual and *simultaneous* parallelisation of points of view of both one and the same action and of different events in order to have them disintegrate – or, to be more precise, to leave the Inbetween open. The effect is by no means the expected distancing of the viewers for whom such deconstructed action would no longer be comprehensible, but, on the contrary, their induction into it. Collins thus undermines the essence of the documentary image that binds viewers not theatrically by means of a self-contained narrative, but 'admits' them via its openness. Contributory to this are the jump cuts absolutely outlawed in feature film editing because they destroy the illusion of continuity. Yet because they 'jump' in *La Mina* not in the individual sequence, but only in the overall context of sequences, the film doesn't unsettle the viewer at any point.

Again, Collins' work stands out not because of its artistic formalism for its own sake, but because of its congruence of content and form. This experiences its barely surpassable culmination in *Solitude and Company* in 2008. At first sight, it appears to be purely an art film in which the film sequences are dictated by the external conditions of the film material: in two successive sequences, the interior of an empty factory shop, in *La Tossée* in Roubaix, France on the border with Belgium, is shown from a static position for a period of 24 hours and then with the camera tracking along the length of the building. Both the frequency of the individual shots in the first case and the speed of the camera in the second are determined by the length of the reels of film employed, which are sufficient for 60 minutes when shown at normal speed and which were fully exposed without interruption.

Again, in the interests of documentary cinema, Collins reverses the organisational approach of narrative cinema: while the latter combines the moving with the static viewpoint in continuity montage to bring about the coherence of narrative space and narrative time, space and time diverge in two respects. First directly due to the sequencing of spatial shot and temporal shot, and then also indirectly in that the latter was taken from a static position while the former was shot in motion. Collins demonstrates visually what physical theories of relativity wish to say: that space is always comprehended in time and time in space. The formal conditions effective here are again

intimately related to a content that is communicated here with sound recordings of the narrated dreams of local Algerian migrants who have in fact never seen the inside of the factory which has been closed since they arrived in France. Just as the wishes and fantasies expressed in them do not concur with reality, so the separation of space (time) and time (space) is something imaginary mediated by Collins through the medium of film.

3. The quest: clues and nature

In Collins' later works, she again uses the still camera, a tool that she never abandons although she has subjected it in the meantime to an appraisal as a means of truth. In various urban shots taken in London, Lisbon, Barcelona again, Paris and Madrid from 1998 to 2008, we see roofscapes beneath surreal colours of the sky that clearly show the signs of image post-processing – its false colours. For Collins herself, the pictures, which she calls *True Stories*, are the opening scenes of possible films and thus only true in relation to the fiction of the film for which the locations are only ever sets. In keeping with postmodern photography, this poses problems in that the picture's referential value becomes (has become) doubtful. But rather than losing herself in the game of its revocation, Collins again seeks to regain it by embarking on the search for *what remains* and *where it comes from*.

In this way, she discovers for herself the things of nature and equally the nature of things. A staging post is her visits to Sigmund Freud's Hampstead home where he lived and died in exile and which is near Collins' studio. In the interior, she is interested most in the archaeological replicas that Freud not only collected but also used as therapeutic tools in Vienna to encourage his patients to speak, i.e. to start their narrative and then to arrive at the reasons for their problems and conditions. Psychoanalysis is in itself a search for clues and proceeds in its method 'archaeologically', which is why antiques as objects of the past, irrespective of their specific significance, have a semantic equivalence to the deeper strata of the soul explored in the therapy process. For Collins, the analogy goes even further and concerns the medium of photography. This time, however, not as a material, but as a path of dissemination. Just as mechanical reproductions disseminate content worldwide, so were the miniatures of ancient sculptures a means of making these sculptures universally known and available.

But she is also interested in something else about Freud: in the night of 9 to 10 March 1898, Freud has a dream that will become known from his accounts as the 'dream of the botanical monograph'. The entirely positive dream, which can also be interpreted as a reference to his

patient 'Flora' or to Freud's own 'maturation' or 'flowering', is concerned with an undefined plant contained in the imaginary book seen the previous day in a shop window. The plant exists not only as an illustration, but also as itself in dried form in the book in the manner of a *herbarium*. Concurring with Freud's researchers, Collins identifies the leaves as those of the coca plant (lat. *Erythroxylum coca*), whose effects Freud and some of his contemporaries appreciated.

Collins' visit to Freud's house also becomes a farther-reaching search for clues that leads her to the plant's place of origin in South America. Even if she subjects herself there to a drug experiment with the ayahuasca brew derived from yagé plants, she is concerned not so much with the hallucinatory experience as with investigating the relationship between the body and the plant and also between the mind and nature. In addition to Freud as the inspiration for the trip, she is guided by various books on plants and above all by Richard Evans Schultes' *Hallucinogenic Plants* dating back to 1976, a cult book of the psychedelic age. Like Collins, Schultes, who was himself in charge of a herbarium at Harvard University, was interested not so much in the 'pleasure factor' induced by the plant, but in its immediate effect on the body where the distinction between the plant and the body in the intoxication experience is overcome and the person can experience him- or herself (again) as nature. Like Schultes, who is considered the founder of ethnobotany, Collins wants to study indigenous peoples' knowledge of all manner of plants before it vanishes along with these peoples.

An unusual parallel, though no longer surprising in view of Collins' approach, exists between her Fertile Forest project from the south of Colombia, which Collins carried out specifically for the exhibition in the Sprengel Museum and a commission for the celebrated Catalanian chef Ferran Adrià in 2011. In his thoroughly experimental and molecular cuisine, a huge range of foods are used in the preparation of meals that puts the relationship between humanity and nature to the test: what makes the 'feast' 'fragile' is not only that the unusual is brought to the table, but that also Collins shows the products before their transformation by the chef. For this, she travels to the places of origin of the wasabi (Japanese horseradish) and nori (seaweed) in Japan, Stenorhynchus crabs in Galicia and anemones in Cádiz. What is striking about her photography is that it shows the foods in their environments as things that have already been 'served', i.e. what nature has given without the pictures 'humanising' their objects. The characteristic pallor of Collins' colour photographs – that strangely match the false colours of the townscapes – are also at variance with the glossy aesthetic of food photography. The latter not only tends to focus on the served final product, but also, in its theatrical presentation and lighting, elevates the food into

an almost supernatural state. As a preliminary to this, Collins captured shelves and frozen food counters containing tablets and vegetables in pictures entitled *Supermarket* in 2004 – and once again the Inbetween comes to the fore. Here it is the intermediate zone of the retailing of foods that are neither in their place of origin in nature nor at home on the table; or, in the case of medicines, that intermediate zone of hybrid products of pharmacological knowledge that has cancelled its ties with nature without ever being able to leave it behind.

Collins' current project on Noah Purifoy, finally, finds its predecessor in another search for clues – *The Road to Mvezo* of 2010 in which she seeks the place of Nelson Mandela's birth in the former province of Transkei in South Africa's southeast. This is where she not only visits the memorial erected there, but also Mthatha, the place where he spent his youth. The pictures that she brings back could hardly be more distressing, as they show Mthatha as a place that has evidently been abandoned and documents its own abandonment as such (its only legacy being a crooked bookcase in an open house); while at Mvezo is a structure that for its part houses a portrait of Mandela. The current work on Purifoy shows initial points of contact with that on Mandela in that both played a leading role in the struggle of black Africans and black Americans for equal rights. However, when Mandela was elected President of South Africa in 1994, Purifoy had shifted the focus of his work to the Mojave Desert after being the foremost artist of the Watts Riots of 1965 – which happened a year after the sentencing of Nelson Mandela to life imprisonment – and in the process of becoming famous due to his association with the Black Panther movement founded a year later.

The challenge that Purifoy poses for Collins is the fleetingness of his art that consists not of works but of an activity. There is a huge temptation to regard his inheritance, i.e. what is managed today by the Noah Purifoy Foundation in Joshua Tree, as the artist's work. These are installations with objects in their discovered state, which puts Purifoy in the long tradition of work with *objets trouvés* that he combines as assemblages with the inhospitable desert environment. But the sculptures and structures are merely the results of an activity, and it is this that Collins is concerned with in her basic question of 'what an artist does'. So she doesn't just document the shacks, readymades and garbage installations on Purifoy's property. She also asks his still living friends and fellow witnesses about his activity resulting from the protest culture of the West Coast so that she can record the replies and make them available to posterity.

It may be that Collins will never be able to give a definitive answer to the question of what an artist does. But in her affinity to the American artist she has reiterated her position on what an

artist should do: her art must not be irresponsible in order to justify her work as an artist. So Noah Purifoy's motto is certainly applicable to Hannah Collins as a responsive artist: 'I do not wish to be an artist. I only wish that art enables me to be.'