

Contained Experience

The Films of Hannah Collins

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CARLES GUERRA: I would like to begin by remembering the process that led you to produce film and video installation work. I know your large photographic works were already assimilating installation work as readymade genre, and also had a painterly aspect...

HANNAH COLLINS: The relationship between what you produce and how you construct it can be immensely variable unless you are a very straightforward artist in a particular medium. I started out as a painter, and later began making photographic works with objects. I didn't start with photographic works. So I suppose I was more like a sculptor because I'd always worked with space essentially – physical space. So the question is which physical space? Where is the physical space exactly? Is it an abstract physical space, is it tied to a particular place? Is it tied to a particular time? Is that time critical? Those are the kind of questions I was asking when I began making photographic works, which were reconstructions of archive photographs. The titles of the photographic works, for instance *In the Course of Time*, *Signs of Life* and many others were all titles from German films. I've always had a kind of a relationship with film.

C.G. Your photographic work always had a heavy investment in the past.

H.C. When I came to Spain I noticed that people don't talk about the past. Whereas in England they talk continuously about the past and they talk about it in quite a documentary way, particularly about the Second World War, which affected my family and many other families profoundly. So the effect of the past and how it's represented in the present is something that in my life has been a key issue. In Spain, I suppose that the interesting thing about the past was that it was actually well represented through films like *The Spirit of the Beehive* (Víctor Erice, 1973) or *Los Tarantos* (Rovira Beleta, 1963).

C.G. So your very first work for film is the video installation La Mina?

H.C. I made an earlier film about Bulgarian immigrants in Barcelona that was about 8 minutes long, a very simple film shot on Super 16 with a woman and her daughter who lived in Barcelona. It's a very sad film and it was made about five years after I came to Barcelona.

C.G. What else did you do before the video installation about La Mina? How do you remember your first contact with film production?

H.C. La Mina was the first time I tried to find a way to think in time and describe something altogether. Something I really like about film is that it's like a complete object in time, with a beginning, an end and the middle. I ran a seminar with a British film critic once that was about the beginning and ending of films. For two days we just watched the first five minutes of films. If you look at John Ford's films you know the first five minutes tell you the whole film actually. I quite like that feeling that you can contain something. My photographic works have something of that feeling. They are quite still and silent and long. And there's a lot of time implicated in them.

C.G. What was the reason to go to the area of La Mina – at the time, one of the most deprived areas of Barcelona – to make your first important work on film? You knew you were going to be confronted not just with space, but also with people deeply stigmatized, just because they were living on the fringes of the city.

H.C. Yes, I suppose that until then I was involved more with other places than with other people. My photographic works were more successful when they were like empty stages. Working in film is more complicated than other art forms, because everything is contained finally in such a short period of time. I lived in the bottom part of Ensanche in Barcelona that is the area of the “mayoristas”¹ and the gypsies of Barcelona buy and sell clothing there a lot. One of the things that interested me was that the gypsies never looked at me. That was the first time that I had actually lived somewhere where there was a population of people with whom I had no contact. I started to wonder about how one society could be constructed within another society. Obviously from the gypsies' point of view I am excluded in a very powerful way, so it's not only about me excluding them, it's also about them

excluding me. I wasn't interested in classic documentary approaches. What was important was that I took my physical body to their territory, placing myself there at their disposal. This was a very vulnerable thing to do because I am an individual and that's a very strong community. I couldn't go into any houses, I could only be in public places. It's very interesting how people who have never been represented on film will negotiate their relationship with the camera. And because the plate camera is slow, you have no real control of what's in front of it. You can only set up. After nine months I was quite fed up because I couldn't represent what I was thinking about. So I asked a collector if he could help me make film. He agreed and suddenly I had the kind of challenge that I had never been set before, working with 35mm film and a crew.

C.G. Can you talk about the nature of that structure? Is there a particular sense of time or is there any sense of ritualised life? How do the gypsies occupy this urban modern space in one extreme of the city of Barcelona?

H.C. One of the things I knew about gypsy culture was that the rituals to maintain that culture are really powerful and have an amazing ability to adapt to space. They have their own law court and it took me a long time to understand what that meant. But it's just as structured and as rigid as our law courts. It takes place in open air always so anyone can join, essentially in the same way we go to a law court. If somebody murdered somebody in Spanish or British society there's a law court, there's a judge, there's a jury. In gypsy society the two parties opposing one another stand in a particular way. The gypsy mediator who is somebody older and respected in the community enters that space in a very formal way, using a "bastón"² He hears both sides of the argument. The point where it's different is that the conclusion is a negotiation. What interested me is how the space and the ritual interact.

C.G. Somehow you were asking gypsies to enter into the cinematic time. How did you negotiate that?

H.C. Well, I did it at different levels. I didn't want to make a simple piece of work. I could have filmed an event or I could have filmed a story or a relationship, but it wouldn't have really been what I wanted to do. I wanted to do this very ambitious thing of making a whole

picture of something. And what was excluded from that picture was only a kind of falling off the edges. I wanted to provide a real powerful challenge to that community to be represented. It left me less room for my own mistakes, my own inevitable mistakes. If I said OK, let's try to film as much of your society as it is possible for us to film, it's better than me saying: let's try to film a death, a wedding and three judgment courts.

C.G. It's a brilliant work but you are only representing their inner rhythms, their proper space, their own culture and not pointing at the possible conflicts with their environment or their closely related neighbors. You are avoiding a dialectical presentation of the actual state of affairs.

H.C. That's true, but it was the first film work I did, and I think it was beyond the scope. The more conflict I allowed in, the less possibility of making the work. I accepted a compromise. We were filming in 35mm which is essentially immobile. Action can only take place in a structure and that structure is fairly immobile. You can't move a 35mm camera around very quickly, and you can't film without planning. You have to focus, you have to place the camera. That was part of the idea. That certain things like, for instance, the camera is always underneath people, never on top. The only shots from above are structural shots to show where things are. I determined some rules that I would stick to and that was one of them. It was such a difficult thing to do in the first place. Yes, the work can be criticized for the reasons you state. I do agree because it gives a kind of idealistic portrait of something.

C.G. I just mentioned that because you were producing that work at a time when Barcelona was undergoing a strong urban development. La Mina was a real border, mainly during the period around the '92 Olympic Games.

H.C. Between 1992 and 2000, la Mina felt a long way out of Barcelona, and you got there by an old decrepit road that took you there from the middle of the city. Something really interesting about it was that there was a sort of allowed space around the city that has now disappeared. It was space waiting to be negotiated. One of the first things I filmed at the beginning of that piece was the gypsies using this space – which is beside the highway – to keep horses.

C.G. That's true, there was a strong notion of otherness attached to the gypsies, for decades.

H.C. That's why they were willing to be filmed. They felt they needed to be represented for the first time. Gypsies recognized that they needed some other kind of representation. Their method is to choose a person with a task from the outside and then trust that person. That's how they operate. In some way I became a mediator. It's usually done through individuals, not through groups. The first thing we see in the film concerns some Eastern European gypsies who have camped on this urban wasteland where they keep horses. And it's actually La Mina gypsies discussing how to get rid of these Eastern European gypsies.

C.G. So the conflict was among gypsies and within their own community?

H.C. Spanish gypsy culture has been developing for a long time and slightly separately from the rest of European gypsy culture. Other European gypsies speak Romani, and have recognized the Holocaust more forcefully than Spanish gypsy culture, although of course now the Holocaust is recognised and remembered. One of the things that was completely astounding to me once I started filming was that Spanish gypsies suffered terribly under the "dictadura" and I had never heard a single story about what had actually happened until they started talking to me. There was no recognition of it. I certainly didn't know about it.

C.G. Once you become a mediator, especially with that community which in Spain had a somewhat subaltern status, you acknowledge they are considered different. Did they try to ask you what kind of specific representation you would work out in order to make this film?

H.C. I didn't want to be only a negotiator, so maybe the question is: how could I make this work as an artist and negotiate the right space to make it? Also some things that I thought about beforehand – like pleasure – I think were important to include. It can't just be difficult or harsh. It was important that I had other elements to work with, like music for instance.

C.G. You don't want this work to have a political edge?

H.C. The act of making in art is always in some way political but it is essentially an art form, like a play or poetry. More like poetry than anything else, actually. It has a form and that

form also needs space. That's the difficulty that I faced – the form and what I was trying to picture needed to be negotiated together. And that's the central point of the work.

C.G. I would like to discuss Parallel because I feel there is a continuity of certain issues. For instance you are again representing people who find themselves in a transitional situation.

H.C. It is a work in three projections. It happens in three co-existing spaces – physical, mental and time spaces. That work is much more of an overlay. La Mina has a beginning and an end and it is structured. I had a lot of difficulty editing La Mina and finding a form for it. When it came to Parallel I sort of predicated the form. I decided what form it would take before I made the work. It was about overlays, about memory. The fact that it was made with African migrants coming to Europe is not at all coincidental. This is the point but it is also within another series of issues that have to do with how time is negotiated in our minds. It's a very crucial relation to social and political issues as well. How, for example, is Iraq negotiated in time? How do we renegotiate the last ten years? How do we think about it? Why is it that way? What sort of denying takes place? What sort of acceptance? In order to think about that I decided to work with three people, with very different experiences and with a certain amount in common. And it turned out that of the most recent group of people coming to Europe, perhaps African migrants might have the most different experience in a way. How do you transpose that level of difference physically when you find yourself in another place? It's also a key question of globalisation as well. What happens when someone comes from a radically different situation and they find themselves by chance or by life forces in a different place? To what extent are they physically in that place? To what extent does their memory dominate their present? How can that be pictured? Visually, what could it be?

C.G. Somehow by working in La Mina and then doing this piece called Parallel you have traveled from location to dislocation.

H.C. With Parallel I was originally going to focus on Israel, because Israel is the land of migrants and in a way the focus of Middle- Eastern conflict. Then I met a guy from Cameroon who became the first protagonist in the work. He dictated the form of the work

because he was the first person and had his own ideas about how he wanted to be represented. That dictated how the rest of the work went.

C.G. Let's speak about the way you conceive the re-enactment of past events in your work. The feeling of documentary gets somehow eroded or jeopardised because very soon it becomes fiction.

H.C. I wanted to challenge the nature of documentary. That was certainly part of it. My aim was to remain truthful to experience but to give the participants of the work liberty to describe their experiences. The thing about documentary is that it has a series of formal constraints. Documentary is essentially a description of a situation that is truthful and faithful to that situation. So from my point of view I fulfilled that requirement in this work. And the constraints for how that was described came from the people in the work – Dewa the Cameroonian migrant has a very classic story. He stole away on a boat, survived for 21 days with two litres of water and has a very classic migrant story. He has a tremendous amount of strength and intelligence and he dictated how he wanted to describe his own situation. So he worked with an actor and they improvised until he found a way of doing it within his current situation. He was living in the park in Madrid and the re-enactments took place in the park. The actions didn't take place in the theatre or in a recording studio.

C.G. By introducing a fiction in such a real space, like a park in Madrid, you are actually documenting something that's invisible in a more powerful way. Could you not show that by other means?

H.C. Well, I wanted to avoid voice-over. But I found that it was actually quite difficult to totally avoid it because the protagonists' ability to describe their situation in completely other terms, in other words through their body, through their relationship with somebody else, was limited by their experience. So there is in fact some voice-over in Parallel. For instance there's a scene of Dewa with his father where he works out his relationship with him. One of the reasons that he left Cameroon was that his mother died. His father was very strict and didn't want him to play football and he was a Cameroonian football player playing professionally from his local town. So he worked with another homeless person living in the

park who helped him to reenact a scene with his father. A complex set of negotiations took place to allow that to happen. The other way he could have done it would have been simply to describe it. To say: "Ok, I had a conflict with my father, this is what happened". In a way I think he got a lot of release out of re-enacting what had actually happened. That sets it closer to theatre.

C.G. I would consider that kind of re-enactment to be a part of contemporary documentary practice. Sometimes you need a performative trick in order to make visible something you know exists but there is no image or real object to sustain the representation. H.C. After *La Mina* I had a kind of structure that I could work with. I work with an actor, Andrew Saint Clair. During preparation for shooting he works by physically acting out experiences with people. He has a classical theatre training so it becomes part of the work. That was one thing that I decided upon in the very beginning. If there were situations that needed re-living then he would assist the person to do that. That became part of the script. The other thing about it is that the work is scripted. That's a more major conflict with documentary practices.

C.G. It is not yet fiction though.

H.C. Well, it is scripted because in order to make a film you need to make a script. Otherwise you are stuck in the territory of capturing images which is exactly what I want to avoid. In other words: "Oh, let's film that or that's interesting, what's happening over there, let's do that". I specifically wanted to avoid this kind of TV news reporting so I have set up a structure that does not permit it.

C.G. When watching *Parallel* I had the feeling that this story, the one from the Cameroonian man, acquires some pivotal role in the whole film.

H.C. The people that I am talking to are survivors, people who have managed to be where they are. I also decided to work with people between the age of around 28 and 35, they are all in that age group. So they all have a different sort of potential. I was 28 when I went through the experience of moving from one country to another and so it's within my personal experience to some extent. I suppose I always work from my own experience.

C.G. As you are unfolding your work I feel there is a certain sense of remoteness, far away spaces that come close to you through the film practice. This brings us on to Current History which was actually filmed in Russia.

H.C. The work in Russia was to some extent an attempt to resolve what I understood about this huge, distant place. The parents' generation was there when Soviet Russia was developing, and for a time that was a major pivot on the World. When that collapsed, in a way it was an opportunity for me to resolve how I understood the East of Europe to really be. Parallel has a general feeling about it. Whereas the aim of Current History was highly specific and it had to do with going to a small, relatively inaccessible place – which is relatively free from immediate change. Nijzni Novgorod, where I shot the city parts of Current History was a closed city for 70 years. Beshencevo, the village where I shot the majority of the scenes was relatively distant from Moscow's influence. Anyway, somebody invited me to their house and that allowed me a completely powerful kind of access. The person that I worked with needed to describe his own background. He lives in Paris now and he is someone who comes from a Russian intellectual background. It turned out not to be my own drive to make a piece of work but his.

C.G. The last thing you said is quite interesting. Because you would think that your work might have an aesthetic potential in contemplation, it might have a political potential sometimes, but now you've actually said that the film is also like an object that helps you to elaborate a particular situation. You are always filming people who are caught in such transitional situations, in such unstable situations.

H.C. Well, I'm not sure that the people that take part in Current History want a more comprehensive understanding of their lives! I wanted to make a film about several different things – about weather – cold winter, a white place where life is conditioned by weather. It also allowed me to make work that was about the exterior and the interior in a very polarized way.

C.G. There's always the coziness of the interiors and the vastness of Russian exteriors.

H.C. The village is a sort of powerful mental unit within Russian society. There was a series of stories by Isaak Babel that I started to read and what's interesting about them is that they are two or three pages long, incredibly short stories. They are very contained, very specific, very powerful descriptions of situations. They are almost like the scene of a script, each one in a very kind of clear way. They tell you about a series of events but they do it in a multi-layered kind of way. I wanted to get that richness into the work. I had the Babel stories, I was in a village and I had a family I could work with.

C.G. Now we should tackle some issues that are common to the three pieces or even aspects of the work that do not relate to film. When you started producing your big prints it was also the time when Jeff Wall was emerging, it was some kind of a parallel practice to yours. How do you see that moment retrospectively?

H.C. At the time my own discoveries were maybe more allied to sculpture. Like the first photographs I made with these big cardboard boxes that I got from the street. I made these invented spaces that were not possible in the real. So the photograph was sort of an event; it was a sort of interesting human scale. I think the illusion of somebody like Jeff Wall is very intelligent.

C.G. But he brought into photography a very powerful sense of cinematic production.

H.C. Yes, but he did that later, actually in the beginning he was setting things up. Although I do think Jeff Wall has done some incredibly powerful poetic work. The image with the light bulbs, "After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue" (1999–2000), is a fantastic work.

C.G. Your work appeared on a parallel track to Jeff Wall's practice but it looked at least to me as a little bit slacker, loose. Wall's pictures contained action whereas yours were more like the scenery for a possible action.

H.C. I'm more interested in a poetic possibility and in that sense it probably links historically more to Artaud's poetry or to films of Buñuel. I recently saw Buñuel's film made in México *Los olvidados* (1950). That was a film that for me epitomized some of the kind of

things that I wanted to describe, concerned with fragile human relationships. And it's not described plastically in Jeff Wall. His practice is theatrical at that level and mine has never been that. I don't re-invent a relationship or place – I find and describe the situation or place sometimes in different terms.

C.G. This could be the connection between Current History and some works by Chantal Ackerman. I'm particularly thinking of D'Est (1993). At some point there's a similar climate, a similar weather. In both films there are hardly any relationships between people.

H.C. Yes, slow I would say. Look at the way that Chantal Ackerman filmed the Eastern Block, which was in a Stasi vehicle. She's a filmmaker and she understands film and the power of film to sort of answer back. There's a multiplicity about D'Est that I really like. When I made La Mina I had never edited something on multi-screens before but I worked with a fantastic editor and we found a way to do it.

C.G. One difference we could try to work out is the one between those big photographs you produced in the eighties and your current filmic practice. The big photographs allow you to enter the space, because they were hung in a way that they almost touched the floor. The photographic space and the spectators' space are shared. The film, I don't know why, feels like it's still creating a different time from the one of the spectator. So it doesn't really allow the same experiences you allowed with the big tableau-like photographic works.

H.C. I think it's true. Film is essentially dynamic. Current History achieves this different sense of time quite a bit as the two images meet in the middle, creating another kind of imaginary space. What happens between those two images creates a kind of ambiguous place all the time throughout the work.

C.G. The images of Current History always refer to the same places. The one on the right is always the interior and the one on the left is always the exterior, isn't it?

H.C. The left screen is always the city and the right always the village, so one could think about this as the exterior and the interior. There is also a kind of common space. I think of it as kind of memory space, a sort of compressed space of many different times. It's very similar

to the big photographic works where what you are actually looking at is beyond the edges of the picture. You know the picture represents other experiences. That's why it has that bit of silent slow feeling, partly due to the way it is made. There is also another important period of time between the taking of the photograph and the printing of the work – this unfolds into a long period of time because the big prints take days to print. I had to be in the dark for a day. So during that day I could re-negotiate; some trees would become darker, a road greyer, a person less clear; and a lot of very precise kind of distinctions take place. So you are talking about many different times contained in one image. I think that's also true in Current History, that you have these imagined times – you know they are there, but you don't see them.

C.G. But it could also be true of Parallel because of the overlapping of time zones, past time and present time.

H.C. It's more theatrical and overlaid. With Parallel the editing is between experiences. So Dewa had to imagine himself to be in the bottom of that boat. He then had to think of what his mental state had been at the time he was in this imagined place and to re-live it as an action. So on camera, what I tried to create was some kind of empathy that allowed you to be there with him at that time. But at the same time it was a harsh experience because you don't cut to when he got out of the boat, to the continuation of the imagined experience. You cut to the present, whatever that present might be. In editing there were a variety of possibilities for the present, which are limited in his case: there in the park, or in the street or in the station. That cut between the physicality of that other experience and the physicality of being in the street, that is the precise moment of the overlay. Whereas in a photograph that never happens.

C.G. Thank you, Hannah.

H.C. Thank you.

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1 Wholesale clothing stores located around Comerç St. and Trafalgar St. in the city of Barcelona.

2 A walking stick used by the oldest member of the gipsy community as a distinctive mark for his authority.