

Ingrid Swenson in conversation with Hannah Collins

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IS: A lot of your work has a sense of looking at the past.

HC: I think it's actually an attempt to describe the future. It's just in terms of the past.

IS: *Solitude and Company* was made in Roubaix in France in 2008. It seems, more so than in your other films, to relate to your photographic work, in terms of its use of still and moving archive images. Although nearly an hour in length, there are only four or five camera positions apart from the last shot, which is a slow tracking shot that travels the entire length of the factory interior.

HC: Perhaps it seems closer to my photography because I didn't edit it, or rather I edited very little. This film was structured around the length of each film roll, as the film rolls end, we change camera position but not otherwise. The work is very structured and acknowledges structuralist film.

The film is a description of space, in this instance the space of an abandoned factory, one of many abandoned factories in the area of Roubaix around Lille, where there was a textile industry. So one key component of the work is about the end of industry in that area. There are a number of voice-overs from people of different ages, who have come to live in that area, and who are from an Algerian community. I was responding to conversations that I had had with them when they told me about never having been inside these spaces – they may have been in the area for 20 years, and are surrounded by these derelict and locked buildings that they couldn't enter. It was about prohibited space and what that might mean to different societies. I then asked the group of people that I was working with to recount their dreams to be used as the soundtrack. I worked with them and also an actor to recount their dreams, as if they were dreaming them at that moment.

Many are Algerian people living in the north of France don't have very much of a voice. They may have quite a strong voice in their own country, but in France, they have very limited official voice.

Dreamscapes are places for potential freedom and I wanted to juxtapose the image of the locked and abandoned space of the factory with the boundless space of the dream.

The dreams recounted by the people have no immediate or direct bearing on the empty factory space, I choose it because it is a un-enterable space that is located in the area that these people live in.

IS: Tell me about the archive footage and images that you used right at the beginning?

HC: One of the first things I was shown after I had been invited to come to Lille, was this film of archive footage, and what was really odd about it was that it's a series of shots taken at different times from the 1900s to the 1950s of the factories and the workers presumably from the area, shot using a hand held movie camera. They're short and they're at varying speeds, because the speed of the film has changed and you can't reproduce it at the film speed that it was filmed at. So people seem to rush about their work as if they were in a dream and the machines jerk through their movements in the projected film. It's various factories not just one. It's a sort of amalgam of spaces. I didn't take it from the original footage, I took it from a video copy that was lying around, and nobody knows where the original footage is, so I haven't re-edited it. There is one shot that is very similar to an early Lumière film, of people leaving a factory. So for me it's got a reference to the beginning of film, and I also thought of it as being about industrial processes at their height, and then how things have ended up, in terms of physical space. For me, this has quite strong economic, social and cultural repercussions. Today we are at the end of a very long period of 150 years of industry.

Someone I met recently said "all your work is about filling in gaps in history, filling in things that are invisible."

I was very drawn to the archive footage at the beginning – all these factories steaming away and massive activity, and hundreds of machines. It felt quite similar to surrealist imagery, like Louis Buñuel perhaps, and of course the idea of the dream was something that the surrealists were very interested in too.

IS: And there are certain still images within the archive footage. In particular there's one shot of cotton spools against the brick wall, which seems to be about different texture and a lot of your work is about texture.

HC: Exactly.

IS: And the desert appears in the recounted dreams of more than one of the stories, and the image of the desert has played an important role in your photographic work early on.

HC: When you think about abandoned factory or warehouse spaces, perhaps you also think about a desert – perhaps it could also be a desert. One can transform into the other, visually, quite easily while listening to the dreamer's dream. But I want the viewer to make these connections. One thing I've learnt about my own films is that it's better if you get the viewer to work. The viewer needs to participate in the process of the unravelling of the imagery.

IS: But you also let the viewer take a rest, because there are sequences of up to a minute where you watch nothing happening and there is no voice-over or soundtrack. It's compelling because there's little tiny things happening, and little ambient noises, or the suggestion of something moving right at the very back of the empty space. So there's a heightened sensitivity about it, which appears in a lot of your work. In this sense there is a lot of connection with the desert, which is about emptiness, about texture, a sense of endless time.

HC: In this particular work, I've challenged the viewer to stick it out, and be with that place for an hour, which is a cold, not particularly nice place for an hour, just watching changes, but then I've given the viewer some help, because of the dreamers' dreams and the sound. Even so, you've got to work hard, it's quite an exhausting thing to watch.

IS: Now I would like to leap back right to the beginning of your photographic work, and particularly your large cardboard works *Thin Protective Coverings* (1986) and the haunting interiors like *Where Words Fail Completely* (1986) that have a heightened sense of stillness.

HC: The first thing I looked at and loved in photography was Roger Fenton's images. They were much more in touch with process than my contemporaries in British photography at that time. My reason for making those early works had a lot to do with process – a lot to do with the act of putting the paper on the wall, projecting the image in the dark, having the possibility of manipulating that image. I tremendously enjoyed the different stages that you go through; first of all the act of having something in a glass screen, where you see it big, where you see it upside down. The screen I used had measurements on it so I could tell that if my image was going to end up two metres high, which is a bit taller than a person, then half-way up the image would be a particular thing, because it was marked on the screen at the back. So before I took the image, I kind of knew what I was thinking about in terms of printing it, and the printing was a physical, mechanical act. It was getting these great big rolls of paper out of blackened plastic boxes, and then putting them on the wall for maybe six hours.

IS: So you did all the printing yourself?

HC: Yes. Putting them away between the long time of the exposure and then developing and washing the pieces of paper with sponges and chemicals until the image was just right.

IS: Did that connect with your training at art school as a painter, this very physical way of making the work?

HC: Yes, I had studied painting, but also I was a student in America. I saw the work of artists like Jackson Pollock's as large-scale, physical acts. Their painting was given meaning by the physicality of their presences. I wanted to bring that to photography. The cardboard pieces are similar in my thinking to how Rauchenberg would put a cardboard box on a wall. I was reproducing it photographically and thus gave me a chance to have another attempt at describing it. When I was printing it, I was actually describing it.

IS: What, in terms of controlling the exposure on the paper?

HC: Some of those images are at least 90 minutes and some are two hours in front of an enlarger. Two hours is quite a long time to reconsider an image. It gave me a chance to think that maybe

that should be darker, or maybe if you walk to the left, that should be black over there when you finally see the image. When I was printing them, I'd move my body in different places or stand in front of the enlarger to get rid of everything except one area or another. The final image is the result of several stages of working at it or rethinking it.

HC: When I started making all those works with cardboard boxes and things in my studio, I didn't have a penny, I had to go and get the stuff off the street and work out what to do with it. Part of the reason that I used things like cardboard boxes, plastic sheeting and my bed was because I couldn't afford anything else.

IS: It's also important to emphasise the scale of your work at this time.

HC: They were large, often over two metres high and six metres wide and sometimes on multiple sheets, but they roll up and get transported around. They're not massive things with frames, they're just thin bits of paper put on the wall, I didn't really think about permanence but I did take care to make them very well, so they lasted very well.

IS: But they were the opposite of what Thomas Struth was doing in terms of his photographic project.

HC: Yes, they were the opposite to that. My work is not at all part of that archiving tradition in Germany from Sander, to the Beckers to Struth and Gursky. When I've seen woman photographers adopt that way of working, it's partly a sense of importance that allows them to archive their surrounding, and its partly a sense of organised history; that history was one thing and then it becomes another thing, then it goes to something else. It's very ordered, I actually like that work a lot.

IS: So do I, but it's the opposite of what you do.

HC: It is the opposite. I don't think the British have put up much of a challenge in terms of what they are doing in contemporary photography, and I think there are various reasons for that, and it's an interesting problem that British artists have in terms of photographic work. But if you go to

America, it has quite a strong history connected to the way they see their own history reproduced photographically – exhibitions such as *The Family of Man* or Robert Frank's *The Americans* bear this out. Britain has a completely different history of engagement with photography. It's had a lot of difficulty bringing photography into the present in a meaningful way. There's Julia Margaret Cameron, and there's my favourite photographer of all time, Roger Fenton and later photographers such as Bill Brandt but they didn't create a trajectory which moved Britain forward in terms of defining a new photographic language.

IS: How do you see your films in terms of film practice in general; as a filmmaker and an artist?

HC: It's really problematic because of the expectation of your audience. It's not problematic because of the work, it's problematic because there's such a gap between the expectation of a film festival audience, and the expectation in an art gallery. And as film's presence has grown in art galleries, people expect to spend time watching films in art galleries. Having said that, you can help them. For instance *La Mina* is a five-channel film, and the running time is 40 minutes, and the sound takes you from one place to another, so you're physically encouraged to walk around the space in order to hear, and see different things. Because it's five screens in a row, different connections are set up between the screens. It's very flexible. You can have one story line or line of thought going on in three screens, and then it changes to two screens, and then the middle screen becomes a kind of centre for an authorial voice – that of the gypsy mediator – Tio Emilio. You're asked to keep up with a rapid and logical pace of change. I edited *La Mina* on the west coast in America where there's a certain film tradition which incorporates Indie narrative and experimental film. The film editor was part of that tradition and was happy to work in that way.

IS: With *La Mina*, I think you get the sense that, because it's five screens, you could walk into the gallery at any time. It behaves well in a gallery environment. Although there are certain stories that have a beginning, middle and an end.

HC: Having said that it is flexible, I would like to be able to control the viewing situation in a gallery so visitors could only watch something from the beginning. *La Mina* was very carefully structured, it deals with architecture, then with the result of the architecture, and the impact it has on the people who live within that architecture, then it describes their relationship to mobility, and

their life customs, then it has a break. It has three chapters. Each chapter is entirely different. The second chapter deals with rural gypsies that live just outside the city and how different their lives are, and what their relationship with space is, and what their relationship with night and day is. If you came in half way through and started with chapter two, you really would have a totally different relationship with the work.

IS: *La Mina* was made in 2003/04, just as you were moving away from Spain to live in London and then teach at UC Davis on the west coast of the States. What prompted this shift into film making at this particular point in your career?

HC: Before *La Mina*, I made two short films. I made one about an immigrant Bulgarian woman in Barcelona, with her daughter. It was 15 minutes long, and I shot it on film and then I did another one about a singer singing an aria. But *La Mina* was the first serious attempt to do something on a big scale, and it was very ambitious.

*La Mina* is about the gypsy community who live on the outskirts of Barcelona. It is a closed society. The ambition was to describe this whole society through the descriptions of the people who wanted to be in the film, and to describe themselves. I attempt to show all aspects of life and death in their society, from their justice and education system to their folk traditions, music and rituals. It's closest to a piece of poetry, it's more like a poem, maybe an epic poem.

It was scripted by me, with the gypsies, and then acted by them. But in one sense they are always acting; their whole interface with society outside the gypsy community is that they act, because they're constantly put into situations or have to deal with situations, where they're completely unfamiliar with the surroundings that they're in. For instance, if a gypsy family have to go to a judge when somebody dies, they resist autopsy, that's a good example of it. And so the family will have to act in front of that judge, to try to avoid an autopsy being performed, which they would feel to be a violation of their culture. This involves them appearing to be something, which in their own society they would never appear to be.

IS: So is it about the relationship of gypsy society to...

HC: ... how do you manage to maintain a totally separate society over 500 years? I mean, even though things are known about gypsy culture, the particularities of different gypsy communities are not widely known. What was special about *La Mina* was that they chose to describe their own society. So the work was a kind of reflection on our own changing society in the face of a longstanding culture where the changes are much less apparent.

IS: And what was unusual about that film was that you had that privileged insight, because you got to know particular people in that gypsy community with who you worked closely.

HC: That's true, and also true of the recent Russian work *Current History* (2007), which came out of getting to know someone through the gypsy network. Through *La Mina*, I got to know a Russian who was half Romany and half from a Russian intellectual background, so he had both sides. And what I wanted to make a film about was Russia.

IS: I've seen *Current History*, the Russian film, only in a cinema setting as a split-screen work, so it seems to have a stronger sense of narrative and of juxtaposition. Was your shift into film making about a desire to work in narrative, because your photography isn't, first and foremost about narrative at all.

HC: No, my photography's not about narrative, but I don't think my film work is really about narrative either. It is about different narratives or various narratives that all come together, I don't think it's all one narrative that begins at a beginning and ends at an end, I think it's various narratives. But that's quite similar to my photographs, even the early photographs using cardboard and found materials. I remember it being very clearly about going and getting bits of cardboard from all over the place and then putting them together at this one time, and then returning them to the streets, so there was this recycling element to it, and also there was just this thing about the fact that these particular things would never be in that particular order again, and that they would return to another environment.

IS: That work had quite a stagey kind of lighting. It seemed to reference homelessness ...



HC: I think it referred to loads of different things all at the same time. It referred to the body a lot as well, to skin. I think they're quite difficult to describe, because the description isn't really the experience of looking at them.

IS: I just mentioned that you were moving away from Spain around 2003/04 around the time you made *La Mina*. But what interested you about the idea of living in Spain in the first place? That happened around the late 1980s?

HC: It happened around the time I was making the cardboard works. I've always loved Spanish art, and I've always had Spanish things in my life, because my great grandparents lived in Spain for 40 years. My great grandfather was a ship surveyor. I always had more of a relationship with Spain than say, France or Italy. I think it's because I liked the art better.

IS: And you visited there when you were young?

HC: I went there first when I was nineteen in the mid 1970s, on my own, and I travelled around. It was quite difficult because Spain still had a fascist government so travelling alone as a woman was quite unheard of. I went to Madrid to see the Prado and I went to Alicante and Barcelona. But the main thing that prompted me to move to Spain was that I didn't want to bring up a child in London, and it was during a recession so it was fairly depressed in London, and I just felt that I didn't want the first few years of my daughter's life to be like that. I knew that the Olympics would take place in Barcelona three years later so I knew the city would be optimistic for the next three years at least. And also I had a plan that I was going to come back to London in five years, but of course you don't reckon on how much you're going to change in that time. My whole life changed and I didn't want to come back. And I did think it might be hard for my daughter Echo to be away from her own country for that many years, or not know her own country, and I did think, I wonder what's going to happen in ten years' time, but I just went on with it regardless.

IS: And it turned in to how many years?

HC: It turned into... it's now 20 years because I still have a studio and make work in Barcelona and rent a flat there. And my gallery is there.

When I went away to Spain, I felt that I saw things much more clearly in terms of my practice as an artist. It wasn't that I responded differently to them, I just saw them more clearly.

IS: Well there's also lots of room for misinterpretation when you are in a different country.

HC: Yes, which I've also been accused of in Spain, of misinterpreting things, because I simply don't understand them well enough.

IS: Culturally misinterpreting.

HC: Yes, but that's been quite useful. One thing that I had noticed is that Spanish people didn't talk much about their own history when I first moved to live there. They've escaped from the British obsession with their own past by going somewhere else, and I went to a place where they simply didn't talk about their past. And I didn't question it very much at the time, and now I question it more, and I think, well, now Spain's having to dig over and think about its past again, and it's causing quite a lot of trauma. But when I went there, people were just so relieved to get away from what had happened to them, that they were sort of charging into the future and not worrying about what had happened in the past. So that affected how I saw art, actually, because it just meant that I saw everything in immediate terms, I wasn't thinking about what had happened in 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960.

IS: Your work is often situated in different countries, and I'm intrigued by what you look for or what you find in the very different cultures that you visit. I suppose what I'm asking is, what takes you to South Africa, or to Russia, or to India?

HC: Maybe I am attracted to the moment when there is a regime change or a disappearing status quo or that a place that will simply cease to exist as it is at that time. The first time I really did a major trip was at an invitation from the British Council to go to Istanbul and make work. And that was blindness. I went to this place, I had no particular reason to go there, no particular feeling for it. I just went there. What I decided to do, which was a very particular situation, and quite

uncomfortable, was simply to do it with the least possible information I could have. Not to read, not to understand, not to plan, not to investigate. The opposite to what I would now do.

IS: And what work did you make...

HC: I did a picture of a street, *Signs of Life* (1992), which was some of the work that was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1993, I think because it was so raw. It was a picture of a street, there was one picture of gypsies on a city wall, with big stones on the front. This work came just at a moment where I'd been quite enclosed in Spanish culture, I'd adapted a lot to Spain, showing work there. I was speaking Spanish, my daughter was in a Spanish school, my life was completely sort of wrapped up with Spanish life. And then when I went to Istanbul, it was a raw response to something. What I look for when I go somewhere is the physicality of the place, the complexities of one's environment... there is something about being nomadic that allows you to absorb complexity in a way that if you belonged to it, you wouldn't be able to do.

IS: So you try to distance yourself from something to see it. Could this picture of Istanbul be of somewhere else?

HC: It could be somewhere else, except that it was a city that had this particular place that was full of rotting rubbish, mostly animal hides, and animal parts that were on the street. What you see embedded into the walls is the result of the tanning processes. It was an old part of the city that hadn't been redeveloped, and had a feeling of physical industrialness. It was the first image I made like that. For me it didn't refer to anything else, it was just itself, and that was what I was trying to do, make an image that was itself – what you got was something quite complete, not something that was part of an essay about a city, or part of a description of somebody else's life. Something very short and poetic. I started writing diaries, when I was there, and I've written diaries ever since when I've gone places, so that's part of it as well.

IS: These dejected places, for want of a better word, are places that have been left to crumble and self-destruct slowly.

HC: Yes, but that gets you into the thought of, what does photography have to offer now?

IS: What I'm trying to prompt you to talk about is your interest in texture and decay in the built environment. And also, when I look at this, or other images of urban spaces that are neglected, or falling apart, or empty, they are often completely or almost devoid of people.

HC: Yes they are. The minute you put a person in a photographic image, you create a sense of scale, and unless you decide to play with this, you have dictated the scale of the image. Once the viewer views the person in the image, the relationship they have to the work is the scale of that person. There is one photograph of a metal factory in Poland with a man walking down a street, but the image isn't dominated by the person, it's dominated by a sort of stunted tree, so that helps to stop you from identifying immediately with the figure. But I think they're more like stage sets, in that sense, they're more like places where you might imagine a relationship with that person.

IS: Or a film set.

HC: Or a film set. I definitely think they have a relationship to film, that's right.

IS: I see these works in contrast to but also closely related to your photographs of the Mies van der Rohe Barcelona Pavilion taken over a decade later in 2003.

HC: I think they're a response to modernism, not a rejection of modernism, but a way of looking at what modernism has failed to address, and why, it has failed as a movement. That's been my whole interest, really.

Some of the reasons I am interested in decayed spaces is to do with my own personal background. That definitely is true, I identify with them, I understand them, I think about them, I'm aware of those kinds of spaces. I think that this has to do with the fact that my father was a Polish Jew whose family had immigrated to Britain and later in his life he became unwell and ended up living in one room and his life was more or less that of a vagrant. His living situation originally started as a commune in Sussex, so it had the idealism of Modernism, and then it had its decay.

The work that I made with the gypsies is specifically titled after the place, it's not named after the people in that place, it's named after La Mina, which is a massive ghetto of Franco-built flats. They have no relationship to Modernism. My central force is how did the world develop architecturally. That's what interests me in art as ideology.

I would say it was impossible for me to work with something where I had never come across any of its attributes before. If I go to a place and I cannot identify with any aspect of it, I would find it very difficult to make work there. For instance, the location in the Russian work was specifically chosen because, first of all, I can relate to the Socialist ideal. I might not go with it, but I can relate with it.

IS: But it's clearly failed in your film, *Current History* (2007), where we follow the story of an extended family who live in a small, very traditional village just outside Nizhny Novgorod, the third largest city in Russian. You are constantly made aware of the relationship to the city and post-soviet economic struggle, as it can be viewed in the distance.

HC: It's failed, exactly. On the other hand, it's still present as something that has passed and had been there.

Perhaps all of this relates to why I've moved about a lot. If I was very English and I'd been brought up in a household where what is valued is the permanence of family, or the place where you live, or traditions of a particular type... none of those three things were valued in my childhood, not one of them. I didn't have a sense of permanence and place, although I did in fact have more or less permanence in Britain, but I didn't have a sense that that was where I came from, particularly. And then I didn't have a sense of traditions, because my father came from a Jewish family, but was sort of in denial about it. But what I did have was a history of thought, the history of the possibility of thought, the idea of where thought could take you, and I suppose that's what I was interested in about Russia; that thought that had taken Russia to a certain point where it changed, and then what had happened after that change.

IS: I remember you talking about the Russian family, the extended family that you filmed, and you described their way of thinking. The film enacts a set of their collisions such as the city against the

country, or the urban against the rural, just as it does different modes of thought – that which is intellectualised and that which is direct.

HC: I'm just reading this book about Stalin, and that opposition is there too. In fact it was set up at that time; essentially the peasants were oppressed and degraded and given no human respect. The film's an exploration of the relationship between, say, the soviet building – massive blocks of flats, decayed, brutalist modernist flats – and then there's these wooden decorated houses, and the two exist side by side in Russia, as they do in other places. And also the film engages with idea of the place of nature. It is also a descriptive film about winter; it was supposed to be a white film. It didn't turn out very white, but the idea was a white film.

The film was also based in part on Isaac Babel's writing. He was influenced by Chekhov and exposed the brutality of Stalinist Russian and was eventually murdered under the regime. They are short stories, just a few pages long, they're almost like Haiku poems; incredible, intense human stories, all contained in just a few pages, they explore aspects of human behaviour in that environment.

IS: A word that you use when you talk about a loose series of photographs that you have taken over a number of years that look at the notion of the site of memorial, is nostalgia. Thinking partly about the Russian film and also about this series of images, I wonder how travelling to these places was ...

HC: ... in itself is a nostalgic act.

IS: Exactly. That's what I'm wondering.

HC: Well, I don't think my trip to South Africa was particularly nostalgic.

IS: No, but maybe going to Poland where your father's family came from...

HC: Poland perhaps was quite nostalgic, but then and I'm not quite sure to what extent nostalgia is about absence; about something that's not present, and in my case... I think it's quite a basic human instinct to want to know where you come from, and that for me, was part of that journey.

IS: When you write about your image of the *Hunter's Space* from the series called *In the Course of Time* taken in 1995 in a Warsaw Cemetery, you talk about a dead tree, next to which there is a little sapling. And you talk about it as a place of memorial, and inside this place there's both the past and the future. A more recent photograph of a memorial is the one of Nelson Mandela's teenage home, an extremely modest, impoverished dwelling. Can you talk a bit about your interest in the memorial?

HC: I've taken a number of works over the years that I consider to be images of memorials. For me these works are similar to domestic-scale land art. There are traces of the thing that it has originally been and can also be understood in relation to other traces made over long periods of time. Like the image I made 15 years ago in Istanbul has a completely clear relationship with the monument of Nelson Mandela's home as a teenager that I made this year. And you could put them side by side, and they would read completely coherently and consistently. They are both kind of monuments to the overlooked and the discarded, and both place the emphasis on the tenacity of human beings in relation to their environment. The amazing thing about Nelson Mandela's teenage home as a monument is that it's there at all. Not that it has an ability to be monumental in a 'monumental way' but just that it's a monument to the possibility of doing anything in this world.

IS: And it's also a monument to somebody before they became the figure that we know them as now.

HC: Exactly, and we want Mandela to be a reasonable human being, we want him to have triumphed in the world because we've given him that status, we want him to be effective in changing things. He's a symbol, his own personal life is kind of irrelevant to that. When there's the monumental made out of the everyday, and the everyday is so obviously humble, the status that it has, has nothing to do with its physical reality. I suppose what I tried to do when I photographed it was to allow myself to imagine that I was Mandela living in that space. I want the viewer to become Mandela when they look at the space, which I think is sort of what happens. A kind of empathy.

Before you know what it is, you just think of it as a domestic, human abstract space. It's only when you know what it is, that it becomes something else. It's only a possibility, it was never more than a possibility at that time.

IS: It's a kernel of his greatness, isn't it.

HC: It is exactly that. I also went to where Mao grew up in China and it's quite similar. Although Mandela's is a truly abandoned space made into a monument, Mao's is absolutely revered and monumentalised by the Chinese authorities, which has made it into a very pompous place; it isn't monumentalised visually and physically; it has just been given status. The photograph of Mandela's hut is printed on very thin fragile paper, and it's the size of a wall, so it's big, and very damageable. I wanted the physical image to have equilibrium with it's subject – the two things to meet in the middle.

IS: I don't know why, but I'm thinking about the photograph of the little kids in La Mina who are drawing with chalk on the ground, and why you photographed that (*Paseo Cameron 2*, 2004). If that connects...

HC: That's quite similar actually. On a hot Summer's day the children of La Mina who live in tiny apartments make these drawings on the street, all sorts of amazing things at different scales, so an eye can be huge, and a horse can be tiny. These massive collections of drawings get rubbed off the pavement each night so in the morning the drawing begins again. They draw a mixture of what is their everyday life, and what might be their lives. In a way it's a performance as an action and in another way it's also got lots of statuses at the same time. So it's got the status of almost a filmic quality to it, and then it's got the status of the anticipation of an event, and then it's got the status of making... you know, it's about somebody making their version of art, in a way, or certainly of expression, not art but expression. So it's got lots of different layers to its being on a piece of paper on a wall, and in that sense, it is quite similar to the Mandela one, yes. It's a sort of monument of an anti-monument.

IS: Yes, they do connect in my head, maybe it's to do with...



HC: In the background of that photograph there is a statue of the gypsy God of music, Cameron; he is singing. The street is also named after him. I think he is the most important gypsy musician ever, and he is very important to the people that live there. So there is an image of a monument in the picture.

IS: Your work is not autobiographical in any meaningful way, is it?

HC: I've written autobiographical stuff, but I don't quite know what to do with it. I suppose I see it as being a bit limiting, if something is strictly autobiographical. Why would I put myself directly as an image into my art? Some people do it and some people don't. And in my case, I think when I become more than a shadowy presence in my own art, the art, from my point of view ceases to be interesting. And also, we live in an era of obsession with self-image.

IS: In your artist's book *Finding, Transmitting, Receiving*, one of the images is a drawing by you, made in 1961, the titled *Myself with a Ghost*. I can see why you're drawn to these childhood drawings, and to use them. In the book you've placed this picture alongside found images of postcards and photographs that you collected in Russia. Why did you decide to include this in this context?

HC: One of the gypsies said something to me, which I think is quite interesting. When I look at the past, it's something that's behind me, so when I think about myself as a body, the past is physically behind me, and the future is physically in front of me. But when gypsies look at the past, the past is physically in front of their eyes, and the future is behind their backs. So it's a complete reversal. But the way I think about imaging the past, it's definitely something that's behind me, you know, it's something that creeps up on me or something, it's not something that I go and face, which is culturally different to some other people, I think. And I think the way contemporary culture is constructed is to do with one's interrelationship with the past. It's certainly quite important where it physically is in relationship to you, you know, what you think it ought to be. The image of *Myself with a Ghost* was included because I remember it as one of the first times I understood myself to be a separate human being in the world, so I drew a ghost to keep me company on my journey through life.

IS: I want to talk about the relationship with still life in your work, and how it keeps coming back as a motif, and also the idea of intimacy.

HC: Historically, photography adopts languages for different purposes. Roger Fenton who I've mentioned and Steiglitz and others developed languages for different aspects of the world as it was visualised then, which was informed through painting. When I make something like a still life, it's not really informed by painting, I think it's more informed by an act of doing something, an intimate act. What is in common with painting is it's quite a studio-based activity, so in that sense, it's in opposition to going out and finding a place that exactly meets criteria for things crossing over with one another, because when you bring things to a studio, you combine things to make the still life. I think about things like Velazquez's painting of the *Old Woman Cooking Eggs*, where the viewer is witness to a sort of act of alchemy. It's halfway between being a still life and being a historical action photograph, or domestic painting.

IS: That reminds me of one of the earlier large photographs you did, which I remember finding completely intriguing and almost a bit incomprehensible. It shows a man spinning plates (*The Platespinner*, 1986). It was of an action but strangely, perhaps like the Velazquez, it is also a still life.

HC: It was. Well it was also asking somebody to maintain something in perpetual motion and then stopping that through a photograph, essentially a paradoxical act. Which is what painting can do. It can stop something in the act, and it also takes quite a long time to do the act that stops the action, so you've got all these different times, and that's what I took from painting, and incorporated into photography. And the fact that I use a big format camera means you're always looking at the edge of something rather than looking at... I don't ever crop anything from the edge of the image; the whole of the negative is usually used for printing. The negative has an edge, and that is the defined edge, you can't extend beyond that. That is where you've cut off the image, and I think that's how I started making still lives. I was taking notice of the edge, and what could go within it, which is similar to making a still life painting, working out what could go into your painting.

IS: But with this early series of black and white still life images there were no people in them, and then you photographed a person.

HC: That's right, but that happened almost by accident. What was quite interesting about him was that he was a Russian plate spinner from the Moscow State Circus who'd come to marry a policeman's daughter in England. He was very aware of his own body, because he was a performer, so it was almost impossible to take a bad photograph. He was so used to being looked at, every movement he made was done with a kind of aesthetic in mind. Also as a performer he was aware that each performance was slightly different.

IS: Like he was constructing the image?

HC: Yes, he was constructing the image. Essentially it was an image of a private performance.

IS: When you were making work as a student, painting, you were taking photographs of performances, is that right?

HC: I did do some. I was certainly surrounded by performance people, and I had the option of becoming a painter or moving more towards performance and I was always somewhere in between, I could never work out where I really ought to be, and I think it's because I didn't really fit with any of them. I couldn't stand the act of painting, and spending months and months on one image. I found that very difficult to do. But when I made photographic images, I no longer found it difficult for some reason. I think it was because there were moments of clarity. With painting, you do get those moments, but it's not marked by anything, whereas with a photograph, it's marked by a series of processes. I enjoyed working in total darkness to develop an image exactly as you want it. Something that you know to be there, you've see what you've photographed and you've seen it in the back of the camera, but you've never seen it as a negative, which is a flat piece of gelatine. You don't really know what's contained in the negative, and you bring that to fruition by developing it. You've got lots of choices about where you go with it, and that's what I liked.

IS: And also just seeing the image appear is also filmic for the maker.

HC: Yes, and it's also negative, and negative to positive is a whole other change. All those changes made a big difference to how I would think about the subject matter, and what I would do with it, and what I understood as far as scale was concerned. All photography is a kind of performance at

some level. You're bringing about an image out of nothing. When you draw an image, you start with your support, which could be your piece of paper or wall, or whatever you decide to draw on, each line adds to that image, whereas with photography you get a series of shocks, which bring about the potential for that image, to come to fruition and become something. After I did the plate spinner, I started taking pictures of salt, and images that were accumulations of things. The salt was like little grains of something that you could push together into a form, and that became another action in a series of actions that led to the photograph. Most of them were non-aggressive acts, not like cutting and collaging, for instance, which historically in photography is something artists have done, like Hannah Höch who used it to make political or satirical commentaries about society. Whereas my photography has been, if anything, more like an accumulation of something or a dispersal of something.

IS: What was the thing that made you move from working predominantly in black and white, and then to colour?

HC: For a long time you couldn't choose colour, the only way you could do it was through dye transfer printing, which was terribly expensive. Dye transfer allows you to control colour very beautifully, and it's what Eggleston used, for instance. But as time went on, you could start to control and work with colour. As I started out as a painter, colour was frustrating to me, because it always had an overall colour one couldn't lighten or darken areas separately to the colour they had or even change one part of the image – it was kind of all or nothing. I suppose when I started to be able to control colour printing, I got more interested. In a way I shifted the process back, because when I make black and white pictures, I think first about the image and how it's going to work as a print, and then about the negative and the plane of the camera, and then about developing the negative, and then about making the print. So it's many-staged. When I work in colour I think about the colour from the very beginning. With black and white photography, I'm discovering it as I go along. With colour photography, I am planning it, so it's much more manipulated...it's less felt and more intellectual.

IS: And more purposeful.

HC: Exactly, it has more purpose behind it.

IS: When you digitally insert a colour behind the image of a city skyline, which you've done in your series *True Stories* of many different cities that you have been making since 2001, is the colour you choose based purely on the image, or is it based on a feeling about that city?

HC: I think it's based on the image that isn't based on the image, so to speak. They're mostly colour; almost like flat colour paintings with a bit of an image in them. It's based on walking down the street and how I feel that day, on a transitory, fleeting impression of something, made physical, visual. It's not based on 'London would look good with a green sky'. It catapults the image into another category, in quite a purposeful way. Minute changes make a difference; sometimes when I'm finally printing something, and say, alter two tiles of a roof to the right, the whole thing changes completely. It's a very absolute kind of image.

IS: Do you feel that this series of images of different cities has a collective purpose?

HC: It's quite similar to the dreams in *Solitude and Company*, like a collection of potential thoughts about different places. But to me that's almost irrelevant, it's where I physically am at the time. If you put these city photographs in an exhibition with *Solitude and Company*, I think it would work really well.

IS: These are the only images where there's obvious digital manipulation.

HC: Yes, but I see that as irrelevant. It's just another stage in the development of something. It's all just image-making for the purpose of the work itself.

IS: There's no narrative in these photographs, is there?

HC: No, they're just facts in and of themselves, and they float at a distance from the specific geographical location where they originate. They originate in one place, but they finally are in quite a different place.

IS: Is that because you introduced colour, does this have a distancing impact on the image?

HC: First of all it's an image of the city that you never see, except perhaps in film, not by walking around in a city, you rarely see above a city.

In the case of the recent photograph of Paris (*True Stories, Paris*, 2009), I knew exactly what colour it was going to be before I shot it because I know what I was thinking about before I took the camera to Paris. My decision was based paintings that I had seen on a recent visit to the Pompidou, surrealist painting from the 1930s. One of them was made in Cadaques; it was of a sandy beach, it was gritty and grainy and it had these very specific colours in, and that was one of the colours that I had remembered and took back to Paris. It was sort of an act of return.

IS: You've talked about the *True Stories* series and also how the idea of cities has played a central role in other works like *La Mina* and *Current History*. Do you see cities as unmanageable spaces or manageable spaces?

HC: As a child I lived partly in Hampton, a suburban area outside London, and I didn't understand the complexity of the city; I saw it mostly through American film. I had an ideal of what I thought what the city was as a child growing up. When I came to London and became a student and then lived in New York and LA, I then started photographing cities. Perhaps what I did was try to control them to bring them down to an understandable level. It's the opposite of a desert, it's the conglomeration of human beings trying to make a permanent nexus for operations. I used to read Charles Dickens when I was a teenager, and I thought of London as a Victorian city. When I went to Barcelona and discovered the Roman city that it has grown from, I started to understand the city in different timescales. My flat in Barcelona had been built on top of a Roman wall, that fact fascinated me.

For me cities are definitely negotiated spaces. I think that different political regimes and governments have interpreted the city very differently; they've used it for their own purposes. When I made the trips in Eastern Europe, for instance, that's one of the things that I photographed – the city as a socially manipulated space.

I think human beings have a remarkable way of negotiating city space. Like the picture of the people on the railway track in India – my favourite picture of India, which is of Calcutta (*Life on Film*, 5, 1999-2003) – there's a lot of hidden histories to almost all of the picture. It is taken beside the funeral ghat – a holy space, which Allen Ginsberg also wrote about. It is where there are open funeral pyres where you'll see a dead body being burned. You can't photograph it, but what an extraordinary cultural custom in the middle of a city? The photograph was taken beside the river Ganges near to the railway track where people live. Again, it's an image of a contemporary city where the people seem to be living on top of, or have imposed upon them a pre-industrial world.

IS: This is the antithesis of your post-soviet, or decayed modernism, isn't it? This image doesn't even look like it is of a city.

HC: No, it doesn't, although it has the signs of being near or around a city. I'm interested in the periphery of cities, like many other people. The middle of a city is always bureaucratic space, but what happens at the edge of a city where it spins out in lack of control, it becomes a much more human space, and a space that carries the signs of things that come in and out of the city. Calcutta, was originally a dumping ground that the British constructed, where there shouldn't have been a city. It is a transitional space that has found a way of continuing to exist. It's managed to survive because of the tenacity of human beings. If you photograph London it seems to become surprisingly ordered.

In this image in Calcutta, I am very drawn to the figure of the man who is a brahmin, and stands alone staring at the camera. This image contains many different people in different situations and statuses in relation to one another and in relation to this defined space. Another thing that interested me was that it was a long narrow space that follows the train tracks as they travel back into the photograph.

IS: In terms of its construction as an image, it's a very classical composition.

HC: It was intended to be kind of 'painted'. It's also one of the first colour photographs that I made where I really felt that I was using the colour for something.

IS: Going back to the idea of the edge of the city, can you say something about the sculpture project that you are working on, again in the area of La Mina?

HC: The project is called *Drawing on the City* and it is my attempt to catch up on my own understanding of the part artists could play in making the city a readable space. I am working on this with London-based architects called 51%.

IS: It is a regeneration project essentially, which is a very current idea for urban planners to work with artists to regenerate space.

HC: Yes, and I think it's a role artists can have. This is art on the periphery of the city. It's also art that comes from what already exists, and is being lost, rather than introducing entirely different elements. The first project will be created by running horses over wet concrete slabs that will then be built as a wall into a space beside a river. It's on an architectural scale, it's the size of one of the blocks of flats in La Mina, so it's 300 metres long. The action will happen in collaboration with the people of that area, and it connects to the long-standing links between gypsy tradition and their use of horses in their daily lives, so it's regenerative in that sense. The impression that the horses leave is similar to a photographic impression. I thought about Muybridge when I was thinking about it and his images of movement, so it's quite photographic in that sense.

IS: It's also hugely about architectural space and texture, which a lot of your photographic work is interested in...

HC: Yes, but it's very difficult that photographs have texture, and that's an essential problem of the photograph; how to give the photograph texture.

IS: But you're saying the process of making the concrete wall with horses, references the photographic process because it's about impression, and physical impression, and it's physical impression on wet concrete as opposed to...

HC: Exactly, so it's very similar processes, and similar interests but the result will be external, highly physical, architectural and in a way, a kind of a challenge to the local population to bring nature



back to their environment, and to encourage nature to come back to their environment, although paradoxically, the act of making this work will involve horses, but won't bring nature back. So it's visual and physical reference to something in their culture, rather than being it. It's not building a garden, it's making an image.

But I suppose one of the things I've learned about it is, if I go and make a photograph in my studio like the salt, for instance, which is very textural, I've got to take the salt to the studio, I've got to build the environment in which to build it, I've got to photograph it.

When we're trying to do a big public event resulting in a permanent artwork like this one, it's quite similar to the idea of working in the studio and planning a shot in the sense that we have to bring all the materials to one place at one time to create it. This is different to most public artworks, because they are often constructed somewhere else and brought to the site. But this will be made in the place where it's going to be.

IS: And it's got a performative element to it.

HC: Yes, so it's got to happen at a predetermined and set time and will be vulnerable in the sense that it will be in a public place and because the action itself must also include the possibility that the result could turn out in any number of different ways.

IS: Is it also vulnerable because it's open to interpretation as to what it actually is?

HC: Yes, that's another thing, that's part of its intention really.

IS: Whether it's read as art, or architectural or urban embellishment or...

HC: I think the structure of the performance and the structure of the actual piece, which is a series of concrete panels, which are regular, even and made a particular way, to some extent determines it as art.

IS: From your position as the artist.

HC: From my position. From a viewer's perspective, would you know you were in the presence of art? I think that you would. But on the other hand, art has tried very hard in recent years to integrate itself into public life, to varying degrees of success. I don't think this is an attempt by art to get into the life of the public. I think it's a response to a public situation that can be expressed through art.

IS: It's about creating urban space that is meaningful in that specific context, whether you want to call it art or something else.

HC: I'm not too worried about that. It's also about the section of space around you, and it's also a project that, in theory, you can walk through the city and understand it slightly different terms after you've seen that work. And what it's supposed to do is generate altered perception of the space around you, and I hope that that's what it'll do.

IS: And when is that project likely to happen?

HC: Well, it's supposed to be happening now, but let's see.

IS: This makes me think again about your interest in the aspirations of modernism, and the failed aspirations of modernism. In this instance you are working to create an architectural intervention in a difficult or marginalised urban space that aspires to a kind of utopian ideal that is for and about the people who live there. I am thinking about your photographs of the Mies van der Rohe pavilion, which is the reconstruction of a monument to modernism.

HC: It's not like photographing a sky-scraper or massive blocks of flats, its dimensions are very human, it's on a scale that is both architectural and sculptural, so that interested me in making photographs of it. And it was also one of the first things that I photographed in colour, where the colour was an absolutely integral part of the work. Without the colour, the work would be less. There are many more materials and surface textures in that one building than there are in later modernist buildings; concrete, glass, marble, granite, water, stones, curtains, the planting... It is pure modernism before the language of modernism was adopted for other agendas.

IS: But it is a reconstruction.

HC: It's a reconstruction of an original space and it is a stage. It's not a lived space. And it's also not a place that's becoming anything else. It's a space that's been preserved in aspic because it's not even its original space. So it's preserved as an idea of something, rather than the lived version of it. I could have made photographs about its maintenance or its failure, or its lack of integration with its surroundings, but I went with its more optimistic side. It remains optimistic in my portrayal of it, and it could easily not have been. It could easily have been the space of a failed ideology in a way. But I haven't actually done that.

IS: Does that link up with the notion of the aspiration of something and the reality of something?

HC: I think it does, yes, definitely. The griminess of reality to some extent attracts me, I think, because I lived with it. I don't feel capable of inhabiting pure modern space.

When I made the book of photographs spanning my work from the mid 1980s, *Finding, Transmitting, Receiving*, I did not construct the book chronologically, but in terms of different kinds of spaces, and the Mies pavilion is in the last part, which is called Pavilions and is specifically about ideal spaces. There are certain sorts of ingredients in idealised spaces, like water, which is often part of temples. I thought it was going to be about big, real spaces. In the end it was almost like a sort of catalogue of materials; the materials people use to describe utopian space, and the very subtle ways in which we follow ideals through materials.