

MORGAN O'HARA

LIVE TRANSMISSION: attention and drawing as time-based performance

*“... always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known -- cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments.
Myself not least, but honor'd of them all, --*

*I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravel'd world whose margin fades
For ever and ever when I move.”*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Ulysses

I. Portraits for the Twenty-First Century

From 1978 through 1998 I worked on a series entitled *Portraits for the Twenty-First Century*, drawings based on peoples' geographic displacement patterns. Starting with an individual's birthplace, a record was made of all travels since birth, on as many scales as were necessary to convey the various levels of lived experience. If a particular journey or path had special significance to the individual being portrayed, this was evidenced by a thicker or differently drawn line. Areas which were densely traversed were indicated by shaded areas or cross-hatching. For the final drawing, all maps used and marked were superimposed on top of one another with the principal city in the life of the person as axis. The lines were then traced onto one piece of paper and this was the configuration of lines which formed the basis of the portrait. The title of each portrait includes the name of the individual, the birthplace, birth date, profession, city and date of the interview. Some portraits were done in a day. Several took 10 years to complete because of various time-space and/or conceptual complications which ultimately produced further evolution of the process. Most were completed within a month.

This work piled up and after a while I felt that I was buried in “homework.” What I liked best was the immediacy of the encounter and the drawing but the more complicated the process grew, the more time consuming it became. Though the results were satisfying, the parts of the process which I least appreciated began to dominate. I needed a process which was more immediate and in which a drawing could be brought to completion in a timely manner. From about 1982 onward, this question was becoming more and more urgent.

II. Two-handed drawing 1981

In the 70's in San Francisco, Brandy Ho's Hunan Restaurant on Columbus Avenue in North Beach had a long counter where customers could eat. Behind the counter were two chefs working on woks over open fires. Watching them was inevitable while enjoying the spring rolls and spicy Hunan chicken. Cedric Ho was ambidextrous and very quick. In 1981 I tracked his movement onto paper. It was exciting to follow so closely his precise and quick action, not knowing where it would go. He and the other chefs became curious and when I invited them to sign the drawings and to write in Chinese the names of the dishes they were cooking they were glad to participate. I did this work daily for several weeks. I used both hands because he did. They were my first two-handed drawings. In 1982 I left San Francisco to continue my ongoing series *Portraits For the Twenty-First Century* in New York. I liked the wok drawings very much, especially for their visual power and unusual energy but didn't take the process further until 8 years later.

III. LIVE TRANSMISSION drawing beginning in 1989

I began doing LIVE TRANSMISSIONS in June 1989. The circumstances were these. I was a guest of Carlo Cattelani, an Italian art collector who lived in Baggiovara, Italia, near the northern city of Modena. I was living with the Cattelani family while I produced an artwork for his collection. It was summer and the five-meter-long table under the eaves outside the kitchen was an important locus for people from all over Italy and the world who came to share time and meals and lively conversation. I eventually learned Italian and my friendship with Carlo grew until his death in 1995 at the too young age of 66. In that house I had the best round of conversations about art, life and meaning that I have had anywhere.

Living in the big farmhouse where the stable was the visiting artist's studio, I was always included in the festivities but my not being able to speak Italian at the beginning was a big drawback. Often enough there were international visitors when French, English and German were spoken but the longest and liveliest of the conversations were in Italian. It was fascinating but at the same time frustrating because I could not understand the content of the laughter and carrying on. The conversations went on for hours, sometimes lasted all night, and I would often find myself a semi-animate observer slipping into a sort of mind-body split. I often would be physically present at the table but mentally elsewhere, a condition I found increasingly uncomfortable. Anyone who has spent hours listening to people speaking in an unknown language has had this experience. Dullness produced by lack of comprehension and the inability to participate eventually takes over and the mind wanders. I personally do not like this situation. I find it really difficult and the split I find truly uncomfortable. This difficulty led to the creation of a new process which has been my principal work now for 19 years.

I began wondering what I could do to stay present in mind and body to enjoy the situation. The gestures of the Italians became my starting point. At the beginning they seemed exaggerated and theatrical, a source of amusement and entertainment. As a private joke, I decided to track these gestures, committing their trajectories to paper. One day I took a small drawing tablet to dinner and began drawing, tracking and mimicking the wild gesticulation. I was self-conscious about doing it openly so I

supported the tablet on my knees under the table. It worked. The drawing kept me mentally and physically present and I liked the drawings. Plus, it was fun. It was a process strong enough to withstand the eventual queries of Cattelani and his challenge to do it on top of the table which instantly made everyone extremely self-conscious, including myself. Finally we all got used to each other and in time this became my LIVE TRANSMISSION work. Focusing on "The Other" kept me present in an intense way and had a tremendous calming effect on me. In time, I started working in earnest and in public. It was strange and the initial stages were sometimes awkward but the drawings had an unusual kind of energy to them so I continued pursuing the process. One day, Cattelani was studying a new series of LIVE TRANSMISSIONS and said "It's great to see classical drawing again." I remembered back to when I was very young and had studied book after book of classical drawings, absorbing in particular, line quality. It was both a revelation and an honor to hear him say this.

Early in 1989 I had begun the practice of a Japanese martial art, aikido. In the martial arts one trains using both sides of the body and slowly through practice, the asymmetries and imbalances sort themselves into better balance. Consequently, the left and right hemispheres of the brain come into better coordination. When I began drawing the LIVE TRANSMISSIONS it felt strange to be drawing with only my right hand, it felt awkward, out of balance. I took up another pencil and since then have been drawing with both hands. Gradually over time I have become almost ambidextrous through this practice and often draw with up to twenty pencils simultaneously. The number of pencils I use simultaneously is determined by the subject of the inquiry.

IV: Compulsive nature of the process

I started carrying pencil and paper with me everywhere and was soon deep into a process which for 10 years became more and more compulsive. I felt that I had to "catch" every movement of every person, animal, each leaf on a tree. The concept behind what I was doing began to evolve. For the first few years I was simply in a fit of compulsive accumulation. As soon as one drawing was finished I needed to do another. Then I would suddenly notice another movement I hadn't recorded and I would be drawing again.

To quote Harold Pinter from his Nobel Lecture in 2005 on *Art, Truth and Politics*,

"Truth ... is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the endeavour. The search is your task. More often than not you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond to the truth, often without realizing that you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found..."

By now the compulsiveness of the work has dropped off. Being more selective has stimulated the process in other ways and I have begun thinking more about what and why. It is now possible to enjoy watching a line of movement in an intense way without having to draw it. I feel very deeply the training this process has taken me through in particular in the realms of attention and concentration.

V. Theoretical base for the work

Transmission of the principle of vitality, the theoretical base for the work, evolved slowly over time; the archival nature of the work as well. I didn't set out to record energy transmissions at the bridge between two centuries. The understanding that I was actually doing this came later after several hundred drawings had been done.

The focus on attention, a rare non-consumer skill in the 21st century, became more and more apparent as the work progressed. Contemplation through calm observation, the opposite of contemporary living, the dialectic between observer-participant, participant-observer, control versus relaxed participation, all coalesced to form the conceptual base for the LIVE TRANSMISSIONS. It was more a process of my being taught by the practice than of a guiding idea which informed the modus operandi.

Scale and physical limitations were determined by expediency. I couldn't sit at a dinner table with a huge piece of paper and expect to draw. As an observer it would have been possible but not as a participant-observer and I needed both to proceed. Awkwardness became a skill in the sense that I couldn't control all the lines, couldn't manage all the aspects of the work at once, so I had to let go and let the thing grow in its own way. What I know now about it after years of working is very different from what I "knew" about it at the beginning. The clearest thing I knew at the beginning was that I absolutely had to keep drawing, that I was onto something interesting and had to dedicate myself to the process for it to evolve. Faithful, non-judgmental tracking was always the rule. It all felt unknown and magnetizing but chaos and order, strong elements of the creative process, had little to do with it.. The aesthetics of form and composition were not dealt with directly. They "happened" as a part of the process. Perception developed through practice. Witness, testimony, validation, honoring an activity as well as human life evolved. Art took on its role as communicator beyond the specificity of language. Truthfulness and integrity of line were and still are my goals. By truthfulness I mean faithful transmission of the movement of whatever I am drawing, without interjection or interpretation.

Initial problems were self consciousness and keeping the pencils and my mind equally sharp. To an outside observer it might seem that the process is akin to automatic writing. In fact, it is the opposite. Acute relaxed mental concentration and attention on the subject is basic. Rather than becoming "lost" in the process, I must be totally present in order to transmit as close to simultaneously as possible whatever action I am following. For the quality of line to be good I must be relaxed.

The chief satisfaction in the process is the surprise of the drawing when I complete the time base and look down to see what is there. A form of energy has been caught on the page. And it is subsequently transmissible to the viewer.

VI. Meaning and interpretation

Meaning and interpretation I leave to others, giving here a few examples.

WORDS IN THE AIR

“Adept at ballistics (the science of projectiles), MORGAN O’HARA is an antenna, a department of registrations which detect and follow inexhaustibly the range of our limbs. As the aneroid barometer registers the high and low pressures of the atmosphere of a region, Morgan O’Hara inscribes on her pages nothing but the deep barometric depressions or the quick storms of our comportment...”

Breath, wind, word and wake of the body, the OBJECT of the drawing is here the TRAJECTORY, the prime mover of the research of discourse, the SUBJECT in search of meaning. An exhibition of the choreographic work of Morgan O’Hara is then, the perfect equivalent of the ancient "Practice Charts" which were hung in the maritime hall, showing the complex evolution of MARINERS' KNOTS, to teach seamen the art which ties and unties the thread of destiny of vessels.”

Paul Virilio urbanist, essayist, Ancien President et Directeur de l'École Speciale d'Architecture, Paris, France.

LIVE TRANSMISSION 1 2000, page 9; for full text see appendix ...

“LIVE TRANSMISSION: Toward a Comprehensive Mapping and Joyful Celebration of Human Activity

“There is boundless beauty and mystery to be found in all forms of human life. O’Hara strips the subject to its bare essentials in order to expose the astonishing wonder, absolute dignity and endless variation by which life reveals itself through movement. Her drawings constitute a radically new approach to accounting for, describing and narrating who we are, starting from the slightest movement of the hand to touch the broader movement of our souls.”

Alessandro Cassin journalist, art critic New York
LIVE TRANSMISSION 3 Macau 2005, pages 24-25;
for full text see appendix ...

VIRTUAL TRACES IN SPACE AND TIME

Morgan O'Hara's art impresses me as an untiring investigation into how our virtual traces in space and time reflect our biographies and personalities. She is looking for "finger-prints" at the meso-scale of everyday life. The work invites us to reflect upon varieties of being in the world and also upon the basic dimensions for artistic communication. The first question she poses is the role of space and time in the formation of conceptual images.

Morgan O'Hara's images are different. They characterize one person at a time and thus are not generalizing notations. On the other hand, they are neither meticulous line by line registrations. They are complex images of movements, sieved through the mind and hands of the observing artist. The outcome has a striking truth-value. Even the portrayed persons themselves are likely to be perplexed when they are confronted with evidence of their own bodily traces in the world. It is one thing to recall through memory where one has been living and visiting but quite another thing to be exposed to one's biography in the shape of a tangle of paths, summarized on a set of nested but invisible maps. Traces of gestures are still more surprising, since they are essentially governed by the subconscious, the better to depict a personality.

TORSTEN HÄGERSTRAND 1995

Time-Geographer, Professor Emeritus, University of Lund, Sweden

LIVE TRANSMISSION 1 page 7-9; for full text see appendix...

“These strange abstract drawings of nervous skatting lines or violently irregular black shapes continue the modernist tradition of art determined by chance. It turns out that they trace the gestures of different people working or talking: a pastry chef, a window washer, an architect, several musicians, a lawyer arguing a case, and such well known figures as Susan Sontag, André Previn, Amiri Baraka, the Dalai Lama and Umberto Eco.”

Roberta Smith art critic *The New York Times*

Friday, January 30, 1998

And, for the record:

“When I would take a bunch of pencils. make a (scribble) drawing and call it “The Ice cream man selling ice cream” I would be declared insane. ... Why is what this American lady doing something else than insane? There is no reason to give a different name to the same thing. So let us call what she does also insane.

Then the question arises why she get pages in my newspaper and an intelligent man to tell a consistent story in MY newspaper; with some good photographic reproductions of the ice cream selling man (drawing) on paper. She looks like an intellingent lady and so does the newspaperman. What happened that she believes her crap is Art and so does the newspaperman?”

Cees van de Wouw, irate citizen of Tilburg, The Netherlands, following a positive review of my work in the Tilburg press, September 2003.

VII: Naming the series

The need for a name for this work arose because I was invited to show the drawings at Milano Poesia in October 1989, a big international festival organized by Gianni Sassi and the work needed a title. At first I called them “Espressioni dell’Anima” or expressions of the soul or spirit. The title sat fine for a while and worked in the Italian language but when translated into English, German or French it had unwanted religious overtones. Several months later in a television broadcast in New York, news reporters were transmitting live from the scene of an accident. It was clear that *live transmission* was what I was doing, so I adopted the term and made it the title of my work. This was in 1991 or 1992.

VIII: Art influences

Japanese calligraphy, in particular, has had a strong influence on me since my early years in Japan. I grew up in Japan from age 7 through 14 during the period of reconstruction after the second world war, from 1948 - 1954. Completely open to discover the new country which surrounded me and aided by classes in traditional arts, I absorbed the aesthetic of pure form and concept contained in drawn line. It was an instinctive education and later study developed this instinct conceptually. The concept of being as completely as possible in the present moment and working / creating simultaneously using the energy and flow of the moment has been my method of working from the beginning of my LIVE TRANSMISSION work. The main principle of *bokki*, or transmitting one's energy or life force into the work at hand is incorporated into my modus operandi. Even essential points of concentration and posture adhered to in the Zen arts, are a part of my working method. It is interesting that I arrived at them through the practice of drawing and only later discovered their existence as a canon. However, my instinctive grasp of these factors have been in my blood since childhood: calligraphy, purity of line, simplicity, concreteness of form, the material substance of meaning, humor, the embodiment of the spiritual in the material; all of these poured into me at an early age and I began unconsciously absorbing and digesting them. They have since begun working their way out through my art. In Japan, concept, language, character, drawing process and finished work all come together as one inseparable whole. This has influenced me in a very profound way.

John Cage (1921 - 1992) had the most influence on me partly because he lived in my lifetime and I knew him personally and but mainly because of his conceptual thinking and fascinating writing, focusing in particular on the details of everyday life. Influential were his books Silence (1961), A Year from Monday (1963) and Notations (1968), all of which I read when they first came out. *“I think that daily life is excellent and that art introduces us to its excellences the more it begins to be like it.”* This statement by Cage has been with me for many years and the truth of it has become more and more evident and motivating as time goes by. His idea of utilizing chance operations to determine the outcome of a work of art opened wide available options for art practices. Before this discovery / invention, most art was personality based

and self-expression was considered primary. His work removed the absolute necessity of self-expression as *modus operandi* and I as well as many others found this to be liberating. Taking the "found object " from Duchamp and merging it with chance operations, my *modus operandi* is structured on chance encounters with movement in daily life.

IX: Materials and technical considerations

As mentioned earlier, I draw simultaneously with both hands.

My choice of pencil and paper has to do with the sensitivity and responsiveness which are possible with this medium. I have found nothing which favorably compares with it. In addition, graphite has magnetic properties which operate a bit like an electric charge and brings energy to the drawing. In addition I like the subtle color changes of the various graphites. Traveling widely it is possible to purchase graphite from the Czech Republic, Korea, Brazil, Italia, etc. Each graphite has its own consistency and color. When I draw, I mix all the pencils together at random and the mix gives a depth of color and intensity to the various greys.

At first I used fairly rough paper with lots of tooth and HB drawing pencils. I used a fair amount of pressure when I drew and the line was almost imbedded in the paper. At first my left hand was heavier than my right so I compensated by using a pencil with a harder lead on the left. That way the left and right lines merged and were indistinguishable from one another. Slowly over time I became much more experienced and I now use a hard paper, hot pressed if possible, usually Bristol and soft pencils, 2B - 5B, sometimes 20B. This way I can drag a pencil in the lightest way and it still leaves a good line. This hard paper-soft pencil combination is a good one for my work.

A matte fixative is used on the drawings to prevent the graphite from displacing.

X. *Modus operandi*

The pulse of life is carefully observed and simultaneously tracked with two or more pencils. To make the LIVE TRANSMISSION drawings I hold a pencil in each hand above a piece of paper. I then observe the hands of the subject and mirror his or her movement by tracking its path in real time onto the paper. If the person makes a particularly delicate movement, I make a correspondingly delicate line. If the person makes a strong or aggressive gesture, I make a correspondingly forceful line.

This highly structured *modus operandi* allows for chance. Nothing is pre-determined and until the drawing is finished it is not possible to know where it will go on the page nor what level of intensity will be transmitted. Two handed-multi-pencil drawing creates an even more unpredictable situation. I very much like this unpredictability. It gives me energy and stimulates my curiosity.

XI. Choice of subject

When I began the LIVE TRANSMISSIONS, I started by drawing people I knew, tracking their movements in daily life. In the most compulsive stage of the process I tracked anything that moved: an eddy in a stream, a squirrel on a branch, an old woman directing traffic, a homeless person building a night shelter, a musician setting up an electronic music concert. As much as possible I tried to avoid being transgressive in the process, much along the lines that a sensitive photographer might work. The point was to honor a life activity, any activity. I was hot on the trail of vitality in its million forms. Sometimes I would sit still and squint my eyes to a slit and then see where they were drawn to look. I could sit for hours before a tree waiting for the wind to lift even one leaf. The excitement was in not knowing which leaf would move first, and then being “with” it when it did. This activity truly heightened my perception. The phrase I use to describe this work: attention and drawing as time-based performance is not theoretical it is purely descriptive.

The process brought up problems of observer-participant, participant-observer. I was not intentionally trying to create dualistic set of actions and thoughts. In some way the process matched perfectly my introspective temperament to observe. Photographs of myself as a child completely absorbed in studying something visible, usually an object or a landscape are numerous. But the social aspect of my adult nature requires contact and communication so I developed the skill of simultaneously observing, studying and communicating. I can make a drawing for hours while talking with someone without their hardly being aware that I am drawing. It is almost as if two mental trains of thought are functioning simultaneously on parallel tracks.

XII: Titles on the drawings

The time-space coordinates for each drawing are written across the bottom edge of the page, usually beginning in the left corner. I have experimented with leaving these coordinates off and leaving the drawing “free” as it were, of information, but this does not mesh with the concept of my work. To quote from an article written by Philip Geffer.

“A picture may not be worth a thousand words, but a picture and a good caption are worth a thousand and ten. The image is only as valuable as the information it provides....But often only short captions - the who, where and what - are needed to make the editorial image work.” International Herald Tribune, Thursday, March 30 2006 p 24.

The author is speaking of documentary photographs, however, however, the thought is applicable to my LIVE TRANSMISSION work.

XIV. Working nomadically

For the past 10 or so years I have been invited to participate in many international festivals, residencies and exhibitions. I try to do a body of work in each place, thus accumulating a wide range of internationally done drawings. I have designed projects for residencies based on local daily life activities. The catalog produced during a four-month residency in Macau is a prime example of this process. In 2004 and 2005 in Macau I did drawings on busses, trains, in cars, restaurants, planes, homes, parks, estate grounds, ferries. Something I have not yet drawn has a strong attraction and I will go anywhere to make a LIVE TRANSMISSION. Problems with working nomadically are basically the problems of finding paper of good quality and more or less a reasonable size and price, which will not yellow or crumble with age; pencils which meet the requirements of the paper; keeping a drawing clean, protecting it until it is fixed, getting it through the exercise of traveling without getting damaged, showing it to people and without becoming paranoid, trying to keep a drawing free of fingerprints and smears when people (inevitably) run their fingers over the lines. As much as possible I try to write the title in the language of the country where the drawing was made and this requires an extra effort at communication, replete with spelling lessons in strange languages, the correct pronunciation of names and the specific terminology for each activity. When it is possible and not intrusive I try to get someone to photograph the drawing process, sometimes entrusting my camera to total strangers while I am drawing in a rice field in Japan, a temple in Myanmar or a farm in Italy.

XIII: General categories of drawings

People at Work

People at Sports and Martial Arts

People in Conversation

People at Leisure

Musicians: ensembles, soloists, duets, trios, conductors

Dancers: soloists, companies

Animals and nature

Children and babies

Machines and moving objects

Actors

Poets

Artists

Performance Artists

Speakers and Lecturers

XIV: Data base and archiving

I will eventually make a data base for the drawings. I want to do this because the listing of subjects drawn reads like an inventory of cultural and life activities of our time. It is also becoming important to be able to search for specific subjects drawn, for example: "Do you have any drawings of the now shut down Ballet Frankfurt?" Yes. 20: performances in New York, Frankfurt and company rehearsal in Frankfurt.

“Other dance companies?” Pina Bausch, Martha Graham, Cunningham Company, etc. “Individual dancers?” Twyla Tharp, Trisha Brown, Merce Cunningham, Mark Morris, Bill Forsythe, etc. Not to mention the ethnic festivals of Japan, Okinawa, Macau, China, Taiwan, etc.

Cooks? yes. in Japan, China, California, Myanmar, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Italy, New York; LIVE TRANSMISSION PERFORMANCE with Kimchee makers in Gimcheon, Korea; LIVE TRANSMISSION PERFORMANCE special rice being wrapped in bamboo leaves for steaming in Taipei, Taiwan. LIVE TRANSMISSION PERFORMANCE with Japanese soba master in Nagano and New York; etc.

Musicians? Martha Argerich performing Beethoven and Prokofiev, Radu Lupu playing Schumann, Aki Takahashi performing Scelsi, David Tudor inventing electronic music, Julie Steingerg performing Cage, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Randy Weston, Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill to mention a few jazz masters. Youssoun D'Our, Japanese rock bands, Taiwanese folk bands, Scottish bagpipes, Irish pub bands, you name it. Probably one third of my drawings - approximately 1000 drawings - have been done live during musical performances.

Readers, writers, lecurers? Amiri Baraka, Umberto Eco, Stephen Hawking, The Dalai Lama, Joan Rettalack, John Ashbury, Jerome Rothenburg, Jackson MacLow, James Beard, Cynthia Hogue, Sam Swope, Julia Zarankin and many others in Europe and Asia.

Politicians? Silvio Berlusconi, Bill Clinton, Vaclav Havel, George Bush, Saddam Hussein, Lech Walesa, Barack Obama...

That is the idea. Life is my subject, vitality seen through movement.

One day I will make a data base of these works and when it is published it will be seen as a story in itself. The list makes for good reading, rich in detail and multinational experience. There exist approximately 3000 LIVE TRANSMISSION drawings to date.

LIVE TRANSMISSIONS communicate beyond the specificity of language.