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IMPULSES: MORGAN O'HARA AND DRAFTSWOMANSHIP

At the close of my museum career of more than 40 years I am happy to write on the work of Morgan O'Hara. (1) During the 20 years of curatorship at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam I have been able to follow the developments in the work of the artist, thanks to her keeping up true contact. It would be too much to go into here the successive stages of her work. Other writers have done this and their words can be found in many earlier publications (2), all 60 of which are now housed in the Van Abbe Museum Library in Eindhoven in the Netherlands.

In principle, the life and work of an artist are always one, but this seems even more to be the case with Morgan O'Hara: her life and work seem to be indissoluble indeed. This could be the reason why in texts on this artist so much attention is always given to her biography. Another reason could be the fact that her life - which is fascinating - can be considered a model for the life many others would like to live, but do not. "*After all's said and done*" as writes Simone de Beauvoir: after one's death each life becomes a kind of documentation of what has been produced. I have never known the uncle of whom both my father and I carry the same first name, but he lives on in his good forger's work on the fences of the Palace of Peace in The Hague, which were done at the beginning of the 20th century. O'Hara perceives the danger of letting loose the combination of life and work, therefore she gives the form of an encyclopedia to a series of publications of her work.

As an art historian in an international museum of modern and contemporary art one wants to fit artists and their works into art history. I am one of those art historians who originally wanted to be an artist. During my short studies in that field the main precept was that skill in drawing or painting was only a means of representation and that good art could come only from within. Although that view has been overtaken for quite a while now, it can apparently suddenly reappear. The way Morgan O'Hara works differs a great deal from romantic views on the making of art.

The work of O'Hara till now can be divided into three parts: for the first part the artist made charts, like those of plan makers. The second part is based on noting down lines on maps, resulting in drawings that resemble diagrams of moments in trade or emigration. The more recent drawings can be compared with seismographic registration.

The strongest renewing power in the conceptual art of the sixties and seventies of the preceding century might have been the fact that so many of the formerly separated liberal arts came so much closer together. The work of Morgan O'Hara, at least in her method of recording, is relatively in conformity with that of the empirical sciences. A number of artists - including O'Hara - have adopted since the 1960's, relative scientific methods in their work but at the same time their processes differ considerably from these strict methods.

The British neurologist Geraint Rees has developed a 'brain-reading-machine' for the research of processes in the human brain. Alfred Tomatis invented a method for measuring the therapeutic value of musical experience and Gordon Shaw got to a method for analyzing music. From all this it became clear that music which is received by the right ear is connected with the left side of the brain, where a sense of well-being originates. In science data from research is gathered in the form of outlines or diagrams, whether drawn with the computer or by hand.

Since the 1960's and 1970's artists began to use such forms of recording in artworks, also because this accorded with a wish to abandon any personal imprint in their work. But after all, this was an illusion as the real power of making art lies in the fact that esthetics inform the impersonal clarity of scientific registration. It might not always define exactly where the differences lie, but this fact is essential. The eminent art historian Max Friedlaender wrote in his book on the limits of art scholarship that a work of art cannot come only from pure science nor can it be understood in a purely scientific way.

The power of drawing by Morgan O'Hara is found in its combination of standardizing and individualization. The semi-scientific side of her work parallels that of the artist of Suriname / Dutch origin, Stanley Brouwn. It is interesting that they have known kind of the same development in their work: from a concentration on the 'self' via a growing interest in their entourages into opening themselves to the world. This went with the general trend of artists since the 1960's to withdraw from the solitude of the studio. The interest and openness to fellow-creatures is important for the works of Brouwn as well as of O'Hara. Another aspect which distinguishes them clearly is a certain fanaticism in working. In "Outsider Art" one can find comparable forms of repetition in notation. More important however is the fact that both - Brouwn and O'Hara - allow unforeseen moments of personal decision into their work, while in science one only works strictly after given instructions as any deviation in method would lead to failure of an experiment.

One sees that in the 1960's and 1970's, when the making of paintings and sculptures was taboo and the concept came into the fore, the art of drawing resurfaced along with the new media of photo, film and video because it is a good means to register adequately and quickly: thoughts, performances and installations. One accepted that a simple sketch could represent a full sculpture, because a first record of an idea was representative and could replace the time consuming execution of a work in difficult materials. In the following decades when painting and sculpture again flourished, certain changes appeared among

the traditional art disciplines, which had been so strictly stipulated before. For instance: it became acceptable to work with oils and acrylics on paper instead of on canvas or board and collages could be made three-dimensional in a way that resembled assemblages in sculpture. In drawing, traditional techniques and materials became less important than other aspects like directness in working without any obstruction or delay such as those which one finds in many other art disciplines. Nowadays a drawing can be upgraded from being a “study” to being an independent artwork. At the same time the premises which a sketch formerly held have disappeared and the artist as well as the beholder have to accept that there is nothing more than what is on the paper.

O’Hara’s artistry was formed by drawing or related techniques. Drawing might have been an outstanding means for her at the moment that she decided to become a visual artist, because of its directness and the fact that one can work with it any time and everywhere. Also its intimacy and contemplation seem to go perfectly with her character. The German word - *die Handzeichnung* - gives a good description of what drawing is and what drawing with Morgan O’Hara is in particular. Drawing is about transferring impulses which come to existence in the heart and brain (sentiment and knowledge) onto paper via the hand. All phases of the process stay visible as do energy and concentration while working. The rhythm of the drawing hand leads to the occupation of space, which fits within the borders of a piece of paper. As a draughtswoman, Morgan O’Hara most certainly can be considered one of the pace-makers of the contemporary and more independent art of drawing. She distinguishes herself from her contemporaries, fellow artists who gradually went on to work in more striking techniques. This keeping to drawing does not come from conservatism but rather from the simple fact that it suits her so well. By education and self-tuition the artist is well informed and knows about the situation in art, but she decided not to join certain trends, although there are, of course, parallels. (3)

The 19th century French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire said: “...*pure draughtsmen, if they wanted to be logical and true to their profession of faith, would content themselves with a black pencil*”. (4) Baudelaire considered drawing to be the direct means to transmit impulses from the mind into visible form. So does O’Hara and she thinks of movement as “the most immediate sign of life”. That is why movement is of such importance for her work, which she brings together under the title *LIVE TRANSMISSION*. (5)

The best representation of this can be found in more recent drawings, for which she concentrated on “the movements of hands of specific people doing their preferred activity”. (6) The artist thinks of her way of working as a perfect means to keep a “finger on the pulse of life”, which is still the most direct method of sensing life and energy in the human body. ‘A finger on the pulse’ employs the sense of touch, but also other senses like seeing and hearing do take part in the search for life and energy. Morgan O’Hara is not so much interested in analyzing the movements which go with all activities, but focuses more on the intangible hidden elements in it, as she says: “a collective record of the energy of a particular event”. (7) There is some similarity to the work of the Dutch artist Hendri van der Putten, who makes small pencil drawings from television of the

moving border between light and shadow. (8) Both try to draw the intangible by hand rather than by using a camera.

When one wants to fit the way of working of O'Hara and Van der Putten into the history of art, one ends up by using what is called 'monumental registration'. What extraordinary things and thoughts, which the modern media cannot manage, are represented within the borders of the paper. In fact we could go back as far as the 15th century, when Leonardo da Vinci was making drawings of swirling water. (9) He not only tried to catch its movements but also the energy that broke free. Something like that also can be found in Futurism, for instance in the work of Giacomo Balla, who at the beginning of the 20th century did not want to represent only the movements of modern life, but also the invisible forces behind it. (10) Like the Surrealists who needed their dreams and Henri Michaux who even used mescaline to get to 'automatic drawing', Morgan O'Hara needs to be part of actions - either her own or that of others - to start the working process. Essential is after all the synthesis between the energies represented and the energies which are freed through re-presenting.

Notes:

1)

Thanks to Henk & Lily ter Kuile for their hospitality which made it possible for me to write a first draft of this article during a stay at 'De Putter' in Olst.

2)

Morgan O'Hara, Research 1978-1998, (1998); Morgan O'Hara, Porträts für das XXI. Jahrhundert, Petersen Galerie, Berlin 1990

3)

www.wesleyan.edu/music/braxton/o'hara

4)

Charles Baudelaire, The Mirror of Art. Critical Studies, (translation: J. Mayre), Phaidon Press, London 1955, p87.

5)

Exhibition notes.: Drawing Center, New York 1997

6)

Cat.: Macao Art Museum, 2005, p85

7)

www.MorganOHara.com

8)

Cat.: See Meer. Hendri van der Putten. Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden 1993.

9)

Leonardo da Vinci, Hasselt 1971, repr. 12

10)

E. Crispolti & M. Scudiero, Balla depero...., Fonte d'Abisso, 1989

Amsterdam, The Netherlands 2006