

# KRISTINE STILES

*Professor of Art, Art History and Visual Studies , Duke University, North Carolina, USA*

*The following is an excerpt from a long introductory essay for the catalog of O'Hara's first exhibition in Europe at Le Musée Cantonal des Beaux Arts in Lausanne, Switzerland curated by Jacques-Edouard Berger. Bilingual catalog with French translation by Guy Ville. 1980.*

---

## *INTRODUCTION TO THE ART OF MORGAN O'HARA*

---

"I am interested in transformation by choice and I use time and my conscious awareness of my own movement through life as a way of accounting to myself for who I am." Morgan O'Hara <sup>(1)</sup>

Introspection, the attempt to locate oneself in the world and the effort to counterbalance "the feelings of fragmentation I experience while tending to the details of every day" characterize Morgan O'Hara's art. Locating, defining and working to make oneself "whole" represent aspects of a continuing existential dilemma present in Western society. These emotions also form the basis for much of the art in Europe and America during the past forth years -- Morgan O'Hara's lifetime. As Sartre explained: "I build the universal in choosing myself." <sup>(2)</sup>

Morgan's art exteriorizes this philosophic search through means which resemble quantitative analytic methods. By appearing to be the result of a logical, rational analysis, the highly subjective, idiosyncratic rhythms of her existence seem comprehensible to us on an objective plane. The autobiographical and self-referential modules she constructs of the "time spent" relate her very personal, qualitative discernments to those public, socio-cultural quantifiable experiences accessible to us all. In many ways, her art is the struggle to reconcile the seemingly artificial demands of the daily world to the meaningful determinations of her own will. The tension in resolving these two realities -- the imagined and the experienced -- results in her visual representations. They are the keys to the process of transformation through which she moves while seeking the route to harmony.

The three major influences upon her art and her thinking have been composer John Cage and her art history teacher Paul Laporte and his wife, Annette. The Laportes gave her intellectual guidance and emotional support as well as the richness of their friendship. The writings of John Cage and one of his rehearsals, which she attended in 1961, brought her intellectually and artistically in contact with experimental ideas prevalent in the Sixties and Seventies. The self-

educational process of Morgan's life and the relationship of her very personal art to a wider sociological structure may be summarized in Cage's statement:

"...we know this fact of education: namely that one person can do it, and we use the term self-education. However, more and more nowadays we have the sense of society as being, in itself, an individual, if you can conceive, for instance of the extension of the central nervous system of McLuhan, that we share one mind... In a sense, what we want to have in the world, would seem to me, is an education of society as though it was one person." <sup>(3)</sup>

She follows a pattern from introversion to extroversion, from self-exploration to social practice. Beginning with private ritual and investigation, she documents and analyzes her life. "While her art (1965 - 1980) has been primarily devoted to temporal observations, the visualization of spatial concepts developed primarily after 1978, when she attempted to psychically project a trip from San Francisco to Paris, calling the work which resulted from this projection "Shorten the Distance between Thought and Action." These spatial projections emerged even stronger when she began to trace her own travels around the globe. The images which resulted from her tracing over the pattern of her movement on maps resulted in territorial symbols of energy which strongly resemble the concept of the mandala. They illustrate the look of human movement left by the presence of an individual as she or he travels across the face of the earth, sea and through the air. Very recently, she has begun to chart the lifetime travels of her friends. She began my portrait...by explaining that these patterns were "portraits" and belonged to the traditional genre of portrait painting very similar to the kinds of portraits which appear in Northern Renaissance paintings which represent the sitter as a person of the world with all of his / her belongings, the significations of travel and knowledge.

The rhythmic sweeps created by air and sea travel, the natural shapes (often reminiscent of petals, potatoes, and other organic things) created by land travel, bring out exceedingly subtle, emotional depths experienced by the traveler. The lines travel the mystical trails left by the spirit. Those individuals who have not traveled widely leave dense weavings.

Mathematical, biological, psychological, ontological and metaphysical time references are aspects of the plurality of time each of which functions within its own temporal frame and is tangibly conditioned by the socio-cultural milieu. The various temporal ways Morgan O'Hara selects to reveal her own immediate experience tell much about her but also about the society in which she lives. Time is in fact the natural binding and bounding element in her work; it is the defining quantifier which allows her to make her dream plausible. Beyond it is the imagination which is lived outside definition and scrutiny. Only through understanding and creating limits to live within, can one go beyond to a certain freedom. The creation of limits, the recognition of them in society, is part of the fundamental meaning of Morgan O'Hara's record keeping. Her will generates the

ritual through which her intelligence and reasoning powers approach the seemingly uncontrollable mystery of existence. Her art expresses the tension in all lives between the imagined and the worldly experienced.

<sup>(1)</sup> *Morgan O'Hara, statement from unpublished notes, 1979.*

<sup>(2)</sup> *Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialism and Human Emotions (New York: The Wisdom Library, A Division of Philosophical Library, 1957). p. 39.*

<sup>(3)</sup> *John Cage in an interview with Robert Filliou in Filliou's Teaching and Learning as Performance Arts (Cologne and New York: Verlag Gebr. Koenig, 1970), p. 114.*

*San Francisco, California 1980*