

ALESSANDRO CASSIN

Journalist, Writer

Director of Publishing Primo Levi Institute New York City

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TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE MAPPING AND JOYFUL CELEBRATION OF HUMAN ACTIVITIES

Over the years, many people including the artist herself, have eloquently described the process she calls *LIVE TRANSMISSION*. For me, the next step is to reflect on the scope of this bold and far reaching body of work. O'Hara's point of departure is the idea that change is the essential form of life. Change is made visible through movement and her art is based on observing and recording movement. Mostly she records movement of human beings, that is to say, human activities. In this skeletal formulation one can see that her work stems from the same impulse that gave origin to all art making: the description of life, as we find from the Altamira cave drawings forward. In this continuum, ancient to present, art making has provided viewers with a formidable mirror. We learn who we are through the mirrors we create. The cinema is a prime modern example of this.

Yet what makes Morgan O'Hara's art unique and specific, stems from her oblique representational technique. The paradox is to penetrate deeper, by showing apparently less. Her focus is merely on the outline of the movement, portraying a person through a mapping of his/hers specific movement. The aim is encyclopedic and encompasses all human activities anywhere in the world. A close observation of a single *LIVE TRANSMISSION* is enough to appreciate the exquisite quality of her drawing and the characteristics of O'Hara's oeuvre. However it is through the viewing of multiple works that we begin to intuit the scope.

The power of *LIVE TRANSMISSION* rests in its subtracting all the unnecessary so as to reveal the essential physical characteristic associated with each activity. It is as if the artist were x-raying the movement of her subject. In juxtaposing and comparing *LIVE TRANSMISSIONS* of the a wide range of human activities we arrive at the real goal: a rendition or mapping and joyful celebration of the ways in which humanity busies itself. Each of O'Hara's exhibitions gives a glimpse of this wider goal, by presenting *LIVE TRANSMISSIONS* (and the *SHAPE OF DISCOURSE* series which derives from it) of multiple subjects, usually arranged by categories: music, birth and healing, poetry and lectures, sports and dances, artisans and workers etc. Each one of these categories in fact constitutes a chapter of an ideal comprehensive monograph of her work. By recording the hand movements of two pianist performing the same piece of music, O'Hara highlights the often striking differences, as two basket weavers producing similar products, move in radically different ways. Each one of us walks, gesticulates and talks in a unique way. In pointing our attention to differences and similarities, the artist is really moving our focus from the unique to the universal, and back again. If the hand movement is specific to each person, by tracing the hand movement of a sample of people from of different social, cultural and geographic backgrounds, we approach a mapping of humanity at large.

Focusing on hand movement allows the artist to bracket psychological, linguistic and socioeconomic factors, and to focus on man's essential characteristics. From this perspective the activity (or work) of the subject of each drawing defines his or her nature. We are what we do. This places Morgan O'Hara in the tradition of "reportorial" or "documentary" art. By this I mean an artistic process in which personal observation, recording and interpretation collapse into one finished product. Prime examples of this practice come from photography and later, with greater ambiguity, from video. An excellent example is the work of the photographer August Sander (1876-1964), giant of photographic portraiture. His highly analytical and penetrating portraits address central aspects of life in Germany in the Weimar and early Nazi periods, and indeed highlight some of the

paradoxes of modern life. His life work was to create a visual account of twentieth century man.

He planned a seven-volume work, Menschen des 20 Jahrhunderts. Because of the difficulties of world travel at the time, Sander focused on German society as a token for his larger theme, Tellingly, he called his life work *20th Century Men* rather than *Germans of the 20th Century*. Sander, much like O'Hara, organized his portraits into professional and thematic groups: workers, artists, the sick, people who came to my door, etc. But the similarity between the two bodies of work are far reaching and regard mainly the ultimate scope: they both solicit reflection on the mystery of human life. In the case of Sander, through the ambiguity of an art form in which overabundant details alert us to the "invisible" while in O'Hara's art the apparent simplicity of a line makes the viewer recompose a defining action and it's wider ramifications. Further and perhaps more importantly both artists in their unique way, try to focus the viewer's attention toward the complex, multi-faceted mysteries of human activities.

The scope is not merely analytic, but rather celebratory: if we really look, if we sharpen our attention... there is boundless beauty and mystery to be found in all forms human life. In O'Hara's case the artist, strips the subject to its bare essentials, a tangle of lines, in order to expose the astonishing wonder, absolute dignity and endless variations in which life reveals itself through movement. An earlier series of work by Morgan O'Hara was titled *PORTRAITS FOR THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY*. Indeed all of her work, particularly her *LIVE TRANSMISSION*, is precisely described in that title. Her drawings constitute a radically new approach to accounting, describing and narrating who we are, starting from the slightest movement of the hand, to reach the broader movement of our souls.

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