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Artist, Critic, Curator, Teacher

*Written on the occasion of a group exhibition entitled WALL WORKS,
The Painting Center in New York, May 2011, curated by the author.*

SHE SEES THROUGH WALLS

In the lexicon of architectural form, the wall serves to differentiate space, establishing and maintaining distinctions among disparate activities. In the psychogeography of human endeavor, the wall represents a physical or imaginative barrier. To *hit the wall* is to reach an impasse; movement is arrested. So it is a delicious paradox that Morgan O'Hara's *LIVE TRANSMISSIONS*, drawing / performances that attest to a dissolution of the space between the observer and the observed, between analysis and action, through a form of unison movement should provide source material for this artist's commanding wall drawings.

The *LIVE TRANSMISSIONS* record the movement of the pencils O'Hara wields as her eyes follow the motor functions of her subject. Gesture mirrors gesture. Whether walking, talking, playing, competing, cooking, composing, fabricating, assembling, or expounding, her subject performs—by virtue of O'Hara's scrutiny. The drawing records her absorption in this complex but fleeting and often unintentional choreography of muscle and bone. No mere exercise, this practice has a profound spiritual dimension. "Dualism is limiting," O'Hara avers. "The self-and-other concept is partly an invention and keeps us severely limited."¹ Though logistical expedience dictates its meagerness of means, the representation of a sweeping away of such boundaries by the tracery of pencils on a sheet of paper is appropriately direct.

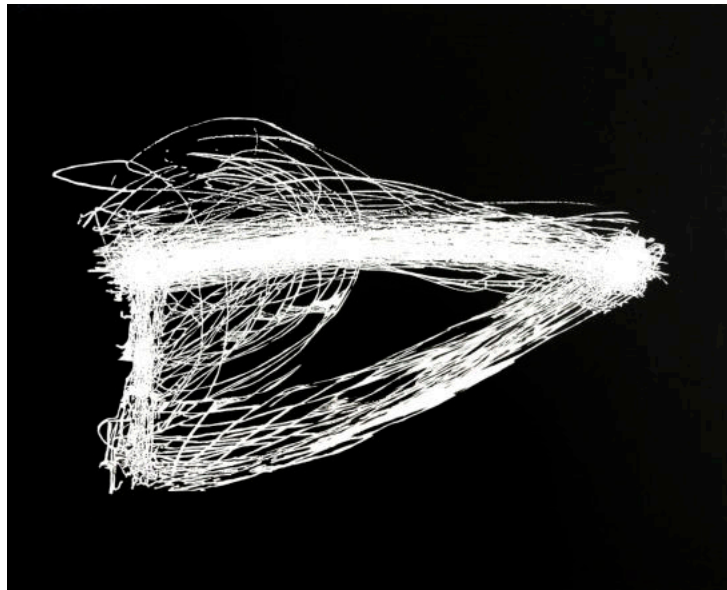
Interesting things happen when O'Hara adapts one of these intimate, tactile drawings to an architectural setting. She has done so over a period of twenty-three years. She does not make a literal enlargement; the wall work "is a translation, not a transliteration," directed by new contingencies.² The most pressing of these is legibility, for which the drawing's scale is refitted to the wall's dimensions, and its swarming, skittering lines reworked as hard-edged shapes in flat, contrasting colors—often black and white.

For a 2003 project at the Aomori Contemporary Art Center in Aomori, Japan, O'Hara drew the movements of a woman serving meals at a lunch counter in a fish market. The incessant placing and removing of dishes and utensils yielded a topographical density in parts of the drawing, generalized for the 43-by-10-foot wall work into tentacle-like bands in black radiating outward from a locus below. A larger, billowing white shape marks the extremes of the server's sweeping gestures, and of O'Hara's.



Site-specific wall drawing based on a LIVE TRANSMISSION graphite drawing of Yokoyamasan serving lunch, Furukawa Fish Market, Aomori, Japan, 2003. Aomori Contemporary Art Center, Aomori, Japan. flat black and green tea green acrylic paint on white wall. 10 x 42 1/2 feet / 3 x 13 meters. Photo Yamamoto Tadasu.

Many works are site-specific, conceptually linked to their location. The gymnasium of the Canadian Academy in Kobe, Japan permanently houses nine wall drawings executed in 2008 and based on the movements of Olympic athletes O'Hara drew from television broadcasts. Ranging in size from about 11 by 7 feet (darts) to 16 by 12 feet (aikido) to 16 by 23 feet (sumo) to 16 by 40 feet (soccer), their location along a busy corridor inflects the everyday movement of passing students, underscoring the precision and subtlety of ordinary animal locomotion.



*2008 / DARTS / Canadian Academy International School / KOBE, JAPAN
flat black acrylic on white wall / 6.7 x 11.5 feet / 1,5 x 2 meters*



2008 / SOCCER / Canadian Academy International School / KOBE, JAPAN
flat black acrylic on white wall / 16 feet 5 inches x 40 feet / 5 x 12 meters

For the enormous *FROM THE HEART*, a permanent wall drawing executed in 2006 in the lobby of the Opleidingsinstituut Zorg en Welzijn at Amsterdam Vrije Universiteit, O'Hara referred to decade-old *LIVE TRANSMISSION* drawings, derived from MRI imaging, of the beating heart of Berlin physician Tilman Ehrenstein. A complex matrix of interrelated curvilinear shapes in black and gray, the work stretches across and around a large, nebulous form suspended in space — a lecture hall, in fact — which O'Hara comprehended as the intellectual and emotive heart of the building. As the heart is the motor of all other corporeal processes, the dissemination of knowledge drives the activity at a research institute such as OZW.



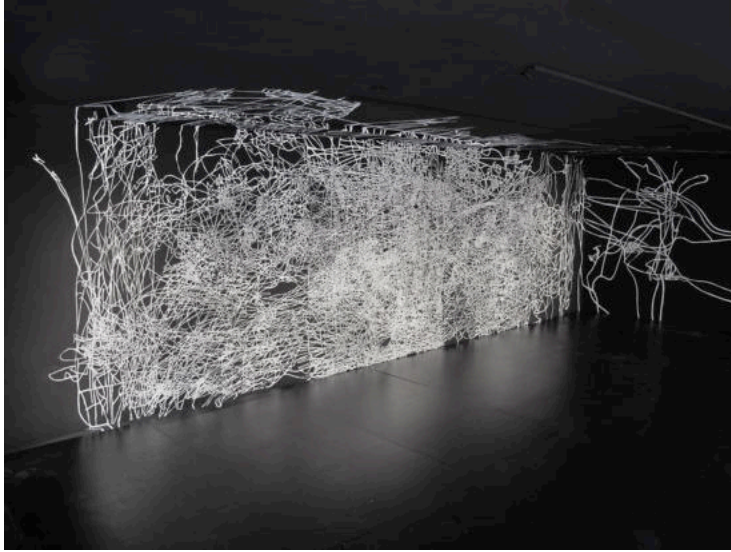
2006 / FROM THE HEART / front with escalator / OZW Building / Vrije Universiteit / AMSTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS
flat black acrylic on white walls / overall dimensions 224 square meters. Permanent site-specific drawing.

Works such as these play with the transience of human gestures, arresting their fleeting course and enlarging them to the scale of public address. O'Hara's *STEKELENBERG MEMORIAL* in Tilburg, The Netherlands, inverts the relation. As if from an elevated vantage point, O'Hara drew the movement of crowds at the 2003 funeral of that town's well-liked mayor. The work's distinctive image, mapping the current of pedestrians streaming toward the entrance to the cathedral to pay their last respects, was reborn as a wall drawing for the Tekenketen Project, a cluster of "drawing sheds" in a public park. Painted with flat black acrylic on a plywood construction, the memorial was popular with Tilburg residents wishing to prolong the period of civic observance of this beloved figure, returning the Tilburg *LIVE TRANSMISSION*, for a poignantly brief time, to the public scale and municipal context of its origin.



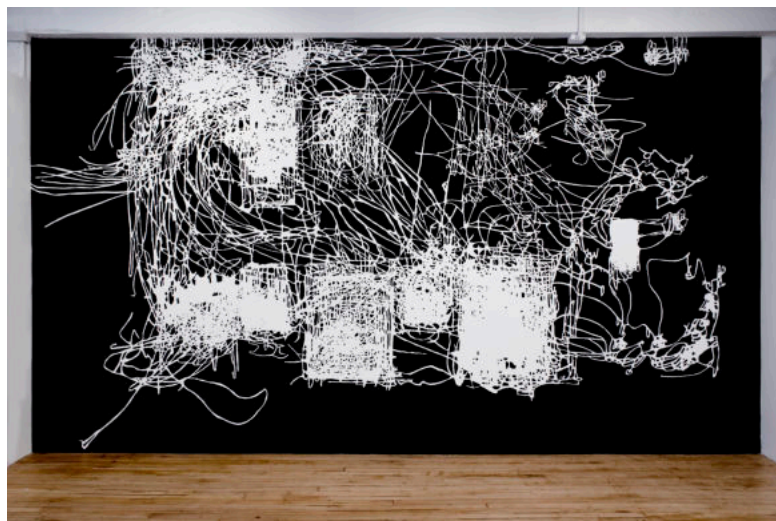
2003 / *STEKELENBERG MEMORIAL* / *Tekenketen Project* / *TILBURG, THE NETHERLANDS*
flat black acrylic on primed plywood construction / 20 x 8 feet / 6 x 2.4 meters

The sense in which these works are performative artifacts, proceeding "out of actions" in curator Paul Schimmel's memorable phrase, was doubled in *BACKSTAGE TRANSMISSION*, a 2009 project for the LAB Gallery at the Roger Smith Hotel in midtown Manhattan. Exhibitions at this street-level space at the corner of Lexington Avenue and 47th Street are viewed from the sidewalk through large plate-glass windows, compelling a physical distance that greatly mediates the viewer's perceptual contact with the work. Turning this limitation to her advantage, O'Hara in effect incorporated the gallery's untrammelled, glossy-black floor into the work as a dimmer but distinct mirror image of wall drawing's high-contrast swirl of white lines on a black ground. Working from a *LIVE TRANSMISSION* that was also on view throughout the exhibition's duration, a team of thirty volunteers executed the work on site over the course of eleven days in full view of the passing public. Derived from a drawing / performance, *BACKSTAGE TRANSMISSION* itself constituted a drawing / performance.



2010 / *BACKSTAGE TRANSMISSION* / *The LAB at Roger Smith Hotel / New York / May 2010*
flat black acrylic on primed plywood construction / 8 x 40 feet / 2.4 x 12 meters

In the spring of 2011, O'Hara contributed a wall drawing to *WALL WORKS*, an exhibition I curated for The Painting Center in Manhattan. With typical conceptual rigor, the artist acknowledged the constituency implicit in the venue's name by deriving the piece from a *LIVE TRANSMISSION* drawing of me in my studio, working on a number of small paintings. Her deceptively simple tactic focused on an underlying theme of *WALL WORKS* and tied it in knots: the contemporary wall painter's temporary embrace of public space as work site. Such was the painter's situation before the widespread adoption of the portable support allowed artifacts of studio activity to assume primary importance. O'Hara's frame of reference is dizzyingly broad, and races across centuries. Taking her image of another artist's studio-bound activity as the basis of a public work, O'Hara, herself a *post-studio* artist, suggests that in the end we are left with traces -- of the hand, the eye, the mind.



2011 / *MOVEMENT OF A PAINTER AT WORK IN THE STUDIO* / *The Painting Center, New York*
Flat black acrylic on white wall / 9 1/2 x 16 feet / 2.9 x 4.8 meters. Photo Nadler.

Drawing allows both artist and viewer to see what ordinarily might pass unseen. As a record of the intersection of two concentrated human wills, the *LIVE TRANSMISSIONS* make visible not what is seen, but sensed. In O'Hara's wall drawings, her gestures — and that of her subjects — come off the page where they had been cloistered, and back into the realm of living, moving, breathing, interacting, performing beings.

For this artist, whose method is to face the scrum of human activity head on and fix it in her gaze, the greatest irony of her wall works is procedural: "While I'm doing them, I have my back to life, so to speak."³ With her heightened awareness of her subjects' embodied energies guiding her, she flouts the function of the compartmentalizing, dividing wall, taking its intimations of spiritual isolation for a *tabula rasa* on which she inscribes a metaphor of its obsolescence.

¹ Email exchange with the artist, March 16, 2011.

² Conversation with the artist in her studio, Elizabeth Foundation, New York City, February 1, 2011.

³ Conversation with the artist, New York City, March 18, 2011.