

TORSTEN HÄGERSTRAND

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

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VIRTUAL TRACES IN SPACE AND TIME

When scientists look back on human evolution they tend to hold up brain and language. To my mind they systematically forget that hand and brain work together and that the arts are older than languages and are a precondition for the spoken word. It is easy to see that small children have to touch things before they are ready to attach words to them. The haptic sense is largely underestimated not only as a source of well-being but also of an intellectual understanding of the world. In the human sciences this means that we have to give the body a place in our work that it has never had since Plato forbade his colleagues to build mathematical models in wood. In economic practice as well, the arts have somehow to be brought back again.

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.

Traditionally we place space and time in quite different realms of understanding. Shape and location are viewed as spatial phenomena; events, processes and durations are understood as aspects of time. Space seems to be more comprehensible than time perhaps due to our understanding of three-

dimensional space via our tree-living ancestors. It takes a much more conscious mind to discover time -- or maybe to invent it. There is nothing directly tangible about time. It is not immediately obvious that the varieties of experiences and observations which we have come to call time are manifestations of one single dimension.

Today we all know how to measure space with rods and cubes. We measure time with watches and calendars, but do we know what we measure?

Philosophers rarely agree on an answer. Historians should know a lot about time and yet one of them, Lennart Lundmark, has concluded that "time is only a word". He did not express a corresponding opinion about space. He would probably agree with most of us when we fancy space as a huge container. That time is nothing but a word is harder to accept. Behind the word "time" lies both an inner experience and an idea of a mighty but intangible force by which we are irresistibly driven in a forward direction but never back again.

However that may be, the distinction between space and time has become inscribed in the old established division between two great art forms, the visual, plastic and graphic arts on the one hand and song and music on the other. Arts which speak to the eye traditionally present images chosen from an external landscape: realistic, symbolic or abstract impressions of lines, shapes, colours and objects; or purely expressive mental images. Whatever the case, the mode of communication is spatial. Music stands out as the art form which most directly and purely reveals some of the mysteries of what we call time, not the long durations but the ongoing flow. Sometimes music can even make us feel that we enter into the realm of time itself.

In front of Morgan O'Hara's work it becomes tempting to ask if space and time are really so fundamentally separate concepts as we have habitually come to think. Listen to what Albert Einstein said in an interview when he arrived in New York in 1921: "It used to be thought that time and space would remain if all things in this world disappeared. According to relativity theory, space and time

disappear with things." Now, of course, one has to be careful. Relativity theory is a theory remote from art and from everyday life in general. So any direct applications are uncalled for. Nevertheless, we are free to take the statement as a recommendation to move our focus to matter itself and then to view space and time as labels on secondary manifestations of matter.

We know already from normal experience that both space and external time as such are invisible and intangible without the continual change of matter which crystallizes and dissolves, changes shape and colour and moves from neighborhood to neighborhood in the total spectrum of things. That matter is what binds together space and time is obvious from the fact that we have no possibility of measuring time without the help of things that move. But what is this internal flow of time we feel so strongly? Is this flow maybe closer to a "real" time of the universe beyond the bounds of matter? Well, each of us is a parcel of matter, even if we as a rule prefer to disregard that fact. A belief in the human soul as belonging to a world beyond matter does not make our corporeality less essential.

There exists an art form for which the human body itself is the means of expression. Dance may well be the oldest form of art. Its formalities are only a small step away from the movements of ordinary life. There are anthropologists who maintain that dances in different cultures closely reflect movement in the daily work of people. That explains why Eastern rice-growers dance with their arms and hands and why Western ploughers are foot dancers. Since small children very early like to dance, this art seems to bypass intellectual abstractions such as time and space. It makes a self-evident unity of them both. It is well known that good dancers feel themselves as one with the natural laws. This is most striking in figure-skating. There is little reason to assume that internal feelings of duration and change are less grounded in the intricate organization of living matter than in the configurations observable by outsiders.

The body does not lie. Psychologists have demonstrated that, for example,

viewers who watch a person lifting a load from the floor are intuitively able to estimate the weight of the load with very good precision. It seems impossible to cheat onlookers by trying to behave as if the load is more heavy than it actually is. When taking a step out in the wider world we notice how pedantic courts are concerning the whereabouts of individuals and things when trying to clarify criminal acts. Verbal stories are weak proofs compared to reconstructions of how bodily situations emerge and evolve in specific locations on the ground. Morgan O'Hara's art mirrors the perspectives of both the psychologist and the detective. She is fascinated by what bodily movements have to tell both at the scale of travels and the scale of steps and gestures.

Documentation of movements in graphic form -- to deep-freeze life -- is a contradictory task. One must spatialize time. Efforts to solve this problem are by no means new. Closest at hand we can consider the various ways in which choreographers over the centuries have tried to fix the movements and positions of dancers on paper. Here the purpose has been to create notation with the capability of assisting in the creation of dance as well as the reconstruction of past performances. The resulting conceptual graphs, for example, labanotations, attempt to give shape to roles, not to portray selected individuals.

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.

The viewer of these images has a good opportunity to guess the sort of occupation and what the visible patterns refer to. One begins to reflect upon what one's own traces in the world would look like. Morgan O'Hara's innovative art has effectively demonstrated that we all have our "finger-prints" not only in the genetic code and on the skin of finger-tips. The virtual trajectories of our movements are also a unique aspect of our experience of existence in this world.

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