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SINCE THE TIME OF LAO-TSE AND HERACLITUS

Since the time of Lao-Tse and Heraclitus, it has been clear to mankind the seemingly irreversible nature of the temporal process. Both the *Tao* and *Panta Rei* have often and in various ways been interpreted as archetypes of both dynamic and process-oriented views of reality, based on the older discovery of periodic linear flowing time and attempts to control this flow by breaking time into basic modular units of measure. Consciousness and the synchronous realization of the diachronic temporal frame of reality (in nature as well as in human life), both in mythological cycles and historically linear sequences, can be considered anthropological constants differentiating human beings from other animal species. Movement in time is, contrary to spatial movement, unthinkable without rhythm, coded as such somewhere in the psychomotor subconscious of man. Even so radical an intellectual reformer as Descartes, with whom modern scientific paradigms are associated, did not consider verification of the category of motion necessary because of its axiomacy. He even used it to explain psychic movements caused, according to him, by the motion of what he named "*les esprits animaux*."

It is precisely this rhythm which at first sight seems to differentiate the portraiture of Morgan O'Hara from her drawings and etchings which record the temporal-spatial frame of people's gestural movements. Previous attempts in the history of the arts which have visualized motion (impressionism, orfism, futurism, kinetic and op-art) have all approached the problem through association and representation.

Some current tendencies in modern visual arts, (i.e. virtual reality), work with motion through its simulation. Morgan O'Hara tries to record "only" motion. She tries to catch the unique, unrepeatable, flowing moment pressed into temporal-spatial co-ordinates. Her approach to recording the movements of the hands of people of various professions doing their work is partly based on a fascination for the artist with unforeseen and unrepeatable juxtapositions of hand movements and linear configurations. However, she is also very aware that these movements are the expression of the activity of living persons responding to the chain of actions, reactions and challenges which make up our lives.

Between this activity and its schematic representation we find Morgan O'Hara and her aesthetic relationship to the work. Her drawings of hand movements cannot be and of course are not exact morphologically structured studies but are instead spontaneous attentive calligraphies. While the *PORTRAITS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY* are dynamic images, *LIVE TRANSMISSIONS*, her hand movement drawings, are living expressions caught in a moment of time.

Portraiture, a royal discipline within the fine arts, has gone through many developmental permutations as it has woven its history. Every period, every culture has its specific iconographic principles. The naturalistic anthropomorphism of Neolithic Venuses, kneeling figures, cult masks and totems change gradually into realistic sculptural and relief portraits of Egyptian priests and pharaohs. These portraits transform in two directions: on the one hand, into Greek mythological and heroic anatomically perfect portraits, and on the other hand, into psychologically expressive Roman portraits. The symbolism of the Byzantine mosaics of saints and expressive gothic allegorical figures are secularized and individualized first in Giotto's frescoes and later in the works of the masters of the quattrocento. These latter portraits evolve more and more away from anonymous representation towards capturing human uniqueness.

Who is not fascinated by the mysterious smile of Leonardo's *Gioconda*, Arcimboldo's floral exercises, the look on the face of Rembrandt's *Saskia*, the attitudes of Velasquez' court ladies or Picasso's paraphrases of the latter? Who doesn't know Klee's *Senecio*, Bacon's deconstructed portraits or Warhol's serigraphic pantheon of the bearers of modern myths? The revival of interest in the figurative in the last decades, whether transparent, mocking, deconstructed or hyper-realistic is a logical expression of our contemporary period with its unmistakable characteristics: media explosion, uncontrollable aggression, overt eroticism, pornography and self-aggrandizing philanthropy.

Principles for representing the human figure were canonized in particular periods and mimetic conventions became either the tool or the aim depending on the character of fine arts thinking which prevailed at a particular moment. According to Michel Foucault, representation has itself played a constructive role in the history of western culture.

*C'est elle qui a conduit pour une grande part l'exegèse et l'interprétation des textes: c'est elle qui a organisé le jeu des symboles, permis la connaissance des choses visibles et invisible, guide l'art de les représenter.*¹

However, the world closed in on itself reveals its similarities hidden under the cover of signs.

*Le système des signatures renverse le rapport du visible à l'invisible. La ressemblance était la forme invisible de ce qui, du fond du monde, rendait les choses visibles; mais pour cette forme à son tour vient jusqu'à la lumière. Il faut une figure visible qui la tire de sa profonde invisibilité. C'est pourquoi le visage du monde est couvert de baisons, de caractères, de chiffres, de mots obscurs, -- de 'hieroglyphes' disait Turner.*²

We could also interpret the portraits made by Morgan O'Hara over the past two decades as hieroglyphs, hieroglyphs ciphering the shape of the portrayed person in the temporal dimensional co-ordinates of his or her empirical experience. Time, space and motion (change) make a basic categorical triad of O'Hara's philosophy. Only in the framework of these three can one understand her art and decipher the semantic layers of the particular works. In spite of the fact that the three

previously mentioned levels (temporal, spatial and motile) can be separated in the particular portraits only with immense difficulty, they are chronologically separable in the context of the total oeuvre of the artist.

Having visually recorded human activity and the passage of time in the 1970's, the center of O'Hara's interest shifts in the 1980's to the mapping of space. The connecting thread between both bodies of research becomes movement or mutation, which itself later becomes a category for another body of work. Her visualization of space takes on a new fine arts physical form which she identifies as a human portrait. *PORTRAITS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY* began in a "simple" way with literal linear recordings of the artist's physical movement drawn directly on geographic maps. (Mercator projections). As with the recordings of time, so in this case the moment of empirical experience plays an important role and this experiential base is later transformed into the process of making portraits of other people. This develops into a method factually faithful, even sociological, a research in the motion patterns of an individual with the intention of trying to anthropologize at least partially the depersonalized physical-temporal spatial tracing. It is interesting to note that the first portrait done was that of the father of the artist with a long professional experience as ship's captain.

Careful observation of the lines and shapes created by the different geographical experiences of each individual recorded and first seen drawn directly on geographic maps, inspired O'Hara to give up the map and to move the pure lines and shapes onto a neutral background. O'Hara's portraits thus become entanglements of not only biological and bio(geo)graphical determinants but also psychological dispositions of the portrayed "model." They are perfect manifestations of the extension of art into life as well as the parallel process in the opposite direction.

There is yet another level on which the previously mentioned extension functions. There is in this work an attempt to understand in practice (relying on one's own empirical experience) the substance of humanity in its creative potential in the

widest sense of the word. The tools to reach this goal need not always be academic. They may also be ritual, meditation, art, music or the integration of all these. If we take into account the important fact that this process of rendering visible temporal and spatial movement is subject to reflection and meditation in the work of Morgan O'Hara, we can better understand the importance of her portraits. The portraits are a calm focus upon life and meaning. Perhaps in O'Hara's *PORTRAITS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY*, the individuality of each human being as Foucault's divided empirical-transcendental *doublette* appears in its own unique way.

Notes:

Foucault, Michel *Les Mots et Les Choses*, Paris, 1966, p. 32. "It to a great extent led to explanation and interpretation of texts: it organized a play of symbols, it enabled knowledge of visible and invisible things, it directed the art of representing them."

Ibid., pp. 41-42.

"The relationship of visible to invisible is inverted by a system of signs. Similarity was an invisible form of that which was made visible from within the world of things, but the visible figure, drawing its form from the depth of its invisibility, is necessary to make this form visible. This is why the face of the world is covered with coats of arms, signs, ciphers, mysterious words -- with 'hieroglyphs', as Turner used to say."

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