Morgan O'Hara // Radial Trace & Full Circle

It's a dark rainy night in Cardiff and I'm sitting in Trace gallery watching Morgan O'Hara swing her arm and expel breath verging on a primal scream that, with graphite stick in hand, produces a perfect human scale circle on the back wall of the gallery. It is a moment of disruption in what has been up until now a rather quiet, intense, yet meditative occasion. This moment of violent rupture has taken us all by surprise. A moment that simultaneously anchors us in the present and transports us into an art-historical past riddled with the actions, personalities, and excesses of what we associate with the primal sources and occasions of performance art. On a purely subjective level it is a feeling that one might experience when a film has been played backwards at speed revealing all the moments of performance art history I have witnessed, read about, and imagined. This film (performance action) brought to a crashing halt by the finality of a body action by a woman; Morgan O’Hara, in one massive percussive radial cluster fuck. That experience and that image of Morgan O’Hara has remained with me as a key moment in my art witnessing that I think about from time to time and relish like some guilty pleasure. It remains bodily, inside of me, with a handful of other images from a history of performance art secreted in my memory; and elsewhere in the mysterious storage systems of fabled documents and archives. It was, is, and remains, a special moment in my life and the lives of those who were at Trace Installaction Artspace in Cardiff on a dark rainy Saturday night in April 2002.

Action Revealed
The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought to identify the specific role of the body as mediator between the world and self. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach derived from the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger is based on structures of subjective experience and consciousness. Phenomenology allows us to explore our relationship to the world
using all our senses. Central to this is the argument that the body is a form of consciousness underpinning all action. Merleau-Ponty, argues that “there is not in the normal subject a tactile experience and also a visual one, but an integrated experience to which it is impossible to gauge the contribution of each sense.”¹ This embodied experience or phenomenological sense of being connected; in and of the present moment, has a correlation with the emergence of performed acts by artists within a fine art context after the Second World War.

The American academic Kristine Stiles has summarised the beginnings of performance art as taking place “After World War II, (when) performance by artists emerged almost simultaneously in Japan, Europe and the United States. The artists who began to use their bodies as material of visual art repeatedly expressed their goal to bring art practice closer to life in order to increase the experiential immediacy of their work. Emphasising the body as art, these artists amplified the role of process over product and shifted from representational objects to presentational modes of action..( )..they also sought to reengage the artist and spectator by reconnecting art to the material circumstances of social and political events.”² These new performance ‘actions’ by artists where seen as a radical gesture, and indeed corroborate twentieth century modernism’s rejection of tradition. Initially, although not exclusively, having their genesis in modernism’s avant-garde advances and the development of the gesture as a performative intervention in art through painting; artists sought to engage in what Harold Rosenberg called a “sensual, psychic, and intellectual effort to live actively in the present.”³
“On one of those brief days of pure light, bundled against the cold, with only a cigarette for warmth, his hands so numb he could barely hold a brush, Jackson Pollock altered the course of Western art.”

From the 1940’s through to the early 1950’s focus shifted from the self-contained and autonomous artwork towards emphasis on process and action in art. “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.”

Where previously painters concealed the act of process in favour of the creation of compositions that displayed careful selections from the world of appearances that could be appreciated as ‘pictures’, they now dispensed with pictorial representation and figuration.

In Europe during the early twentieth century a collapsed multiplicity in picture making through ‘cubism’ emerged to challenge preconceptions of time, space and perception. Eventually, particularly in the United States, a received ‘fluid cubism’ was radically demolished in favour of ‘all over’ or immersive experiences; what Merleau-Ponty might consider ‘integrated experiences’.

With the process revealed through the convulsive and revolutionary action of Jackson Pollock’s work from the mid 1940’s onwards; each gesture in the process of ‘making’ a painting animated subsequent movement; production became a non-narrative-non-figurative linearity that focused the viewers attention on the performative dimension of the act of painting. Here, with process revealed, it was now possible to consider the artist’s actions and its outcome as a form of embodiment. In Pollock’s work and the work of artists that followed, embodiment is not just an experience, it is the very basis of an integrated experience.
Post-Pollock, the act of painting (and consequentially gesture, mark making, drawing etc.) was underscored by non-representational operations; emphasis placed on being in and of the world, and of a new embodied practice and performance as theorised by Merleau-Ponty that suggested relationships are fluid and complex and that the subject is constituted within the relationship. Thereafter with initial 'painting-performance' and 'mark-making' work by artists - most notably the Japanese Guitai Group (formed in Osaka & Tokyo in 1955, and influenced by the Zero Society: Amagasaki & Osaka) - emphasis was placed on the human body and its very condition as a phenomenological participant relative to material, time, space and place. Post-Pollock and beginning with the early concerns of the Gutai Group, artists have sought to engage and investigate painting and mark making as simultaneously immersive and presentational by placing the artist in an active position.

The immersive witnessing of O'Hara’s work at Trace in 2002 is part of a subjective and a collective historical timeline that refers back to Pollock and Guitai. This is also a form of embodiment whereby the complex legacy of documents and images from performance art is hyperlinked, networked, and archived.

These personal experiences of images from performative acts by artists - some witnessed, some borrowed from collective storage systems, some happened upon in the pages of long lost artist publications and neutered periodicals - continue to impact upon current and contemporary art.

Immediately I think of: Saburo Murakami’s seminal ‘Work painted by Throwing a Ball’ from 1954 - and then some:

Shozo Shimamoto ‘Throw Painting’ 1956, and later, seeing him suspended in a harness and chucking paint from a great height in the Beaconsfield artspace in London in 2001 - Kazu Shiraga ‘Feet Painting’ 1956, and then only last week my young niece making feet paintings after seeing a catalogue of Shuraga’s work - Yves Klein’s ‘Anthropometry: Living Paintbrushes’ 1960, - The Viennese Aktionists - Shigeko Kubota making her ‘Vagina Painting’ at the Flux Fest, New York 1965 - Paul McCarthy ‘Red Penis Painting’ Pasadena, Los Angeles 1972 -
But not only…. and so much more.

Hyperlink
Morgan O’Hara is a Post-Pollock American with all that this infers in terms of knowledge and influence. She is also the daughter of an American sea Captain and spent important formative years living in Japan. Close to the source of Gutai yet not connected until years later.

“The son of the one of the founders of Gutai used to ride bicycles with my brothers in the late 40s, early 50s when we lived in Japan. Naturally we knew nothing about Gutai at that point. I showed my mother’s photographs of Japan taken between 1948 - 1954 in Shukugawa, the town we lived in - in 2010 - and Yoshihara showed up at the opening and we’ve been in touch ever since. One of life’s surprises.”

Formative experiences of living in Japan as a child between 1948-1954 have had a strong influence on her art practice and drawing activity. Proficient in drawing and geography embedded in a particular education system that stressed the “maintenance of scholarly notebooks, wherein every piece of work, every exercise, was recorded permanently for constant reference and review,” O’Hara recalls “roaming at will through the countryside” and choosing to “structure my movement on a geographic scale.”

From an early age we see the influence and the application of a particular ‘graphic’ account of being in and of the world. This extending to a correlation with artists actions and performance art making through the systemic use of graphic notation to record, interpret, and define experiences.

From 1971 to 1981 O’Hara graphically recorded her use of time in accounting books. These took the form of mapping timelines, using a colour-coded system, and connecting places with points on grids. In the last few years of the decade while living in San Francisco these activity maps became the basis for a form of
‘space recording’ as portrait. By portrait she means, “..a recording, a memory trace, a conscious live tracking of my use of time.”

An epiphany of sorts occurred in 1987 at a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco. O’Hara started doing a two-handed drawing when she saw the chef cooking in a wok with tools in both hands.

Having grown up with an awareness of Post-Pollock abstract expressionism, and performance art of the nineteen sixties and seventies which O’Hara always found emotionally dangerous, the notion that drawing could be immersive and interactive came as a revelation. By placing herself as both observer and participant in the ‘live’ relationship O’Hara had found a way to immerse herself completely in the situation.

“I felt a bit embarrassed doing it in the restaurant at the counter but it seemed like the only way to track the chef’s movement since the kitchen was right in front of me, not in a separate room. I got engrossed in what I was drawing and didn’t pay any attention to the people around me or what they thought. I just didn’t want the owner to tell me to stop. It was pretty exciting to start drawing with both hands.”

That her drawing activity could be an integrated experience and a form of performance art was even more startling. But defining the work as performance art would come later.

Although not yet directly articulated in terms of a phenomenological methodology O’Hara does note that in the eighties understanding of an integrated experience came to dominant her thinking.

“It has become the way in which I integrate the experience of living into the experience of self, the process by which I assimilate life, the way I overcame the existential estrangement between my experience of inner life and outer life, the process by which I now begin to experience the dissolution of boundaries between the inner and the outer.”

She had found a way to embody and connect to the activity, situation and context by a method of drawing that relied on how the drawing was ‘performed’. This
involved the handling of bunches of very sharp pencils and tracking on paper with two hands, simultaneously, the movements that people were undertaking in their everyday activity. On her travels, fistfuls of pencils, a battery operated sharpener, and various sizes of sketchpads have become ubiquitous.

Immediacy of means - pencils, surface, space, tactility, pressure, physicality, reduction/expansion - space - compacts experience - of being and doing - reduces liminality - marks on surface - tensions - visible traces of process. Indexical - gesture, mark, trace, directly causal - Immersive. 13

Here then we see O'Hara starting to explore the possibilities of drawing that places emphasis on the human body and its relation to activity in various environments. The act of drawing is examined by implicating the artist as an active participant and not as a passive bystander or observer of events. By placing the artist in an active position, emphasis is focused on drawing as a performed activity. This in turn is further explored through the idea of drawing as the trace and connector to the physical environment. The performance and its document.

In 1998 O'Hara was visiting the performance artist Boris Nieslony at his studio in Köln, Germany. On the journey the airline had trashed her old suitcase. While Nieslony was repairing the hinge of the suitcase on a table in his studio she started to draw the activity. She started to make what she had been calling a ‘Live Transmission’. In this instance drawing the movement of his hands as he worked. She was surprised later when he invited her the following year to participate in a specific performance art event entitled Performance Konferenz in Frankfurt as a performer. This was the first time she had thought of what she was doing as ‘performance’. It was in this context and with the support of respected performance artists she was finally able to accept and legitimise her role as performance artist. A chain of events was then set in motion that has lead O'Hara to make performances of ‘Live Transmissions’ at an expanding international level. This has encompassed performance art festivals and events, solo exhibitions at major institutions and galleries and extended artist in
residence projects. The resulting activity links her practice to the strategies and experimental exercises in freedom by previous artists concerned with the rejection of tradition whereby process is inhabited and revealed.

**Transmission**

In performance there is often the simultaneous processing, translating, transmitting and recording of events in the moment of their occurrence through an embodied state of being and presence. And too, there is the transmission of experience; direct or otherwise, through the recording and experiences of those circumstances and their impact upon those present. Through her practical engagement and example O’Hara introduces us to the possibilities of drawing that places emphasis on the human body and by extension its very condition as a phenomenological participant and its relation to time, space and place. By placing the artist in an active position, emphasis is focused on drawing as a performed activity that incorporates occurrence, embodied state, impact, and document.

In O’Hara’s ‘Live Transmission’ performances this is iterated directly through drawing as an integrated performance process. This in turn is a circular referent connected to the integration of knowledge that reverberates throughout a post-war / post 20th century artistic occupation with the here and now moment of being and doing. Here the artist as exemplified by Morgan O’Hara becomes the embodied, connected, immersive conduit of experiences in and of the present moment, that informs and impacts upon a range of contemporary fine art practices.

Here in actuality, in memory, in transmission, and in my body; and in that moment at Trace on a cold rainy night in 2002 I am allowed to continually re-consider our art historical preconceptions concerning image making, image processing and their preconceived outcomes. It is here I am also allowed to engage in an experience of performative drawing as embodied activity that has an historical association with the ephemeral, and a relationship to the history of painting and performance art, that is immersive, fluid and integrated.
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6 Email 4 Sep 2013, at 00:04, Morgan O'Hara
8 ibid
9 ibid
10 ibid
11 Email. On Mon, Sep 2, 2013 at 11:15 PM, Morgan O'Hara
12 ibid Leonardo, Vol.16, No.4, pp. 265-272, 1983
13 Stitt, André, Student Drawing Workshop, Cardiff School of Art & Design, 2012