

ARTFORUM

MAY 2017

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Morgan O'Hara

MITCHELL ALGUS GALLERY

Across the past three decades, Morgan O'Hara has produced more than five thousand examples of what she calls her Live Transmission works, a strand of her practice situated between performance and drawing. These renderings are the product of a process whereby O'Hara "records" movement—of musicians, orators, actors, and fellow artists; of workers of all sorts, from gardeners to bakers to stonemasons; of bees and carp and turtles—in real time with only pencils and paper, tools that function for the septuagenarian artist as a mediumistic interface between herself and the world of space and motion around her. Portraits not just of entities but also of places and temporalities the artist draws in a unique sort of physical and emotional communion with her subjects, O'Hara's diagrams—more than a hundred of which were on view in this revelatory exhibition—represent a novel interaction between a spectator and her surroundings that makes movement and presence visible in a manner that's at once frankly descriptive and profoundly personal.

The show, the first exhibition of O'Hara's Live Transmission works in New York in two decades, was hung salon style, covering the walls of Mitchell Algus's modest second-floor Delancey Street space. The works' basic form was, on the surface, highly consistent: a piece of white paper (or, in a few cases, canvas) filled to a greater or lesser degree with the artist's vaguely seismographic inscriptions, then titled in small script along its bottom edge with plainspoken information listing the subject, activity, place, and date of the event recorded. Yet despite their general compositional constancy, the various categories into which the works were divided had their own particular moods and methodologies, the works within them demonstrating a diversity of response to the stimuli with which O'Hara engaged.

The artists she recorded include a spectrum of major figures: Marina Abramović and Ulay, Vito Acconci, Hermann Nitsch, Jonas Mekas, Nam June Paik. *Movement of the hands of DICK HIGGINS reading his poetry and performing at the piano with garden gloves / Fluxus Festival / Anthology Film Archive / New York City / 30 October 1994* is beautifully suggestive of the two discrete moments of the Fluxus pioneer's performance, featuring a small cell of relatively circumscribed gestures describing the reading set alongside a rambunctious thicket of horizontal lines depicting him at the keyboard. But O'Hara also focuses on less canonical figures, such as the ikebana master Ken Katayama: Her *arrangement of yellow flowers: acacia, forsythia, cala [sic] lilies and yellow rice paper in a tall vase / New York City / 13 February 1997* elegantly evokes his creation of a floral composition. Her drawings of theatrical productions explore the conditions of ensemble movement, while the musicians' cohort fascinates in the way it shows gesture necessarily bound to the physical requirements of a given instrument: the low-slung mound of dark lines describing the hands of the piano virtuoso Martha Argerich as they moved over the keys during a performance of

a Beethoven concerto, for example, or the traces of Hill Greene's interaction with the body of his upright bass condensing into a starburst topped by the long stem of the instrument's fingerboard.

Though it's tempting to try to glean some psychological insight from the drawings of the main players in contemporary American politics—a unitary clutch of lines describing Obama's tightly focused speaking habits contrasted with the looser and more expansive movements of Sanders, Clinton, or Trump—O'Hara's idiosyncratic depictions are always necessarily oblique and incomplete, perfectly aware of their own limitations. Yet in her remarkable persistence with them, whether working in realm of the anthropological—as with in her rendering of the slanting movements of Stephen Hawking's eyes during a lecture that perfectly conjures the physicist's familiar slumped posture, or the jittering hands of a newborn in a Berlin neonatal unit—or in the precincts of things, as in the fitful, arrested curves of *Movement of fire beginning to burn a papier maché sphere, put out by a sudden rainfall / Sheifling, Austria / 1 July 1995*, O'Hara does add to our knowledge of the world, registering and translating moments of vitality wherever they might break out.

—Jeffrey Kastner



Morgan O'Hara,
LIVE TRANSMISSION:
*movement of the
hands of JONAS
MEKAS performing at
the Fluxus Festival /
Anthology Film
Archive / New York
City / 30 October
1994, pencil on
paper, 11 x 14"*