

John O'Connor

Like exploded pages from a mad scientist's notebook, or experimental algorithms by a conspiracy theorist looking for patterns, John O'Connor's intricate colored-pencil drawings map the mismatched contours of his world, from the grandest public events (wars, earthquakes) to the most intimate personal (the strains of hair loss in his family). Mining his environment for data and applying nonsense rules to them, juxtaposing them with seemingly unrelated information and running them through the mill of chance operations, O'Connor produces elaborate ruminations on order and randomness that simultaneously comment on viewing and decoding, on perspective and indeed on perception itself.

A confident, slightly psychedelic aestheticism masks and cracks the strictness of his predetermined systems. His charts foreground the notion of *mediation*: that of reality through the interpreter, and that of the work of art through the viewer, in this case invited to literally decode. In the chaos of his surroundings—the rhythms of his own sleep talking, the syntax of a few books, the proclamations of Nostradamus—sly patterns flicker. In *Dr. Atkins' Code of Independence*, 2005, O'Connor "documents" his reading material over two summers, from the *Farmer's Almanac* to *Fast Food Nation*, using a simple but obscure code based on words per sentence and sentences per paragraph, colors denoting numbers (as is typical in these works). The result of the meticulous two-year charting process is a glittering grid in a jagged figure 8, in which it becomes obvious from the colored squares that the structure of *The Da Vinci Code* is far simpler than that of *The Bible Code II*.

Conjuring relations among the most disparate terms, O'Connor toys with the notion of significance. A breakthrough moment came for him about a decade ago, when, on the brink of his own artistic maturation, he found himself hamstrung by an insistent question: Why make *this* mark on the paper and not some other? While many artists find a satisfying response by drawing out a personal style, O'Connor sought to ground his work in two ways: to reflect the relativism that leads to the absence of meaning in art; and to rely on the actual world for its substance. In the attempt to strip his process of authorial decisions based on a projected aesthetic, O'Connor pared his vocabulary to a Twombly-esque scribble and chicken scratch and, later, turned to an automatism borrowed from his own erstwhile musical practice, drumming, which in the years-long absence of an instrument had devolved into absent fidgeting: a table-tapping, thumb-thumping, foot-jiggling idle tic. With charcoal or lead-pencil "drumsticks" O'Connor would rap out a standard sequence or drumroll, the resulting marks simply a visual record of the percussive act, a trace both predetermined and, due to the unique contingency of every strike, consistently surprising. In renouncing the "meaningful" gestures of artistic subjectivity, O'Connor had found a mark that recorded a moment as insignificant as it was unrepeatable.

It may be misleading to think of *music* as the basis for this breakthrough, for it is the Cagean definition of music—a kind of anti-music—on which O'Connor relied. John Cage, celebrated (and reviled) for being the first to confront the negation of meaning in his own field, brought music and performance to ground with a crash by composing according to chance and predetermined systems, and separating composition and the sound of the work in performance, along the way positing music as the accidental

conjunction of ambient sounds during the “performance” of his silent works. Cage’s so-called aesthetic of indifference is equal parts mysticism and anti-aestheticism. His reliance on chance in works derived from the flipping of I Ching coins (such as *Music of Changes*, 1951) replaces traditional musical structure with the atonality of randomness repetition, and silence and conventional musical time with a nonlinear permutation. Perhaps paradoxically, Cage’s rigorously structural approach brought freedom from the bounds of musical composition and performance that had not yet been definitively broken.

What O'Connor sought was the reverse: looking for a structure that would authenticate his practice, he found the freedom, or the license, to express his ideas. It is not the mysticism of aesthetics (now a bankrupt notion) but that of the everyday world, a rational mysticism—something akin to science—that underlies O'Connor’s practice. Appropriately, his recent work has a new-age Big Bang feel, with great flashes of prismatic color and untethered line cracking outward from tightly controlled islands of pattern. Each image yields several layers of narrative, encouraging the viewer to free-associate. The planetary dome of *Mexada*, 2005, tops a miasma of stages of fission that unleash a steadily intensifying wave of static. Or: the dome, with its patches of hieroglyph, microorganism, and rune, represents the past, which gives way to a mishmash of genetic sequences, state boundaries, and biological variances (the present), which in turn fragments into an unreadable, mechanized hum that is the future. Or: raw information in black-and-white binary form flows relentlessly into the maw of a gridded, brainy eggshell with complementary east-west antennae, who reads in the lines all the stuff of this world, while making a meal of us. In fact, O'Connor explains, for this drawing he made stencils of the contours of the U.S.-Mexican and U.S.-Canadian borders, traced them onto the paper according to a set of winning lottery numbers (odd number, Canada; even number, Mexico), repeated the lower edge of this shape in black and white, and for the top of the drawing, turned to a book of hierarchies and constructed a grid based on the names of Greek and Roman gods.

The obscure cross-referencing and layering of cues here is typical. But though O'Connor’s systems are generally illegible, his language is neither uncommunicative nor private: as a set of codes that determines an image, it is actually expressive and transparent. His reliance on outside texts adds a note of literary transcendence, but also roots his practice in a web of available materials and accessible contexts. On the other hand, O'Connor is not interested in laying out a system of rules that someone else could carry out. If his project developed from a crisis of meaning, it has grown to reflect the complexity of the position of the contemporary subject: both author and neutral observer, the artist invites the viewer to both *read* and *gaze*, to interpret as well as just look. Positioning himself as a necessary figure in the full apprehension of the work, O'Connor accepts the privileged role that his strategies of chance and predetermination would seem to work against, and simultaneously acts as the originator of a peculiarly Cagean split: between the sometimes elaborate terms of the process of creation or composition on the one hand and, on the other, the resulting visual testimony, which bears little or no trace of its ancestry. His complex structural approach highlights the character of all visual systems as determined, mediated, sometimes even closed, and the role of the viewer in the completion of the work of art—and how it can be thwarted. Many of the words that appear among O'Connor’s swirling forms are the output of his pocket dictionary, a

constant companion and sometime collaborator that spits out its guesses at correct spelling when fed a nonsense series of letters that result from some numeric formulas or other.

The tension between chaos and composition at the core of O'Connor's work also fuels the controversy in this country over so-called intelligent design, the ideologically based critique of evolution. (O'Connor is planning a drawing around the subject.) The theory of intelligent design holds that it is impossible for the teeming, luxuriant variety of matter and life to have evolved steadily from its basic building blocks under exactly the right conditions without some guiding force; the theory is, of course, a pseudo-scientific veil for creationism. What it rails against is the idea that the intricate, mysterious systems of the natural world can and do develop as finely balanced, perfectly adapted, unfathomably sophisticated entities simply by chance. The true foe of the intelligent design proponent is not the evolutionist but the chaos theorist, who extends the argument into mathematics, physics and meteorology to demonstrate that wondrous complexity can and does develop as a result of tiny variations in initial conditions in nonlinear systems: the butterfly effect. But the term *chaos* is misleading: what chaos theorists have shown is that the apparently random patterns that infinitesimal changes in an initial condition generates are in fact dependably graphable as a spiral, a definitely ordered pattern.

Chaos is not randomness, and has little to do with chance, which itself is not a nonlinear but a probabilistic system. Chance functions for O'Connor as a tool with which to distance himself from his own ideas, allowing aesthetic decisions to be determined without consultation with any actual aesthetic. It also enables him to act in concert with natural laws and secure the cooperation of the viewer as an ally in the quest for meaning. What O'Connor offers in his coded webs of relations is a chart of the tortured path.

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