

BRIAN O'DOHERTY *Connecting the ...">*


CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE


MAILINGLIST

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BRIAN O'DOHERTY *Connecting the ...*

by Kara L. Rooney

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It is nearly impossible to summarize the various contributions Brian O'Doherty has made to the art world over the past five decades. Artist, critic, and writer, the famed editor of *Art in America* (1971 – 74) and pioneer of the “conceptual double issue” 5+6 of the magazine-in-a-box *Aspen*, as well as the author of several novels and critical essays, including the seminal text “Inside The White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space” (1976), O'Doherty—until 2008 also known by his artistic pseudonym, Patrick Ireland— has continually slipped the trap of classification. A two-venue exhibition of O'Doherty's visual work, concurrently on view at Simone Subal and P! galleries on Manhattan's Lower East Side, largely examines the output of these prolific years, with drawings, sculptures, and site-specific installations that span as far back as O'Doherty's time as a medical student in 1951, to the present. The mirrored, joint exhibitions offer an eclectic overview of the artist's probing intellectual and existentialist pursuits, subjects that range as widely as the semantic structure of language to our comparative experience of space, the exploration of individual identity, art historical tropes, and a personal (and formative) obsession with chess.

The capacity of language, as a means of approaching relational and individual meaning, has always posed a quandary; what is articulated is rarely what is received, the problem of speech existing in the interstitial gaps that frame our understanding of the self and of others. Along these lines, O'Doherty has made the visual and semantic exploration of language's communicative flaws his life's work. His *Structural Plays*, two-person acts in which performers engage in a type of conversational call and response, illuminate the complexities of context and inflection characteristic of any spoken exchange. “Structural Play: Violence” (1968), one of 10 such works by O'Doherty and exhibited here in the graphic form of ink on paper, consists of 16 movements by two participants. Framed by two 60 × 60-inch grids placed approximately five feet apart, each actor, according to the drawing's instructions, is assigned the task of stating a simple phrase (the script comprised of one of the many conversations overheard and recorded by O'Doherty

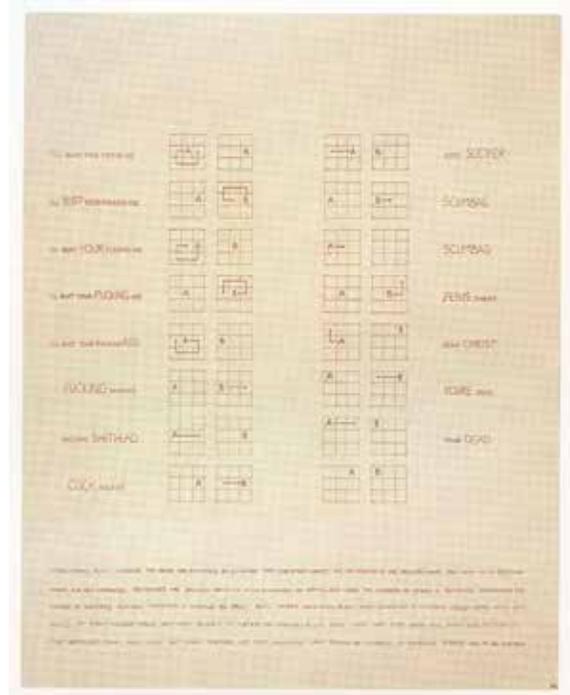
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during his daily encounters between 1967 and 1970). Each movement placed emphasis on a different word in the sentence: “Sentences are spoken briskly with emphasis on capitalized word. The number of words in the sentence determines the number of squares claimed. Movements should be brisk. Both movers lead with right foot,” and so on, the drawing stipulates. The speed of the performers’ enactment, their intonation of the script — “I’LL bust your fucking ass; I’ll BUST your fucking ass”—and androgynously presented personas, signaled by identical costumes in white stocking masks and red codpieces, determine the Socratic cleverness of the work, where the vernacular patterns that define daily interaction and receipt are repeatedly called into question.

“Structural Play: Vowel Grid” (1970), for which both spaces have screened videos of the original performance on floorbound television monitors, also utilizes the rapidity of performed movement, diction of the players, and organizing principle of the grid for its visual and auditory punch. Here, however, as opposed to the aggressively charged verbiage that defined “Violence,” the emphasis is placed on the vowel sounds that make up the Celtic Ogham language, where the exclaimed phonic structures—the “broad” vowels A, O, U, and “slender” vowels, E and I— act as a type of cultural reality formation, a notion supported by Wittgenstein’s theory of utterance as an image of reality. Via the deliberate actions of the performers and their almost sculptural cries, our connection to sound and speaker constantly shifts. Such powerful aural effects reference the writings of linguists like Walter Ong, wherein exploring the function of sound in primary oral cultures he states:

the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings’ feel for existence, as processed by the spoken word...the centering action of sound (the field of sound is not spread out before me but all around me) affects man’s sense of the cosmos, and by extension, his situational place in the world.¹

Staged within the ancient stone ringfort of Grianan of Aileach, thought to have been built by the Uí Néill prior to the sixth century C.E., the “Vowel Grid” performance assumes specific socio-political, historio-lingual, and aesthetic overtones for O’Doherty—those of Minimalism and Conceptualism, envisioned via the artist’s use of the grid as both a practical and conceptual solution for disarming the systematic structure of linear reading, and complex ties to his homeland’s turbulent history, visible in the breathtaking views of the Irish countryside that make up the work’s dramatic backdrop. For this viewer, however, the experience was much more alien, the juxtaposition of vivid landscape and guttural calls conspiring to produce an approximation of awareness more akin to the subconscious plane.



Brian O’Doherty, “Structural Play: Violence,” 1968. Ink on paper 29 × 23”. Image courtesy of the artist, P!, and Simone Subal Gallery.

Simone Subal Gallery

The Structural Plays are children of the chessboard,” O’Doherty writes in a letter to the former director of the Orchard Gallery, Liam Kelly, “which is where my grids come from. The idea of chess was fascinating.” The plays and drawings thus serve as both vocal and visual scores, producing meaning on multiple levels situated simultaneously within the graphic structure of the grid and verbal recounting of narrative without imposing a hierarchy of forms. With these works, O’Doherty points to and reinvents historical fact. He suggests that relational understanding is just as much about context, about one’s history and experience in the world that instructs us how to interact and understand one another, as it is about a set way of interacting within our linguistic environment.



Brian O’Doherty, “Rope Drawing #122: Here/Now,” 2014. Acrylic paint, rope 13 × 17 × 19’. Image courtesy of the artist, P!, and Simone Subal Gallery.

Other works in this vein include “AOU, The Broad Vowels” (2005), a 6 × 6-foot painting in liquitex on canvas, that spells out the equivalent markings of the Oghum broad vowels, as well as “One Here Now” (1970), in which the viewers reflection is mirrored by two narrow plinths of aluminum on wood, conjoined at a 45 degree angle, with incised notches that spell out the work’s title in the succinct lexicon of Oghum markings. This use of drawn text, particularly in the instance of the Ogham script, whose written language is a matter of charted lines (A=one vertical slash or l, O=ll, U=lll and so on), is thus comprised of warring dualities, apparent in the artist’s struggle to free the word from the orderly structure imposed upon it by its written form, while at the same time embracing its most human qualities in the mark’s relation to visibility.

Such experiential exploration extends to the notions of space as well, most poignantly in “Rope Drawing #120: Here and Now” (2014), made specifically for the Simone Subal gallery. This bifurcated immersive environment features four portals, two painted on opposite walls and two that open freely into the space, their boundaries delimited by alternating white and orange rope. An elongated rectangular black portal forms the locus of one wall, with a hot lavender pyramidal shape surrounding its frame. Moss green triangular forms lock the purple hue into position equally on the left and right sides, with a royal blue shape hovering above the plotted geometry as if to indicate sky. From this arithmetic wall painting extend multiple pieces of rope, dividing the gallery into identical portals from which one can enter or exit the installation. Depending on one’s position within the piece, our optical comprehension of the space is destabilized: as soon as an individual breaks the frame, the illusion of two-dimensional form is shattered.

O’Doherty’s occupation with identity formation also appears throughout the exhibition. It is present in the artist’s idiosyncratic portraits of Wittgenstein and Marcel Duchamp (the latter of which he made 16 non-pictorial representations in sum), as well as his intimately delicate drawings in graphite, one of himself as a young man in 1957, and two of an unnamed girl from 1951. “Past,

Simone Subal Gallery

Present, Future: Portrait of the artist Aet. 7” from 1967 confirms this musing curiosity, the handwritten text a meditation on presence and its associated analysis: *Looking at the shopfront, which turned logic into paradox, reversed future and past ... his triplicated body was perilously sustained.* The portraits humanize the exhibit, wherein the rigor of intellectual and phenomenological endeavors give way to the infinite array of possibilities vital to the formation of self and memory.

Ultimately, O’Doherty makes what is invisible visible—he points with witty eloquence to the instability of spatial presence, normative speech, and most importantly, our temporal sense of being in the world. His objects and performances, charged with the erratic and sentient markers that define a life lived, are his contribution, for in denying any sense of narrative closure O’Doherty reminds us, often with an invocation of the trickster’s playfulness, that we alone are in command of our making and ultimately, our becoming.

NOTES

1. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1982/2002), p. 72.
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