

# Strolling with the Zeitgeist

Brian O'Doherty is a doctor, artist, writer, editor and award-winning documentary filmmaker. Highlights of his career include: taking Marcel Duchamp's electrocardiogram; commissioning Roland Barthes to write 'The Death of the Author' and Susan Sontag 'The Aesthetics of Silence'; writing the hugely influential book *Inside the White Cube* about the meaning of the Modernist exhibition space; and being short-listed for the Booker Prize. Here, he reflects on six decades of avoiding being categorized.

*Night Window*  
from 'Times of Day Cycle', c.1985,  
installed in one of the bedrooms  
of Casa Dipinta,  
Brian O'Doherty's house in  
Todi, Italy



After training as a doctor in Ireland, Brian O’Doherty was an art critic for The New York Times in the 1960s, produced and hosted two art series for television; edited *Aspen* 5+6 (1967) (which included Roland Barthes’s essay ‘The Death of the Author’ and Susan Sontag’s ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’); and was editor of *Art in America* from 1971–74. Throughout, he continued to make work as an artist. O’Doherty also served for 19 years as director of the film, radio and television section of the National Endowment for the Arts, where he funded artists and exhibition spaces working with new media. His published works include *Inside the White Cube: Ideologies of the Gallery Space* (1976) and the novel *The Deposition of Father McGreevy* (2000), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The first monograph on his work, Brian O’Doherty/Patrick Ireland: Between Categories (Brenda Moore McCann; Lund Humphries/Ashgate), was published in 2009.

O’Doherty continues to make art and write. His novel *The Cross-dresser’s Secret* will be published by Sternberg Press later this year; his solo show at Kunstmuseum Bayreuth, Germany, opens 3 July. The following essay is an edited version of the lecture he delivered at Frieze Talks in 2012.



I am amazed at how, with time, I have been absolved from my general disregard of categories, as nothing summons the fury of the category monster more than breaking the rules of professional conduct as it conceives them to be. Painters who become sculptors? Probably not. Paediatricians who become psychiatrists? Disallowed. A concert pianist who is also a great poet? Impossible. We are allowed one role and breaking out of it disturbs constancies, the frame within which we see each other and which facilitates social discourse.

But this is small stuff compared to the great wind that hurries our little selves along. Poor zeitgeist. It blows along heedlessly, a vast, imprecise flatulence to which we apply grand phrases like ‘the spirit of the age’ and ‘historical inevitability’; I have felt it exhale on my forehead off and on for 60 years. How should I measure my small creative struggles against that vast abstraction, as life meanwhile accumulated its great collage of experiences, hopes, fantasies, loves? All those memories are deposited where time and place converge to be retrieved in convincing facsimile, in the ‘now’ – always with the rumble of the great events we live through in the background.

In 1957, chance, a generous friend and the Nuffield Foundation had placed me in a Nissen hut in the experimental psychology laboratories in Cambridge, UK. I was in the same town as the great neuro-researcher, Lord Adrian, who I would see pedalling down Trumpington Street in his gaiters, and Frederic Bartlett, who wrote one of my favourite books, *Remembering* (1932). I had to invent an experiment to earn my keep, and so I devised a test in which five things changed into five other things. My premise was that the old have a rich imaginative life, though they may not express it. Between the first card and the last, there is a zone where hypotheses are formed and discarded. This is the area, the ‘in-between’ where, in retrospect, I realize I’ve lived most of my life.

In 1968, in New York, 11 years later, as my colleagues and I were attending Conceptualism’s *accouchement*, I thought: there’s a nascent work of art here. So I added what I thought were appropriate meditations on the nature of categories and presented it as a work of art: *Between Categories*. It’s been shown several times to great incomprehension. It’s one of what I call my ‘gestures’: a work of art that marks, and perhaps defines, a moment and remains more-or-less isolated from the so-called grand teleology of one’s work. Gestures are made at a specific time and place. Making the wrong one at the right time, or vice versa, is a timing error – like playing on after the whistle has blown.

1  
Brian O’Doherty, *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp: Lead 1, Slow Heartbeat*, 1966, wood, glass, liquitex, motor, 43 × 43 × 10 cm

2  
Aspen 5+6, edited by Brian O’Doherty

From Cambridge, I travelled to the School of Public Health at Harvard University. Secular transcendence was in the air; Yuri Gagarin was circling the earth. What an impact that had! Pure wonder. Down on earth, I shrugged off the medical degrees I took in Dublin, and the degree at Harvard, and found myself at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts doing a television series – which is very bad for any artist. Things got worse. I was invited to join *The New York Times* as a critic; but how can you make serious art if you’re a critic? So, in 1964, while still at *The Times*, I surreptitiously masturbated some art into existence: *The Body and its Discontents*. Its four-sided half-cubes colour-code the body’s anatomy, physiology, pathology and the sensorium – a continuing obsession of mine. So medicine wasn’t wasted, perhaps.

In 1966, *The New York Times* a memory, I made a gesture I couldn’t have done without medical training. I was in the US, where I wanted to be, where baseball is played in pyjamas and football in space-suits. As a kid in Dublin, there were three artists I wanted to meet: Stuart Davis, equal in my view to the Romantic absolutists such as Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock *et al*; Edward Hopper, about whom I made a film, *Hopper’s Silence*, in 1981; and Marcel Duchamp, whose appealing voice I recorded.

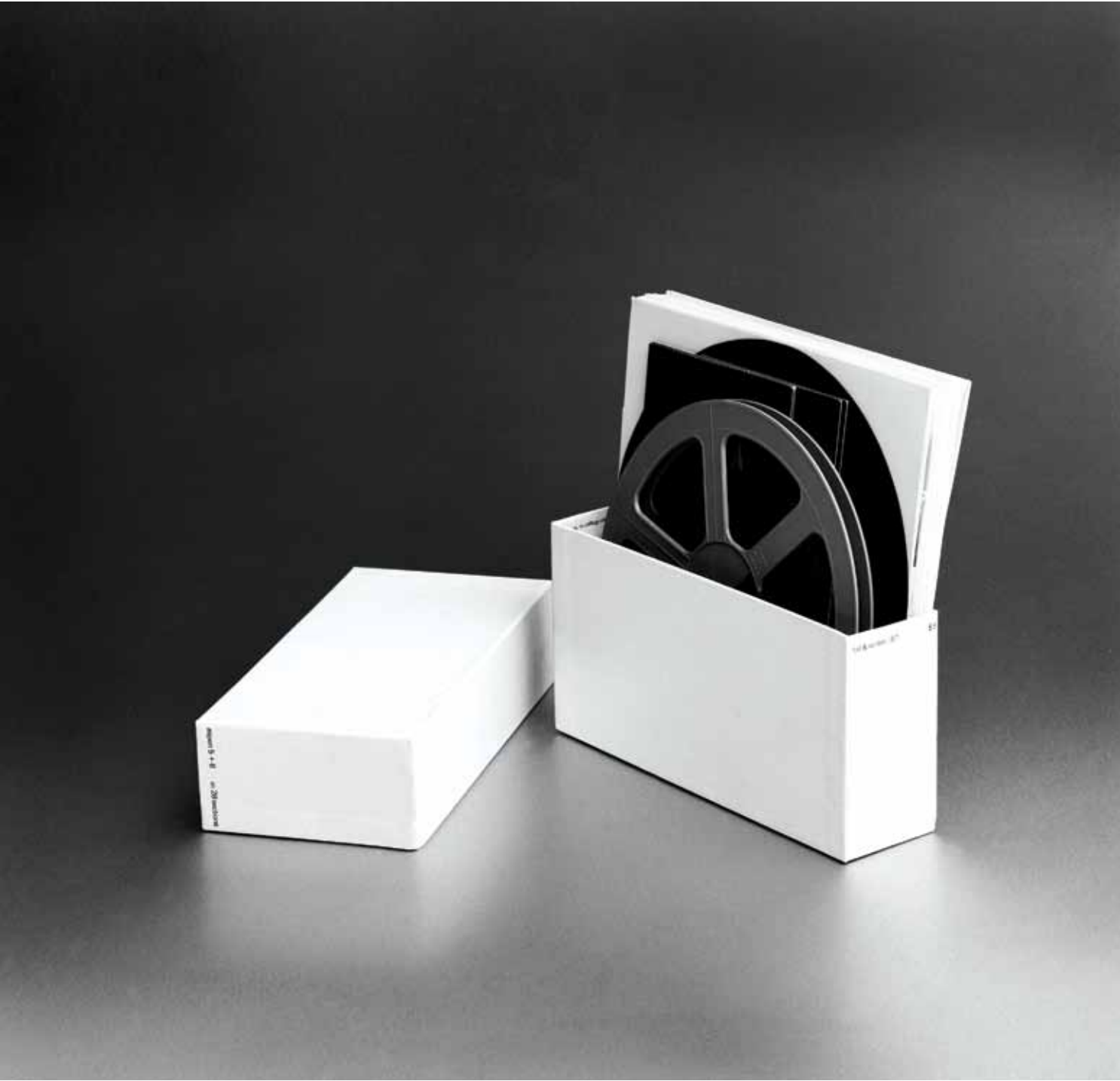
The three of them didn’t have much time for each other. Duchamp was the joker in the Modernist pack. I asked him if I could do his portrait. He said ‘Yes.’ He came to dinner with his delightful wife, Teeny. I had hired an electrocardiographic machine and took his EKG in the bedroom before we ate. Duchamp had said that art diminishes by half-lives in the museum; I wanted to refute that. When he came to my exhibition in 1966, he saw *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp: Lead 1, Slow Heartbeat* (1966). Looking at Duchamp looking at his heartbeat I was reminded that Eugène Delacroix apparently said he hadn’t understood Turner’s paintings until he saw John Ruskin looking at them. Did Duchamp’s captured heartbeat refute his idea that art died on the institutional wall?

In 1967 I edited issue 5+6 of *Aspen* – an assemblage of artists, writers and musicians in shifting configurations. The themes were language, silence and time. I commissioned Roland Barthes to write ‘The Death of the Author’; Susan Sontag, ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’; and George Kubler – the author of *The Shape of Time* (1962), which we were all reading then – to write ‘Style and the Representation of Historical Time’. I also asked Samuel Beckett to contribute something. After I explained some of my ideas he replied: ‘Ah, sure I haven’t a scrap.’ I was prepared for that. I said: ‘Could I use something out of “Texts for Nothing #8”?’ He said ‘Yes.’ ‘Would you read it for me?’ ‘No, I don’t do that. But you could get Jack McGowran to read it.’ Jack, though long gone, is, in my view, the unsurpassed Beckett performer. I called Jack in Dublin. Yes, he would read it. Send the fee. I did. Back came this magnificent tape. Some have generously called it the best Beckett reading ever. My wife, Barbara Novak, and I are in the kitchen listening to this great fugue. Suddenly, it stops. I call Jack. ‘It’s wonderful, Jack, but it stops half-way’. ‘Ah,’ said Jack, ‘that’s as far as the money brought me.’ Back to the publisher. More money. The full tape arrives.

Around the same time, my colleagues and I in New York were slipping from late Minimalism into first-generation Conceptualism. Each of us took our own path – Sol LeWitt, Dan Graham and Mel Bochner; a young British artist in New York, Peter Hutchinson; some others, including the great Eva Hesse, the most original artist I ever met. We hung out together for some years and I learned about the violent energies within an avant-garde. I wanted to put together three things: minimal means, serial sequences (a way of avoiding the exhausted fallacies of composition) and language.

Dozens of languages are progressing to extinction as I write this – a sad parallel to the extinction of species. The demise of both lessens us; they are mirrors of ourselves that go dark. Each extinct language frames the user and the world he or she inhabits. Joseph Cornell, who was genuinely pained about such losses, sent me a letter with an interesting example of a dead language, its last speaker being a parrot. Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that if only one person speaks a language there is no possibility of communication. Language, written and spoken, was intrinsic to much of the work I made in the 1960s.

Conceptualism entertained language eagerly, as it had to, to make its point. Language began to chew up and digest the visual. The galleries, except for a brave few, hated it. In part, it questioned the system within which we artists worked, and which worked us. Could we separate ourselves from the bathwater in which we were immersed? Conceptualism was international in its simultaneity and formidable intellectual energy. I had a distaste for the Roman alphabet’s arbitrary configurations, which, through common agreement, give us the vast abstraction called language



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and its Tower of Babel. How could I replace it with a rational system that could convey its signs across cultures?

So I searched. I looked at Pre-Columbian numerology, Scandinavian runes, Mesopotamian word-lists, languages including Farsi, Egyptian hieroglyphs and signs, the evolution of written Japanese and Chinese. I learned a lot. It didn’t help. Everything was curiously organic, strange, jagged and smooth configurations, blooms of denotation grown from God knows what. What did I want? A numerical and unbreakable logic, and the elimination of organic taint.

By accident, I found it in my own backyard. The Irish Celts of the seventh century did something quite extraordinary. They translated 20 letters of the Roman alphabet into lines: a language, or code, known as ‘ogham’. Of these 20, they used 18. ‘Q’ and ‘x’ were unused – alphabetical

fossils. Of particular interest to me were the vowels. You could translate them, Beckett-style, into knocks: ‘a-oo-uuu-eeee-iiii’. Four registers, one to five lines on each. One register – the vowels – vertically across the line, above the line, below the line, slanting obliquely across the line; it was an entirely logical system. The ogham was carved into the edges of standing stones. The horizontal line is the spine the crossing lines use as their voice-box, as it were – the lines being the syllabic tongues. Now, let’s take a leap forward into the 1990s, the preface to the new century.

I had started out as a painter, and was occasionally nostalgic for the larval trail of the brush across the weave. So in the 1990s, in six-foot-square paintings, I formalized my earlier work based on ogham, shamelessly betraying my Conceptual roots by indulging in colour. My painted epistles to the tradition of Henri Matisse & Co. were written in a dead language;

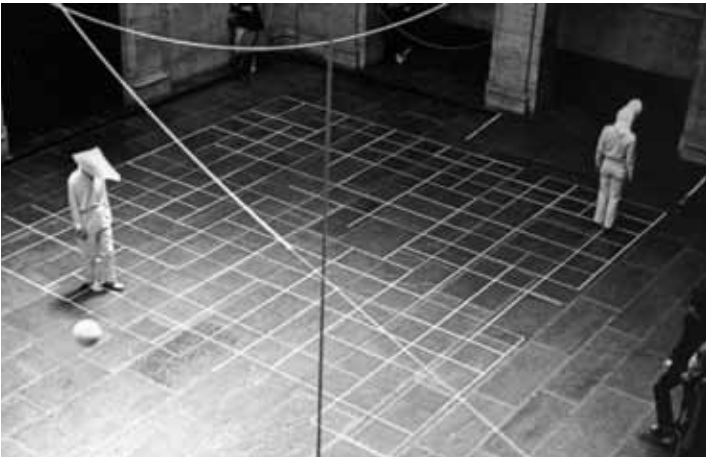
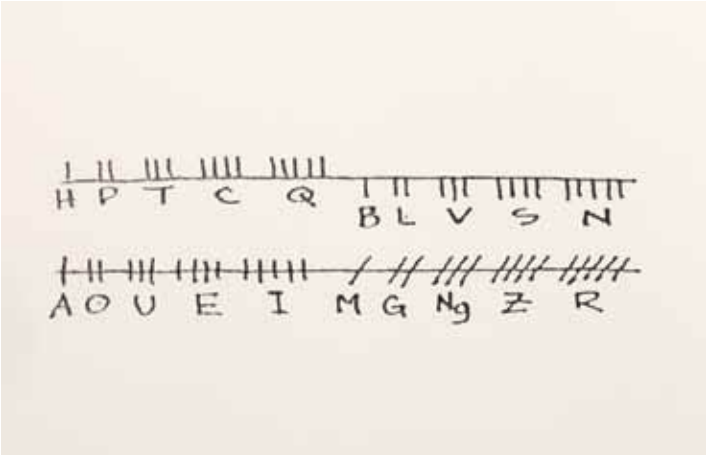
1 courtesy: the artist and Dublin City Gallery • 2 photograph: Fiann McCann



How should I measure my small creative struggles against that vast abstraction, as life meanwhile accumulates its great collage of experiences, hopes, fantasies, loves?

though, to be precise, the code still utters its nouns and vowels on standing stones over the Irish Southwest and parts of Scotland. I was reviving a code that had been mute for over a millennium – a long silence – and bringing it into the cockpit of New York Conceptualism.

This dead code seemed to me eerily contemporary. Think of the four registers of serial music: the set, the reverse of the set, one over the set, the reverse of one over the set. In the mid-to-late 1960s, my closest friend was the composer Morton Feldman. Many of our conversations centred around music, of course, and serialism, visual modes of music notation; much of our talk, however, focussed on Morty’s magical attachment to the Abstract Expressionists and my Janus-faced situation between them and my Minimal/Conceptual colleagues.



The magic square – in which every column, down and across, and each diagonal, adds up to the same number – was my canvas and page for 30 years. For many artists, the grid was the war horse of the 1960s. I was a demon griddier. If there is any consistency in my life, apart from my wife, it is the grid and the vowels. I think the grid is misinterpreted as a static, paralyzed icon. For me, it teems with possibilities. It’s indexical of all that is rational, but as mad as many logical things turn out to be – artificial, hysterical, subsuming its own version of chaos. It’s rigid, but flexible, a measure of scale but scale-less; it’s flat with intimations of depth, democratic about space but really absolutist, stamped with rigidity but alert with permutational virtuosity. It’s a container that contains itself, both form and content. It’s definitely not a paralyzed cliché, particularly when each cell can have different powers.

Drawing, for me, is always connected to the voice, to sound. The vowels are primal utterances, borne on gusts of air from chest and glottis – no tricking around with tongue, lips and palate to produce the pouts, hisses, ticks and clicks of consonants. There is a little sly tonguing (gentle pressure on the upper molars) in the ‘e’ and at the end of the ‘i’. The opaque Tower of Babel is made from a chaotic compression of consonants within which glimpses of translucent vowels catch the light. The consonants can’t go anywhere without a vowel. This is my ramshackle theory of linguistic origin.

Let’s look at that grid again and think of ogham vowels: one to five strokes, sounds and lengths each distinguished by colour. In *Vowel Grid* (1970) two performers spoke my drawing through movement and sound. The performers knew what to say by walking the five-coloured line. Three steps = ‘u’; 5 steps = ‘i’; the broad vowels (‘a’, ‘o’, ‘u’) spoken from the chest; the slender vowels (‘e’, ‘i’) forced through the glottis. It was first performed at the Fogg Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts; they prohibited subsequent performances, a response that’s hard to get nowadays. *Vowel Grid* was part of the series ‘Structural Plays’, which I made between 1967 and ’70. I was interested in various modes of pre-literate speech; the vowels are pre-articulate chords of emotion, audible in the scales of opera singers, in the weird conversational attempts of my dog, and in the mourning of so-called primitive societies. Around this time, I performed vowel poems, usually to the great amusement of my friends.

In 1973, drawing led me to installation – the first one, at 112 Greene Street in New York, a vowel grid. I found myself clambering all over galleries, attaching ropes, twine, silk cords to ceiling, corners, floors and walls. I noticed that the space I worked in was always white and as blank as a canvas – the modern gallery, the aristocratic, highly pedigreed artificial container which now contained me. I could turn it into a place with hierarchies of occupation, vistas, framed and unframed, with walls I could make breathe, in push-pull fashion by evolving various devices. I asked myself: ‘What is this space I’m in? How did it get there?’ Nobody in the 1970s was asking that dumb space that dumb question. So, in 1976, I wrote a series of three articles for *Artforum* titled ‘Inside the White Cube: the Ideology of the Gallery Space’. If the white cube is a virus, it seems to have infected everyone, everywhere. I am now the Ancient Mariner and the White Cube is my albatross. White Cubists write to me. I am their possession.

Suffice to say here that the White Cube is a construct, an artefact, a piece of immaculate social engineering, temple-like in its convergence of aesthetics, the artist’s egomania, the dealer’s legerdemain, the curator’s arena of inflection and performance, and, of course, money. At this rather weary point in my life the only thing I can accuse money of is that I don’t have more of it.

But in 1976, the zeitgeist and I are dancing madly. I’m hot, yet from this moment on, the zeitgeist and I slowly slide out of register, and it begins to cast its shadow over others. I become luke-warm, relocated to where

- 1  
Ogham Alphabet,  
transcribed by Brian O’Doherty

2  
Brian O’Doherty  
Vowel Grid, 1970, from the series ‘Structural  
Plays’, performance at Fogg Art Museum,  
Harvard, 1981
- 3  
Burial of Patrick Ireland, Irish Museum  
of Modern Art, Dublin, 2008

4  
Brian O’Doherty  
Bird (for Charlie Parker), Rope Drawing #117,  
2012, installation view at Galerie Thomas  
Fischer, Berlin

1 & 2 courtesy: the artist and Brenda Moore McCann • 3 photograph: Fiona McCann • 4 courtesy: Galerie Thomas Fischer, Berlin



I can work out the implications of my premises, and be subject to revivals – as now. So I devote myself largely to the temporary: from 1973 to the present, I have made 117 rope-drawing installations.

Why call them drawings? Because I invented my own means; I learned to stop and start a line in space just as I could draw a line on a page. Each linear conundrum was measured, tailored, fitted into its coloured architectural suit. A room does talk to you, in various accents and with uncertain clarity. Some spaces remain mute, refuse to speak at all, though that’s rare. Usually what you pick up is the muffled voice of the architect. Sometimes, I wanted to be my own architect. Most of the rope drawings require some self-examination, but what self are we talking about? They ask you not just where you are, but how, insofar as they call on the so-called somatic, proprioceptive self – position, balance, body experienced through the appetite, the passion of the eyes. Maybe that’s why dancers always want to dance in them. I’ve watched people choreograph themselves as they search for sight lines. Each rope drawing clarifies a grammar of occupancy: ‘You are now where I was’ and ‘they will be where you were’.

The ‘Rope Drawings’ are the largest single part of what is grandly called one’s *oeuvre*. Almost all of them were made by Patrick Ireland between 1973 and 2006. He was born in 1972, in a performance during which his new name was inscribed, in response to the Derry Massacre, or Bloody Sunday, the IRA’s most effective recruiting tool, for which, in an extraordinary act of reconciliation, David Cameron recently issued an apology. I decided to take the name Patrick Ireland until the British military presence was removed from Northern Ireland and all citizens were granted their civil rights. In 2006, the unthinkable had happened: there was peace in Northern Ireland. Pollock’s widow, Lee Krasner, had declared to me: ‘You’ll be Patrick Ireland forever’. However, he was buried to five poems in English, Irish, Spanish, French and German – the latter, a poem written specially for the occasion by Hans Belting and read by Ingmar Lahnemann, who wrote a brilliant thesis on Patrick Ireland. Patrick is the most important of my alter egos. Oneself – one self – is not enough. We are limited by the perception of others, who involuntarily design the permissions, the limits within which we function. I won’t talk about the construction of identity. I prefer the deconstruction of identity, whatever expands the limits of the ever-fluid self.

My other alter egos – all writers – include the brilliant William Maginn, a writer from Cork, who died in London in 1842. I came across him as a

young man in Dublin because he had written *The O’Doherty Papers* and used the name ‘O’Doherty’ to sign his work. Sigmond Bode, my fictive linguistic philosopher, is another; he was particularly interested in that famous meeting in Cambridge on 25 October 1946, when Wittgenstein and Karl Popper had their ferocious argument over the fundamental nature of philosophy. My final alter ego is Mary Josephson.

Carl Jung’s asymmetric twins, animus and anima, are a handy shorthand for imaginative versions of the other sex that can become real, who can be a constant in one’s inner life. (Honoré de Balzac called on the doctor he had invented in a novel to save him when he was dying.) My need for Mary was urgent. I found myself editing a magazine with no bank of articles to draw on. I had long desired a female persona. Who does not have that profound curiosity about the other sex, the desire to change genders and to see how the world arranges itself from that re-gendered perspective? I wanted to think and write from a female persona, to free myself from limiting male selfhood, to substitute another voice for that inner voice that never stops speaking, that won’t leave us alone – about which Ralph Waldo Emerson said: ‘You should pay no attention to what’s going on in your mind. It’s none of your business.’

Mary liberated me in several ways. She was American, not habitually detained in the past, which sticks to your boots in Europe. She looked as Americans do, to the future. She was a feminist obsessed with equal pay for equal work and very sensitive to dismissive male sexism. She wrote verse, *Degrees Below Zero*. Her insights, I found, were fresh and astute. Apart from Patrick, Mary was my most intimate associate. We lived together comfortably for 30 years. She had a clear persona: no-nonsense, approachable and smarter than me – a wonderful thing for a man to find in a woman. Once created, however, Mary demanded time. She had to grow.

She wrote about Morris Lapidus, the Florida architect of the Fontainebleau Hotel, about Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix and their urgent rush to departure. I commissioned her to write about the blank magnet of Andy Warhol’s face, much as Barthes wrote about Einstein’s brain, quoting both the late Hilton Kramer (negatively) and the then editor of *Artforum*, John Coplans (positively). John was taken by Mary’s essay on Warhol. He had a job for her and demanded: ‘Give me her phone number.’ He had searched for her book, *Degrees Below Zero*, but couldn’t find it. Did I have a copy? Of course I didn’t, as it didn’t exist. John wouldn’t be put off. I



1

1  
Patrick Ireland  
*Ogham on Upper Broadway*, 2003,  
liquitex on canvas, 1.8 × 1.8 m



2

2  
Brian O'Doherty  
*Between Categories* (detail), 1957–68,  
hand-written text and ink on paper;  
drawings on paper on plasterboard, each  
plasterboard 76 × 102 cm



3

3  
*Temple of Ogham*, c.1990s,  
from kitchen to dining room, Casa Dipinta,  
Todi, Italy. Around the arch:  
the words 'one', 'here' and 'now' in Irish,  
German and Italian.  
Far wall: *Song of the Vowels*

## *Is art a conundrum wrapped in obscurity, an aesthetic fortune cookie or a complex of cultural signs? If it is a language, who speaks it?*

turned to my wife for help. She provided a colleague from Barnard College at Columbia who was willing to be Mary, and who called John: 'I write very rarely and only for Brian. No offence.' John subsided. The pseudo-Mary was in fact a statuesque Texan blonde, who eventually became an Episcopal minister. Mary Josephson was outed years later.

How do I remember my personae? Much the way we remember our dead. One sees them. They are present in mind; their lineaments melt with time. If they have been loved, their image is durable. For me these aliases, like the dead, were rich company.

What have I learned from all this art-making, writing, shadow-play, careers disposed of, categories transgressed and prices paid? I may be old enough now to make authoritative pre-mortem statements. Be good at several things at your peril, though the young are changing that; more variety is allowed now. If you wish to fulfil various aspects of the self, you will encounter the puzzlement, even resentment, of mono-selves unaware of their own multiplicity. Whatever you do, the standard must be unyielding, punishing though that may be, so be careful how you multiply. The great Swiss art historian, Heinrich Wölfflin, said: 'Not everything is possible at all times.'

Speaking of community, we are all in the art-bubble. We are it, and it is us. The vast world is reverberating outside, like the double-decker buses shaking Oxford Street in the hot summer. We know the art-bubble because

we live in it. What is the art? When you ask that question, bells and whistles go off, buildings shake and fall and the dead generations stir underground. Is it an entity or a function? Can you decline the word 'art' socially and assume it has a grammar? Is aesthetics to art – as Barney Newman used to say – as ornithology is to the birds? Perhaps we're on the right track in one way in answering a question by asking questions. Does art do something? If it does, what does it do? Is it for pleasure, a higher form of masturbation? For spiritual enhancement and purchasable transcendence? Is it an instrument for political action? Satire? We know it brings its Louis Vuitton purse of ironic condiments to shake on everything. But then, as someone said, irony is to the 20th century as sentiment was to the 19th. Is art a well the depths of which psychology can plumb? (Hello and goodbye Freud.) Is it a perceptual laboratory? (Hello Wolfgang Koehler and friends.) Has it a moral, even ethical component? But in relation to what? It is entertainment? Spectacle? (Movies are better.) Is it a conundrum wrapped in obscurity, an aesthetic fortune cookie or a complex of cultural signs? (Hello Jacques Derrida!) If it is a language, who speaks it?

What I do know is that we're all in a flotilla of large and small craft, rafts, canoes, accompanied by numerous individual swimmers, crossing from here to somewhere, and that this is a good place to pause. I need a good exit line. So I'll call on Wölfflin again: 'We only see what we look for, but we only look for what we can see.' ♦♦