

"In the mid-sixties, I was broke", Brian O'Doherty writes. "Fred Praeger had been asking me for a book, so I went and told him I'd do a book. We made a deal with a 1,500\$ advance. I would provide a book in a couple of years on contemporary art." O'Doherty indeed delivered a book called "Art since 1945". But, humorous as he can be, it was simply made out of wood.

The book object and the full story as told by the artist are on view at O'Doherty's second solo show at Galerie Thomas Fischer. The exhibition assembles objects, drawings and paintings ranging from one of his earliest figurative self-portraits ("Portrait of the Artist as a Naked Young Man", 1953) to his more recent abstract painting "Ogham on Broadway" (2003). The show's title "Self, Sign, Scenario" provides crucial keywords for the understanding of the oeuvre of this multifaceted Irish-born, New York-based artist and author.

O'Doherty's "self" is not easy to capture. During a time span of almost forty years, he has taken various photo booth self-portraits and arranged them in a grid, entitled "The Transformation, Discontinuity, and Degeneration of the Image". These portraits are far from the silly self-representations we have all created in photo booths already. O'Doherty's booth pictures are analytical in their mug shot-manner: frontal, sideways, backwards, three-quarter, looking up and down, with glasses and a forced smile - each of which has been repeated irregularly since 1969. The photographic quality changes, as do the artist's physical appearance and style, but the images hardly tell us anything about their author, except for his interest in serialism - and perhaps in identity or the lack thereof.

Strictly speaking, these images do not even portray the same person: When the first two rows of pictures were taken, O'Doherty was O'Doherty, a trained doctor turned art critic turned artist, who had emigrated from Ireland to the USA in 1957. When the rest of the pictures were taken, O'Doherty had already become an artistic persona called Patrick Ireland.

The creation of this alter ego was both a sign of protest and an artistic gesture in its own right: After the "Bloody Sunday Killings" in Northern Ireland in 1972, the Irish artist vowed to sign all his artworks with this most Irish of all names and to refuse any exhibition practice in Great Britain "until such time as the British military presence is removed from Northern Ireland and all citizens are granted their civil rights." So he did; it was only after the retreat of the British Army in 2007, that O'Doherty staged an official burial of his artistic alter ego at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin and became Brian O'Doherty, the artist, again.

In the meantime, Brian O'Doherty - as an author - had coined one of the most widespread expressions of 20th century art history: the "white cube". It first appeared in his essay "Inside the White Cube" from 1976 (the year, by the way, of the third line of photo booth portraits) and since then, it sticks with him like another one of his personas: connected to his name, but with a life of its own, as one of the most cited contributions to 20th century art history. O'Doherty's revelation of the gallery space as a social construct came from his very practical approach as an artist during the installation of his site specific, temporary, three-dimensional "rope drawings" in New York's art spaces since the early 1970s. He has realized more than one hundred rope drawings to date, one of which was featured in his first show at Galerie Thomas Fischer in 2012, another one at Daimler Contemporary.

His interest in identity and spatial logic was always accompanied by his interest in "signs": systems, grids, labyrinths, notations and letters. In 1967 he had found a way, in his own words, to "fuse minimalism, serialism and language", by deploying an ancient Gaelic letter system called "Ogham".

Ogham is found on the rim of a couple of hundred Irish Ogham stones, dating from the 5th century. Its letters form a certain number of vertical or diagonal lines in relation to a horizontal line (see figure 1). On the ancient Ogham stones, the line of reference is simply the rim of the stone. O'Doherty transformed this principle by creating aluminum-covered, contemporary versions of the archaeological stones. Inscribed is one of the three words ONE, HERE or NOW, which appear quite often in O'Doherty's/Ireland's Ogham works.

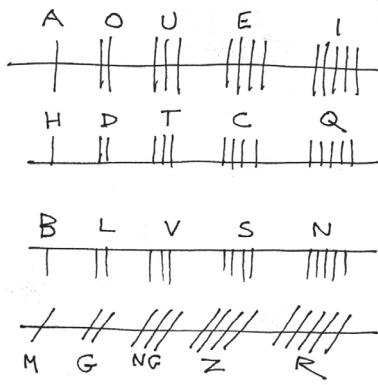


Figure 1: The Ogham Alphabet transcribed by Brian O'Doherty

In the reflective sculpture "ONE" (1970), the visitors' physical reflection is constantly accompanied by this logical reflection about the self in a certain time and space. In his Ogham drawings, with which Patrick Ireland even participated in documenta 6 in 1977, and in the paintings that are based on the Ogham principle, the rhythmical, structuring lines provide both form and content ("One drawing", 1969, or "Vaughan's Circle", 2004/5) and can literally be read with the help of the transcription.

There is more to the Ogham lines than first meets the eye: The large format painting "Ogham on Broadway" (2003) is a reflection on the grid - and an ode to Piet Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie", a piece the Dutch artist had done shortly after his arrival in New York

in 1942/3, just a couple of years before O'Doherty's own immigration. In O'Doherty's/Ireland's picture, New York City's urban grid inspires a magic square, with each of the colors represented only once in every line and articulating the five Ogham vowels by their overall length at the same time. It contradicts Rosalind Krauss' notion of the static, anti-symbolic grid as expressed in her notorious 1979 essay "Grids".

O'Doherty's artistic "self" is a multi-faceted and ever-changing identity. Not only his creation of Patrick Ireland confirms this, he has also invented other personas for himself, among whom are a female art critic called Mary Josephson and a German philosopher by the rather telling name Sigmund Bode. Humorous but also radically political, conceptual but also participatory, O'Doherty's/Ireland's selves, signs and scenarios have rejected strict categorizations as much as the artist himself.

Stefanie Gerke

#### Brian O'Doherty

Born in 1928 in County Roscommon, Ireland, Brian O'Doherty worked as an artist from 1972 until 2008 under the pseudonym Patrick Ireland. Exhibitions have been held at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C., at P.S.1, New York, at the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin and he has also been featured at documenta 6 and the Biennale in Venice (1980). After studying medicine in Dublin, O'Doherty emigrated in 1957 to the U.S., where he conducted research for a time at Harvard, before he resumed his artistic career. He was also the editor of *Art in America* and later became the part-time director of the Visual Arts Program, and subsequently of the Film and Media Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1976 his essay "Inside the White Cube" appeared in *Artforum*. For his novel "The Strange Case of Mademoiselle P." O'Doherty received the award of the British Society of Authors. In 2000 "The Deposition of Father McGreevy" was short-listed for the Booker Prize. His works are in numerous collections including the Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery in Washington. Brian O'Doherty has lived in New York since 1960 and is married to the art historian Barbara Novak. In 2014 Brian O'Doherty's new novel, titled "The Crossdresser's Secret" has been published (in English) by Sternberg Press.

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