



Brian O'Doherty - Diverse Enigmas
19 June - 17 July 2021

Thinking and Its Discontents: On Encountering Brian O'Doherty's Work

It's a running joke with my dear friend, the nonagenarian artist-slash-everything, Brian O'Doherty: I tease him for being a "dirty conceptualist". This turn of phrase suggests a specific breed of aesthetic impurity. You see, by some accounts, the first generation of conceptual artists in New York were focused primarily on the idea of art made by thinking alone (hence their moniker). Yet, amongst that particular clique – whom O'Doherty exhibited with and even helped corral, most notably by editing and designing the milestone 1967 issue 5+6 of *Aspen* magazine on minimal and conceptual art – he stood out in multiple ways. For one, the polymathic O'Doherty's work held the body and all its five senses dearly, in contrast to the coolly rational artistic currents of the 1960s. This insistence on the primacy of the embodied, holistic, and subjective aesthetic experience marks his works as different from other colleagues of that period, as well as signaling its continued relevance today.

As anthropologist Margaret Mead noted in her 1943 essay, "Art and Reality: From the Standpoint of Cultural Anthropology", the modern exhibition and its privileging of sight as the primary human sense represented a poor substitute for the rich, multisensory experience of the medieval church and other cultural rituals.¹ O'Doherty's canonical 1976 series of essays, later published in book form as *Inside the White Cube*, coined the term "white cube" to describe how the 20th century exhibition intentionally produced both cultural and commercial value through the stark reduction and control of context. At the same time, we could see the white cube as an apogee of a historical trajectory that undid the interconnected value of sensory and bodily knowledge of all sorts.

O'Doherty's approach to the subject cannot be disentangled from his own unconventional path to artmaking. Trained first as a medical doctor in Dublin, his understanding of the world was embedded in a deep familiarity with the body and its processes. One of the earliest artworks made after his emigration to the USA, *Between Categories* (1957-1968) emerged out of his work in experimental psychology first at Cambridge University and later at Harvard. The object of the artwork is the limits of cognition and perception itself: it captures where sight, and the brain's grasp of visual forms, begins to fail. The work reflects the methods of an artist-researcher, who does not take ideas as known, but instead uses science (and, later, art) as a medium for experimentation and learning. This porosity between medical categories and the structures of conceptual art becomes even more palpable in *The Body and its Discontents* (1964), a small-scale sculptural work reminiscent of an apothecary's cabinet. It features color-coded labels that include Latinate names for sensory and digestive organs, fluids within the body, and specific medical ailments. The transposition of this nomenclature into the context of art functions both as a linguistic game and as an inquiry into how the modern grid attempts to

¹ Margaret Mead, "Art and Reality: From the Standpoint of Cultural Anthropology." *College Art Journal* 2, no. 4, part 1 (May 1943). Cited in Dorothea von Hantelmann, *What is the new ritual space for the 21st century?* (New York: The Shed, 2018).



compartmentalize organic and otherwise interconnected things. On a more abstract register, O'Doherty's *Scenario for Black* (1967) constructs a tactile, interactive "film" out of a sequence of transparent overlays that plays with the dimensions of time, perception, and optical transformation initiated earlier within a clinical context.

In O'Doherty's subsequent work, the body assumes an even more pivotal role. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, O'Doherty authored a series of conceptual performance scores known as *Structural Plays*. These pieces marry strictly scripted movements upon a floor-grid with specific vocal cues: sequenced vowel sounds in some cases, versus narrative and dialogical elements in others. Certain works such as *Structural Play: Sex* and *Structural Play: Violence* (both 1968) – presented most recently in 2017 at the Metropolitan Museum in New York as part of the exhibition *Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason, 1950-1980*, and which I had the pleasure to help produce and perform – most explicitly contravene in the unspoken rules of early conceptualism. Combining gridded movements by two performers with a set of explicit vocal utterances, these works juxtapose the rigidity of rational structures with the messy, bodily stuff of the world.

The climax of the artist's thinking through and inhabiting of the body is in his ongoing series of *Rope Drawings*, begun in 1972 and continuing today. These spatial installations, designed as perceptual plays and virtuosic interventions in exhibitionary contexts, can be read as counterpoints to – or even physical extensions of – O'Doherty's arguments from *Inside the White Cube*. Whereas O'Doherty the critic used the medium of language to critique how modern exhibitions had constructed a hermetically sealed site for the presentation of art, O'Doherty the artist tested the boundaries of these ideas in space. A rope drawing is typically constructed from the single-point perspective of the artist or another individual, who plans the installation from a specific position and height in space. From this one perspective, the tensed rope and painted walls snap into place, optically flattening into a two-dimensional image. Yet the real play is the process of moving around and through the three-dimensional installation to discover this sweet spot. So, the rope drawings implicitly challenge a common misconception: the idea of an objective, impartial, or disembodied position from which art can be experienced.

Over years of watching and helping O'Doherty to create multiple installations, what has also struck me is that he never reaches for outside tools such as rulers or spirit levels to determine the "exact" siting and hanging of the work. Instead, he calculates and conceives his exhibitions using only the bodily faculties and senses – his eyes, his hands, his sense of balance and position and motion. O'Doherty follows this human measure rigorously. What matters to him is not an abstract idea of precision or perfection, but rather a subjective understanding of how the work feels to a specific human body in space.

This insistence on wholly embodied, sensory experience holds a particular meaning for me – and perhaps other art goers – today. Amidst the COVID19 pandemic, my own ability to see exhibitions has dwindled nearly to nil; most of my experiences of art are confined to navigating website interfaces or endlessly scrolling on a phone. Such contexts of visibility and tracking have become the new "white cubes" for art's experience and commerce. Here, too, as in the white cubes of yore, the senses are mostly neutralized: one engages simply as a set of eyes, a pair of ears, and some fingers (or even just thumbs) within this emergent world of art.

In contrast stand Brian O'Doherty's ongoing claims for the importance of the body in experiencing and understanding the world fully. Rather than privileging only the visual and conceptual, the purity of an abstract, aesthetic vision, his work across media embraces the more muddled, searching, and entangled perceptions of a human organism. Reasoning itself, in this

framework, is only one part of how we know things. As designer, educator, and mover Emily Smith once remarked to me, “The brain also has feelings, it just calls them ‘thinking’”. I think that’s a fitting way to close this text, as I look forward to encountering O’Doherty’s work for the *n*th time, anew.

– Prem Krishnamurthy, Berlin, May 2021

Brian O’Doherty (born in County Roscommon, Ireland, 1928) lives in New York.

After studying medicine in Dublin, O’Doherty emigrated to the U.S. in 1957, where he initially worked as a researcher before becoming an artist. From 1972 to 2008, he worked under the pseudonym Patrick Ireland. In 1976, he published his still influential essay “Inside the White Cube” in *Artforum* and later published it as a book. Parallel to this, he was editor of *Art in America* and worked with the National Endowment for the Arts, first as director of the Visual Arts Program and subsequently heading the Film and Media Arts Program.

He has presented numerous exhibitions at renowned art institutions, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., New York’s P.S.1, and the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin, in addition showing his work at documenta 6 and the Venice Biennale (1980). His works are included in several major museum collections, such as New York’s Museum of Modern Art and Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, Berlin’s Nationalgalerie, Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, and Staatliche graphische Sammlung, Munich.

The exhibition is being held at ANDREAS MURKUDIS, Potsdamer Straße 77 in Berlin-Tiergarten.

Opening hours: Wed-Sat 11-6 pm

The opening reception will be held on Saturday, 19 June 2021, 12-6 pm.

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