



Brian O'Doherty

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What kind of art can emerge if you are a bustling, clever and widely received theorist and critic at the same time? Do these practices amalgamate or is it possible to keep them separate? And if so, how? Does the art emerge to test the theory, or does the theory emerge from the art? Although we can no longer ask Brian O'Doherty these questions, we can try to answer them by looking at his artistic oeuvre.

O'Doherty was several things at once: doctor, editor, artist, Irishman, writer, critic, husband, theorist. He saw the challenge of living out manifold roles and reflected upon it. So it was not without reason that he coined four pseudonyms to keep the various fields of work with their different mindsets separate from one another. He left the art criticism in part to Mary Josephson, while Patrick Ireland took over Brian O'Doherty's artistic practice from 1972 to 2008: the change in name, which took place in a performance of the same title (*Name Change*) was primarily politically motivated: it was due to the violent events in Northern Ireland, *Bloody Sunday*. After a period of peace, Patrick Ireland was ceremoniously buried in Dublin: The message here: identity is a construct, but for O'Doherty bound to very personal matters and his Irish homeland.

His drawings, paintings, and sculpture, being conceptual, thus draw from the intellectual discourses in which they emerge.¹ And yet they have a strong link to the biography, to the body of the artist. This becomes most clear in *The Body and its Discontents*, created in 1964: a kind of miniaturized medicine cabinet, with a total of 60 compartments filled with small boxes that are pasted on all four sides with a paper in different shades of pastel and various specialist medical terms. These refer to male and female body parts, to our sensory capacities, but also to illnesses. As bone dry as the work might seem at first with its scientific vocabulary and rigid system of order, it is also playful and humorous. It makes it possible to create a variety of bodies, including bigendered ones, with various infirmities, an individuality using the components of medicine and conceptual art. O'Doherty transforms the "aesthetics of administration" that Benjamin Buchloh so cleverly attributed to conceptual art into an "aesthetics of anatomy."

The small piece *Black Glass Labyrinth* (1967) is another early work by the artist: the abstract black upon black surfaces and lines are not only reminiscent of the labyrinth in the title, but also recall a playing field or the geometries of Celtic knots. In fact, O'Doherty's first labyrinth drawing is based on a four-armed St. Brigid's Cross, an Irish national symbol. Labyrinths, already in myth an emblem for the detours and confusion of life, are a recurring motif in the oeuvre of the artist, in a small flat format as well as in an accessible construction. They also allow for reflection on one of the foundational problems of artistic work: the relationship between surface and form, the transfer from two to three dimensions and vice versa.

The untitled drawings from 1974, monochromatic or in several colors, also appear superficially like conceptual exercises in purely formal variations: in a pattern of 15 series in the horizontal and the vertical, brief lines are assembled to create ever never constellations. They recall the paintings from the series *Corpse and Mirror* that Jasper Johns began in 1974, where cross-hatching covers the entire canvas, turning a technique used in drawing to suggest depth into a flat element of design. But while Johns retains the parallelism of crosshatching, O'Doherty's/Ireland's lines seem more like codes. Here, they allude to the signs of so-called Ogham writing found in Ireland, which consist of one to five brief lines, while their number, five, refers to the five identities of the artist. Here, too, there is a strong biographical reference, if not a kind of self-portrait behind the supposedly thematic void of the obsessive-patterned approach, while the supposed rigorous, serial quality of the patterns flickers before the eyes of the beholder.

Daniel Buren's thoughts about the "function of the studio" was published in English in 1979. Here, he describes and criticizes the studio as a site of production, in which works emerge that are intended to be seen somewhere else. Buren characterizes this site as a "predictable cubic space, uniformly lit, neutralized to the extreme,"² or in other words, O'Doherty's words, as the white cube. Buren as well as O'Doherty/Ireland largely refused a painterly practice that created transportable pieces, O'Doherty/Ireland's preferred site to paint is on the wall, but the *Rope Drawings* he began creating in 1973, expressly labeled "drawings," allow a certain mobility by way of their re-installation. The cords are stretched over colorful surfaces that result in geometric compositions and extend out into the exhibition space; seen from a single place (and with just one eye) in the room, these cords become the outlines of the colored surfaces. In this way, the three-dimensional, expansive work becomes something flat. This "ideal" standpoint is oriented toward the body size of O'Doherty's wife, the art historian Barbara Novak.

In this way, personal aspects flow into a conceptual work that explores artistic issues such as the illusory, the inclusion of real space and its reception: in the "The Eye and the Spectator" included in the essay collection "Inside the White Cube", O'Doherty explains how in light of contemporary sculpture the eye and the spectator separate from one another, since the sculptures demand that we move around them. The *Rope Drawings* equally demand, to remain in the terminology of his essay, that the eye and the body work jointly.³ In these works, O'Doherty's theoretical and artistic practice intersect the most, but they are more than just an illustration of a text, because the strongly physically based perception of the *Rope Drawings* makes them unlike the reception of an essay or a small work on paper. And in this way, we can learn from these works that any change of standpoint offers a potential of (self) knowledge.

Astrid Mania

¹ How close O'Doherty was to the debates of his period is shown by the double issue of the magazine *Aspen* he edited in 1967, which included for the first time Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author" and Susan Sontag's "The Aesthetics of Silence."

² Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Studio," trans. Thomas Repensek, *October* 10 (August 1979), 54.

³ Brian O'Doherty, "The Eye and the Spectator," *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 52.

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