

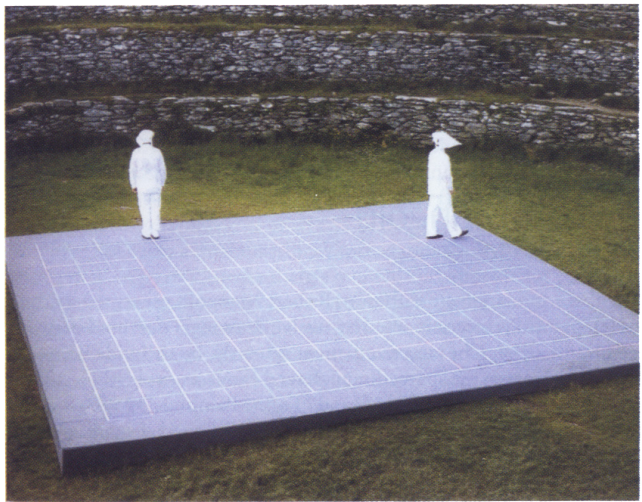
Brian O'Doherty

P!/SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY

Artist, writer, editor, arts administrator, and more, Brian O'Doherty has been well known in the New York art world since coming to the city, in the late 1950s, from his native Ireland. His book *Inside the White Cube*, first published in 1976 as a series of essays in this magazine, is a foundational critical text, an analysis not so much of art as of its physical environment—the white-walled modern gallery—and of the sociological and ideological networks invisibly embedded there. This was a context designed to sanctify its content by itself receding from the eye, by going unseen, but O'Doherty saw it, and did so with radical clarity.

If O'Doherty is a little less known as an artist than as a writer—he is also, incidentally, an accomplished novelist—that may be in part because he exhibited for many years under a pseudonym, Patrick Ireland. Adopting the name in 1972 to protest Bloody Sunday, when British soldiers killed fourteen during a civil rights march in Derry, Northern Ireland, he gave it up in 2008, in happy recognition of Irish progress toward peace. Although formally deceased (in fact, buried in a funeral ceremony in Dublin), Patrick Ireland is a revealing alter ego for O'Doherty not only in the name's hyperbolic Irishness but in its gentle nudging of the viewer toward politics, history, and the world beyond the white cube. Indeed, this mainly retrospective, two-venue show, in which most of the works came from the second half of the 1960s, included a good deal of Irish content, and other works involved intensifications or disruptions of perception that pushed viewers toward an activated understanding of the place in which they stood.

Many of O'Doherty's visual and verbal language games of this period are of a piece with the Conceptual art of the time, but are distinctive in the sources they draw on. *Plato's Cave*, 1968, for instance, recalls Joseph Kosuth in its pairing of image and text, but it's hard to imagine Kosuth writing a detailed, indeed near-hallucinatory narrative about a visual experience, let alone one involving the state of *fe geasa*, a magical Irish spell. Diagrams, charts, and grids are similarly familiar as logical exercises in the vocabulary of Conceptualism, but O'Doherty's works in these forms are as much corporeal as intellectual: One, for example, is based on an electrocardiogram he took of Marcel Duchamp (I don't think I mentioned that before entering the art world, O'Doherty trained and qualified as an MD?), and another became the basis for an outdoor performance in Donegal in which costumed men moved, chessman-like, around a board, calling out the sounds of letters in the ancient ogham alphabet of Ireland. (Ogham features in a number of O'Doherty's works.) *A Geographical Notation on Equivalence and Multivalence of Meaning (Arse/Ass)*, 1965, is a witty diagram that seasons linguistic exploration with bawdry—a set of mostly scatological words, with lines and arrows indicating the meanings they do and do not share in their uses in Dublin and New York. If, in *Inside the White Cube*, O'Doherty looked beyond the formal qualities of the art object to the conditioning qualities of its context, works like this one tie the concerns of Conceptual art to body, culture, and place.



Another interest of O'Doherty's is the field of optics—reflected here in works involving mirrors—and, more generally, how we see. Both *Plato's Cave* and a related work, *Past, Present, Future: Portrait of the artist Aet. 7*, 1967, combine a photograph of an urban storefront with a verbal account of it as visual experience, an account so exhaustive as to completely defamiliarize both the storefront and the process of looking at it. Meanwhile, the tour de force work in the two shows was a new rope drawing, a form of O'Doherty's invention in which panels of color painted on the walls align with ropes strung from walls, floor, and ceiling in such a way that as the viewer navigates the piece, these panels can suddenly seem to pop into three-dimensionality. Relating to the ideas of phenomenology and reception theory, the work also explodes the white cube.

—David Frankel