

Brian O'Doherty Speaking in Lines

PRESENTED BY P! AND SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY
131 BOWERY, 2ND FLOOR
JANUARY 8 - FEBRUARY 12, 2017

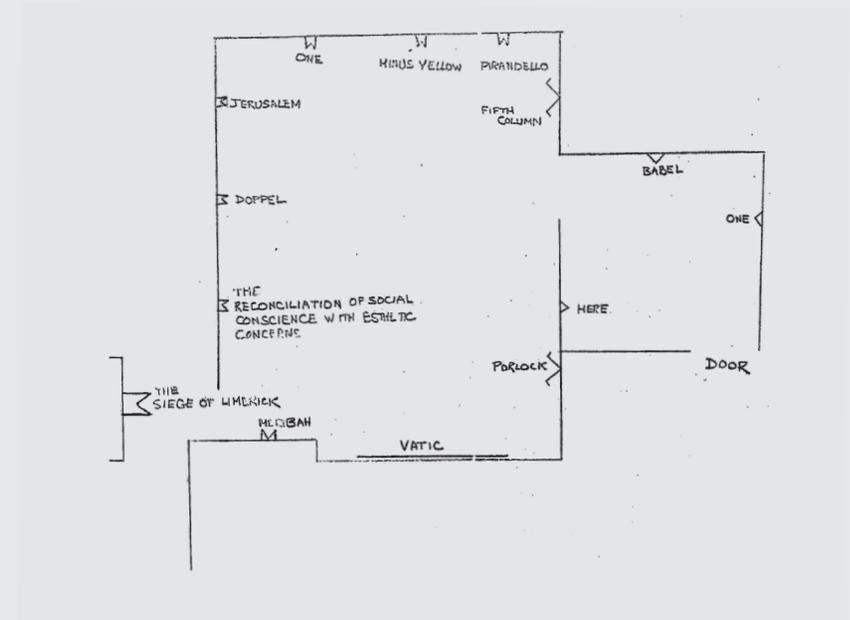
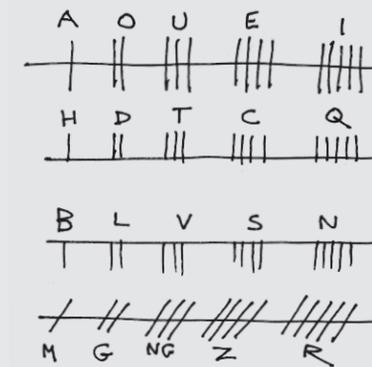
In Brian O’Doherty’s work across painting, sculpture, drawing, and performance, the line—a basic visual element—takes on a range of embedded meaning that pushes it into the realm of linguistic communication. Connecting the artist’s synthesis of encoded text and linear abstraction within a number of rarely-shown bodies of work from the 1960s and 1970s, this exhibition presents an argument for line itself as a critical building block for expression within O’Doherty’s ever-shifting artistic practice.

During the 1960s in New York, alongside the advent of both minimal and conceptual art, O’Doherty developed an individual and specific visual language. He discovered in “Ogham,” an ancient Celtic linear script used originally for trail markings and hidden messages, an existing linguistic code rich with personal resonances. From that period onward, O’Doherty often created drawings and sculptures employing words and phrases written in Ogham, injecting a sly wordiness into geometric form.

At the show’s center hangs a set of mirrored, colored Ogham sculptures, which were first shown at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1970. Initially, these works appear abstract, foregrounding the experiential quality of the viewer’s interaction with their polished surfaces. This opening view is interrupted by lines of Ogham cut into each sculpture that offer a multilayered reading. Through their unusual combination of incised texts, painted surfaces, and reflective elegance, the pieces evade easy categorization. A planar counterpoint appears in a selection of the artist’s works on paper from 1969–1979. In these drawings, the same linear code writes out structural notes ranging from individual letters and words, vowel sequences, and other fragments of language. Repetition and color transform this abstracted alphabet into pattern.

Contrasting the purity of line with the body’s imperfect composition, the show includes several large unprimed canvasses from 1975. These paintings arise from a series of small “Hair Collages,” in which the artist measured lengths of randomly plucked hairs (from his own head) and then crossed each of them with drawn straight lines of the same dimension. Rendered in strokes of watercolor marker, the works register O’Doherty’s performative tracing as an analytical yet light gesture.

This diverse grouping of works highlights core concerns within O’Doherty’s artistic production: the struggle to articulate speech in a variety of forms, juxtaposed with the abstraction of visual geometry. Here, as elsewhere, a line may serve either as a boundary—a border or edge that divides—yet also as a “red thread,” linking together disparate ideas, approaches, intentions, and desires into an unbroken strand.



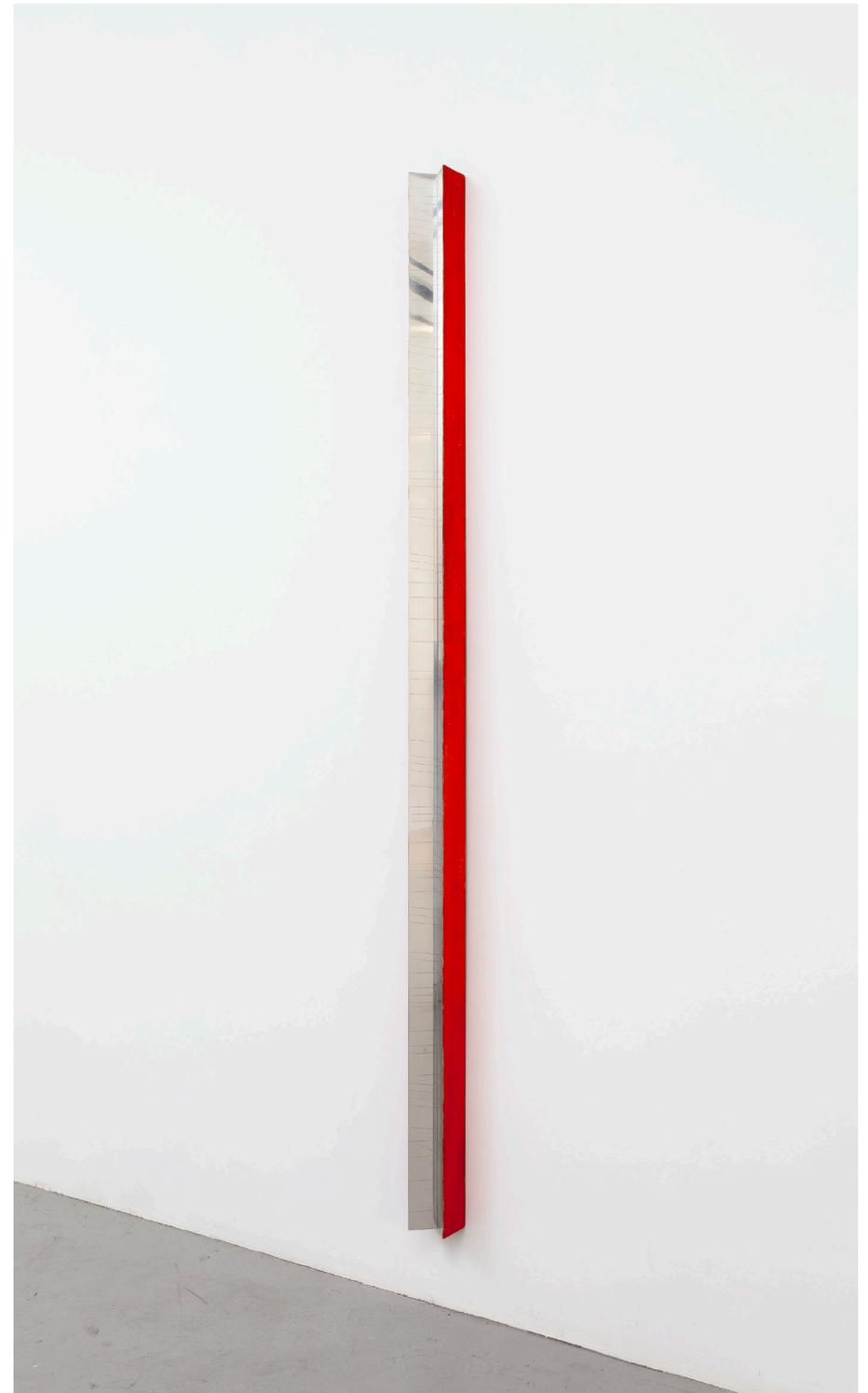
Above: Ogham alphabet
Below: Schematic floorplan of Brian O’Doherty’s 1970 exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery

“Artist and writer are separated by a river of words, beyond which—to follow this geography—is a zone of silence where visual art resides. But language, in our culture, is the instrument by which we socialize the visual... It is seductive to believe that art is a wild child that can always be taught to speak. But in a generation most artwriting exposes its conventions as masses of words are transported to some esthetic landfill. No matter how brilliant, scholarship is always provisional, and implicitly offers itself for revision. The artwork survives the verbal masks we lay upon it, and we must always work to recover its inscrutable face.”

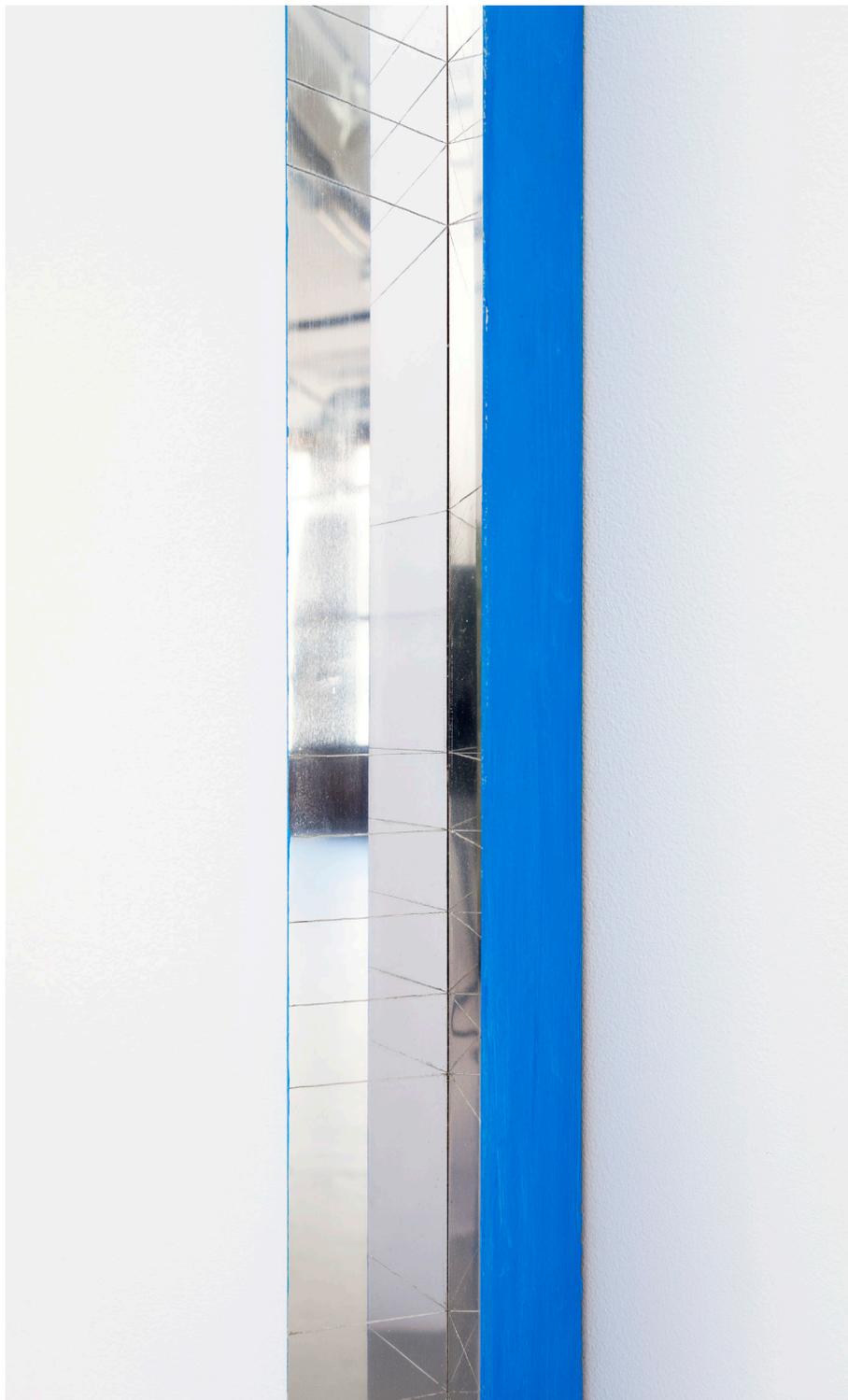
—Brian O’Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth*¹

Artist Brian O’Doherty and I are separated by a river of words. In my first attempt to cross that “zone of silence,” I visit him and his ebullient wife, the art historian Barbara Novak, in their home on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. There I learn of a forgotten trove of artwork, recently uncovered behind the piles of storage boxes, books, and ephemera that line O’Doherty’s studio. Since he was a young adult, O’Doherty has painted; the studio is still active. Over lunch at the couple’s favorite Italian restaurant nearby, they explain to me that a few years previous, a dusty crate sealed for over forty years ago turned up a dozen large, long-neglected paintings made in the mid-1970s. Like a number of mini-narratives cast about that morning—that of O’Doherty as a novelist, a critic, a TV host, a student of medicine, and, most especially, an artist—the tale I am told, I realize, posits a revisionist history. As a fable, it suggests the provisionality O’Doherty alludes to in the quotation above; it is subject to reinvention, as per the scholarship I read later around his other biographical features (including being kidnapped by gypsies as a child, or the idiosyncrasies and eclecticism of O’Doherty’s five alter-egos, including the conceptual artist, the female art critic, the poet-journalist, the radical linguist, and one identity as yet revealed). Understood within the broader system of his conceptualist practice, O’Doherty’s entire life might be considered a study of perceptual revisionism, one long, unerring performance.

The purpose of this preamble is not to discredit O’Doherty as a reliable source in the retrospective positioning of work long held in his possession while he moved between complementary projects.² Instead, the origin myth suggests the fallibility of any narrative structure one might attempt to apply to an otherwise uncategorizable career. O’Doherty’s life and work is fugitive—and that is just what makes it fascinating.







O'Doherty's output in the late 1960s and 1970s (as both himself and *nom de guerre* Patrick Ireland) reads as lines, diagrams, charts, and grids in the form of drawing, sculpture, installation, performance, and painting—until we discover that the provisionality of these systems mirrors the ambiguity of his meta-fictions. Although a prolific writer, O'Doherty avoids directly publishing about his work. We learn of his analyses from letters to curators and critics he was in dialogue over the years. In writing to Russell Panczenko in 1992, O'Doherty says of his Ogham drawings: “The complexities of these works are belied by their minimal appearances.”³

You cannot get O'Doherty's work without understanding the significance of Ogham, a translation of the Roman alphabet devised and conceived by the Irish in the fourth and fifth centuries AD. The linear and serial mark-making system is based on one to five strokes in four permutations: vertical lines crossing on a horizontal line (or an edge or corner), lines perched either above or below that horizontal, or lines slanting diagonally across it. O'Doherty writes: “The Ogham drawings, which preoccupied me for over twenty years, look like drawings, behave like drawings, can be seen as drawings, are drawings, but they also have a voice, that is, they can be spoken and performed.”⁴ When incised as semi-legible marks on O'Doherty's stunning wall-mounted mirrored sculptures, they reflect bodily attributes at a human scale. Trying to read or speak the sign system on mirrored glass or on a blank white page can be enervating and requires supreme patience, until you realize that Ogham is another storyline in which to play.

Seen through the lens of history, the paintings, drawings, and sculptures on view in *Speaking in Lines* describe a rationalized system. Both the cube and the grid became modular units for artistic inquiry in conceptualist practices at the time, evident in O'Doherty's applied lexicon. The grid and the cube operated as easily recognizable default forms, bypassing the need for a more lofty or loaded substitute. The work bears resemblance to that of Sol LeWitt's from a similar period. In comparing LeWitt's elegant and pioneering structures to O'Doherty's witty, graceful diversions, LeWitt's tend toward the simple and finite. As an artist, LeWitt was planful, systematized, and exacting. O'Doherty, on the other hand, is full of mischief, chance, and deviations. LeWitt once described his interest in systems as basically “a repudiation of Duchampian aesthetics.”⁵ In contrast, O'Doherty is a Duchampian. In the 1960s, O'Doherty created a series of portraits of Duchamp made using an electrocardiogram machine that recorded Duchamp's actual heartbeat at a single sitting.

By the late 1960s, O'Doherty reflects, the grid was verging on cliché. In his writings, he continues: “To rescue the cliché I applied the [Ogham] vowels to it. I turned the units of the Ogham vowels into lengths—the A is one length, the I is five lengths... Thus the grid glides, stammers and

blurts with different lengths and colours.”⁶ Using the language of conceptual art and infusing it with a good dose of humor and chaos, O’Doherty’s Duchampian tactics refract an unusual mind-body impulse. O’Doherty’s systems became increasingly complex and difficult to trace as he continued to produce conceptualist work throughout the 1970s. Unconventional approaches—such as the study of a single piece of hair—allowed the work to possess artistically progressive qualities.

By the mid-1970s, O’Doherty began to layer systems to build a complex network of bodily and semantic cross-pollination and interaction. In that way, O’Doherty’s relationship to conceptual thinking was consistent with his peers, who tended to view systems as ever-changing in relation to other, equally arbitrary and transient ones. However, in O’Doherty’s case, the study is of human subjectivity itself. To participate in the perception and experience of meaning in O’Doherty’s network is how one plays the game. In the ever-elusive act of speaking the lines, or tracing the narrative arc, that is where we will find, again and again, the glimmer of O’Doherty the artist, O’Doherty the linguist, O’Doherty the performer—where we find his inscrutable face.

- 1 Brian O’Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Random House, 1973; reprint, New York: Universe Books, 1988), 285.
- 2 O’Doherty’s salaried positions in the 1970s included editor of *Art in America* and part-time program director at the National Endowment for the Arts.
- 3 Letter to Russell Panczenko, June 29, 1992 as printed in *Patrick Ireland: Labyrinths, Language, Pyramids, and Related Acts*, ed. Russel Panczenko (Madison, Wisconsin: Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993), 33.
- 4 Patrick Ireland, “Vowel Grid and Structural Plays,” in *Language Performed/Matters of Identity* (Derry, Ireland: Orchard Gallery, 1998), 21.
- 5 Sol Lewitt interviewed by Saul Ostrow, *Bomb Magazine*, Fall 2003, accessed December 11, 2016, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2583/sol-lewitt>.
- 6 Ireland, “Vowel Grid and Structural Plays,” 21–22.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Brian O’Doherty <i>The Late Show</i> , 1968 Mirror, mirrored tape, liquitex 30 × 30 inches (76.20 × 76.20 cm)	Brian O’Doherty <i>Minus Yellow</i> , 1970 Aluminum on wood 72 × 2¾ × 2¾ in. (188.88 × 6.99 × 6.99 cm)	Brian O’Doherty (a.k.a. Patrick Ireland) <i>Untitled</i> , 1975 Watercolor stick on canvas 66 × 66 inches (167.64 × 167.64 cm)
Brian O’Doherty <i>Ogham Vowels</i> , 1969 Colored ink on paper 22 × 30 inches (55.88 × 76.20 cm)	Brian O’Doherty <i>Ogham Vowels</i> , 1970 Colored ink on paper 23 × 29 inches (58.42 × 73.66 cm)	Brian O’Doherty (a.k.a. Patrick Ireland) <i>Untitled</i> , 1975 Watercolor stick on canvas 66 × 66 inches (167.64 × 167.64 cm)
Brian O’Doherty <i>Places</i> , 1969 Aluminum on wood 72 × 2¾ × 2¾ in. (188.88 × 6.99 × 6.99 cm)	Brian O’Doherty (a.k.a. Patrick Ireland) <i>Golden Vowels (Cry)</i> , 1968/1972 Aluminum on wood 72 × 2¾ × 2¾ in. (188.88 × 6.99 × 6.99 cm)	Brian O’Doherty (a.k.a. Patrick Ireland) <i>Six Triangles and Six Planes</i> , 1978 Colored ink on paper 23 × 29 inches (58.42 × 73.66 cm)
Brian O’Doherty <i>Meribah</i> , 1970 Aluminum on wood 72 × 2¾ × 2¾ in. (188.88 × 6.99 × 6.99 cm)	Brian O’Doherty (a.k.a. Patrick Ireland) <i>I Drawing</i> , 1973 Colored ink on paper 22 × 29 inches (55.88 × 73.66 cm)	

COLOPHON

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IMAGE CAPTIONS

Cover and back cover:
The Late Show [detail], 1968

Inside front and back cover:
I Drawing [detail], 1973

Page 7:
Places, 1969

Page 8–9:
Untitled, 1975

Page 10:
Meribah [detail], 1970

