

# Exhibitions

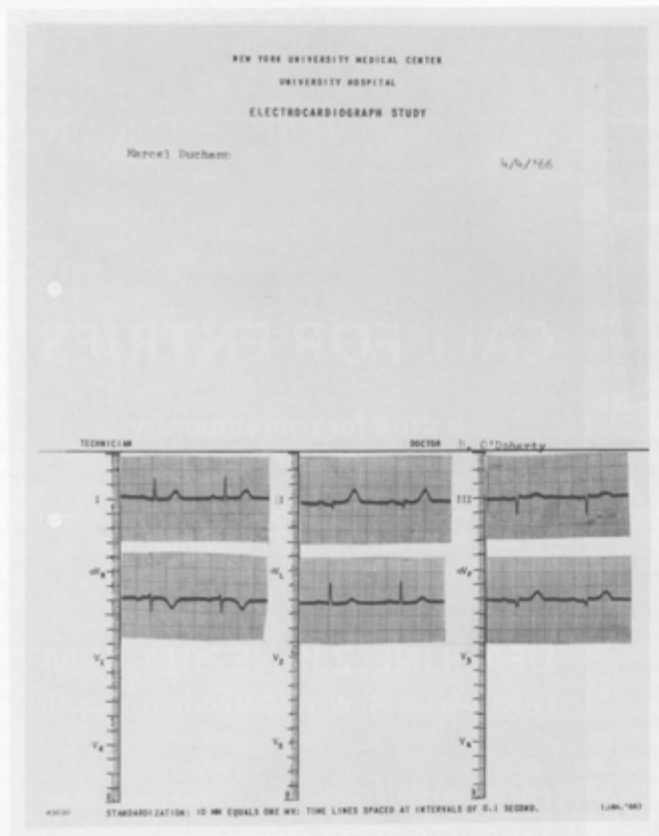
## Brian O'Doherty: Connecting the ...

PI and Simone Subal Gallery New York  
2 March to 20 April

A retrospective of sorts, installed at two galleries, prompts a consideration of the nature of the retrospective as such where conceptual art practice is at issue. Not to worry: the open-ended programmes of these galleries, which often configure themselves as project spaces, offer a less institutional framework than most. Here we find the retrospective as an interpretive hypothesis of artworks which are provisional and yet discursively open ended.

A retrospective may not be all that this pair of exhibitions wants to accomplish, but taking the retrospective framework for Brian O'Doherty (aka Patrick Ireland) provides the context for interpreting the history of his artistic production, starting here with a self-portrait from 1957 when O'Doherty was a medical student studying in the US. And yet the self-portrait provides a baseline for a refined draughtsmanship that is more than adept, which the artist will however decide to largely do without. What he retains

Brian O'Doherty  
Portrait of Marcel  
Duchamp: Mounted  
Cardiogram  
1966/2012



is a clinical precision in facture and an analytic problem-solving attitude towards art.

A touchstone for this career must be the 1966 portrait of Marcel Duchamp. An electrocardiogram taken of Duchamp at three points during the course of an evening's visit, rendered on properly identified medical stationery, gives us a crucial object in O'Doherty's praxis. While not a fingerprint or a voice print, this cardiogram does place positivist information singular to Duchamp as available for our inspection as Duchamp himself. Eschewing optical perceptual art, Duchamp nevertheless utilised such information to show what art is not here, palpably positive information acknowledges not the optical nature of art but the textual diagram, and so, if anything, furthers the language calculated from this information. O'Doherty, who had come to US for medical studies only ultimately to abandon them, produces a diagram one reads to learn where Duchamp is and once was. The criterion by which to judge it has everything to do with the caniness of the choice of the cardiogram to represent Duchamp's conceptual being. Also on view is a kinetic object meant to keep the cardiogram 'alive' for as long as possible and hence give longevity to the tutelary spirit of Conceptual Art.

Drawing construed from information signifies the will to Conceptual Art. So does the application of a method deriving from a discipline other than art provide the generative grammar for conceptual images and performances predominant in the 1960s and 1970s – and O'Doherty is on the case. His score *Vowel Grid* for the performance *Structural Play: Vowel Grid*, 1970, together with other similarly generated pieces remain some of his most compelling works. Characteristically, O'Doherty has adapted the most salient thought form of the era – the linguistic game – and triangulated it with culturally rich Irish literature elements to make something of his own. Imagine a grid drawn in pencil coloured to encode differing vowel sounds, with this serving as a score for performance of the same by two figures covered and cowed, stepping from colour to colour as each utters the appropriate sound. Five colours, each assigned a vowel, cued the position of figure to board: the two figures moving with respect not to an endgame but to open-endedness. Each scored game is different yet iterable. Cultural heritage is paid in this mash-up to Samuel Beckett's *Carré*, here with Ogham, projected as structuralist performance practice. Sol LeWitt, François Morellet, Marc Devade and Guy de Cointet, not to mention Lygia Clark, Theresa Cha and many others – contemporary and younger – further locate the zone of reference for linguistic scoring relevant to certain contemporary conceptual practices.

O'Doherty's works on paper form the crux of his oeuvre, even as artefacts we call painting, sculpture and so on also come about. An exception to this would be *Sight*, 1966, a mirrored chamber within which a head of Narcissus is reflected and proliferates an abyss – an abyss of the selfsame – in its perfected isolation. There is humour, too, in this solipsistic refusal to disclose new sculptural views. Given the fascination with doubling reflected among his contemporaries (as with Giulio Paolini and Nam June Paik), *Sight* finds its context within the era that give prominence to the idea of the copy as perhaps the most indispensable postmodern topic, and to follow the structural logic consequential to that. Textual strategies worked out on paper with their problem-solving intent also allow drawn writing to manifest itself not as mere technique but as built idea and campaign. Curiously enough, O'Doherty's drawings showing the series and the accrual of marks are the most palpably made, with the mark attended to being rendered with care as the least clinical aspect of the artist's economy. However, the conceptual idea to which the mark is put tends to a reduction, which is very smart but sometimes adolescent in assuming that the undermining of a canonical concept amounts to a philosophical negation.

334 布隆街

纽约, 纽约州 10002

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New York, NY 10002

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Conspicuous in the pair of shows is the frequency with which O'Doherty goes directly to the art-world commonplaces and verities of his time in order to encapsulate a problem. The mid 1960s was a time of hyper-formalism, wherein one exacted a scrupulous artefact from painting as a surface, and kept distinct the concerns of painting and sculptural essence. The question then asked was: could these modes retain their integrity even when combined? O'Doherty's answer to this was to create wall paintings from which extend ropes pulled taut to the floor to induce implied volumetric form. Perceiving the volume collapse into painting along certain fixed – even dogmatic – sightlines is deliberately undermined by any movement away from the fixed perspective. Part heuristic, part parody, these constructed works express O'Doherty's approach to art orthodoxy. Actually, *Rope Drawing: Here and Now #120*, 2014, the installed version adjusted to the site of the Simone Subal Gallery, is superior to the version once seen at the Charles Cowles Gallery, and the reason is informative: scaled to this rough space with unequal wall heights and conspicuous utility pipes, the precision of the installed artwork synthesising drawing, painting and sculpture is forced into a necessarily antagonistic relation to its site; and the relatively short width of the gallery further complicates the situation by producing sightlines that interfere with perspectival self-evidence, whereas previously installed in the amplitude of perfected gallery space, the artwork was given to read as a script, with the rhetoric of modernist art getting too much play.

All the more reason to reconsider the format of a retrospective as something other than a self-evident chronological account of an artistic development: this restaging of O'Doherty's life's work in two galleries, distributing well-known pieces in and among works beneath the career radar, is an extremely welcome approach to the historical timeline. It presents familiar works in the refreshed context of exploratory studio practice and access to a headspace not so scripted as the packaging of the art world generally superimposes on studio practice. That he – an art critic at a time when the world tolerated criticism and benefited from a discourse for which not everything was subsumed into public relations – could also find a haven in studio practice wherein he served as a gadfly and mole, makes for a singular form of engagement, and so interesting to test with respect to this long view of a complicated relation to the art world. That O'Doherty crosses the threshold from critic to artist to act as a character within a fiction of potential art-world orders he himself has authored is yet another way this retrospective is a one-off and not at all self-evident. ■

MARJORIE WELSH's constructed artist book *Oaths? Questions?* was last seen at Cambridge University and at Galerie Peithner-Lichtenfels, Vienna.

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