

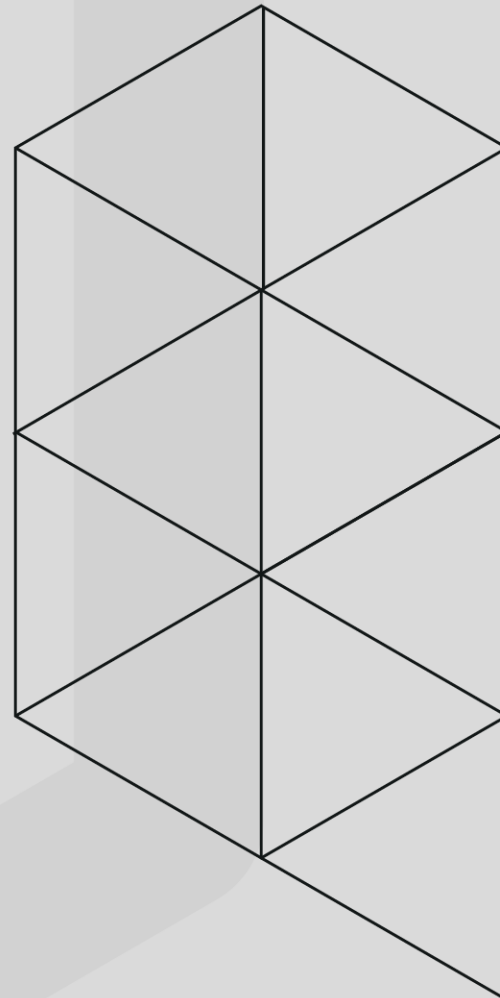
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Spatial Practices in
Art & Architecture for
Empathetic Exchange

Brian O'Doherty's Social Practice

SPACEX Deliverable, Work Package 5 (D5.6, D18)

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Amsterdam
SPACEX Work Package 4: Archives
Secondments: Sirius, Mayday Rooms, Project Art
Centre



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Installing Brian O'Doherty: Reading Time at the Sirius Art Centre, Cobh, four months after the artist's passing, and preparing a Summer School on him there now gives ample opportunity to engage with this polymath's legacy. I thank the VAI for suggesting I put some of these musings on paper.

It is expected that his US-based institutional activities (National Endowment for the Arts Programme Directorship, Art in America Editorship, his Professorship etc) would be rather distant for Irish audiences to have figured much in an appraisal of his calibre here, and that (his) literature could be foregrounded a bit more, too. It has been the visual art realm after all that has led the critical reception (with Brenda Moore-McCann, Christina Kennedy, Lucy Cotter, Yvonne Scott and myself having done our bit from an Irish perspective). And if this "realm" – for my students' generation at least – now exceeds what could once neatly be pinned down as art practice, art history, theory, curating or criticism, then it is already clear that the category-defying artist would have a good chance at resonating more with current, expanded, rather than more rigidly "disciplined", historical categories; that he may even have something to contribute to as art(istic) research, art writing, social practice (art), artists' instituting activities, art activism, decolonial work etc.

These connections are what I will explore with the participants of the Sirius Summer School. And I look forward to doing that with them in that Cobh building: the former Queenstown Yacht Club, overseeing the site from which Brian O'Doherty (in 1957) and untold numbers of other Irish people have emigrated. While "artist in residence" in that building, the site and the spatial connection to the O'Dohertys' 1995/96 artist residence, literally walking in the footsteps of Brian and Barbara, holding the same keys: this has quite an affective charge for me. The medical doctor and perception researcher O'Doherty's attention to such material and physical situatedness feels present there. It is an attentiveness and thoughtfulness that we (can) all have and that his work appears to value and foster in different ways.

When planning the exhibition with Brian and Barbara in New York last July, I received his “blessing” for establishing a material connection: I suggested not just to reproduce a rope drawing (HCE Redux) in the building, but also to span the same kind of rope from the Classicist columns of the yacht club’s balcony to the dock below, showing in concrete ways (without having to say it) how the leisurely, “civilized” life of one group had necessitated the emigration on “coffin ships” for others. This rope now reaches from the art to the water: to the global military complex’s presence in Cobh, questions of migration in Europe today, and the ecological issues at the doorstep of the exhibition space, too. That rope may be a fairly limp little gesture that doesn’t do anything on its own, but it is there for all of us to “stumble over” when admiring the sheer and absolute beauty of the site. Without it, we would have just borrowed from the ice-cream hungry attractiveness of Cobh to draw audiences and remained quiet. We know that silence about violence is also violence. Brian O’Doherty didn’t remain quiet vis-à-vis Bloody Sunday. For 36 years, he signed perfectly well-behaved Ogham-derived prints and multi-coloured drawings responding to James Joyce with “Patrick Ireland”: an incessant stumbling block and open invitation to remember and act.

How plausible and “connection-spawning” in the here and now the social practice side of Brian’s work would be has been truly surprising to me – even me I should say, as I’m the person who turned him into a bit of a “Beuys” in the introduction to my edited volume *Brian O’Doherty / Patrick Ireland: Word, Image and Institutional Critique*, Amsterdam: Valiz 2017. He was happy about that. His “helicopter view” on the art / writing sphere has both a strategic and tactical side that the world today appears to need. I’m not suggesting that anything quantifiable about the “peace process” on the island of Ireland changed because of O’Doherty’s *Name Change*, or that the arts sector in the US is now without its problems, “just” because Brian O’Doherty marched through the institutions (NEA, TV and art criticism) and managed to make the funding landscape more inclusive for conceptual practices and artists from marginalized groups. His is a pioneering institutional critique (*Inside the White Cube*), but also a foresighted critical infrastructural investment of considerable time, energy and leadership qualities (aka thoughtfulness and kindness).

This is why my curating his exhibition at Sirius now surprisingly neatly fits with a very special (but also typical) EU project on spatial practices for empathic exchange (SPACEEX), why Cork Caucus, Art/Not Art's Cork City of Culture programme (curated with Charles Esche and Annie Fletcher) can feed into the programme of my Summer School as local social practice legacy. Brian O'Doherty's large, near-psychedelic wall painting in the Sirius' central space (MDF-covered) may yet have the long-term effect of tearing down walls (including MDF) and convince both locals behind brightly coloured doors and others not fitting into a Classicist yacht club that there is a social practice space that in 1996 has already been turned into theirs.

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