

Transcript: Brian O'Doherty's Life and Work

Dr Brenda Moore-McCann in conversation with Caomhán Mac Con Iomaire.

Introduction

This podcast looks at the life and work of the pioneering Irish conceptual artist Brian Doherty. In this recording, Caomhán Mac Con Iomaire from the National Gallery of Ireland's Education Department is joined by Brenda Moore-McCann, Assistant Professor (Adjunct) Trinity College Dublin, editor of *Dear...: Selected Letters from Brian O'Doherty from the 1970s to 2018* and author of the first monograph *Brian O'Doherty: Patrick Ireland Between Categories*. During the conversation Caomhán and Brenda discuss work by Brian O'Doherty in the National Gallery of Ireland's collection, with a particular focus on a series of prints that were produced at Stony Road Press in Dublin between 2009 and 2016.

00:46

Caomhán Mac Con Iomaire (CMCI)

I'm delighted to have the opportunity to discuss the work of the artist Brian O'Doherty, a true polymath, renowned artists, doctor, critic, filmmaker and novelist, to discuss the work in more detail. I'm joined today by Brenda Moore-McCann from Trinity College, Dublin. And Brenda, thank you very much for joining me for this special podcast. We're going to discuss Brian O'Doherty's work and focus a little bit on the work he has in the National Gallery of Ireland's collection. What I'd like to talk about is your friendship with Brian O'Doherty first. I really enjoyed reading the selection of letters from *Dear...: Selected Letters from Brian O'Doherty from the 1970s to 2018*. It gave me real insight into Brian the person, but I believe your friendship goes back many years.

01:36

Brenda Moore McCann (BMM)

Yes, that's right. Yeah, well, first of all, I think I should explain how I was first introduced to him as an artist, I had been practicing as a doctor for over 20 years. And then I switched,

and I went and did an art history degree in Trinity College as a mature student. And I can't remember exactly it might have been around second year, one of my lecturers, Catherine Marshall mentioned to me one day, was I aware of this Irish doctor, who was also a very prominent critic, and artist in New York. So of course, I had never heard of him. And, I didn't think too much about it. But anyway, he came up again. And that was the thing, he kept popping up in various guises. And so, I decided a year maybe might have been the following year that I needed to a topic for my final year thesis. So, I thought, well, this is interesting. I was, I should find out more about him. Now, that wasn't very much available to me at the time, I'm talking about the 1990s, mid 1990s. So I found some catalogues. And in one of them interestingly enough, I there were included in the catalogue publication, some letters that he had written to curators, to museum directors, etc., etc., answering questions about his work. And I was very taken by these because there was a sort of informality about them, there was a wit, there was humour. And yet there was tremendous fluency in the way he was able to talk about quite complex ideas in such a straightforward way. And, strangely enough, it was the letters that drew me in. So that's where it started. I was also very interested in fact, and always had been once I started art history. Obviously, I was interested in people who had studied medicine, and were interested in art. And then I've discovered that he had been a doctor. And in fact, he had qualified in the same university as I had in UCD, some 20 odd years prior to me, and as I got to know more about him, and eventually I met him, we found we had a lot in common because of that training and that background. I eventually met him, it is quite by chance there was a champion of his and the Irish art critic, Dorothy Walker had been championing his work in Ireland. And one day she told me that he was arriving it as an artist in residence in Cork in the Sirius Art Centre. So of course, I went down there and I arranged to meet him. And I was quite terrified because I realised the breadth and range of this artist's work was indeed very, very large. However, when I met the individual in the Crawford Gallery, he was so very informal, very engaging, and actually invited me to partake in making an installation with him. And I protested saying, "No, no, I'm, I'm, I'm not an artist, I can't paint anything." But anyway, he insisted. So, I ended up contributing to that installation, which was a two-room rope drawing called Borromini's Corridor, in the top two rooms of the Crawford gallery. So that was a very kind gesture of his because it meant that my name to my surprise was added, as the list of assistant artists. So, it was a nice gesture. And it went on from there. His wife is a very erudite art historian, very

famous for her own work on American landscape painting, 19th century, and she also was very helpful to me. So, what began there was, quite as now being over 20 years of a relationship, which grew into a friendship, I did my BA thesis. And then, when that was finished, I decided that well, I just don't know enough. There's more, much more to this artist's work, I have to find out. And so, I set about doing that. And I ended up doing a PhD, the first PhD on his work in Trinity awarded in 2002, which I subsequently made into the first monograph, which I called tellingly and deliberately, *Brian O'Doherty Patrick, Ireland: Between Categories*. Now, the reason obviously, I did that well became quite clear to me that, as you mentioned, this is a multifaceted individual, who has played many, many different roles, not only in the arts, but also in medicine. He also had studied experimental psychology in Cambridge University in the UK. And this is very important because it's it underpins a lot of his work and psychological understanding of perception. So, when I, the book, I eventually resolved that it very disparate range of works in all kinds of media, but just didn't seem to be the traditional what we will call stylistic unity that we expect from traditional art. So, it sometimes appeared that you were dealing with more than one artist. And indeed, we were because this is an artist who split his artistic identity into the most famous one being Patrick Ireland in in 1972, he became Patrick Ireland. And so this complicated ones work and research into him because now, you had two artists to deal with you had Brian of Doherty, who had been making art long before he arrived in New York, here in Ireland and have been showing in all the usual places that are available to exhibit from the 50s qualified as a doctor in 1952. And he was exhibiting art, he was writing art criticism, and publishing poetry, all while he was a medical student and a young doctor. So, this was a quite an extraordinary person. And then he complicates the whole thing by taking another artists' name. And he develops these two parallel lives, to which he added other personae later on, which I can go into if you wish, but the most famous one is Patrick Ireland. And I should say that, before I leave his work, and how I would explain it, or how I can attempt to explain it, is that one must understand that it comes out of a dramatic change within the art world in in the 20th century. So we had modernism from the late 19th century, up until the mid-20th century, and the late modernism or high modernism, as it is often called, particularly under the influence of the theoretical criticism and writings of Clement Greenberg, it was art that existed for art's sake, so artists were only interested, this wasn't true. Artists were interested in other things.

10:00

BMM

Then you got the clumsily named post modernism, which arrived on the scene, possibly in the early 1960s precisely the time that Brian O'Doherty had immigrated to the United States, had gone to Harvard University, where he had done a Master of Science degree in medicine. And having made a promise to his parents that he would not only complete his medical degree, but he also would do a postgraduate degree. But after he did his master's, he got back to what he had always wanted to do, which was to be an artist. So, he has been an artist in his mind, and in practice, for well over 50 years now going on 60 years. He'll be 93 in May, and thankfully he is still with us. However, so the phase of his work that we now know him best for would be the work that emerged in the early 60s in New York, in the context of New York. So, he would be if we want to put a label on him, of course, artists hate labels, but the one he will accept is that he is a Post-Minimalist Conceptualist. So, he was part of the Minimalism movement, which lasted for a number of years in the United States, and paved the way for what we now call Conceptual Art. So, it appeared in various forms all over the world, as we learned subsequently. It wasn't just in the UK, and in the United States, that Conceptual art emerged. It emerged a little later in Ireland. Thanks to him. He introduced Conceptual art to Ireland at the Rosc exhibition in 1977, along with James Coleman, but getting back to the 60s, he first became very well known in the United States. He started working in the Boston Museum of Arts where he started before, he arrived in New York in 1960, and he started presenting a series of art programmes to the public, which was called *Invitation to Art*. I have seen one or two of these, they're immensely skillful, because they're very conversational. They're not full of theory, and so on, because by the way, he never really went to art school, and everything he knows about art, he learned through importing books before he left Ireland, reading, mixing with artists, like Jack B. Yeats, who became a friend and mentor of his, and I know you have the very fine drawing, which is the last portrait of Jack B. Yeats, three weeks before he died, which Brian O'Doherty did in 1957, before he went over to Cambridge. And I know you've been reading the letter that I included, at the very beginning of the letters book, published in 2018. I deliberately did that because I felt it's extremely charming letter, full of mistakes, typos, and in one sense, he didn't bother correcting them.

13:30

BMM

And, and of course, as editor, I didn't either because they had to be as fresh as they were, to the person who is reading them. But it is a very charming letter in the way that Jack B. Yeats was quite ill. And he was in the Portobello nursing home, which is on the canal. And Brian has already visited him there on Valentine's Day actually in 1957 just before he went over to Cambridge and UK, and Jack B. Yeats had given up painting he, I think, must have been quite depressed and his wife had died. And so, he was he had given up painting, and the letter comes from Cambridge subsequently. It is this younger doctor trying to encourage the older man whom he admired very much, not so much exactly for his painting. But it wasn't that useful to the artist Brian O'Doherty as it turned out, but more for his attitude, his independent spirit. That's what he really liked. And as we will see, he has this knack of befriending older artists. He went on to become a good friend of Marcel Duchamp. And I know you have the portrait of Marcel Duchamp. He became friendly with him again, he admired Duchamp's independent attitude, his defiance of art world rules and regulations that outside of which you work could not thread. And as it went on Brian O' Doherty's whole practice is about breaking rules. It's about breaking conventions, which is what a lot of postmodernist artists were doing. Just to hop back to that, because at the point of this high modernism in the early 60s, which would have been broken initially by Pop art, and Fluxus art, happenings, and things like that, artists wanted to get out of this stranglehold of the museum and gallery system, which only had its favourites, and was not allowing certain artists work to be shown in galleries or museums. And so they moved away from or they tried to move away from the museum, and get out into the community, and link art again, once again, with the society with the people, because a lot of people become alienated from art. There's very high condescending kind of art that was saying, well, if you don't understand Abstract Expressionism, there's something wrong with you. That was the implication. And so a lot of these artists of which Brian was one, you know, wanted to move away from that they wanted to get away also, from this concept of the artist, the persona of the artist, has been a genius figure who was hidebound to the original brushstroke, originality, and only being concerned about the future, not the present, they were concerned about the present. And of course, in the background to all of this was gathering pace as the 60s went on to and I remember this because I'm old

enough to remember this, having visited America, at the height of all of these, what were called antiestablishment views and resistance to the Vietnam War, and the growth of feminism, the growth of rights of all kinds, black people's rights, which of course was still being dealt and gay rights. All of this was in the background. So, it was a very exciting time for Brian O'Doherty to arrive from the relatively stayed, conservative environment of Ireland, which at that time, was only interested in French art. He was more interested in Russian art. And as you can see this, that it continues to be a strand within his work, particularly in the rope drawings.

17:58

BMM

So, I identified it wasn't the style that was common to the works because the different medium in which he worked demanded different ways of working. As with other artists as well, ideas were more important than making objects. That was the big thing that Conceptual art was concerned with. And of course, if you're interested in ideas that opens up a whole new field, in high modernism, politics, you were not allowed to talk about politics, or address political issues. It was only about art for art's sake, in other words, so this opened up ideas about art that opened up ideas about society, about history, about politics. And I identified in my book and my thesis, actually my PhD, that there may seem to be a disparate number of works without any stylistic unity, however, there is a thematic unity that underpins all these works. And I found that these were weighty subjects, perception, identity, or the self and language. Now, of course, language for Conceptual art, in the most common model became the medium, but usually artists, that use language, they use the English language, assuming that the English language is a universal language. Now, contrary to that attitude, Brian looked in the 60s for a language that will be minimal, and yet would connect with the more communal nature of language and he found that having looked at many, many different languages, pre-Columbian, you know ruins Scandinavian ruins. He eventually, as he says himself founded in his own backyard. He had learned about the Irish Celtic language of Ogham when he was at school in Loughlinstown. And we didn't, I didn't learn it, but they learned it in his day. So, he was familiar with it. And it was perfect for him because coming out of minimalism, here was a script or a language that was reduced merely to a set of lines. And so, it was four sets of

five lines, and they could be disposed vertically, or slanting, or drop off a common invisible horizontal. And it is for him in a delightful way, it also related to serialism, which was a new form of music, founded by Schoenberg in the early part of 20th century. A friend of his Morton Feldman, who was a composer, was very interested in serialism. And he learned a lot about serialism. He wasn't the only artist interested in serialism at that time. So, a lot of artists at that time were looking to basic mathematical, fairly simple concepts like progressions, like magic square, he's particularly interested in the magic square, which is, I learned, you have a set of numbers on a grid and if they add up, or they should add up, horizontally, vertically, and diagonally, they always end up with the same number, magically. And he has used that frequently in his work. But of course, one of the key things about minimalism was the use of the grid. And he used the grid and continues to use the grid. But the grid for him was not really a symbol of order. It was more the grid for him came out of his interest in chess, because he had played chess as a family, they play chess, he says he's only a middling player. But he was interested in chess and part of his work in the early days, he made chess pieces minimal chess pieces, one of which Duchamp asked him because he was chairman of the chess Society of America. So, there's a Brian O'Doherty chess piece in the Society of American. So, I think maybe to kind of wrap up at Brian's work, I could quote, I'll give you a couple of quotes. And one is from if the American critic, Lucy Lippard, who wrote what was regarded as the bible of Conceptual art, one of the first books to come out about Conceptual art, and it's called *Six Years, The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, which is published around 1972. And in that, she, even at that early stage is lamenting that many of the major conceptualist were contrary to what they started off in their resisting of the art system. They were now selling their conceptual works for large sums of money to museums. Brian, of course, wasn't and he doesn't fit in there. But the other thing that he does fit in was her other comment, was that conceptualist interactions, this is about conceptualists "interactions between maths and art, philosophy and art, literature and art, politics and art, are still at a very primitive level." Now in my book I have argued, they were at a primitive level for many conceptions, but they really by the end of the 60s, it's all there (interactions between maths and art, philosophy and art, literature and art, politics and art). In the early 70s all of those interactions exist in Brian Doherty's work. So in that sense, it's that one thing that makes it quite remarkable the spread of it, the broadness of it, and the other one I will quote is Brian himself, and of course, he has wonderful ways of

paraphrasing things as I said earlier, in the 1960s, he was a critic for the New York Times and in one of the pieces he put all his reviews together in a book called *Object, An Idea*, which was published in 1967. One of those essays caught my eye and it's called *Parameters for the Authentic Artists*. In it, I'll just give you a small quote, he says, "the genuine creator..." (in other words, he's talking about how many artists were now selling their soul for money, you know, it was all art was becoming a career rather than a vocation or a profession) he says, "the genuine artist or creator is involved in breaking the rules, we need to de-centre, up to now the role of the modern artist has been that of the great individual." So he's talking about the cult of the artist, which he tried to undermine, in his own practice, by inventing all these personae and staying in the background.

25:52

BMM

At one stage, he told me he had decided he would no longer go to openings of his work in his gallery, the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. She was outraged because, of course, she was trying to promote his work and if the artists didn't turn up, other people wouldn't go because they will want to meet the artists. So, there was the cult of the artist, which again, in his own way, Andy Warhol hyped it, he made it into an even bigger cult, you know, so all these things were going on at the time. Would you like me to talk a little bit about the name change? Or would you like me to elaborate more on his work?

CMCI

Well, what you were saying there was really fascinating, and I think the quote that you have there, "...thus, the pursuit of excellence in art is stringent and demanding, yes, those rewards are usually not monetary," That's one of my favourite quotes, I think it's very important for artists to consider that it is a vocation that you are going into, you know, to achieve, I suppose something that's really different and to find something within yourself to produce a body of work.

27:15

BMM

To take risks of presenting it or representing it to an audience that without knowing how they're going to receive it. Those are the risks artists take. And so many artists, unfortunately, have actually decided to take the easier route if they find something is a seller, to just stick with that and keep selling it. Now he has resolutely stuck to his last as it were and he is to be admired and is indeed he is admired internationally for that, but also by younger artists, younger generations of artists in Ireland whom I've interviewed, and they have told me about how he influenced them. His attitude influenced them to take more risks, and be braver about what you want to say, particularly in the area of the troubles in Northern Ireland. I've interviewed a number of artists about that, of course, he showed the way by his performance in 1972. I suppose, one of the things that attracted me getting back to that was these are very weighty subjects. I was very frightened when I realised, oh, my goodness, this is what's going on. How on earth am I going to get my head around such weighty themes and be able to do justice to this artist's work? But what attracted me apart from his encouragement, I must say, don't forget, he's a teacher as well. There is the teacher in him because his father was a teacher, there were times when I thought, I just can't do this. I once said to him, but look, you could do this better than me. I haven't got the language. I mean, and he said, "No" he said, the artists can't do that. And he said, keep going, keep going. But he never really handed me things on the plate. Anything I learned about them, I had to find out myself, which allowed me I suppose to be protected in that people might think living artists are ghosting this for you, you know, and I was very determined not to let that happen. But it never arose, he never tried. But what attracted to me, as I was about to say, is the themes are weighty, but the way he presents them is incredible, how straightforward I mean really, if you think about it he deals with dots, the most minimum mark you could possibly get in art. And then if you join dots together, you get a line. And lines are all over his work. And then he takes that line and as he quotes, was it Klee or was it Kandinsky, no it is Klee, "taking a line for a walk." So he took a line for a walk from the two dimensional space of a page or on canvas, but he didn't do canvas work until, it was 30 years before he went back to canvas. But he took the line out into three-dimensional space to make installations. And of course, he once said to me the one of the things if you hadn't been a doctor, well, the first thing you want to be, always, was an artist, but he had to be a doctor, he had to have a sensible job. I mean, parents usually want their children to have sensible jobs and being an artist is not

regarded as being too sensible, or an actor or something like that. But so, he did medicine and he doesn't regret it but because it doesn't form a lot of his work and the way he thinks the other thing he once said to me that he would love to have been, would be an architect. So, he's very, very interested in space. And of course, a lot of theorists were getting very interested in space in the 60s and 70s. And he and his wife have a beautiful house in Umbria in Italy since the 70s. So, his work as I would see it, much like Sol LeWitt's who also lived in Italy and was very influenced by Italian colour, Italian frescoes, and so on, frescoes of course, are wall paintings and Brian O'Doherty began to paint walls in this house in Umbria and it's called Casa de Pinta, which means painted house. But it essentially is a museum too, it's the only place that you can go permanently and see a range of Brian O'Doherty or Patrick Ireland works because it mostly was done under Patrick Ireland and so it can now be visited by the public. It's an extraordinary place, it has completely painted walls inside. And so, it's like a living, breathing museum, the way you know, art should be as well as in Roman times, and so on. Art, you lived with the art, in Roman villas you were surrounded by the art. And this, his museum is like that. So, it fits in very well, he obviously wrote this very famous book, which he became very famous initially, *Inside the White Cube*. And that's his term, he coined the white cube term was used ubiquitously now.

33:22

BMM

That was published in 1976 and is still as influential today it had been translated into about 15 or 20 languages, sometimes without his permission. But they are very intimately linked that those essays, very intimately linked with his thinking about his installations, which are made simply with a rope and Venetian cord rope. And he paints the walls and he juxtaposes the ropes, with configurations on the walls. You the spectator have to find where the ropes become aligned with geometric configuration on the wall, and they're all about order and disorder, about things falling into place and then falling out of place, which he relates very much. Well, that's how life is. Life is like that. You know, we all feel grateful for the times when everything seems to be falling into place. But then we all know quickly, it may not stay that way. And so, underlying all of his work is this deep kind of philosophical kind of ideas about life itself, what life means and which is what all our great

art is about, and what is our role in the life so it's not just our role in the installation, or in the labyrinth which he introduced into contemporary art in the 60s. He was very early with the labyrinth, Robert Morris's labyrinth was, you know, about seven or eight years later, even though he's often credited as being the first one. But Brian Dorothy's labyrinth is based on the St Bridget's cross. So, he, he does look back to his own culture from time to time to find motifs that might work for contemporary practice. And of course, the big one that he looked back on was the language that I touched on, the Ogham alphabet, which is found originally on standing stones in the south and southwest of Ireland and in Wales, as well, where they were taught to be kind of boundary markers. So, he is adapted that for millions of well, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of drawings. Drawing is a big feature of his work. His friend, George Segal, the American sculptor used to make these plaster casts of people, he died a few years ago, he was quoted as saying that Patrick Ireland/Brian O'Doherty's drawing oeuvre, is among the most eminent in American art. And of course, he was using Brian because Brian is now an American citizen, but he still has his Irish passport and his dual citizenship in other words, so drawing is very much linked to his understanding of psychology, because, you know, he says, about drawing, you draw to see what you think. And very often, that's why artists bring around little notebooks where they draw something, and then work it up, maybe later, but he is always drawing, and has his own notebooks. And it has various sayings in them that have guided his practice. And he has looked to others, he's looked to philosophers like William James, the philosopher, George Berkeley, he has done work on George Berkeley, and whose course was the Bishop of Cloyne, down in Cork, and he's very interested in his philosophy of what reality is. And he, you know, uses multiple sources, but I won't, I should say, this sounds all very heavy but I would say if you give a time, if you get into his work, there is a wit in it, there's humour in it, you can just stop, if you wish, at the abstract level and see an abstract drawing or an abstract painting, and enjoy the colours and the juxtapositions of them and the movements that the implied movement that's in a lot of his works, particularly in that later set of, of drawings that are the prints he did with Stony Road Press, which were shown in Berlin, and I noticed myself that there's always implied movement in a lot of his work. Obviously, in the rope drawings, you are the moving part, you are the person who controls the rope drawings. And it's difficult to explain them because you have to be in them to know what I'm really talking about. But if you look, some of the works you have there in the Gallery, you have *Rotating Circle*, and *Echo*. So

made of dots, which is a beautiful piece, you have the implied Ogham movement of the kind of zigzaggy on lines that are dancing they're dancing across. There's an implied grid there, because if you look in, you don't see the grid, but if you look, you will see each of those lines is in a little bunch of fives, so they're fives going all the way across, and all the way down. Those five lines in Ogham add up is a vowel. And of course, I mentioned that she's very interested in the self and we've already spoken about how his own work is divided in this divided self of artists. There's a whole body of work by Patrick Ireland. And there's a whole body of work by Brian O'Doherty before he was Patrick Ireland and now there's a body of work by Brian O'Doherty after Patrick Ireland was buried in the grounds of the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Once there was peace in Northern Ireland, and in 2008, but he was for 36 years, he was Patrick Ireland, and when I started my research, I would speak to people and I'd say, oh, I'd like to talk to you about Patrick Ireland and sometimes I would get this response "Who?" I said, "Oh, do you know Brian O'Doherty?" "Oh, yes, I know, Brian, of course, I know." I'm talking about people in America. "Of course, I know Brian O'Doherty, then I would say to somebody." Or, here in Ireland, "...perhaps can I speak to you about Brian O'Doherty?" "Who?" "Oh, can we speak to you? Have you ever heard of Patrick Ireland?" "Oh, yeah. He's the fellow that buried himself." And, you know, this is in more recent times. It's very interesting that he managed to keep these two personae quite separate in a way, because his artwork from 1972 until 2008 was Patrick Ireland. It was all signed by Patrick Ireland. Whereas his writings continued under Brian O'Doherty. So, his criticism, his more recent novels were all done under the name Brian, O'Doherty. I said to him, when I first when I met him in 1995, I said, "Well, what do I call you?" So, at that time, in public, I called him Patrick. But in private, I called him Brian, out of respect for this persona. And I was dealing with the artist persona. So, Barbara, his wife, Barbara Novak, she very often was called Mrs. Ireland, she'd be introduced as Mrs. Ireland. And just to show you how successful he was, in keeping these two personae quite separate, was that there's who's who in America, you know, it's like a directory. It's like Tom's directory over here, where you've entries about various people who are considered worth putting into a directory. And so there's a directory and I have it in the letters book there, I think I put it in to show how there's an entry for Brian O'Doherty. And then there's a separate entry for Patrick Ireland. And you look down, you read the whole thing, and unless you're quick enough to pick up the few little overlaps, that they sound like two different people. Yeah. So he was able to keep these persona and the others he added in

and used only occasionally, he kept them very quiet, and didn't reveal their existence at all, until his retrospective here in the Hugh Lane gallery, in 2006, and that was the first time these other personae were brought in were revealed. And one of them was a female, Mary Josephson. He got her and this is where the humour comes in. He got Mary Josephson, and her name, by the way, is derived from the horror he had as a young boy to find which was common in those days, his name was Brian Mary. There was a culture in Ireland at the time, and funnily enough, my name is Brenda, Mary. And anyway, for his confirmation (Irish people will know this sometimes you have to explain it to Americans) as a Catholic, for his confirmation, he decided he's going to reassert his masculinity. So, he took the name Joseph. So now he was Brian, Mary Joseph. So that's actually the Holy Family, isn't it? So, when he wanted another feminist, he wanted a feminist you wanted to write as a feminist because he was very intrigued and interested in this development. So, he needed a female writer and there wasn't one around, so he invented Mary Josephson, he's put on the son at the end. So, the son of course, is Mary Joseph and the Son. So now he had the Holy Family. So, it was his kind of secular thing. You know, a lot of people were, in his generation particularly felt terribly repressed by the Catholic Church. I'm a generation younger. I grew up with it all right, but many of us rejected it, but this is a rejection in a sense, just like Joyce, Joyce rejected his oppressive as he felt, Catholic Church.

44:58

BMM

And strangely enough, they both were voluntary exiles Brian O'Doherty did want to get out of Ireland. And lucky for him, he arrived in America at this extremely exciting time which suited his sensibility. So, he's made all his contributions on that. But, the thing I would say about the name change, which was the first performance art, chronologically in Ireland, and it brought him a lot of opprobrium from people. People here thought that he was an undercover IRA man. And this was added to by the fact that he wore a stocking over his face during the performance but he was dressed all in white with a white stocking at the original performance. He was assisted by two artists, Brian King and Bobby Ballagh. And you probably know what, what happened. He was carried out on the stretcher, and he, his body was painted, you know, I think it was orange from the head down and green

from the bottom up. But at a certain point, as the two artists were simultaneously painting, you actually had the Irish flag displayed on his body, but they crossed over. And so, his body ended up a dirty brown, like a kind of an atrocity victim. So really what he was dealing with, it's too long to go into now but he was really dealing with the symbolism of flags, which we all know about. We see them painted on pavements and everything, the Union Jack on pavements, and union areas, and, you know, the green light and orange in other areas of Belfast, and beyond. So, he was dealing with that, but he was also dealing with the symbolism of flags and things, but also how identities are formed by those cultures that, you know, are aligned to the green or aligned to the orange. Of course, it was a risky thing to do. He knew that. But he also says that he is one of these people that believes art cannot change politics, it can't change it, but it can respond to it. But he wouldn't be under the illusion he could change anything. However, the main motivation of it was as an exile. There were many, many people in the United States when he was meeting, who had no idea what was going on in this little island far away, and particularly in a small part of it. And it wasn't until the atrocities that they began to ask questions. And so, part of his protest, it was an exiles protest. He was criticised for the fact that he didn't live in Ireland and who was he was right as he to take the name of the whole country. And what he wrapped up in that was the whole issue about names like, he talks about how the name Paddy is applied to people in the UK, whether they're from the north or from the south, that everyone's Paddy, the English call you Paddy, which is not highly respectful kind of terminology. So, he wanted Patrick, and he was going to dignify Patrick with the name. And then Ireland is actually an English surname, ironically, and of course, St. Patrick himself was not Irish. So, you know, there are all those complexities involved in it. But I once presented the name change performance at a conference, an EU conference here in Dublin in UCD and many of the people who were presenting papers it was to do with it was the forms of protest in art. I presented this as a unique example that I could find of a peaceful protest. There was no incitement to violence or anything in this. The stocking by the way over the face was as it is for robbers and people like that to neutralise your identity, your facial identity is gone. And if he was going to change his name, from Brian O'Doherty to Patrick Ireland, his physiognomy as it were had to be neutralised until he had actually acquired the new name, which he signed a document in front of a solicitor. Actually, this actually happened and in fact, that was the same document when he was burying Patrick Ireland. And there's simply a similar code, the same code that he wore

originally, he wore, Patrick Ireland was buried, and the thing that happened in 2008, he felt with the peace process in Northern Ireland having watched it for years with horror as many of us as well. His idea was that the idea of burying Patrick Ireland (Patrick Ireland was born out of out of conflict and hate are between two communities and death and atrocity) but Patrick Ireland, when he was buried, peace had arrived in spite of these terrible times, and 3,000 people being killed. And of course, the name change was deliberately a direct response to Bloody Sunday on the 30th of January 72, which was subsequently found, none of the people had arms or anything they were they were shot in cold blood.

51:01

BMM

So, he buried Patrick Ireland, because he felt this is what we're doing here, is burying hate. That's all he said. We are burying hate today. That's all he said. And he felt if it's possible to resolve such a thorny, difficult conflict in a small place like Northern Ireland, it should be possible to resolve anywhere in the world. So therefore, there was an international dimension to the burial. There were readings in in German and French and Irish indeed. So, would you like me to talk about silence?

CMCI

Yeah, that's something that I'm interested in because you mentioned silence in his work, and I just kind of picked up on that. So yeah, I would just like to know what you what you mean, by that?

52:01

BMM

Well, I actually found, there's layering in Brian's work it's like you peel an onion and there's another layer to go and another layer. And one of the things that I found was silence seems to pop up quite a bit. And, and I actually did a lecture on it at one time, but I have a chapter in my book, that between categories book chapter seven, I actually entitled it *Imaging Silence, Performing Language*. So, what I mean by that is, all of these images that he

has given us, like these drawings, made out of Ogham. Now Ogham doesn't exist anymore. It we don't even know if people ever spoke it. We just think it was a script, but I'm not sure. So, I don't know if it was a language in that sense, or whether it was just a script. And Ogham by the way, we're going back in more recent scholarship in the Royal Irish Academy, dates to the third fourth century, up to the seventh century, when you got vellum and so on, like Book of Kells, and so on. And from there on in. And but what I meant by silence, I began to realise but Ogham silence, it's actually silence. And yes, if he has reduced his verbal language, within the context of Conceptual art, to Ogham, but also two very specific words, one here and now. And I and you which is obviously a direct address to the viewer. One here now is a kind of an existential thing, you know, it's, it's the self in time and place. All you've got is now the future may be influenced by the now, but you can't do anything about the past. So, all you have is now and he is very much worked on these concepts. Throughout a vast series of works. Sometimes the words are together, rarely together, usually, they're split up into, you could have a drawing, and it's made up of the word one, you know, it's a whole grid of ones, but of course, and when I got my PhD, he did a very specific beautiful drawing specifically for me. And it was the word "o n e" in English not "n o n o n e" in the kind of blocked out kind of almost like a Bauhaus way, you know, but of course, that was a pun, because it was, it was a pun on "one". I won my PhD and he also inscribed it, "o n e". And then in brackets for Doctor, he loves the fact that I am two doctors and one. I'm a medical doctor, but I'm a PhD doctor. So that's two and one and what he loves all that word play. And that's what can be very fascinating but back to silence. So, Ogham itself is silent, right? It's not a language we completely understand. We know what the letters, they're only 20 letters of the Roman alphabet that have been transferred into this four sets of five lines. So, it's visual, in terms of a mark. And it's also verbal in its language, its visual and verbal, pared down to the minimum. And I think that would have appealed very much to him, because he wanted to combine language, Conceptual art, and serialism together and as I mentioned, is a serial type of language. But the silence is something that comes in, he wants to make the remark about, you know, whispering, gets more attention. You know, when you think about it, it's true. If you whisper people strain more to hear what you're saying, then if you shout and roar and make noise, silence actually became also one of the themes of a very important piece of work that he produced in 1967. And 1967 seems to be a year of tremendous fertility, you know, so much came on stream, he found Ogham, started using it, he started making

performances based on the Ogham language, which are called structured replays. He then also put together an extraordinary box, it's been shown all around the world. And, and it's quite rare now, but I have, I'm lucky to have a copy myself. In 1967, he produced an exhibition in a small 8x8 box with the white box called Aspen. Now Aspen is in Colorado, usually associated with skiing, but actually used to have a very important design festival, there is a very cultural place as well. And there was a lady they're called Phyllis Johnson. She, funnily enough, came from the fashion world, but she was very instrumental in in devising this box and getting well known artists to curate it as an exhibition. So, for example, the box that Brian did, he did a double edition 5+6, and it's called the Conceptual Edition, the minimal and conceptual edition. Andy Warhol did the one before him. So that's the Pop edition. So, they were dedication to various art movements. And Brian's having by most people, not just me, his is the most complex and most extraordinary, because in that small little white box, you open it up, and you find inside, films, there are four films, there are records, a little floppy disk things now I got one of my sons to convert those into CDs. And you have the pieces of sculpture model by Tony Smith, you've got a printed data he calls it, and three little booklets. Now getting back to silence, one of the booklets was...he commissioned all the work in it. And he commissioned Susan Sontag, the very famous writer, he commissioned her for Aspen. And he asked her, he told her the kind of ideas he had about this box and what he wanted to go into it. And so, she came up with an essay, which is called the *Aesthetics of Silence*. And I will just read you a little quote from us, which is very pertinent to Brian's own work. She says, this is in Aspen, "...most valuable art in our time has been experienced as a move into silence."

And in brackets she has "...or intelligibility or invisibility, or in audibility" and obviously I haven't put the whole sentence in but the "...isolation of the work from its audience never lasts." So, I think what she's saying in another way, there are times when we're blind to what artists are trying to show us. We can't see it. Because you can't see what you don't know. You don't see it. And you can't hear what you don't know. So, when we listen to, I know when Beethoven produced his Ninth Symphony, audiences were outraged, absolutely outraged, when, what's his name, who did the customhouse, the architect who did...

CMCI

Gandon

BMM

When James Gandon did his Custom House, there was outrage. So, as that other critic Robert was the second name, anyway, it's called the *Shock of the New*. So, when things are presented to us, we don't actually see it because it doesn't fit into any particular template that we are aware of. And as you know, I teach a class in Trinity to medical students' core perception and medicine and art and one of the things I say to them, you can't see what you don't know. You only know you know, what you see. So obviously, the more you know, the more you'll see. So, to educate yourself as best you can, by reading books, going to plays, looking at art, you will see more. And I can tell you, since I have been studying this artist or researching this artists work for nearly 20 years now, I am seeing so much more than I would have seen if I hadn't studied and research. But it is demanding, like anything that's worthwhile. It is demanding.

1:01:57

BMM

But if you're curious, it is extremely rewarding. And, like a lot of good art, you know, the books that you felt you struggled to read when you were younger, if you stuck with them, the Jane Austen's and so on they ultimately were rewarding. And I would say Brian's work is like that. It's not for everybody. But he doesn't want it for everybody, you know, he wants it for people who are curious people who are interested and prepared to follow a little guiding hand. To me, it's a bit like Dante, in the, you know, *The Divine Comedy*. He's being guided through by Virgil, you know, everyone needs a guide. And I kind of look, I asked myself, many times, what is an art historian supposed to do? What are we supposed to be actually doing? And for me, it is to acquaint ourselves as best we can with an artist's work, it's impossible to be truly inside their head, you just can't be. But you can get as to it as best you can, if you work hard at it. And then the job is to communicate all of that out to a general audience. In in as clear and concise language as you can. And as we all know, as lecturers, you don't actually win every student over but you know, if you bring most of them with you, or if you stimulate them to want to go a little bit further, or

to ask a question and say, well, I want to come back to that. Can I ask you about that? And that's, that's as much as we can do, you know? And so, is there anything else you want to ask me?

CMCI

What I'd like to move on actually too is the rotating vowels which we have facsimiles of in our collection and these were done by Stony Road Press. Just following on from what you were talking about there with his real interest in Ogham which is an alphabet that's not really used anymore. I mean, Ogham really does form this body of work.

BMM

Oh, absolutely. It does, because as I mentioned, once he chose, he was looking for a language as a lot of conceptualist. As I said, we're using languages and medium he decided that he wanted he didn't want English because it's full of problems, impurities, miscommunications, etc., etc., which he deals with to certain degree in some of his structural plays, which are based on Ogham or short English sentences. But they're there. That's another day's work. Yes, you're quite right, the concentric or rotating vowels, again, notice there's an implied movement in those. And they're rotating. And if you look at them, there is a sense in which they seem to move under the eye, to my eye anyway. And there is a sense when you look at some of his, his own works in the ones the line works, but with the own language, depending on the colours you use, they kind of move in and out of your perception, they kind of shift in a way as so and then he has a work, I think you have an example of it, they're *Flying Open Cube*. So that's kind of like an exploding gallery. This is where he burst open the gallery, it's a box. And the cube, of course, is the white box is the gallery. And he did this big series in the 80s, called *Flying Open Cube* and also the different gods, and they're flying, they're open, they're free to be something different from being rigidly stuck inside a box. But yeah, the *Rotating Vowels*. I mentioned earlier that he being a minimalist at heart, he reduced his language to certain words, "one here now" but also to the vowels. Now, he did use consonants earlier in his alphabet, but he actually resolved to use, he ended up with the vowels, he preferred the vowels, because, in his mind, the vowels are the basic, the most basic unit of a language. And of course, Irish vowels are differently constructed from English vowels. In English, we say, a

e, i, o, and u that's how we learned it. But in, Irish, we have what we call the broad vowels a, o, u, and then the slender vowels, e and i. So, they are structurally linked together in the Irish language. So, he was interested in the vowels. And another source for him would be Rimbaud, remember the poet, he died at the age of 27. But he did a poem, and it was called *Voyelles*, which means vowels in French. And he, there's a kind of synesthesia attached to vowels, who are some people who have synesthesia can actually see colours, when they see a vowel. I don't have synesthesia, I don't see colours but some people hear sounds, and they hear, they see colour. And don't forget, I said that this guy had studied experimental psychology so, he would know a lot about that. And as doctors, we're interested in these kinds of sensual phenomena that two senses are stimulated by looking at something. So, you see, and you hear. And this, I think, is something that informs his work. He's very interested in the senses. His work is very cerebral, but he's also very interested in the senses, which you can tell by looking at the way he uses colour in his work. And you're drawn in sensually to the colour and the way he uses colour. And this happens in the rope drawings, but also in in these the installations but also in these drawings. So, the vowels is something he's very interested in. In this case, he uses the vowels, he has made them into arcs. So I need to tell you that the vowels are, as I mentioned, the broad vowels and Irish go together and then slender vowels. So it's a o u the broad vowels and e and i and so, if you look at the centre of those drawings that you have there, it you see a single disc, okay, one single disk at the very centre, like a bull's eye, if you like, that is equivalent to the single line in Ogham, which is equivalent to the letter a. So that's an a, okay, now, if you look at the ring, this the next ring to that, you will see two arcs, which is equivalent to two lines. So that is an o – a, o, so now we have a and o. And you'll see at the bottom, he is giving you those in, in Roman numerals so he is giving you the a and then you the o, and then you go to the third ring. I don't know which one you're looking at this is the five vowels are just following five vowels. So Okay, the third ring, you have three, three arcs, okay, which will be equivalent to three lines in Ogham, which is, which means u. So now we have an o, and u you go to the fourth one, you have four arcs four sections of an arc, okay, so that's four lines. And that's an e. And the outer one has five, five lines, which are arcs in this case, and that is an i. So, you have a, o, u, e and i. So, you have the five vowels there. And in the rest of the series, he builds them up incrementally. So, you start with the single a, and then he has another one, it's an o, and then other ones, a, o, u, and he builds them up to get the full set of the vowels

there in that one you're looking at. So, here you have what I have called a very unusual version of image and text. Like I get it, they're just vowels. But you've got visual, and you've got the verbal together.

1:11:11

BMM

And that actually, in one sense, is bringing the cognitive and the sensual together. Because it languages you know, there was these divisions like, you know, cognition, it relates to language and mathematics and things and the senses are the lower orders. They are, you know, just emotion and this sort of thing. However, I think that's being challenged here. I would argue that he's bringing you as a doctor, we all know, you can't separate the mind from the body. So, the body and the mind are together. Yeah.

1:11:49

CMCI

It was just it's really interesting to have it explained to me, it's like a veil being lifted up. And I just want to finish up the podcast with just a look at the portrait of Marcel Duchamp that he produced using an electrocardiographic machine us back in the 1980s. It was 1966. We do have a copy of this. Now, and I think it's very interesting, because I actually heard Brian talking about this himself, when he spoke in the Gallery, a number of years ago. Yeah. What I found interesting is that it really challenged my perception of a portrait. you know, I think it's interesting as well that you are from a medical background, so as Brian and that they're using this medical machine to produce a portrait. So, what's your view on that?

1:12:47

BMM

Yes, yeah, I have called it actually the first conceptual portrait, first Conceptual art portrait. Robert Morris did do an electro an electroencephalogram, of his own brain, an E.E.G we call that he did it a few years, a few short years before Brian did this. So, this is, you could

talk for a whole day about this particular work, because there are many sources that go into his thinking about it. The first one I think, is well worth knowing is don't forget, this was exactly the time that the first heart transplant had taken place in South Africa, Christian Barnard. And of course, this was an extraordinary thing. To think that somebody would have someone else's heart beating inside them. And for him, it drew it brought up for Brian I'm talking about it brought up all sorts of issues about identity. Like it's not my heart beating, it's someone else's, you know, it also he was also very interested in the background was the, you know, the, the custom in art for many over centuries, which a lot of people find apparent now, where they would be, you know, you'd go and you see Muhammad's fingernail, or you would see somebody's little bit of their hair or medieval times, you know, the relics. In fact, where I live part of the year in Sienna, there is the head, the actual head of St. Catherine of Sienna. It's quite shrunken, but it's there. And I know some Canadian visitors are utterly horrified the idea of it. But then you see you did have the idea. The heart of a person's is a very important organ, which of course, indeed it is. So, there was the idea that the heart was taken out. And Daniel O'Connell, there's a precedent for this. Daniel O'Connell when he was coming back from visiting the Pope he stopped in Genoa, and I've been to the house where he stayed, and he died in Genoa and his heart was taken. And he was regarded as such an important person, you know, the Catholic emancipator and so on. His heart was put inside a silver casket. And it now I believe, I think the casket was stolen. But I believe that I don't know where the heart is, the heart is supposed to be in the Irish college and Rome, I don't know. Anyway, so there is this idea of the organ being separated from its body. Okay. Then there's the idea, of course, Brian, it was also the beginning very much the beginning of the advent of technology, infiltrating all disciplines. And of course, it has become such a pervasive thing now. We're talking about the 60s, he was thinking about how the person might be sick in the intensive care unit, and they're surrounded by machines, clicking and beeping and squeaking. And somehow, what the doctor was reading on that was more important than the person in the bed, you know, so this was becoming this was shift from the human person up to this manifestation of their life, you know, life sources, etc. So, all of that anyway, was some of the idea. But the real reason the real precipitating reason for his concept of making such a portrait was the fact that its Marcel Duchamp, of course, had many memorable things over his long career. But he was living in New York, and Brian knew him at this point. And in fact, he had interviewed him for one of his television

programmes Brian had, and they got on well, and of course, they had chess in common as well. But he invited they were on social terms with Marcel Duchamp and his wife Teeny. And he they invited Brian and Barbara invited Teeny, and who was his wife, and Marcel to dinner. And you probably heard Brian talk about this and Barbara got out her cookbook, and she made an extraordinarily calorific meal, maybe buckets of cream and butter and everything. And Brian jokingly says Marcel must have just looked at because he's very slender guy looked at and thinks she's trying to kill me, you know, with all the cream and stuff. But Brian had this idea of making a portrait of Duchamp in this manner, because Duchamp famously said, you know, art dies once you put it on the museum wall, right? So, Brian decided he very much admired Duchamp, again, he really liked Duchamp's attitude. And he, you know, he was becoming part of the ether everybody knew. But at one point, it's worth saying which I learned through Brian, Duchamp was not liked in in New York, because Abstract Expressionism was in its heyday, because they hated him and he had a tough enough time. But anyway, his star was rising at this stage. And these younger generation of artists work becoming very interested in him. So, Brian decided that he did not just he admire him, he actually in an article that he published it for Newsweek, I think it was, Brian published an article, or he tried to publish it and the editor rejected it, where he was saying that in his opinion, Marcel Duchamp will be, if Picasso is the major artistic figure of the first part of the 20th century, Marcel Duchamp would be the major figure of the second and the editor wouldn't publish it. So, it's now in some Duchamp archive somewhere, I've never seen it. Anyhow. So, he decided he would refute Duchamp's dictum that if you put art on the wall, it dies. Because there was a lot of talk about museums becoming mausoleums and the art being taken out of its original context. And what that does to the piece of art and future generations won't know the original context of which is true. Anyhow, there are arguments on both sides. So, he got him to lie down on the bed and take off his trousers and socks. And he put on these leads, which we use to take electrocardiographic tracing. And therefore, he uses for leads on his ankles on his arms. And then he hooked him up to the machine and he took the tracing of his heartbeat. And that was all Duchamp didn't ask any questions. That was his style very, very cool all together. And when he stood up, he said, "Well, Doctor, how am I?" "Well, I don't really know, because I haven't looked at any of these things for such a long time. But it looks okay to me." You know that the wave, you know, the wave thing pattern. So, anyway, so then Marcel Duchamp said to him, "oh, when you're signing that, would you sign it? Brian

O'Doherty M.D., because that's the way that you are no, recognize the doctor in America?" But of course, Brian said, no, he wouldn't. Because if M.D. was on it, he in a way Duchamp WAS claiming some ownership of this particular piece of art. Right. Now, Duchamp didn't know what he was going to do with it. Anyway, he made it into it's a 16-part series, you only have the print of the original electrocardiographic tracing, but there are there are drawings, which make up the 16-part series. And then he etched the actual wave onto a spirit level, which had three little holes. And he then found a way of bouncing light. I don't quite understand bouncing, light bounce along the wave. So, when it's plugged into the wall, I've seen plugged into the wall, the light bounces along as if it's alive all right. So, if the heart is alive, you know, that's the conceit. And of course, Duchamp died two years later. And he went and he looked at this on the wall and didn't say very much, but he must have understood this will be beating on the wall when after he's dead. And that is, so in a way Brian said it was it was a tribute. But it wasn't a complete tribute. It was also a challenge. He has refuted Duchamp's dictum that art dies if it's put on the wall. That's that was what was really behind it. So, it's still alive and kicking. Yeah, and it's still there. And, you know, so he had refuted the dictum. That was what's really behind it.

1:22:16

CMCI

Well look, thank you very much for joining me today. It's been fascinating just listening to your talking about Brian's work. And I've, I mean, I've been aware of Brian O'Doherty for a long time, since I was in college. And I mean, we, as someone who's been involved in the arts and art and we know that he's a pioneer conceptual artist, critic, prose writer and novelist. And *Inside the White Cube* that you mentioned earlier was just, I mean, I really, you know, catapulted him into fame, but also, he's part of now the contemporary art discourse forevermore. Maybe just to finish up, I just like to talk to you about Jack B. Yeats again, because we do have a drawing of Jack B. Yeats by Brian O'Doherty that he did when he was a medical student. And, but also that letter that he wrote to Jack B. Yeats includes the line, you know, where he's encouraging Jack to go back to painting, and he says, "entertain the thought and reality will follow." I want to write this somewhere, so I can see it every day.

BMM

Yeah. I think what he means by that is allow yourself to think that it's possible you can get back. And if you do, you know, trust yourself as an artist, it'll come, it will become a reality. You know, I think that's, you know, I don't quite know how depressed maybe Jack B. Yeats was, but certainly he had given up I don't think he ever did pick up a brush again. But here was Brian trying to encourage him, you know, so I think that's what he meant, you know, if you allow yourself to entertain the thought it will happen, you know, but I don't think Yeats did. Yeah. The other thing you said you have a drawing of when he was a medical student. Now, is that another one other than that last portrait?

CMCI

Oh, I thought he was a medical student at the time, I could be wrong.

BMM

No, no, no, no, no, he was a fully qualified doctor, because that dates to 1957. And he qualified as a doctor in 1952. So, he already was a doctor at that stage. Now, I was just wondering whether there was another one I didn't know about.

CMCI

And it was the same year. Jack passed away himself.

BMM

Yeah, he died three weeks later. He died in March. Jack B. Yeats died in March, and this was done on the 14th of February. So, it's actually a very fine piece. I'm disappointed to see I'd never see it hanging in in the National Gallery. It was hanging when you had the Yeats room there and you used to have the very fine bust of Yeats and then the drawing on the other side, because actually that drawing was given as a gift by Brian in honour of Dr. Hilary Pyle, who was the then Yeats curator. So, his gift to her in admiration of her work. Yes, I don't know if you knew that.

CMCI

No, I must be mixing it up because I know the artist as a nude was done when he was a student.

BMM

So that's where you're mixing it up. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

CMCI

Look, we've, we've discussed a lot there, I think. And so, I'd like to thank you for joining me once again. Been fascinating. Thank you.

BMM

Pleasure. Thank you.