

Comments on *Promenade* by Patrick Ireland

This paper first discusses *Promenade*, which is permanently installed in the atrium of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. An overview of the many talents of the artist Brian O'Doherty, also known as Patrick Ireland, follows.

Promenade is composed of a minimalist abstract design painted directly on the wall of the KIA, combined with three nylon ropes extending from the painting and held in place by thin strings. O'Doherty uses the term *rope drawing* to describe this type of work.

The design is three rectangles of equal height and diminishing length stacked one on another and centered on the wall. The rectangles are purple, green and yellow on a dark blue field. This pallet includes six of the eight prime and secondary colors creates strong and vibrant image.

The artist uses the ropes to draw lines in space. In many of his series of 111 rope drawings¹, the lines are extensive and complex, often extend from the wall to the floor, and sometimes even through a doorway. When viewed from the correct location, a rope will often frame an element of the painting. In *Promenade*, the longest white rope frames the longest rectangle. The middle white rope frames the middle rectangle. O'Doherty sometimes used color to distinguish between the ropes; here the smallest rope is red and frames the smallest rectangle. Finding the three locations where a rope frames an element of the painting engages the viewer with the drawing. *Promenade* is #105 in O'Doherty's series of rope paintings; only three were permanent installations and it is one of them.²

In his book, *The White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, O'Doherty discusses the effect of the environment in which a work of art is viewed. Older paintings are displayed in heavy frames and we know to limit the scope of our vision to the space within the frame; this is where the action is. Modern paintings are typically hung with no frame. The edge of the painting creates a line on the wall with the stretcher giving thickness to the painting. The wall, usually white, frames the work; each painting requires its own space and the curator will be careful not to violate this space by placing paintings too close to one another. A wall painting or rope drawing is not hung on the wall, but is part of it, and the architecture around the painting becomes the frame. *Promenade* is located at the end of the atrium that starts above the main entrance to the museum. The top of the atrium is an arch shaped skylight. The work is framed by the skylight and the sides of the atrium. The painting fills the end wall of the atrium and the longest rope extends about fourteen feet from the painting. The title, *Promenade*, suggests a public walkway and the area below it is the main entrance to the museum.

Brian O'Doherty is not only a painter, but is also a critic, an author of both fictional novels and art related books, an art administrator, a TV host, a university teacher, a performance artist and a film maker. His reputation as a visual artist is not as large as some of the other artists whose work is in the KIA collection. However, it would be difficult to find another artist in this group whose artistic accomplishments are as wide ranging, highly recognized and significant as O'Doherty's.

Born in Ireland in 1928, he was trained as a medical doctor and then practiced medicine for eight years in Dublin. In 1957 he immigrated to the United States and studied at Harvard, where he earned a MS in public health in 1958. His graduation from Harvard marked the end of his career in medicine; for the next two years he wrote and hosted *Invitation to Art* on the publicly supported Boston television station, WBHF. Walter Gropius, Josef Albers, and Edward Hopper were among the architects and artists he interviewed on this program. He had succeeded Barbra Novak in hosting this program. In 1958 she had accepted a faculty position at Barnard College and moved to New York City; he followed her there and they were married in 1960.³ Because of the success of *Invitation to Art*, he was hired by WNBC-TV to write and host the Emmy nominated program *Dialogue*. On this program his interviewees ranged from James Baldwin to Muhammad Ali to Marcel Duchamp to Woody Allen.

His long and distinguished career as an art critic and author began in 1961 when he became the art critic for the New York Times, a position he held for four years. He was Editor-in Chief of *Art in America* from 1971 to 1974. From 1971 to 1978 he was the art and architecture critic for NBC's television program, *Today*. He lectured frequently and received awards for his work as a critic. *The White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* was published in 1976 and remains in print today. This influential book examined how the modern gallery affected the way in which art was perceived. He examined the work of eight modern artists in *American Masters: the Voice and the Myth*, published in 1974. The three novels he has written is another example of the breadth of his talent. One, *The Deposition of Father McGreevy* was nominated for the Booker Prize.

O'Doherty held management positions in the National Endowment for the Arts for 28 years. He was a part time Director of the Visual Arts Program starting in 1968. In 1976 he resigned that directorship and became Director of Media Art Programs: Film/Radio/Television and held that position until retirement in 1996. He developed several PBS series including *American Masters* and *The Metropolitan (Opera) Presents*. During this time, NEA supported films and videos won numerous Academy Awards and Emmys.

O'Doherty worked under four aliases. While in medical school, he submitted works under the name Sigmund Bode, and while an art critic for the New York Times, columns appeared under Bode's name. O'Doherty's full Christian name is, to his childhood embarrassment, Brian Mary Joseph. Critiques by Mary Josephson began to appear while he was Editor of Art In America. William McGinn (1793-1842) was the narrator of *The Disposition of Father McGreevy*. In the early 1800's McGinn was editor of *Frasers Magazine* and sometime wrote under the alias Morgan O'Doherty. The identity of these three aliases was not revealed to the public until the 1998 work called *Five Identities*. The fourth alias is discussed below. Illustration 1 shows O'Doherty and his four aliases.

O'Doherty began exhibiting his art while a medical student and has practiced art either full or part time since then. Though a talented draftsman, he became interested in conceptual art⁴ after immigrating to the United States and is often categorized as a conceptual artist. However, because of his many easel works, wall paintings and rope drawings, he can also be classified as a painter and his work in this area can be classified as minimalist art.⁵

Perhaps his most well known conceptual work involved his fourth alias, Patrick Ireland. His motivation for this is described below in his own words.

When the British shot down thirteen unarmed civil rights marchers in the city of Derry in January 1972, I was in New York. I thought, What the hell can I do? I decided that if I changed my name to Patrick Ireland and signed my works by that name alone, it would be a provocation, a statement. Every time I exhibited, it would give me an opportunity to tell people why I had taken the name. It was a gesture of solidarity with the nationalist side in the low-grade civil war that was then beginning in Northern Ireland. When young boys, especially young country boys from Ireland, went to work in Britain, they were called Paddies, which is half affectionate and half contemptuous. I decided to make it a name of dignity and substance. The name was not universally cheered; the most vigorous criticism came from those in Ireland itself, charging me with presumptuousness. The endeavor was certainly an expatriate's gesture. Nonetheless, in my *Name Change* performance in Dublin that year, I said I would sign my work by that name until the British military left Northern Ireland and all citizens were granted their civil rights. When that happened, it would mark the end of Patrick Ireland, the end of what could be called my political gesture of no great political sophistication. Not long after *Name Change*, Lee Krasner said to me, "You will never get your name back." But with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, I began to hope I might reclaim my birth name. Now that the "evolution," as they call it, has taken place, and both Sinn Fein and the IRA are represented in Parliament, I am astonished to be able to lay the name Patrick Ireland to rest.⁶

For *Name Change*, which was the first performance art held in Ireland, O'Doherty wore a white mask and clothing. During a portion of the performance, he lay on a stretcher while one performer painted his body green from the head down and another painted it orange from the toes up. Initially he was the colors of the Irish flag, green, white, and orange. When the painters met and overlapped at his waist, the result was a muddy brown color suggesting blood. His body was then carried off the stage. This performance was witnessed by about thirty people. In 2008 he reversed *Name Change* with the performance *Burial of Patrick Ireland* and literally laid the Patrick Ireland to rest in a performance attended by about 300 people.⁷ An effigy, featuring a death mask of Patrick Ireland, was placed on view in a coffin in a gallery in the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. On May 20th the coffin was carried to the museum's grounds. After a simple ceremony that included several minutes of keening, Patrick Ireland was buried. A simple headstone marks the grave. Illustration 2 shows photographs from the performance.

A partial list of museums holding O'Doherty's work include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gardens, the Centre George Pompidou, the National Gallery of Ireland and the Museum of Modern Art in Dublin.

At the age of 81, O'Doherty continues to lecture, write reviews and make art.

¹ Moore-McCann, Barbara, Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland: Between Categories, Lund Humphries, Surrey, UK, 2009, pages 204-5.

² Op. cit. page 153

³ He has been married to art historian and former chair of the Art History Department at Barnard College, Barbara Novak, for more than thirty years.

⁴ Conceptual art is a movement of the 1960s and 1970s that emphasized the artistic idea over the art object. It attempted to free art from the confines of the gallery and the pedestal.

⁵ A school of abstract painting and sculpture that emphasizes extreme simplification of form, as by the use of basic shapes and monochromatic palettes of primary colors, objectivity and anonymity of style.

⁶ *The Thing Quarterly*, 05.09.08.

⁷ New York Times, May 22, 2008



Illustration 1. Patrick Ireland, *Five Identities*, 2002. Photograph on aluminum, 29 × 29 inches.

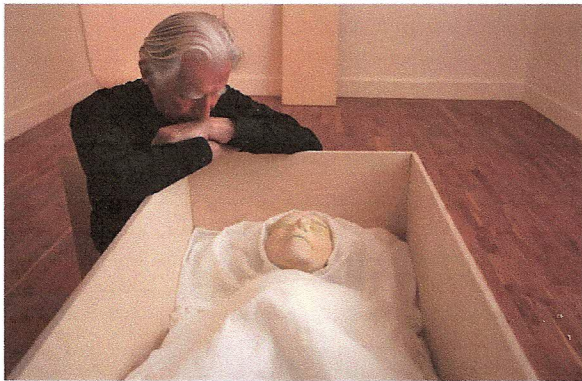


Illustration 2. *Burial of Patrick Ireland, May 22, 2008*. Clockwise from top left. a) O'Doherty contemplates Ireland. b) Coffin is carried to grave site. c) Grave site ceremony. d) View towards Irish Museum of Modern Art In Dublin.

Promenade Fat Questions

Study this work for a minute, then think of a word that could be used to describe either the work itself, or your reaction to it. What word(s) came to your mind?

Possible answers: Colorful, abstract, geometric, minimalist, playful, cheerful, wall painting, big. Color pallet includes the color wheel from purple to blue to green to yellow, missing orange and red. We could call this a minimalist, hard edge, geometric abstract.

Is this a painting or a sculpture?

Possible answer: It is composed of a painting on the wall, but the three nylon ropes give it a third dimension which would mean it's a sculpture. The artist uses the term rope drawing to describe it.

What do the ropes add to the work?

Possible answer: Artists use various media (pencil, chalk, oil paint, etc.) to draw lines. Ireland uses ropes to draw lines. The ropes often run from the wall painting to the floor and even through doorways. He has done 111 rope drawings, but this work is one of only three permanently installed rope drawings.

Do the ropes frame any parts of the painting in this work?

Possible answer: O'Doherty often used the ropes to frame a portion of the wall painting. Here each rope frames one of the rectangles (blocks of color). Locate the three locations where this happens. The artist is encouraging us to interact with the art.

Does this work have a frame?

Possible answer: An older painting is framed and hung on the wall. A modern painting defines a line on the wall and the stretcher gives it depth; it needs white space around it. Here, the work is part of the wall. The surrounding architecture frames it.

This work is located in an important area of the museum. Does it seem at home in this location?

Possible answers: a) Color is a major characteristic of this work; the Chihuly and the Frankenthaler are also about color. The reds and oranges of the Chihuly combine with *Promenade* to include the three major and three secondary colors. The title *Code Blue* speaks for its self. b) *Promenade* is the third of three large works suspended from the ceiling; a rope drawing, a (stable) mobile and a chandelier. c) The museum is in the international style of architecture whose leading architect, Meis van der Rohe's dictum was "less is more." These four works are simple and fit well with architectural style of the KIA.

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