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Man of Letters

RÓISÍN KENNEDY REVIEWS THE RECENTLY PUBLISHED COLLECTION OF BRIAN O'DOHERTY'S LETTERS, EDITED BY BRENDA MOORE-MCCANN.

DEAR... SELECTED LETTERS from Brian O'Doherty 1970s to 2018 – a collection of the artist's letters to art historians, critics and curators – is a valuable contribution to the many events and publications marking the artist's ninetieth birthday last year. The elegant functionalism of O'Doherty's letters implies the artist's careful management of his persona and handling of his correspondents. But when one reads between the lines, revealing insights into his work and his personality can be detected.

An early letter is written by the young and supremely confident O'Doherty, then a 29-year-old medical student, to Jack B. Yeats, the 86-year-old painter and writer, just a few days before the latter's death in March 1957. Encouraging Yeats to keep painting, O'Doherty writes: "I am looking forward so much to the first picture you shall paint again, for it will reveal to you again the universe that you carry in your heart". Self-educated in visual art, O'Doherty had already attracted the attention of critic Herbert Read, then the most influential figure in the British art world. Read thanks him for sending a copy of the *Dublin Magazine*, in which O'Doherty reviewed his 1955 book, *Icon and Idea*, and showed "a rare understanding of my point of view". The Irishman's abilities as a critic and writer were remarkable, even at this early stage of his career, particularly in an Irish context, where serious writing on art was scarce, to say the least.

Soon after moving to the United States, O'Doherty befriended another much older and more established artist, Marcel Duchamp. A long letter to Alexander Alberro recounts their relationship. They met in New York in the late 1950s when Duchamp had 'few champions'. O'Doherty recalls that: "We didn't talk about art. We talked about late-night radio and Long John Nebel, about people, about ideas occasionally, rarely about art." The now familiar story of the dinner to which Duchamp was invited (and which lead to his electrocardiograph being taken) is a repeat, almost word for word, of O'Doherty's description of the event in his 1969 essay 'Taking Duchamp's Portrait'. After the meal Duchamp lay down while O'Doherty took the electrocardiograph of his heartbeat. Duchamp jokingly suggested that the resulting portrait be signed 'Brian O'Doherty M.D.' – a reference to his initials and to O'Doherty's qualification as a medical doctor. But as O'Doherty's letter records, "That would have been a charming and a very subtle act of possession on his part. I wasn't going to let him participate in the creation. His heart had done its work". O'Doherty then had the difficulty of reproducing the heartbeat. Combing local hardware stores, he found a spirit-level with three windows onto which, with some help, he built a container. This held the motor that imparted the lines of Duchamp's heartbeat. O'Doherty writes: "I will not forget my excitement when the heart began to beat, inscribing perfectly the course traced by Duchamp's heart. I had him, alive and in my hand".

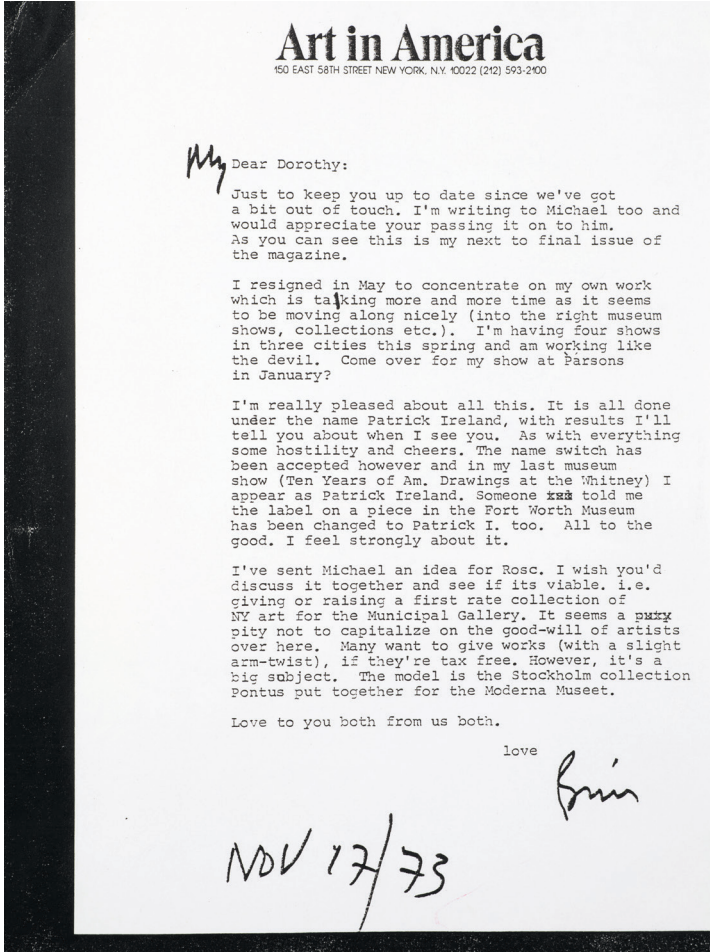
The letters often read like critical essays. The two practices, writing and making art, are closely interconnected. In a letter to Lucy Lippard, O'Doherty reveals that it was through writing an essay on De Kooning that he worked through his fascination with body parts. But more broadly, one gets the sense that being a demanding and perceptive critic is not necessarily conducive to the creation of art. Lippard was, along with O'Doherty, part of the New York-based group of artists and critics that heralded in conceptualism and challenged the certainties of modernism. A letter to Lippard evokes those heady days when "the future was out there like an open five-line highway". But despite the freedom that this might suggest, O'Doherty felt the need to retrospectively rationalise his art work and carefully justify its production. Some of the letters have been quoted in earlier publications. One to Lippard – referring to the *Five Senses of Bishop Coyne* drawings – appeared in a 1986 catalogue essay and was in turn quoted by Alberro in his 2006 catalogue essay, 'After the Senses' (co-written with Nora M. Alter) for *Beyond the White Cube*.

In this circular flow of information, the basic interpretation of the artwork and its rationale goes back directly to O'Doherty. One of the most original contributions of the book, for me at least, is the insights that it gives into art politics in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. At times O'Doherty appears to see himself as a kind of missionary for bringing progressive art to our shores. He takes a close interest in the Rosc exhibitions and advocates the raising of "a first-rate collection of NY art" for the Hugh Lane Gallery that never materialised. The refusal of the 'Rosc 77' committee to include *Name Change* (1972) – the record of the Patrick Ireland performance – in the exhibition and in the catalogue crops up in passing. In addition, an unpleasant encounter with an Irish Times journalist in Columbus Ohio bears out O'Doherty's belief that the Irish "carry their darkness of understanding with them abroad". The book confirms the close relationship between O'Doherty and Dorothy Walker. O'Doherty keenly encouraged Walker's art writing and tried to facilitate her reviewing of his work in American journals. His request to *Artforum* to engage Walker to review 'Rosc 77' was refused, as Walker was on the exhibition committee. O'Doherty's continuing interest in the art scene in Ireland was both generous and largely positive. He attempted to use his considerable influence to expand its horizons exponentially in these years.

Several of the later letters are written to Brenda Moore-McCann, the editor of this collection, who undertook a PhD on the artist, which later became the basis of a monograph. These reveal a close working through of O'Doherty's practice in response to Moore-McCann's questions, as her engagement with his work and its wider contexts began to deepen. One query prompts a fascinating account of O'Doherty's first 'Rope Drawing', made in a "ramshackle alternative space" in Greene Street, New York, in the early 1970s: "I can still feel the urgent stress of trying to mentally secrete a substance that would stretch across that space, column to wall, floor to ceiling. Then, sliding into my mind with ridiculous ease, the thought of string, rope – flexible, mundane, inelastic, each rope's mildly hairy coils twisting daintily around themselves...". This burning need to communicate the physicality of space to the viewer, recalls Yeats's late work, which dealt in a different way with the same concern.

Reading these letters makes the process and purpose of Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland's work more understandable. While his close philosophical justifications and explanations can weigh down what might otherwise be perceived as merely playful or clever, his gift as an art writer shines through. In a letter to Walker, he cogently explains the purpose of the 'Rope Drawings' in memorable terms, as drawing "temporary propositions that give brief visions of order" to space, which "is a kind of jungle, a complete chaos with no rhyme or reason at all". It can only have been a relief to receive such articulate responses to queries on what were often temporary and complex works of art. O'Doherty's correspondents were fortunate that the artist was also a perceptive critic and writer, skilled in explaining both the physical and the intellectual content of an artwork, including his own.

Dr Róisín Kennedy lectures in the School of Art History and Cultural Policy at UCD.



Top: Dear... Selected Letters from Brian O'Doherty 1970s to 2018 cover

Bottom: Letter from Brian O'Doherty to Dorothy Walker, 17 November 1973 (p. 28)