



Brian O'Doherty:
Five Identities,
2002, photograph
on aluminum,
49 inches square.
Courtesy Galerie
Thomas Fischer,
Berlin.

Frames and Personas

by Richard Kalina

BRIAN O'DOHERTY

Brian O'Doherty: Collected Essays

Oakland, University of California Press, 2018; 360 pages, 45 color illustrations,
\$85 hardcover, \$34.95 paperback.

If you are in need of a creative polymath, look no further than Brian O'Doherty. Now ninety years old, O'Doherty—physician, geometric painter, conceptual artist, cultural critic, lecturer, television host and producer, editor, National Endowment for the Arts administrator, and Booker Prize–nominated novelist—has recently published a career-spanning collection of essays. Dating from 1967 to 2016, these pieces range from extremely close readings of Edward Hopper and Mark Rothko to writings both present (a 1971 essay on Andy Warhol) and retrospective (pieces from 1989 on George Segal and 1990–91 on John Chamberlain, Frank Stella, and Eva Hesse, and, finally, a 2016 essay on a suite of late Robert Rauschenberg paintings). Film, video, and music are also given their due, with perceptive examinations of Orson

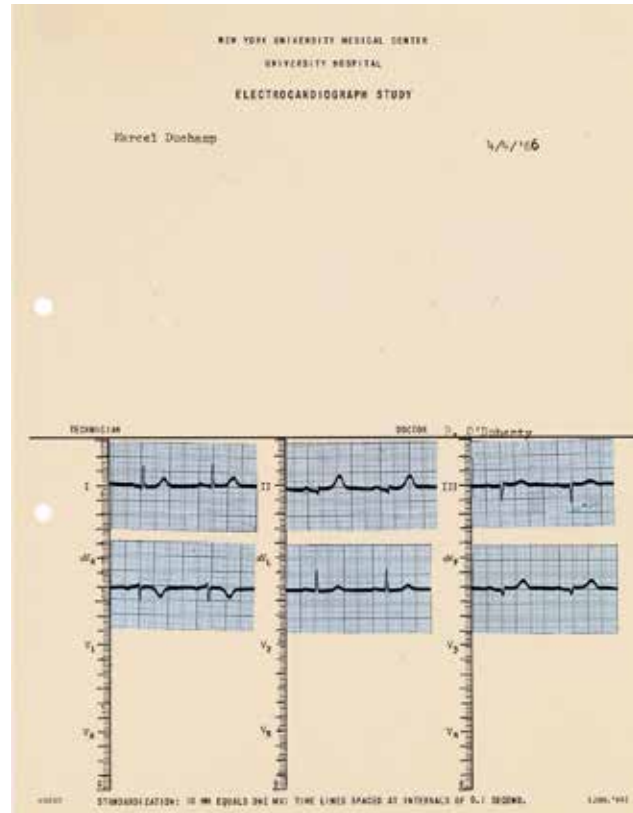
Welles, Nam Jun Paik, the director Steve McQueen, and experimental composer and confidant of the Abstract Expressionist painters, Morton Feldman.

Marcel Duchamp, a friend of O'Doherty's (as were seemingly most of the key art world players of the period), also gets an idiosyncratic look, in an account of the making of O'Doherty's portrait of the artist in the form of an electrocardiogram. Duchamp's famed equanimity is put to the test as O'Doherty takes him away from a dinner party into a bedroom, and there subjects him to a full-blown EKG, complete with gel and metal leads attached to his chest and legs. O'Doherty writes, "He lay still, unperturbed. If I had said I was going to take out his heart, I suspect he would have been mildly curious as to how I was going to go about it."

Few things with a contemporary visual bent seem to escape Doherty's notice—a quality evident in his work as an art critic for the *New York Times*, his editorship of this magazine from 1971 to '74, when he widened and occasionally politicized its purview, and also in his involvement with

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O'Doherty:
Portrait of Marcel
Duchamp: Mounted
Cardiogram, 1966,
ink on paper, 11 by
8½ inches.



television. He hosted or helped originate, among other well-known programs, “Invitation to Art,” “Dialogue,” “American Masters,” and “Great Performances.”

O'Doherty is sharp and expansively cogent on the architecture and decorative flourishes of Miami Beach and Las Vegas (the two Vegas essays—the first from 1972 and the second a 2016 reevaluation of the changing sign-scape of the town, both in *A.i.A.*—serve as fine companion pieces to Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's classic 1972 *Learning from Las Vegas*). Although these examinations of the semiotics of glitzy vernacular taste are replete with O'Doherty's engaging aperçus, such ventures are not unexpected from a cultural critic of his breadth. But who else would or could write a very serious essay titled “The Politics and Aesthetics of Heart Transplants” (with reference to the Frankenstein myth) or explore the formal conventions and philosophical implications of microscopic photography?

O'Doherty's best-known piece, “Inside the White Cube: Notes on the Gallery Space,” is unfortunately not included in this volume, probably because that essay and the others from 1976, as well as the 1986 “The Gallery as Gesture,” were published separately as *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1986). The current collection, as edited by Liam Kelly with an introduction by fellow art historian Anne-Marie Bonnet, concludes with another look at what has happened to the ostensibly neutral space of the contemporary exhibition, and that reexamination animates the entire book. Context and the many varieties of framing are matters of ongoing concern to O'Doherty. He is particularly acute when it comes to that most common of every-

day frames, the window. Near the beginning of his 2009 essay “Windows and Edward Hopper's Gaze,” he remarks:

Windows, which are simply interruptions in a wall, have significant cultural duties thrust upon them. They exist in a potent semiotic minefield. They frame a vista and maybe a culture. To whom is the window's invitation addressed? To you and me, to the public gaze with its unstable modalities of curiosity and indifference. And to the private gaze from within. Looking in and looking out being the only alternatives a window presents. Each representing the two continents of inside and outside. Looking out on the public sphere is generally without guilt. Looking in, which transgresses privacy, is one of the last etiquettes observed on the street. Looking in transgresses a pane, a plane. That gaze from the outside encounters the way windows are masked with the demure opacity of window-shades, the toiletry of lace curtains, the vertical and horizontal strips, like fish-gills of venetian blinds. So windows may be dressed and undressed to the gaze. There is, you remember, a profession called window-dressing.

That essay and the following one, “Edward Hopper, *Early Sunday Morning*” (1999)—a detailed, keenly observed analysis of a painting so familiar that we scarcely see it anymore—are, I believe, some of the most insightful things ever written about Hopper, an artist O'Doherty also knew personally. Key to framing, both artistic and critical, is understanding not only the how and why of separating the viewable from the excluded, but also understanding that the way we look at things is invariably conditioned by our position in both fictive and actual space. O'Doherty says of *Early Sunday Morning*, “Seen from across the street by someone of Hopper's exceptional height, shops, windows and cornice sweep across the picture in a single plane and, as frontal things do, stare back at you.” The bright hermetic white cube, the architectural and social frame that allows us to focus on, clarify, and identify as art the often mysterious productions of modern painting and sculpture, has, in O'Doherty's view, now been largely displaced by the theatrical black box—the preferred space of postmodern film, video, and performance—and by “relational” actions that manifest a powerful impetus to merge art and life. The title of his 1967 review of Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* is “Narcissus in Hades.”

IDENTITY IS also a frame—an often-shifting one—and we position ourselves within it with greater or lesser ambiguity. O'Doherty, born and educated in Ireland but a resident of New York for over fifty years, has not only successfully assumed a range of professional roles but has also cast himself in alternate personas at different stages in his life and for varying lengths of time. The reason, as he said in the 2011 essay, “Divesting the Self: A Striptease,” is “Because each had a job to do. A job I, myself, could not.” There is Brian O'Doherty, of course, but also the most public of his guises, Patrick Ireland, his painter stand-in, brought to life by the 1972 Bloody Sunday killings in Derry and laid to rest in a funeral on the grounds of the Irish Museum of Modern Art thirty-six years later, when peace had finally come to Northern

Ireland. There are also William Maginn (named after a multi-persona nineteenth-century Irish writer who sometimes signed himself Ensign Morgan O'Doherty), Sigmund Bode (the youthful, convention-defying artist of O'Doherty's Dublin years), and, most fascinating, his female self, Mary Josephson. A politically committed American critic, Josephson stayed tantalizingly elusive, once declining a plum writing assignment that would have required meeting artist and magazine editor John Coplans in person.¹

O'Doherty's writing moves in and out of the frame of objectivity and personal distancing, often in the course of one essay. He can float the most abstract of thought balloons—paragraphs that are brilliant from part to part, but as a whole challenge you to construct the larger argument. But a bit later, there he is, in the studio with Hopper or Rothko, in a

coffee shop with Morton Feldman, in Duchamp's apartment, or at a party with Eva Hesse, telling us what he and the other artist said, how they felt, and especially what it all looked like. O'Doherty shifts between active participant and detached speculative mind with a fluidity and stylistic grace that propels you forward, even as it tugs at your sleeve and asks you to stop, reread, and give it more thought. O'Doherty wants us to inhabit what we perceive, to be an acute looker while fully engaging in the conundrums and contradictions that art puts to us. It is not an easy task, but it is one that he has managed admirably these many years. ○

1. For an insightful analysis of O'Doherty's shapeshifting, see Thomas McEville, “An Artist & His Aliases,” *Art in America*, May 1971, pp. 138-41.

Books in Brief



CHRISTA-MARIA LERM HAYES, ed.
**Brian O'Doherty/
Patrick Ireland:
Word, Image and
Institutional Critique**

Art critic Brian O'Doherty, aka artist Patrick Ireland (and others), challenged conventional understanding of the artist's role and the ways art can be viewed—especially in modernist gallery spaces. This collection gathers analytic essays by fourteen scholars, among them Barbara Novak (O'Doherty's wife), Hans Belting, and Lucy Cotter.

Amsterdam, Valiz/Vis-à-Vis, 2017; 304 pages, 240 black-and-white illustrations, \$30 paperback.



PAUL O'NEILL, LUCY STEEDS, and MICK WILSON, eds.
How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse

Borrowing its title from anthropologist Mary Douglas's 1986 book, this anthology reconsiders how institutions, as centers of power and hierarchical control, affect contemporary artistic, curatorial, and educational practices. Curator Binna Choi and artist Annette Kraus are among twenty-four international writers who reflect on the ethos of institutions. The book analyzes institutional frameworks and influences through the lens of political theory, organizational science, and sociology.

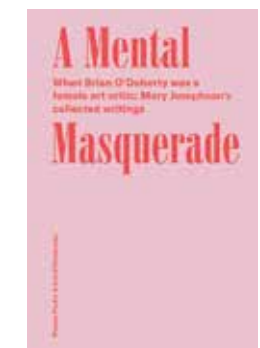
Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2017; 256 pages, 100 color illustrations, \$34.95 paperback.



MATTHEW AFFRON
**The Essential
Duchamp**

Marcel Duchamp shocked the art world in 1917 by submitting *Fountain*, an upended urinal signed “R. Mutt,” to a show at the New York Society of Independent Artists, where it was preemptorily rejected. His “readymade” concept questioned the very essence of art-making by recontextualizing everyday objects. This book also identifies three other key phases of the artist's career: early paintings, the emergence of his female alter ego Rose Sélavy, and the protracted creation of *Étant donné*. Some texts explicate Duchamp's conceptual vocabulary, others include artist interviews, illustrated by works held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018; 200 pages, 154 color and 28 black-and-white illustrations, \$30 paperback.



THOMAS FISCHER, ASTRID MANIA, eds.
**A Mental Masquerade:
When Brian O'Doherty Was a Female Art Critic, Mary Josephson's Collected Writings**

One of Brian O'Doherty's four alternative personas, Mary Josephson wrote essays and reviews in *Art in America* from 1971 to 1972, where s/he mused about Andy Warhol and Willem de Kooning, among other notable figures. In taking on this female nom de plume O'Doherty sought to liberate himself from what he called “limiting male selfhood.” This volume compiles Mary Josephson's critical writing for the first time.

Leipzig, Spector Books, 2018; 82 pages, \$20 paperback.