

INTRODUCTION

A Ship's Log of/to Modernism

BRIAN O'DOHERTY, widely known for his series of essays on the "white cube" published in 1976, which were the first analyses of the display practices for modern and contemporary art, reveals in this collection that he is far more than "only" the one who coined a key word, although his concept of the "white cube," as a specific aesthetic strategy, has become a basic frame of thinking for the encounter with recent art. He not only followed with a critical eye the 1970s, but also has been immersed in the North American art scene since the late 1950s as an active agent, a participant delivering observant credentials. His collected writings bear witness to his mercurial awareness of his time and his sensitive approach to the artistic effervescence of the postwar decades. Of Irish origins, with scientific training, he became quickly involved as a fellow member, artist, critic and companion, a ship's mate in the sometimes troubled waters of the generational change between the first and the second so-called New York Schools. O'Doherty was more acquainted with the big heroes (Hopper, Duchamp, Rothko, Reinhardt, Hesse) and their critics than with the next generation of troublemakers (Feldman, Rauschenberg,

Chamberlain, Warhol, Stella, Segal) whose coming-out he witnessed. His writings are a vivid diary of modernism, written from the inside and the outside at the same time, from his very specific position of inbetweenness: between the makers and the observers, between the generations and between cultures (European and American). They are a ship's log of/to modernism. These texts are a lively reflection of the impact of modernism on our current seeing, thinking and feeling, and an archaeology of our prejudices and codifications. While writing about art, he at the same time reflects about how and why one writes about art, considering as well the changing role of critic from the 1950s to the postmodern moment. He knows the position of the critic as well as that of the artist and always acts as an accomplice in preserving oeuvres.

THE SYMPATHETIC EYE

At the time when Brian O'Doherty entered the American postwar scene, the aftermath of the Second World War and the Nazi destruction campaign against modernity had just generated a fundamental shift of the centers of modernism from Europe to North America and, in the so-called New York School, American artists and their supporters were articulating a new, self-conscious coming-out, a redefinition of what was at stake in the arts. Modernism was debated mainly in the field of painting, by then dominated by abstraction. Nevertheless Brian O'Doherty approached the work of Edward Hopper and Joseph Cornell with great attention, advocating their specific modernity. With the same delicacy and thoroughness, he offered profound analysis of Rothko's genuine contribution to the debates about modern painting. Familiar with the then-newest theories and critical opinions, O'Doherty nevertheless always addressed each artist and artwork in a personal and pragmatic tone, involving the reader—"How do we see, what do we see, why?"—in an attentive looking, and inducing almost *en passant* the conceptual and theoretical background of that peculiar practice. Through the texts collected here from different times (from the 1950s and '60s to the '80s and '90s), sometimes on the same subject, one can follow the changes in the art world and O'Doherty's immutable fidelity to his friends and his convictions. Art has to be conceptual, to reflect its time and its concern with art and worldly topics. Remarkably, he manages to reveal the actuality of all the works he turns his attention to.

THE POLYMATH AND ANTHROPOLOGIST

Doherty appears as a seismograph of the artistic and cultural changes of his time, which he recognizes in artistic practices not only in the visual arts, but also in cinema, video, film, media and music. His texts on Orson Welles, on the pioneers of video and electronic media Fred Barzyk and Nam June Paik, on experimental filmmaker Hans Richter, and on contemporary video artists James Coleman and Steve McQueen are a real diary of change in visual culture and sensitivity, as well as of the impact those media still may have or lose. He and his work take a kind of hinge position between his closeness and familiarity with the heroic generation of abstract expressionists and his comprehension of the uproar of pop and con-

ceptual art against the former; he also reflects the contemporaneities of the 1980s and '90s. He always writes from a personal and time-based perspective, reflecting his own closeness or distance, the unavoidable relativity of his opinions and thinking, and so establishing, paradoxically, their credibility. His judgments are deeply driven by a consciousness of changing times, mentalities and modes of seeing. In addition to the arts, his seismographic attentiveness is also devoted to cultural milestones (heart transplants) or idiosyncrasies (Las Vegas iconography or Miami baroque) in the descriptions and analysis of which one feels the double-bind of his deep involvement in his times, inside North American culture though also still outside it, with his European-trained antennas. He can convey as well a certain *air du temps*, a socio-history of taste, an empathy for opposite characters and involvements, managing a critical distance for instance from the dialectics of New York's art critics, between conservative resentments on one side and an avant-garde overdrive on the other side. And indeed, he maintains "that what is new about new art is recognized both by its positive and negative recipients." He discovers or reveals unexpected aspects in seemingly well-known oeuvres, like the delicacy and poetry in raw Chamberlain and the intellectual concerns in Cornell. Reading his essays is a school of seeing and a voyage through historical and recent, artistic and political, American as well as international culturescapes and sociotopes.

THE MASTER OF PARADOX

These essays compose a panorama, an intellectual diorama of postwar modernism and its metamorphoses, not only reviewing well-known positions, but also remembering some neglected ones (Barzyk, Wesley, Hutchinson), artists whom he calls "un- or under-celebrated," and in doing so reflects on the haphazards of fame and reputation. To read O'Doherty's notes about half a century of art and cultural metamorphoses is not only very instructive but also a true delight, since his language is vivid, his choice of words exquisite and his characterizations as delicate, as pungent, as to the point as surprising. Through his often unexpected epithets ("magnificent neutrality," "acknowledged but unseen"), the almost Wildean quality of his puns, the elegance of his language, the mercurial wit of his concise paradoxes, which tell more than long explanations, he keeps the reader's attention vivid. So, for instance, when he looks at Sieverding's faces: "It is not the presence of a self that defines these faceworks, but of selves multiplied and contemplated in an orgy of otherness." Very often he uses comparisons between literature and painting, or painting and music, moving easily between medias and genres, recognizing kinships and essential qualities that would otherwise be missed. He has a talent for employing dazzling comparisons or parallels (Feldman/Chamberlain, Stella/Hesse) to convey an artistic personality or/and position. Doherty manages to find succinct ways to put complex things in clear words and to unravel the complexity of seemingly simple things. O'Doherty always addresses artists and oeuvres personally, dropping subjective comments about biographies or individual friendships, yet this never turns into voyeurism, but rather contributes to the conveyance

of the higher truth of that position, a deeper insight. When he portrays an artist, he aims at highlighting the difference between person and persona and the specificity of every position.

A CREDO

Although in these essays we are confronted with a wide range of artists and cultural phenomena, one can recognize a kind of credo of modernism throughout. Good art is a seismograph of its time and culture. Recurrent topics are identity, conceptuality, concern for surface and artificiality, political engagement, unconventionality, subversive qualities and the paradox of multiplicity and unity without synthesis. O'Doherty has a *faible* for careers that cut across the usual categories (art, film, music, life) and in describing such artists he at the same time sketches a self-portrait. Art has to be of its time, and O'Doherty brings to his work a high consciousness of the role of politics in and for art, and of the differences between Europe and the United States. His analysis of Warhol's use of the face is almost a socio-anthropological essay about the changing conditions of being a human being within high capitalism. These essays cover almost half a century, asking "How much seeing is remembering" and questioning the relevance of a work in time.

JE SUIS UN AUTRE

Throughout these essays, O'Doherty performs a very witty and touching "striptease," asking himself questions about his own strategies of handling several personae (aliases and identities as an artist, art critic, doctor, scientist, humanist, etc.), addressing the crucial and seminal issues of identity and the double-bind of other/self, of what it means to be an artist, questions still at the very center of any artistic oeuvre, a kind of Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth of modernism, postmodernism, or aftermodernism up to the present day. In his essays on the white cube (not present in this collection), he made us aware not only of the very special aesthetic *mise-en-scène* of its display but also of how precarious the place of art in society had become. Since that time, he has remained an attentive, highly sensitive witness and also an agent, whose role(s) have come only slowly to light since his strategies of masquerade were so successful. Although he does not appear in Lucy Lippard's famous book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Brian O'Doherty was intimately involved in that *bouillon de culture* in New York and was even an immediate accomplice in the propagation of the "death of the author," publishing Barthes's essay in *ASPEN* 5/6, in 1967. Now, we can recognize how alive the "author" is and what our time owes to those decades. In addition to O'Doherty's astute observations of the artists inside the community, of the so-called gatekeepers of the art world, he also followed the changes in the role of and relations to the art market, recognizing already in the late 1970s the upcoming economical turn/diktat. This is why he uses his roles to remain an accomplice to the artists, to speak of their work, their passions, their quest and of what's at stake in artistic researches regardless of the financial issues the art world is obsessed with nowadays. In the final essay presented here, his last rethinking about the place of art in society today, he sees

that the gallery space has been reduced to a utilitarian frame and the specific qualities that the white cube was once bestowed with have now migrated into the audience, into “our white-walled attitude in our fetishized age.” Instead of speaking of the art market, we are reminded that art and the artist’s concern should be our focus: What does it mean to be present in the “art world”? What kind of presence will prove to be lasting? To read his essays is an antidote to our material times. They remind us why we need art.