

2 Patrick Ireland and the Politics of Naming

'The events of Bloody Sunday ripped Ireland apart.'

Frank McGuinness¹

I went with Anger at my heel
Through Bogside of the bitter zeal
—Jesus pity! — on a day
Of cold and drizzle and decay.
A month had passed. Yet there remained
A murder smell that stung and stained

Thomas Kinsella²

'Art is above politics but not humanity ... I am withholding my work
from the North of Ireland.'

Michael Farrell³

'We the undersigned propose that the Irish Exhibition of Living Art
should make a public protest against the persecution of Irish people
by the present Stormont Government, by withholding this year's
exhibition.'

Gerard Dillon⁴

DURING A CIVIL RIGHTS MARCH in Derry, Northern Ireland, on Sunday, 30 January 1972, 13 unarmed people were shot dead by the British army (ILL. 4).⁵ *Name Change* (1972, ILL. 5), O'Doherty's artistic response, took place in Dublin on 29 November, ten months after the event since known as 'Bloody Sunday'. Arguably the most important gesture within the artist's oeuvre, *Name Change* was also the earliest performance art in Ireland.⁶ It referred specifically to Irish identities on the island and the historical legacy of the Ulster Plantation by Queen Elizabeth I of England in 1609, when native-owned land in the north of Ireland was confiscated and 'planted' with English and Scottish Protestants.⁷

'Naming is a crucial element in the construction of identity,' Patrick Ireland stated in 1998 at the mini-retrospective, *Patrick Ireland: Language Performed/ Matters of Identity*, in Derry, the city that provoked *Name Change* 26 years earlier. The potency of naming extended beyond the personal since, ironically, the city itself continues to be known by two names: 'Londonderry' by Unionist/Protestants and 'Derry' by Nationalist/Catholics. 'Derry' is an Anglicisation of the Irish 'Doire' (oak grove). It was renamed Londonderry during the 17th-century plantation. (The mainly Nationalist Londonderry City Council passed a resolution to change the name back to Derry in 1984. Unionist councillors boycotted the Council in



4 Bloody Sunday Memorial, Derry, Northern Ireland
Detail
1974



12 Patrick Ireland
H-Block, Rope Drawing #92
 1989
 Nylon cord and house paint
 Variable dimensions
 Orpheus Gallery, Belfast

Conscience with Esthetic Concerns. All works shared a concern with political death by an artist whose name represented non-violent protest. *Name Change* and these works replaced traditional memorial sculpture with a living memorial, the persona of Patrick Ireland. This persona generated its own history for 36 years. The decision to bury Patrick Ireland in 2008 added one more dimension.

Patrick Ireland RIP 1972–2008

In the mid 1970s O’Doherty observed of gestures: ‘As an invention ... the gesture’s patent is its most distinguishing feature’.³⁸ The fictionalisation of the artist’s name, the history of Bloody Sunday and the Patrick Ireland persona remained open-ended, provisional entities and would, as this author observed in 2004, only become complete, ‘when the name no longer represented a conflict but ... could be reversed when accompanied by an equivalent transformation of fixed notions of identity’.³⁹

Following the Belfast Peace Agreement in 1998 and the establishment in Northern Ireland of a power-sharing government in 2007, the status of Patrick Ireland dramatically altered. In accordance with the original statement, the persona



13 Brian O’Doherty
The Burial of Patrick Ireland
 Wake
 2008
 Irish Museum of Modern Art

became redundant. Accordingly, Ireland announced in 2007 that he planned to reverse *Name Change* in the spring of 2008, providing the power-sharing executive remained in place.⁴⁰

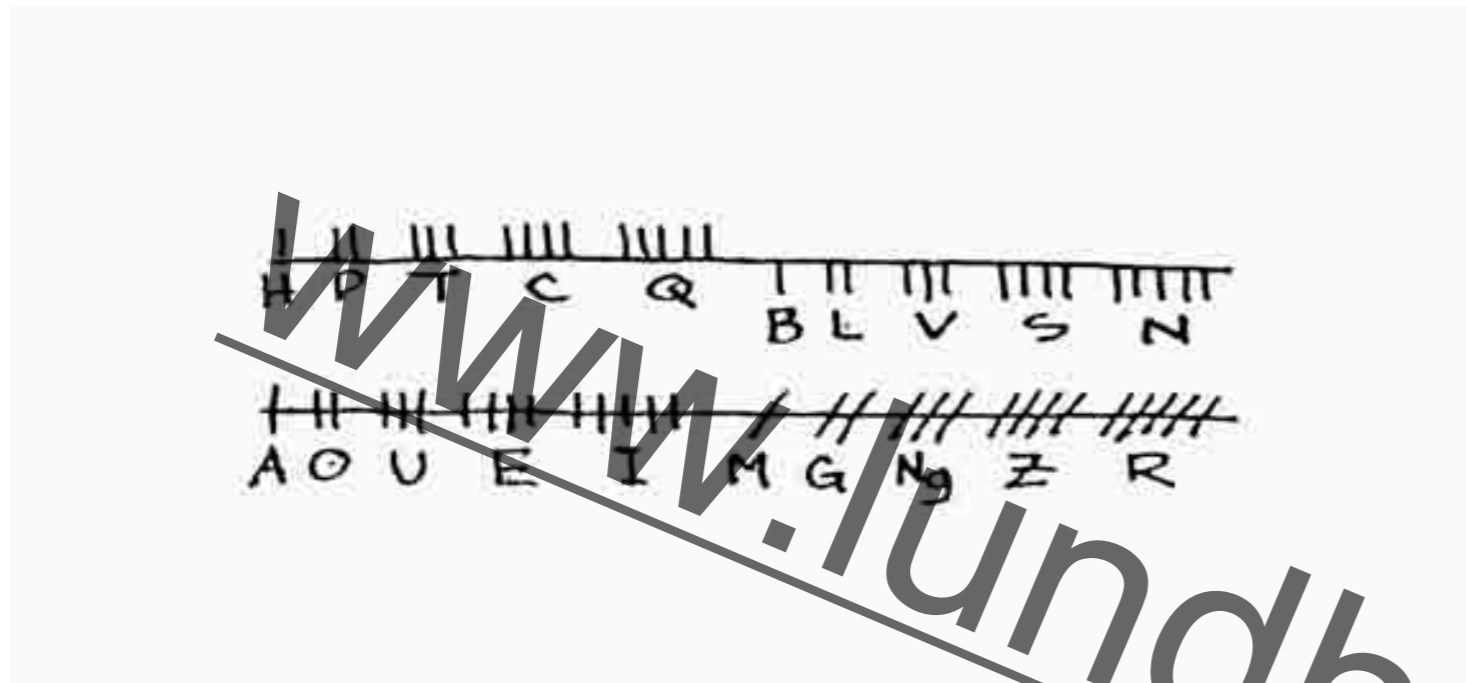
Boxes can be found throughout O’Doherty/Ireland’s art as both objects and metaphors. Probably the most unusual was O’Doherty’s decision to literally ‘box’ his Patrick Ireland persona, declaring: ‘We are burying hate in a ceremony of reconciliation celebrating peace in Northern Ireland’.⁴¹ An effigy of Patrick Ireland, with a life/death mask made by the artist Charles Simonds, lay from 18–20 May 2008 in a simple wooden coffin, open for viewing by the public in the Gordon Lambert



opposite:
17 **Brian O'Doherty**
The Burial of Patrick Ireland
Keening performance, Alannah O'Kelly
2008
Irish Museum of Modern Art

18 **Brian O'Doherty**
The Burial of Patrick Ireland
'Reborn' Brian O'Doherty and wife, Barbara Novak
2008
Irish Museum of Modern Art

19 **Brian O'Doherty**
The Burial of Patrick Ireland
Patrick Ireland's gravestone
2008
Irish Museum of Modern Art



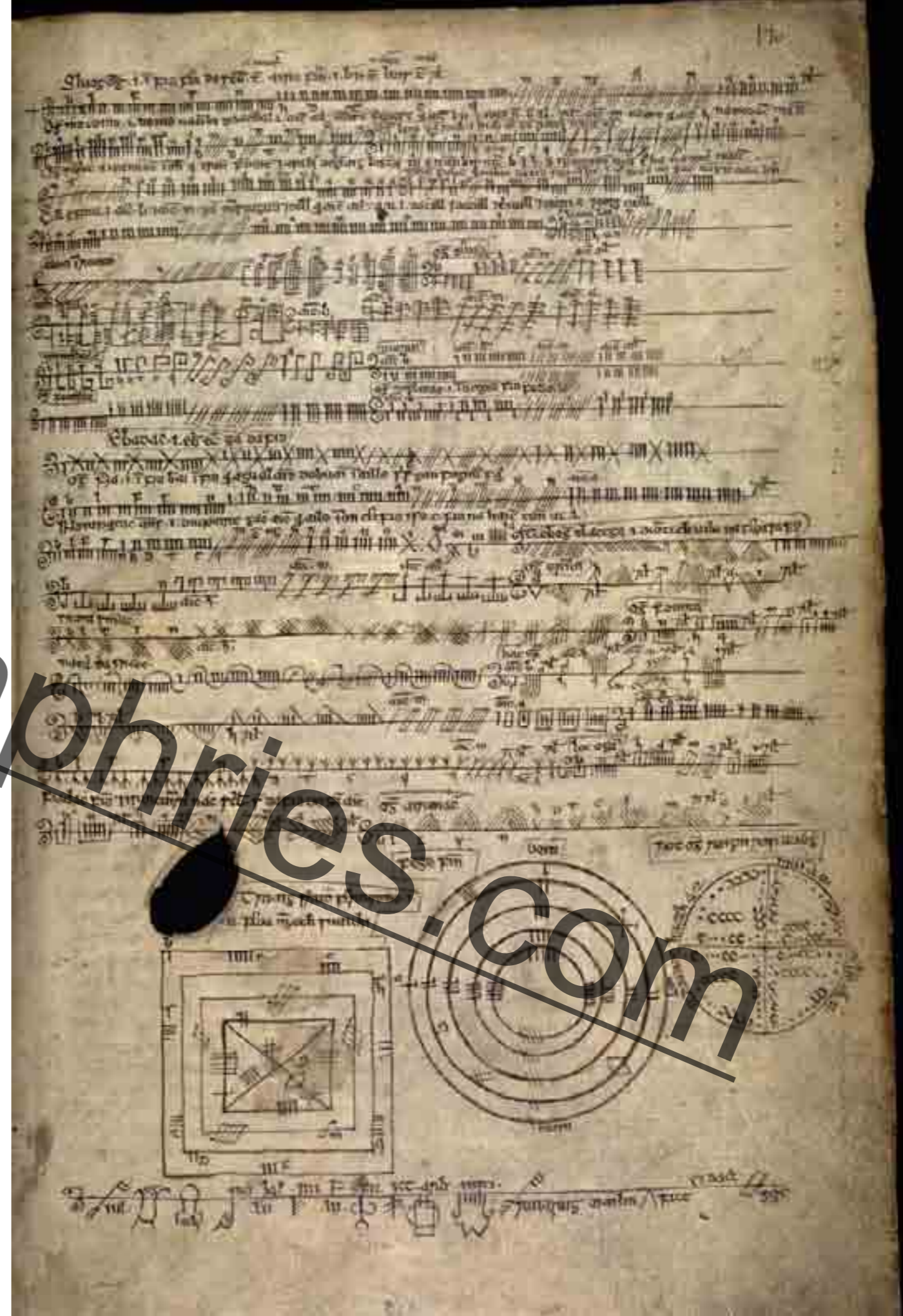
45 Ogham Alphabet, transcribed by Brian O'Doherty

Roman alphabet. Remarkably, Ogham's structure was organised in four sets of five lines similar to the sets of serial music.

Serialism in O'Doherty/Ireland's art linked minimalist concerns to conceptualism. Just as Mallarmé constructed poetry on a musical motif by positioning words in a relational system, O'Doherty, with line and interval, had a relational system that avoided traditional compositional methods. O'Doherty/Ireland's work represented Umberto Eco's cultural (rather than mathematical) concept of serialism as an 'open work' in which serial thought was a polyvalent thought-process, in complete contrast to classical thought.⁷ The 'open work' for Eco also represented modern experience of the world: 'Like all art it is an "epistemological metaphor": not only does it reflect aspects of modern philosophy (phenomenology ...) and modern science (the theory of relativity, mathematical information theory), but what is equally important ... it represents by analogy the feeling of senselessness, disorder, and "discontinuity" that the modern world generates in us all.'⁸ Many aspects of O'Doherty/Ireland's art are reflected in this description.

Devised by Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) in the early 20th century, serial music was a basic order constructed with a pattern of intervals for the 12-note chromatic scale, called a series/row/set, of which there are four. The series could be inverted or reversed but the relationship between the units could not be corrupted. O'Doherty's knowledge of serialism was enhanced by his friendship with the composer, Morton Feldman. With the quasi-musical language of Ogham, O'Doherty/Ireland could 'compose' or 'arrange' by making changes in the number, attitude or position of a pre-selected set of lines, which in turn translated to numbers, letters and words: 'Serialism was our mother's milk in the mid and

opposite:
46 *The Book of Ballymote*
c.1391
Royal Irish Academy





opposite:
 51 Patrick Ireland
Ogham Alphabet and *One, Here, Now (Irish, English, German & Italian)*
 2005-6
 Wall painting, water-based house paint
 Variable dimensions
 Casa Dipinta, Todi

words into Irish, German and Italian. If the colourful ensemble remains mute, that is, not deciphered, the artist is not disturbed: 'Every work of art is layered. If the spectator is detained at a level of pleasure, I am perfectly happy.'²⁴

Two versions of *Song of the Vowels*, inscribed in five concentric squares, each with an Ogham vowel, grace the walls of the dining room. The jagged diagonals to the right are presented with restraint as if the work is 'breathing' its whispered sounds on to the wall. The vowels on the end wall, in contrast, perform a vertical dance. Another *Song of the Vowels* (Ill. 52) from c.1980s, located in the living room on the first floor, superimposes system upon system in a 5 x 5 magic square,



52 Patrick Ireland
Song of the Vowels
 c.1980s
 Wall painting, water-based house paint
 Variable dimensions
 Casa Dipinta, Todi



85 Brian O'Doherty
Structural Play: Vowel Grid
 1970
 Performance, Eisteddfod, Wales, 1977

'vowelers' (walking vowels) became a function of language rather than the other way round. The performance lasted approximately 15 minutes, so that time echoed the dimensions of the 15 x 15 grid. Vowels in space were transformed in *Vowel Grid* to become a synaesthetic blend of colour and sound made both visible and audible to the audience.

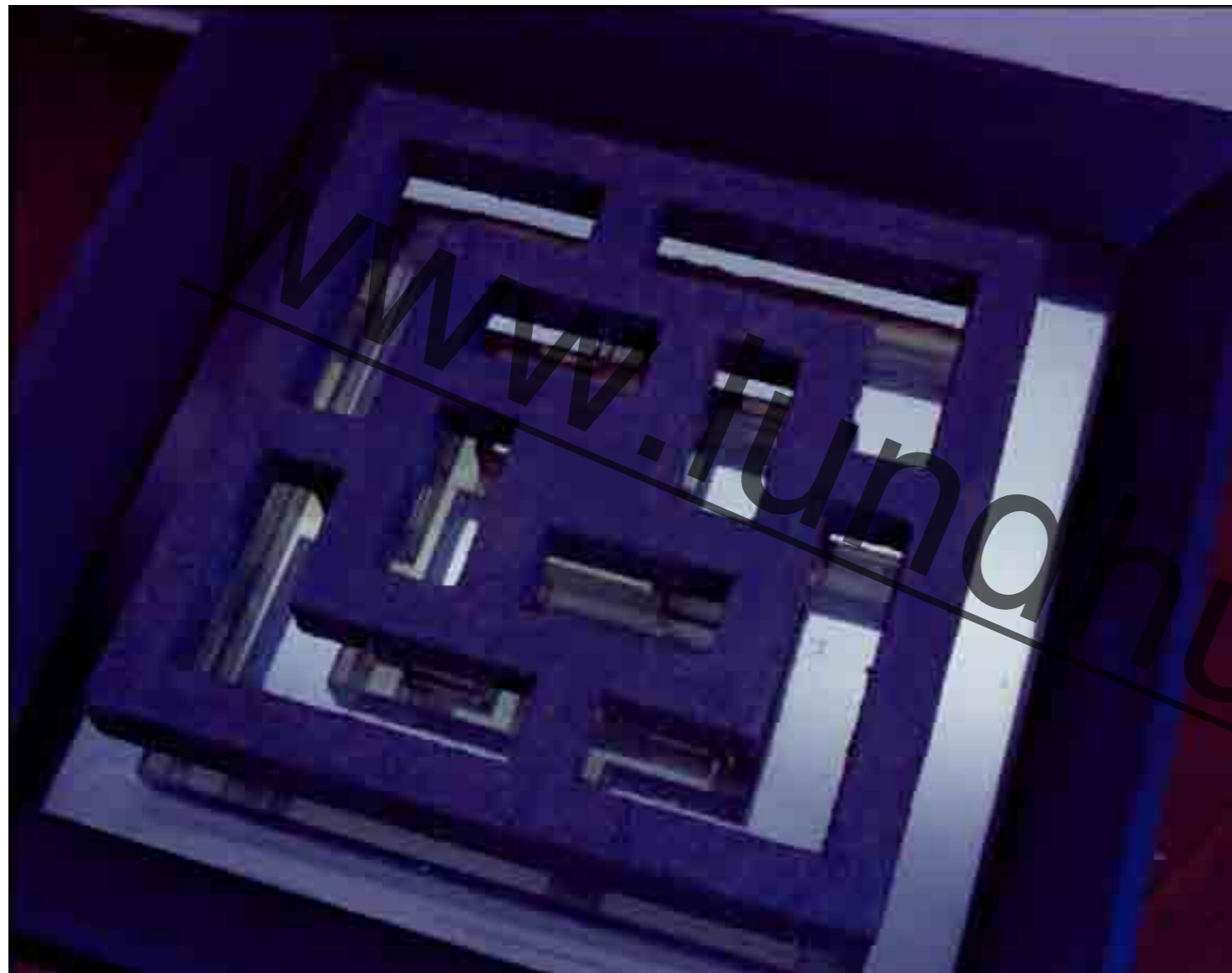
There were intriguing affinities between the performance works of O'Doherty/Ireland and Beckett. They shared an interest in the visual, silence and the Void as well as an uncompromising rigour and minimalist aesthetic. *Vowel Grid* (1970), in particular, bore some resemblance to Beckett's late television plays, *Quadrat I + II* (1981), originally called *Quad*. The visual, always an important element of Beckett's stage plays, was afforded even greater primacy in *Quad*, which concentrated only on bodily movement. In complete silence, four hooded figures, dressed in long white, yellow, blue and red clothing, performed on a square platform. Each figure in turn completed a course based upon serialised movements between points ABCD. The central 'danger zone' was consistently avoided as the performers turned sharply to their left, the direction of the damned in both Dante and Virgil.³¹

Vowel Grid reduced sound to the primal vowels and programmed movements. In *Quad* there was the further reduction to silence, apart from the shuffle of the

players' feet. Both imposed a rigid choreographic format as the performers moved on a similarly squared platform. Both cancelled expression and identity with hoods and anonymous clothing. *Quad*, James Knowlson stated in his biography of Beckett, was originally written, unsuccessfully, for the actor Jack MacGowran in 1965.³² The critic Daniel Birnbaum's review of the exhibition, *Samuel Beckett/Bruce Nauman* (2000), suggested that Beckett's late television works, *Ghost Trio* (1976), ... *but the clouds ...* (1976) and *Quad*, as well as Nauman's work, were 'beyond genre'.³³ It is tempting to suggest here, however, that Beckett's *Quad* might fit O'Doherty's category of a Structural Play.

86 Brian O'Doherty
Structural Play: Vowel Grid
 1970
 Performance, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard, Massachusetts, 1981





100 **Brian O'Doherty**
Vertical Labyrinth
 1967
 Mirrored plexi-covered wood, glass, mirror
 16.5 x 91 x 91 cm (6 1/2 x 36 x 36 in)

idea, part of the small group of minimal performances, involved some risk and a total reliance on memory and balance. The blindfolded performer, on a 4-inch-wide plank resting on 3-foot trestles, started at one end, re-enacting from memory the first turns of the Hampton Court labyrinth, UK. On reaching the end of the 10-foot-long plank, the course was reversed back to the beginning. O'Doherty had also once entertained the idea of making a labyrinth in an Irish bog, but the project remained unrealised.¹³

The most ambitious of the built labyrinths, all of which were temporary and painted in the signature blue-grey colour found in many other O'Doherty/Ireland works, was *Labyrinth for the Elvehjem Museum* (1992, Ill. 102). The first to be made by Patrick Ireland, it was the largest of the built labyrinths. Composed of four

101 **Brian O'Doherty**
Labyrinth as a Straight Line
 1967
 Performance, Bard College, Columbia University, New York,
 c.1979



concentric units, it rose from 3 feet by increments of 2 to 9 feet. Only at the centre was the participant lost to view. Seen from ground level, the Elvehjem labyrinth resembled a monumental ziggurat, a form also found in Rope Drawing installations and drawings like *Ziggurat and Its Reflection* (1979). Balconies above the work invited viewers to look down and trace the pathways followed by those moving within the labyrinth below. This notion of a community of participants moving through prepared spaces has been also a consistent feature of the Rope Drawings.

At P.S.1, New York, for a 1993 retrospective, two distinctive motifs in O'Doherty/Ireland's art were combined for the first time, the Labyrinth and the Rope Drawing (Ill. 103).¹⁴ This labyrinth was the only unicursal in the oeuvre. A formidable 8-foot dark wall confronted the participant before the entrance

10 Decoding the White Cube; the Rope Drawing Installations

'If the artwork is a unit of discourse, both aesthetic and economic ... the thinking went, remove it ... Examine the collector ... Study the corporate drift of the museum.'

Brian O'Doherty¹

'Modernism transformed perception, but the politics of perception remain unwritten.'

Brian O'Doherty²

Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space

IN NOVEMBER 2008, O'DOHERTY AND Daniel Buren (b. 1938), two significant figures in the early critique of gallery space, participated in a symposium in Paris at the launch of the French translation of O'Doherty's *White Cube* essays.³ The essays are so well-known that I will limit myself to a brief summary. The ideas they explored, however, had been part of O'Doherty's thinking for some time. Around 1963, while a critic with the *New York Times*, he observed in a review the gallery's power to transmute junk into gold which, outside of the gallery, relapsed into its former state. This review, or part of it, ended up collaged in an early artwork, *The Critic's Boots* (1964–5, Ills 110, 111). Made as a gesture to formally register his departure from art criticism, the boots that 'covered' shows all over New York were, appropriately, covered with O'Doherty's reviews for the *New York Times*. Some years later, the *White Cube* essays examined the aesthetic, sociological and economic contexts of art exhibition, exposing the myth of neutrality of gallery and museum spaces. After more than 30 years, they remain essential documents, one of the key art texts of the 20th century.⁴ They continue to be translated and studied widely, new essays have been added⁵ and more than one international gallery has adopted the name. The four essays were 'Notes on the Gallery Space', 'The Eye and the Spectator', 'Context as Content' and 'The Gallery as Gesture'. Packed with ideas, they were



109 Patrick Ireland
Cubes/Boxes

c.1979

Wall paintings, water-based house paint
Variable dimensions
Casa Dipinta, Todi