

The Kitchen

Center for video, music, dance, performance, film,
visual art and literature

Fall 2021 Season

The Kitchen presents

*Undoing Language:
Early Performance Works
by Brian O'Doherty*

Guest Curated by Lucy Cotter

October 8, 7pm EDT

Undoing Language: Early Performance Works by Brian O'Doherty is made possible with endowment support from Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust; annual grants from The Amphion Foundation, Inc., The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Howard Gilman Foundation, and The Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation; and in part by public funds from New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Governor and the New York State Legislature. Curatorial travel supported by Portland State University.

Season programming is made possible in part with support from The Kitchen's Board of Directors and The Kitchen Leadership Fund.

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PROGRAM

Introduction — **Lucy Cotter**

Presentation of Works by Brian O'Doherty:
Vowel Poem (1967–70) — recording

Structural Play: Vowel Grid (1970) — **Roxy Farman and C. Spencer Yeh**

Vowel Chorus for Five Voices (1968) — **Ekmeles**

New Composition in Response to O'Doherty's Oeuvre:
Contemporary Vocabulary (2021) — **Holland Andrews**

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Sound Supervisor — Jonah Rosenberg

Production Crew — Kourtney Charles, Leo Janks, Ali May, Alexander Symes,
and Joe Wakeman

Organized by Lucy Cotter, Guest Curator

SPECIAL THANKS

The curator would like to offer her heartfelt thanks to Brian O'Doherty and Barbara Novak for their gracious collaboration. A huge thank you to all of the performers for their commitment and time. Thanks to Simone Subal for her support, and Brenda Moore-McCann for her generosity with archival material. Sincere thanks to Lumi Tan and the wonderful team at The Kitchen who have stood by this project, initially planned for 2020.

UNDOING LANGUAGE: EARLY PERFORMANCE WORKS
BY BRIAN O'DOHERTY

This program brings together early performance works by artist, art critic, poet, filmmaker, and novelist **Brian O'Doherty**. At age 93, this program recognizes O'Doherty's role as an artist who created a substantial body of performance works engaging with the performativity of language and how it interacts with the performance of the "self," and who led the first national funding for performance and media art at the National Endowment for the Arts in 1970s, making an indelible mark on the New York performance art scene.

The works being presented at The Kitchen stem from the period in which Brian O'Doherty developed a series of ten "Structural Plays" (1967–70) that "perform language" in ways that expose its instability, forming a performative precursor of post-structuralism. Notably O'Doherty was also the first person to publish Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" as guest-editor of *Aspen 5&6* in 1967. This interest in deconstructing language is also evident in O'Doherty's *Vowel Poems* series (1967–70), which were partly inspired by the Dada poetry of Richard Huelsenbeck. The event at The Kitchen will feature a recorded poem and two live performances of O'Doherty's works, followed by a newly commissioned vocal work by Holland Andrews, responding to this oeuvre.

The evening will mark the first ever performance of ***Vowel Chorus for Five Voices (1968)***, the most elaborate of several "voice-works" made by O'Doherty between 1967 and 1970. In this work, each of five performers are designated one vowel sound, as well as different times in which to sustain his or her vowel, and a choice of pitch (high, low, and middle registers). This work was influenced by O'Doherty's friendship with Morton Feldman, with whom he shared an ongoing interest in seriality. Perhaps because of the necessity of five trained voices, the work was never previously realized as a performance, being exhibited to date as a score/drawing. More than fifty years after its conception, it will be performed live by **Ekmeles**, a New York-based avant-garde music ensemble.

Structural Play: Vowel Grid (1970) will also be performed live; this is a work for two performers, who utter vowel sounds while traversing a grid-like floor drawing. This grid is a visual translation of the vowels; a kind of "phonic drawing" that spatializes language, made up of the linear alphabet of Ogham. Seeking to translate language into a serial notation, O'Doherty turned to this ancient Celtic notation from his native country as "a non-expressive compositional tool" (Brenda Moore-McCann). The horizontal and diagonal lines that form the basis of the colored grid are "abstract" visual translations of the vowels, rotated and transposed to make a drawing that

can be performed as an open-ended score.

O'Doherty's engagement with Ogham manifests his interest in serialism as an open and polyvalent thought-process that poses an alternative to classical thought. His emphasis on the physicality of language reflects an affinity with (Irish) oral culture, as oral literature inhabits the body rather than the page. Unlike peer Conceptualists and post-Minimalists in New York, O'Doherty explored the relationship between language and identity, with the "Structural Plays" "rotating" sentences (and thus testing the stability of) being one person, here, now. They manifest a decolonial gesture in their juxtaposition of the ancient language of a colonized country with the language of Conceptual art.

The guttural vowel sounds in O'Doherty's linguistic performances will form the departure point for a newly commissioned work by **Holland Andrews**, an extended technique vocalist, composer, and performer who use combined vocal layering to create dissonant soundscapes. Their work will extend the embodied to language of O'Doherty's vowel performances, unpacking their layers in a soundscape.

— Lucy Cotter

BIOS

Brian O'Doherty is an artist, art critic, novelist, filmmaker, and poet who has worked under several identities. Born in Ireland in 1928 and trained as a doctor, he began his art career in the 1960s in New York. As an artist, he works with drawing, installation, “gestures” and performance, exhibiting in museums and galleries worldwide. He is the author of two books and three novels, one of which was Man Booker Prize-nominated, and the award-winning documentary film *Hopper's Silence* (1981). He was art critic for the *New York Times* in the 1960s and editor of *Art in America* in the '70s and is renowned for his paradigm-shifting *Inside the White Cube* essays (1976). O'Doherty's impact on the history of art and intellectual culture is vast. He was the first person to publish Roland Barthes' “Death of the Author,” as guest-editor of *Aspen* 5&6, in 1967. In the 1970s, he led the first national funding for performance and media art at the National Endowment for the Arts. His interest in the embodiment and performativity of language forms part of his wider interest in the performativity of the self. Alongside his practice under his given name, O'Doherty has further explored the “self” as a fluid entity by working under four additional identities constructed for specific conceptual functions: Mary Josephson, a feminist academic; Sigmund Bode, a linguistic theorist; poet William Maginn; and Patrick Ireland, an artistic identity created in a 1972 performance in protest of the loss of civil rights in Northern Ireland during Bloody Sunday. These interests are extended in his most recent novel *A Crossdresser's Secret*, Sternberg Press, 2014.

O'Doherty's oeuvre has been documented in, among other publications, the survey monograph by Brenda Moore-McCann, *Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland: Between Categories*, Lund Humphries, 2009; the critical anthology *Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland: Word, Image and Institutional Critique* edited by Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, Valiz, 2017; *Brian O'Doherty: Collected Essays* edited by Liam Kelly, University of California Press, 2018; James O' Nolan, ed. *Brian O'Doherty: Structural Plays*, Stoney Road Press, 2018; *Dear... Selected Letters from Brian O'Doherty 1970–2018*, edited by Brenda Moore-McCann, 2019, and *A Mental Masquerade: When Brian O'Doherty Was a Female Art Critic; Mary Josephson's Collected Writings*, edited by Thomas Fischer and Astrid Mania, Spector Books, 2019.

Lucy Cotter's multidisciplinary practice explores aesthetics, politics, and the unknown through curating, art critical and experimental writing, and performance. Born in Ireland, she currently lives in Portland, where she is Curator in Residence at Oregon Center for Contemporary Art, with exhibitions including *Unquiet Objects* (2021); *Timelines for the Future: Christine Howard Sandoval* (2021); *Katarina Zdjelar: Proximities: a rehearsal, an archive* (2021) and a performance of kayon gaskin. Previous

projects include being curator of the Dutch Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale 2017 with Cinema Olanda: Wendelien van Oldenborgh. She is author-editor of *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, 2019; a regular contributor to books, catalogs, and journals such as *Flash Art*, *Frieze*, and *Mousse Magazine*; and has published on O'Doherty's work on several occasions. She is currently preparing an exhibition engaging with the legacies of Maya Lin's *Confluence Project*, and working on an experimental play entitled *The Entangled Museum*, which explores restitution, cultural beliefs, and the limits of acceptable knowledge. Cotter holds a PhD in Cultural Analysis from the University of Amsterdam and lectures in Critical Theory at Portland State University.

Roxy Farman is an artist, musician and writer from New York. Her musical projects include *Wetware* and *Manat*.

C. Spencer Yeh is recognized for interdisciplinary activities as an artist, improviser, and composer, as well as for his music project *Burning Star Core*. This past year Yeh has broadcasted live for *The Kitchen*, *ESS Chicago* with both *The Renaissance Society* and *Vox Effusis* (organized by Lou Mallozzi), *Casa del Lago UNAM* (with Jacob Wick and Bonnie Jones), and both solo and in *Luke Stewart/Leila Bordreuil's Feedback Ensemble* for *Roulette*. Additionally, Yeh premiered new video works with *ISSUE Project Room*, and the *Bemis Center* (Omaha, Nebraska), and exhibited with *Loong Mah*, *Carriage Trade*, *5th Floor/Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève*, and *Bánh Mì Verlag*. In 2019, Yeh received the *Foundation for Contemporary Arts Grants to Artists* award.

Ekmeles is a vocal ensemble dedicated to the performance of new and rarely heard works, and gems of the historical avant-garde. Praised as a "brilliant young ensemble... defining a fresh and virtuosic American sound" by *The New Yorker*, they have given US premieres of works by *Beat Furrer*, *Luigi Nono*, and *Salvatore Sciarrino*. In 2019-20 they performed with the *MET Museum's* first commissioned sound installation, *Oliver Beer's Vessel Orchestra*, and released their debut album "A howl, that was also a prayer" on *New Focus Recordings*, with works by *Taylor Brook*, *Erin Gee*, and *Christopher Trapani*.

Holland Andrews is a vocalist, composer, and performance artist whose work focuses on the abstraction of operatic and extended-technique voice to build soundscapes encompassing both catharsis and dissonance. Frequently highlighting themes surrounding vulnerability and healing, Andrews arranges music for voice, clarinet, and electronics. Andrews also develops and performs soundscapes for dance, theater, and film, and their work is toured internationally with artists such as *Bill T. Jones*, *Dorothee Munyaneza*, *Will Rawls*, and poet *Demian Dinéyazhi*. Notable musical collaborations include *William Brittle*, *Son Lux*, *Christina Vantzou*, *Peter Broderick*, and *Methods Body*.

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