

Editorial

Notes on Grammar

JOANNE LAWS OUTLINES THE CONVERSATION SURROUNDING GENDER-NEUTRAL PRONOUNS.

TO MY SURPRISE, the general public suddenly seems to care intensely about grammar. As an editor, I can confirm that the average person is not especially committed to the nuances and particularities of the English language; yet these things are currently being hotly debated in the media.

The language we use is important, particularly in relation to identity, since language is fundamental in shaping cultural expectations and perceptions of ourselves. The growing recognition of gender diversity¹ is increasingly framing the usage of gendered pronouns (such as 'he' or 'she') as exclusionary, in certain contexts.² It's worth emphasising that this pertains specifically to the English language, since there are many widely spoken languages that contain no gendered pronouns. In English, conventional pronouns have the effect of assigning a binary identity,³ which excludes nonbinary people.⁴ It is also important to stress that this critical debate does not hinge on eliminating feminine or masculine pronouns, but on normalising the use of at least one gender-neutral pronoun⁵ – namely, the 'singular they'.⁶

My own learning on this subject began around six years ago, when a group of artists were writing an article for VAN. One of the artists referred to themselves as 'they' – which at first felt unusual, slightly cumbersome, and to my mind, grammatically incorrect. After an informative conversation with the artists (as well as some research, courtesy of *The Oxford Compendium of English*), I proceeded with the article using 'they' as a singular pronoun, while committing to learning more about the convention.

Certainly, the 'singular they' has been around for centuries and is widely used today in everyday conversation, as in: "Someone left their bike outside." It is commonly used in situations where a person's identity is not known. However, more pressing is its use in scenarios where a person does not wish to specify or disclose their gender, or actively states their preference for nonbinary pronouns.

We can see how historical resistance to the evolution of language might act as a cipher for some thinly-veiled moral code – one that serves to uphold societal order, lest it be plunged into existential chaos by syntax. For example, the usage of Ms – as opposed to Miss (used to denote a girl) or Mrs (referring to a married woman) – extends back to the seventeenth century, but it was revived and popularised in the twentieth century in response to a perceived need in the English language for a more general term, untethered to a woman's domestic situation. Nevertheless, Ms was contested well into the twenty-first century, by those who felt it was variously bland, problematic, or even, as described by one Tory MP, "political correctness gone mad." Nowadays, Ms has become so nor-

malised that many publication style guides stipulate its default use, unless the subject has expressed a specific preference for Miss or Mrs.

In the semantics of this debate, my own particular position is that I use gender-neutral singular pronouns and related adjectives out of respect for those who prefer it, but I acknowledge that its usage can lack linguistic precision or clarity in certain circumstances. [As a side note, many have argued that this perceived deficit requires the invention of a completely new non-gendered singular pronoun, and some have accordingly proposed suitable remedies; however, 'they' has gained the most traction, due to its historical precedence]. Often, I will seek alternative solutions, such as reconfiguring a sentence, where appropriate, to avoid the need for pronouns at all.

Crucially, there is a need to balance any pragmatic difficulties of using the singular they against what is at stake in the refusal to employ inclusive language. This may include actively or inadvertently aligning with homophobic and transphobic right-wing factions that are fuelling hostility and violence against already marginalised and othered communities. Research suggests that using non-gendered pronouns actually helps to reduce unconscious bias and gender stereotyping, while also enhancing positivity towards women and the LGBT+ community.⁷ Moving the conversation beyond whether or not gender-neutral pronouns are 'legitimate', to one of solidarity and empathy, is a small but proactive step in creating a more inclusive and accepting society.

Joanne Laws is Editor of The Visual Artists' News Sheet.

¹ Gender diversity describes gender identities beyond the Western binary framework of male and female. Many indigenous communities recognise multiple gender identities and societal roles, which are not assigned according to biological sex. This was commonplace in pre-colonial tribal communities.

² Gendered or gender-specific pronouns reference someone's gender: he/him/his or she/her/hers.

³ Binary identity refers to the classification of gender into two distinct, opposite forms of masculine and feminine.

⁴ Nonbinary describes genders that don't fall into the categories of male or female.

⁵ Non-gendered, gender-neutral, or nonbinary pronouns are not gender-specific.

⁶ The singular 'they' is officially listed in the Merriam-Webster and Oxford dictionaries as a singular pronoun.

⁷ Summary report: Margit Tavits and Efrén O. Pérez, 'Language influences mass opinion toward gender and LGBT equality', *PNAS*, August 2019, Vol. 116, No. 34.

Curatorial

Reading Time and Infrastructure

CHRISTA-MARIA LERM HAYES REFLECTS ON BRIAN O'DOHERTY'S SOCIAL PRACTICE LEGACY.

INSTALLING THE EXHIBITION, 'Brian O'Doherty: Reading Time' at SIRIUS in Cobh, four months after the artist's passing, and holding a Summer School there in his memory gives ample opportunity to engage with this polymath's legacy.¹ It is expected that O'Doherty's US-based institutional activities – including his National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) directorship, Art in America editorship, Long Island University professorship of film, and so on – would be rather distant for Irish audiences to have figured much in an appraisal of his achievements here. It has been the visual art realm, after all, that has led his critical reception, with Brenda Moore-McCann, Christina Kennedy, Lucy Cotter, Yvonne Scott, and I, having done our bit from an Irish perspective. And if this 'realm' – for my students' generation, at least – now exceeds what could once neatly be pinned down as art practice, art history, theory, curating, or criticism, then it is already clear that the category-defying artist would have a good chance at resonating more with current, expanded, rather than more rigidly disciplined, historical categories. He may even have something to contribute to artistic research, art writing, social practice, art activism, infrastructural critique, and decolonial work.

These connections are what I explored with the participants of the SIRIUS Summer School (6 – 10 June). It was poignant to do this at SIRIUS – the site of the former Royal Cork Yacht Club in Cobh, which overlooks the spot from where Brian O'Doherty emigrated in 1957, along with untold numbers of other Irish people. I was again 'in residence' in that building, as were the O'Dohertys in 1995–96, just before I got to know them. Walking in the footsteps of Brian and Barbara, holding the same keys, had quite an affective charge for me. Knowing that O'Doherty was a medical doctor and researcher in the field of perception, attention to materials and physical situatedness, feels particularly relevant there. It is this attentiveness and thoughtfulness that his work appears to value and foster in many different ways.

When planning the exhibition with Brian and Barbara in New York last July, I received his blessing to establish a material connection. I suggested not just to remake a rope drawing (*HCE Redux*, 2004) in the building but also to span the same kind of rope from the Classicist columns of the yacht club's balcony to the dock below, showing in subtle, yet unambiguous ways how the leisurely, 'civilized' life of one group had necessitated the departure of others on coffin ships. This rope now reaches from art to the water, to address the global military complex's presence in Cobh, questions of migration in Europe today, and the ecological issues on the doorstep of the exhibition space, too. That rope may be a fairly limp

little gesture that doesn't do anything on its own, but it is there for all of us to stumble upon when admiring the sheer beauty of the location. Without it, we would have just borrowed from the ice cream-hungry attractiveness of Cobh to draw audiences and remained quiet. We know that silence about violence is also violence. O'Doherty didn't remain quiet vis-à-vis Bloody Sunday. For 36 years, he signed perfectly well-behaved Ogham-derived prints and multi-coloured drawings responding to James Joyce with "Patrick Ireland" in an open invitation to remember and to act.

How plausible and connected in the here and now the social practice side of Brian's work would be has been truly surprising to me – even me, I should say, as I'm the person who turned him into a bit of a Beuys in the introduction to my edited volume, *Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland: Word, Image and Institutional Critique* (Valiz, 2017). He was happy about that. His 'helicopter view' on the spheres of art and writing had both a strategic and tactical side that the world today appears to need. I'm not suggesting that anything quantifiable was altered in the peace process on the island of Ireland because of the *Name Change* (1972), or that the art sector in the US is now without its problems because Brian marched through the institutions and made the funding landscape more inclusive for conceptual practices and artists from marginalised groups. His is a pioneering institutional critique (initiated in his book, *Inside the White Cube*, University of California Press, 1986) but it is also a foresighted, critical and infrastructural investment of considerable time, energy, and leadership qualities (namely thoughtfulness and kindness).

This is why my curating of O'Doherty's exhibition at SIRIUS now surprisingly fits neatly with a very special EU-funded project on spatial practices for empathic exchange (SPACEX) and why 'Cork Caucus' – Art/Not Art's Cork City of Culture programme, curated with Charles Esche and Annie Fletcher in 2005 – could feed into my Summer School programme as a local legacy of social practice. Even Patrick Ireland's large, near-psychedelic, now MDF-covered wall painting from 1996 in the central space at SIRIUS may yet break down walls, starting (hopefully) with its own MDF. I think it should convince locals that in 1996, the old yacht club was turned into something special: rather than putting on show the 'civilized' side of oppressive power, it became theirs.

Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes is an art writer, researcher, and curator working at the University of Amsterdam.

¹ Many friends and colleagues have done this recently. See: Brenda Moore-McCann (ed.), 'A Tribute to Brian O'Doherty (1928–2022)', *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2023 (brooklynrail.org)