

If it need be termed surrender, then let it be so,
or: Trisha Donnelly in parallax
– Julian Myers

Where some imagine that there is only one Trisha Donnelly, I know there are at least four. One is surely a biological entity, and another a projected image, like the one who acts out the codeless semaphore of *Canadian Rain* (2002). A third, a literary invention of the first, sometimes appears in her place in the vicinity of the art world. A fourth is a malleable figure, co-authored by the third, and anyone who tells her story. (There may be more: one who can travel through time, another who can speak in the tongue of seals, and so on.) The following essay surveys some of Donnelly's recent practices in this light, including a lecture at the Frieze Art Fair in London in October 2004, an exhibition at Casey Kaplan Gallery in New York, summer 2004, and one of the works included in the 54th Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh, winter 2004/05.

I. THE GREEN GRASS STARTS TO GROW

1

This discussion was held on 17 October 2004, at the Frieze Art Fair's pavillion in Regent's Park, London, and was broadcast live on Resonance 104.4 FM.

'Where is Adventure? What is Culture?' was the last of six panel discussions held on the occasion of the 2004 Frieze Art Fair.¹ Chaired by curator and artist Matthew Higgs, the panel included Christian Jankowski, David Robbins, Nancy Spector and Trisha Donnelly. These names already suggest that the event was not intended to be your average discussion: each respondent's answer to the title's pair of impossible questions was to be bent into mute and funny shapes. Jankowski improvised his replies on an electric guitar instead of talking; Spector discussed the accidental transformation of an artist's exhibition into a credit-card advertisement.

Trisha Donnelly answered 'Where is Adventure? What is Culture?' by recounting an episode from the convoluted history of Russia around the turn of the 17th Century, which centered on a man who claimed to be Dmitry Ivanovitch II, the youngest son of Ivan the Terrible and the rightful heir to the Russian throne. She then played a short section of a British radio program about people returning in their old age to the bungalows their parents had built, which segued into a passage of a song called *The Green Grass Starts To Grow*. 'Listen really carefully,' she said over the song's opening notes, 'and I want you to think about the song. I don't want you to enjoy it.'

A quick set of evocative, seemingly disconnected images was offered to the audience, and her talk was done. Only later did her presentation's odd details appear to ravel together, slowly, into a tentative cloth of meaning. Each section was about land, filiation, death and rebirth. A Polish pretender to the throne of Russia is shot in the snow, cut to pieces, burned to a powder and then shot from a cannon back to his motherland. 'We used to kill the goats off,' an old woman says next, 'and we used to eat them.' Dionne Warwick then sings a different reply, words written by Burt Bacharach: 'A summer breeze becomes a winter storm ... and then the weather turns warm...'

Asked, during the questions that followed, 'What do you think you are accurate about?', Donnelly replied, 'I found out recently that I have less vision

in my right eye, so it turns out I'm a very perfect archery shot'. Her pronouncement played off the panel's gnomonic subtitle: 'A discussion of the relationship of art to entertainment, touching on the comedic, being popular and failing miserably'. The blurrier her vision, she seemed to say, the sharper her aim and the truer her shot. The more miserable her failure, the greater became her success. Disgraced by his enemies, murdered, the false Dmitry still returns triumphantly as a ball of light, a glorious blaze.

The Redwood and the Raven, 31 gelatin silver prints, one print exhibited each day, 17.7cm x 12.7cm, 2004

II. 'FACETS OF THE PRISM'

Each image flashes past, representing, I am told, one facet of a prism. Three drizzles of red acrylic drip sideways to form the letter 'E' (*E*, 2004; it stands for 'Egypt', whose imagined landscape serves as one structuring conceit of the show); *The Slowness* (2004) is an abstract waterfall that gives birth to a stylised letter 'N', its vertical bars extending to the edge of the paper. Another is a banner that reads, in awkward lettering, 'th. PSNGR', which is 'The Passenger' less its vowels (*The Passenger*, 2004). A fourth, untitled work appears (*Untitled, 1_2*, 2004), a meticulously drawn thing that looks to be a rotting saddle, or crumpled metal wreckage. 'How is it attached?', I ask, fishing for clues. It's pinned, I am informed, for if it were framed the drawing would not be able to go through the wall. During the opening, I learn, Donnelly would lead members of the audience around to the office on the wall's other side, where the drawing continued on a second piece of paper, a pale-blue outline of the first work's modeled abstraction. Another pencil sketch (*The Volume*, 2004) depicts concentric circles on a cream paper rectangle, one tentatively drawn ring inside the bounds of a thicker circle, demarcated by tiny notches around its perimeter. This one is figurative, a picture of a massive volume knob for the 'sound' of the exhibition; it envisions these drawings not as discrete works, but material indices of the sound Donnelly was making as she was creating them. The pencil is imagined as a noisemaker, another kind of instrument.

Two photographs from 2002 appear among the more recent works: *Egypt* (2004), whose murk depicts a shadowed set of figurines, and *Hand That Holds The Desert Down* (2002), a silver-gelatin print of the right hind leg and upswept tail of the Sphinx. (Donnelly's title inverts a joke the artist has cited by comedian Steven Wright: 'I levitate birds but no one seems to notice.')

Other works incorporate unobtrusive changes over the course of their display. *The Redwood and the Raven* (2004) is a group of thirty-one unique photographs of a dancer taken in the forests of northern California, one mounted each day of the show; another drawing, abstract blue panels inside a 'thought balloon', has a paper caption on some days and not others. There are shorter cycles as well: a twenty-minute video loop of shivering circles that bookend the written name 'Frances' (she's the one in *The Redwood...*) and a recorded piece, *Oh Egypt* (2004), which sounds periodically over the duration of the day. Displayed together, these rhythmic cycles interlock to ensure that each viewer's encounter with her works is shaded slightly differently. The dancer's position has changed; the untitled drawing is given a handwritten caption ('Matthew', it reads); and this time the voice never sounds, her voice, that sings, '... Oh! Egypt!'. *The DJ was playing so loud that everything else was drowned out. 'Might as well stop the piece and get a drink,' she declared.*²

The ensemble of works I've just described were exhibited together at Donnelly's 2004 exhibition at Casey Kaplan Gallery in New York City, and incorporated what the artist calls 'a demonstration' on the event of its opening. The artist played a song that she claimed would stop time, and then led the assembled crowd up 10th Street to Maurizio Cattelan's Wrong Gallery – which is just a doorway. From behind the door came the sound of a cannon, loud enough to shake the door, which signaled that time had started again. This demonstration, like all those before it, was not recorded or documented in any way, being transmitted to a larger public, if at all, by verbal description, or word of mouth.

2
Nicholas Trembley,
'Supersize Spree',
Artforum.com/
DIARY, 2005,
<http://www.artforum.com/diary/id=9141>

3
Bruce Hainley,
'The Consensus Thief',
New York Times Style Magazine, 29 August
2004, pp.276–77.



TH.

P

S

N

G

R

The Passenger,
pencil on paper,
269.2cm x 105.4cm,
2004

4
John Miller with
Nancy Spector,
'Waterloo', *Kölnischer
Kunstverein* (press),
2005.

5
See George Baker,
'Fraser's Form', *Andrea
Fraser: Works: 1984 –
2003*, *Kunstverein
im Hamburg*, 2004,
pp.50–77.

6
Joseph Leo Koerner,
*The Reformation of
the Image*, Chicago:
University of Chicago
Press, 2003, pp.11–13.

7
J. Miller, *op. cit.*

8
T.S. Eliot, 'The
Function of Criticism',
Selected Essays,
New York: Harcourt,
Brace and Company,
1950, p.21.

9
Elizabeth Thomas,
'Trisha Donnelly',
54th Carnegie
International (press),
9 October 2004.

10
See Nicolas Bourriaud,
Relational Aesthetics,
Paris: Les Presses
du réel, 2002 (1998),
p.16; and Hal Foster,
'An Archival Impulse',
October, no.110, Fall
2004, pp.21–22.

overleaf
The Black Wave,
silver gelatin print,
127cm x 152.4cm, 2002

This has a few important effects. First, the demonstration stakes much on the singularity of the individual's experience of the work, which is understood to be both specific and essentially irreproducible. 'You had to be there', sings a chorus of critics. Here her practice takes a Protestant tone, with the document as a false idol. (This tone may be implicit as well in her 'small scale, careful production, [and] ruthlessly winnowed output', as well as the peculiar literalism sometimes evident in the names of her work: if it looks like a volume knob, that's because it is one.³) A second, connected effect is a mood of confidentiality, where the audience is enlisted into the ritual production of the work. This persists even in the smallest instances of Donnelly's practice. Bob Nickas has a recorded monologue by Donnelly, but one of its conditions is that the curator must invite people to listen to it one-on-one; when her recordings, meant to be played only in a gallery space, were played privately for me, they were prefaced by a conspiratorial warning: 'I'm not supposed to do this, but I will, in this case...'.⁴ Her audience cannot depend on their anonymity, for these works, like some of Andrea Fraser's recent practices, reject surrogacy, middlemen and safe distance.⁵ Donnelly's reliance on oral transmission means that to speak of the work is to join in, to agree to the terms of its ritual magic. Retelling plays on the inevitable gaps in memory, on distortions, brags and exaggeration, and on the distance between experience and narration, which is the space of fiction. The framing and describing of an exhibition are put to work in the service of art practice.

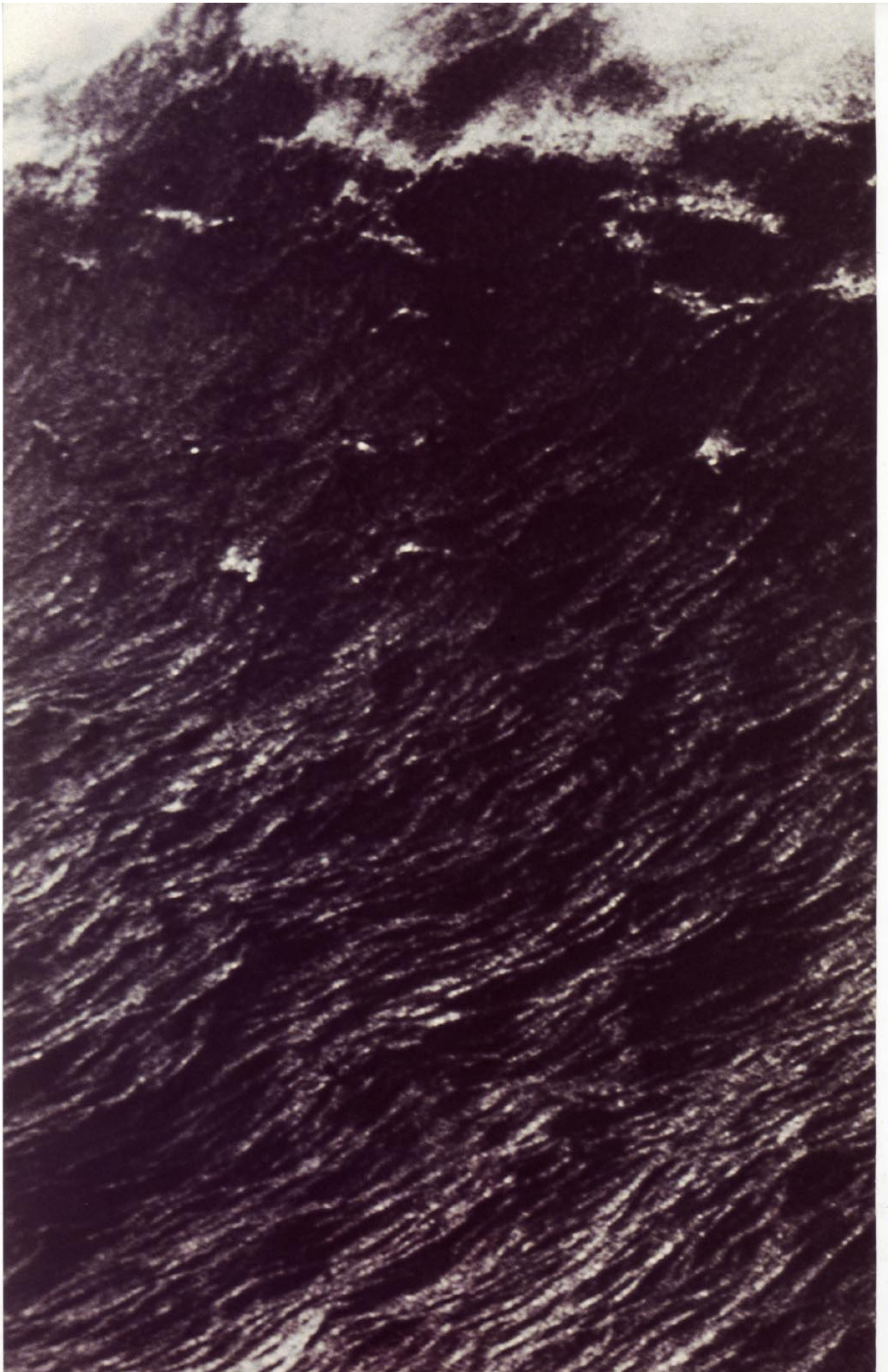
This constellation of events and artifacts gains its mystique by acts of strategic removal, a linguistic/sculptural cutting-away. 'The Passenger' becomes 'PSNGR', 'Ride into Darkness' is rendered 'RIDR'. The reduced means of iconoclasm may collapse upon themselves; ritual magic may become modernist poetry; we may discover that 'there never were, nor will there ever be, idols, since these are artefacts of the iconoclast's conviction, the imaginary Other of all critical campaigns'.⁶ Donnelly's practice is magical in that, in the words of Nancy Spector, it 'seeks to transform experience and alter reality with little more than an incantation or visual talisman'. Nevertheless her talismanic 'demonstrations' both admit and question their mystique. Following Donnelly's former teacher John Miller, 'there's something shabby in the act that undercuts the mythification – a productive shabbiness'.⁷ There are objects, crafted things in real space, like any others. *Yet while the Holy Spirit is never seen, it is nonetheless dramatically present...*

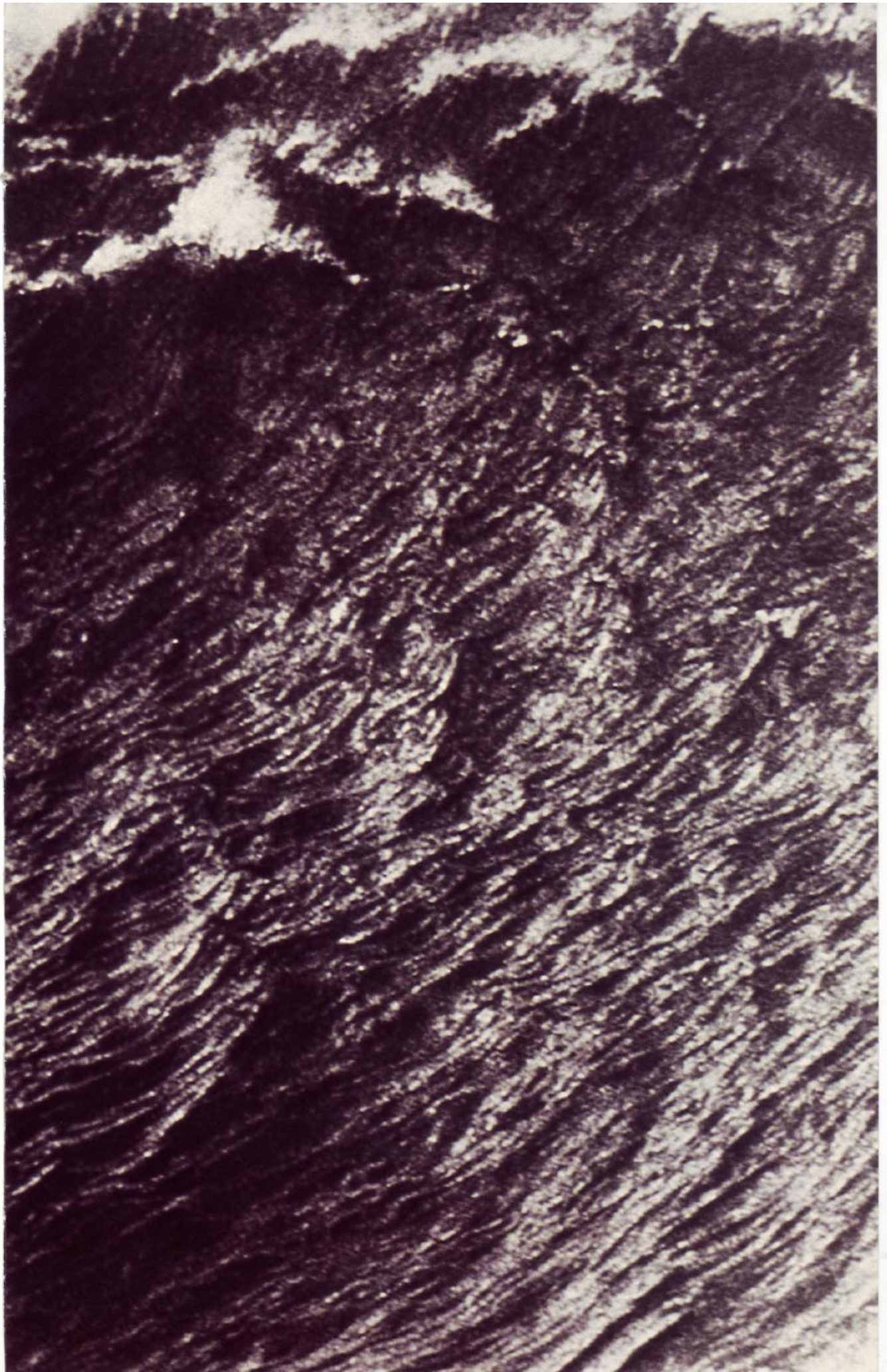
III. PULLING PARTS OF THE BODY FROM ITS POCKETS

Trisha Donnelly's work is about structures of belief. At least that is what I am given to believe. I fear I've been fed lines. Even so I will repeat them. At least the words sound different as they come out of my mouth. The risk of criticism is invention, and fact is hard to master; 'interpretation is always pulling parts of the body from its pockets, and fixing them in place.'⁸

But does her work not invite such projection? Does it not 'slip into the back of people's minds, to create 'exponentially different forms in each person's imagination'?⁹ There may be the beginnings of a disagreement in the public discussion of this aspect of her work. Nancy Spector has described Donnelly's practice as an 'art of non-sequiturs', and the threads that connect her objects and installations as the products of a logic 'entirely her own'. In other accounts their impact 'only unfolds within the visitor himself'; the work, it is said, 'taps into our own contingent assumptions and circumstances to furnish meaning'. It may simply be that Donnelly addresses her audience in a way unfamiliar to those whose aesthetic receptors have been dulled by relational aesthetics on the one hand and archival collections on the other. She neither intends to open a participatory, social 'interstice' where 'meaning is asserted collectively', nor to create 'perverse orders that aim to disturb the symbolic order at large'.¹⁰

One way to explain the queer public-private tenor described above is to say that artworks such as the *Hand That Holds The Desert Down*, or *Black Wave*





(2002) perform as allegories; they ‘simultaneously proffer and defer a promise of meaning: they both solicit and frustrate our desire that image be transparent to its signification. As a result, they appear strangely incomplete – fragments or runes which must be deciphered.’¹¹ The work seems to change colour under the eyes of those who aim to fix it; like allegory it contains strange opacities, reflexes, turnabouts in logic. Regardless ‘we must ourselves decide what is useful to us and what is not; it is quite likely that we are not competent to decide.’¹²

IV. A TIGER’S LEAP INTO THE PAST

In his landmark discussion of allegory Craig Owens wrote that the allegorical mode had flourished in post-revolutionary France, when painting was enlisted to produce images of the present in terms of the classical past. It did so by condensing narrative into a ‘single, emblematic instant ... in which the past, present and future, that is, this *historical* meaning, of the depicted action might be read.’¹³ He quoted Walter Benjamin: ‘Thus to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now, which blasted out of the continuum of history.... It is a tiger’s leap into the past.’¹⁴

Donnelly’s demonstrations often make some such leap, though her tiger’s leap multiplies its classical pasts, which embrace ancient Rome and Egypt, False Dmitry, Montgomery Clift, Debbie Harry, David Lee Roth and Napoleon. How should we connect the dots between this crew of sympathetic dictators, unsuccessful solo artists, autodidacts, sainted messes and sexual double agents?¹⁵ Donnelly seems drawn to their radical self-invention, as well as to their sometimes fatal humanity; through the mirror of her practice their failures become ecstatic, world-creating events. *The mind is its own place, and in it self Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n.*

The opening of her first exhibition at Casey Kaplan in 2002 was the scene of one such transformation. The artist appeared on a white stallion, dressed as Napoleon’s courier (an oft told story, this, now in a kind of rhetorical drift or ruin). The text she read seems to be a matter of record (or was some intrepid soul’s jotting simply repeated in later versions?). ‘Be still and hear me,’ she began. ‘I am a courier. I am only a courier. But I come with news of destruction. I come to declare his end. If it need be termed surrender then let it be so, for he has surrendered in word, not will. He has said, “My fall will be great but at least useful.” The Emperor has fallen and he rests his weight upon your mind and mine. And with this I am electric. I am electric.’ This single, emblematic instant tells an entire story; it tells of Napoleon’s dream of the imperial Republic, his authority and pride, and his final flight from the disaster at *La Belle Alliance*.

Another such leap occurs in *Letter to Tacitus* (2004), a five-minute oration recited daily at the 54th Carnegie International in Pittsburgh. Picture a well-dressed man circling the Carnegie’s Romanesque atrium (surrounded, if you will, by a pack of people with digital cameras). From a sheet held firmly in both hands, he recites the text of a letter written to Cornelius Tacitus, senator, consul and great historian of ancient Rome. This correspondent replies to Tacitus’s description, in a previous letter, of an ideal imperial republic. ‘That dream,’ he returns, ‘is not a map to your earthly paradise. It is instead a death of straightened pain and demand. A blank space.’ Rather, the writer argues, it is Tacitus’s desire for this just and true state that matters, that is his salvation: ‘For the true Rome is the fire above dark water. The true Rome is man’s hope for the true Rome.’ The reverberations of the great hall swallow his words. False Dmitry stands in the wings, on legs of different lengths.

Just who is this retinue of failed dreamers, couriers and impostors? What purchase do they have on the present, or the future? What should we make of their self-invention and lordliness, their imperial ambition, their vision of polity and their final immolation? History paintings sit still, frozen, waiting for their recursive fragments to be pieced together in the present, to be *enjoyed by those who are able to remember*, whereas these tableaux live and breathe.¹⁶ Later, let’s tell stories about them.

The Volume, pencil on paper, 91.4 x 60.9cm, 2004

11

Craig Owens, ‘The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism’, in Barbara Kruger, et al. (ed.), *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, p.55.

12

T.S. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.20.

13

C. Owens, *op. cit.*, p.58.

14

Ibid., p.59.

15

The last two are borrowed from David Thomson’s evocative description of Montgomery Clift in *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p.168.

16

‘... ament meminisse periti’, Jacques-Louis David’s epigraph for his publication ‘Le Tableau des Sabines exposé publiquement au Palais national des science et des arts, sale de la ci-devant académie d’architecture: Par le Citoyen David...’, as cited in Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, ‘The Revolution Glacée’, in *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David after the Terror*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999, p.130.

Her Artillery
— Bruce Hainley

Swords, shields and cannon fire: for Trisha Donnelly art is more than reveille. The battle began a long time ago, before she was born. It continues long after whatever the little word *after* means has fallen into disuse.

Drawings, video, the deployment of photographs not as pictures, actions — it would be best to consider it all, if not sculpture, *sculptural*: the interrogation of space (mental, physical, emotional) and its electric conquest and resistance — these are demonstrations of her tactical knowledge. Recently Karl Lagerfeld said he woke up one morning with an image of a long line of women in black, a kind of *l'armée des ombres*. Yes, an army of night. Glamour apocalypso. In the corps there are only various privates.

What may at first have looked like privacies, girl jumping for joy, or love ~~singing~~ ~~singeing~~ *signing* its tropicalia — and all of *that* it would be extremely well to do, even though the day *were* coming when the sun should be as darkness and the moon as blood — this was not what it was, or only what it was, but a call to arms to figure out video before moving on to figure out something else (not that it's ever concluded, conclusive). The technology allowed her to slow time and pinpoint the ecstasy of the performer's climax, what hurls him or her out of themselves, out of the human. It allowed her to translate place and the idea of place, an elsewhere we often remain deaf to, into a language mistaken for love, instead of the seduction of the medium and its machinery. The human is just one of the aesthetic's effects. Given a sunset and a beautiful girl too many will believe anything rather than the fact that a medium is being taken apart before their very eyes, *and* taking them with it.

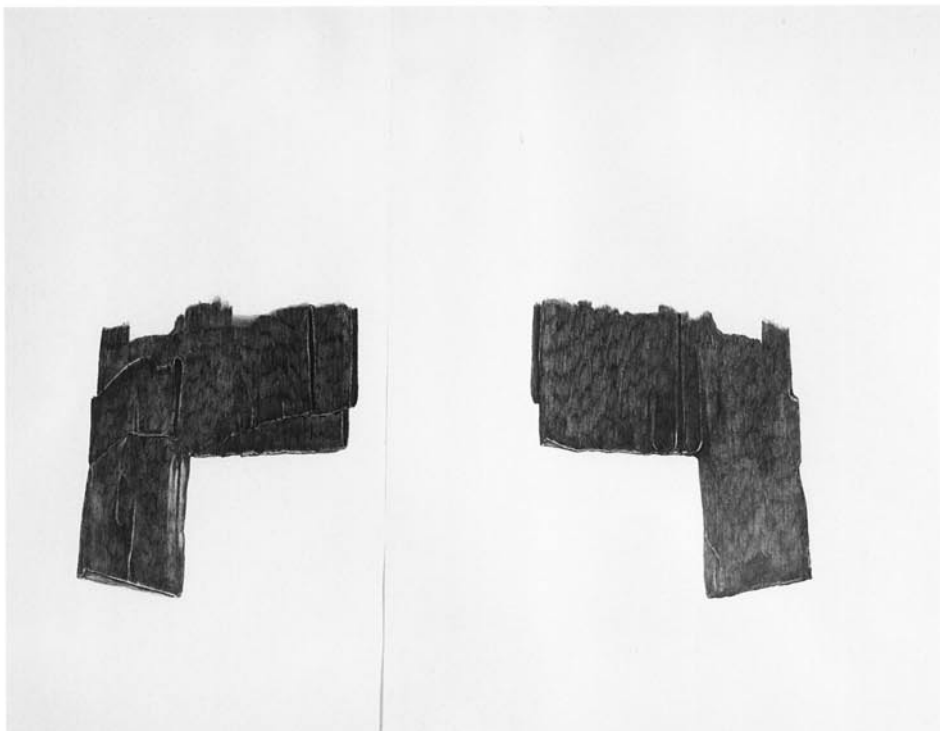
There's a picture in black-and-white of Donnelly as a warrior. Can't see the head, can't see the feet, can't tell if it's just a masque of masculinity or an actual dude — he's going on memory here — but I'd swear it is her, a sword in each hand. You know the look. A nimbus surrounds him, her. It's the radioactivity, it's the sublimity: *The D from W* (2005). A warrior always ready for action draws the sword, and the gesture, radioactive, continues forever, slicing through eternity, half-life by half-life. The distance from war is never very far. Every breath is one for life over death, but approaching the inevitable, nonetheless, the debt from wonder. She arrived as a messenger on horseback to announce a surrender, but it was not hers.

Still some would turn her into a Cassandra, wishing only to see romantic neo-conceptual dreaminess or, worse, the occult. *Ostriches!* They bury their heads in the sand of the beach that Bas Jan Ader shoved off from in search of the miraculous. Of his bones are coral made, those are pearls that were his eyes, nothing of him that doth fade but doth suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange. Most forget the adder's poison; forget the suffering, some of it staged, a scene changed. Most forego the strangeness by relegating it to a box ticked '*magick*'. Anything to forego the decomposition, an art that doth decompose. Ader was never conceptual art-lite, but, like many of his peers, dared to expand art's possibilities: telepathy, sunburns, radiowaves, astrology, ESP, weed and trips into the unknown, beyond. Whatever, it got called 'conceptual', not 'witchy' or 'esoteric'. (Is the trigger wire for these different adjectives'

activation gendered?) By attitude, temperament and look when he with sly tears, when he like Gilles in black cords, when he with careful attention and attenuation seemed to put his finger in irony's dike, he knew it couldn't be left there forever. Ader was questioning, frequently through repeating the 'same' piece in different media, his own place in Dutch art history — fallen from grace, falling off his bike into a river, out of the tree of knowledge, over Niagara Falls from an armchair — as well as his and his object's inheritance and inherency. He who lies full fathom five is not her father. But oh the terrible work that has been tolerated in the name of Ader, 'made' (I use the term loosely) by those satisfied with the LCD of paranormal schmaltz. Donnelly participates in none of this. Early on she claimed Nina Simone as her mother. Her name is Peaches. Peaches pulls the finger from the dike. Let a flood sweep LCD away.

Peaches takes a drawing and tears it into two parts, pins one part to the wall, resigns the 'missing' part to absence, mailing it to someone, anybody's guess, never to be reunited. It is a way of asking what remains of drawing, the medium, torn to pieces. Is the drawing complete? Is any drawing — anything — ever complete? Is the drawing more the part pinned to the wall or its elusive Other? It bothers; it should, since there's usually too much sublimation of the violence of representation. Donnelly has confronted Sturtevant's drawing connections, slicing and dicing into the interior immediacy of contemporaneity, its exquisite corpse; she's seen the use of defacement as autobiography. Asking what remains, Donnelly is trying to find out what a drawing is and could be — other than a luxury item people buy when they can't quite commit to a painting. Do you know what a drawing is, what it can do? It can become 'photographic' or 'performative', by which I mean active, atomic, atomising through a wall, leaving a blue auratic outline, call it Kirlian or call it the moisture transferred from the subject to the emulsion surface of the photograph causing an alternation of the electric-charge pattern on the film. Call it a draw between absence and presence, touching the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. It can destroy not only painting.

The Redwood and the Raven, 31 gelatin silver prints, one print exhibited each day, 17.7cm x 12.7cm, 2004



Untitled, pencil on paper, 100 x 70.2cm, 2005

Peaches takes her bite, sometimes with borrowed wolf fangs, and if you wait and listen you will even hear the howling. She'll kill the first mother she sees, often not even a woman, who refuses to risk hearing the howling. She will take your morning, and it will be broadcast. You will not know until



it is already gone. The strike is preemptive. Experience seizure of time itself, the thing you are filled with, and forget you possess until it's too late. Consider this while listening to the score of collapse played on a grand organ; the opposite of that sound scar is not construction.

The tearing, the removal, loss mailed to the Other, the morning taken, the wind of the future blowing in the corridor of the institute: this has nothing to do with the *invisible*, with invisibility. It is documentary. Anne Carson has written, 'the Sublime is a documentary technique.' Full of danger. Full of *temps mort*.

Donnelly kills her dinner with karate, kicks it in the face, tastes the body. Her name contains the given (*donné*) and it is what she sublimates.

This is a disambiguation page. A grammar of ice and air and solarity to organise a rhetoric of her elements. In Köln – in *Die Brücke* – she provided conjunction, a bridge, by taking away transparency and constructing a long wall to interrupt the glass allowing one to see through something, anything, too quickly. It conjoined the seen with what cannot be seen, how they gird one another, like the drawing torn to pieces holding the room with its missing. Condition: oversight. R_x: dramblings of blindness.

Night is coming; it may already be here. There is something of death in it. She walks oblivion on a leash. Its sound is ominous and Egyptian, untranslatable, just a special effect but no less affective, and a single one of its paws keeps the desert, grain by whorled grain, from disappearing into thin air.

Originally
commissioned by
FROG, appearing
in issue no.2,
www.frogmagazine.net