

Origin Myth

SARAH K. RICH ON TRISHA DONNELLY AT MoMA

TAKE ALFRED H. BARR JR.'S famous flowchart of Cubist and abstract art, ca. 1936, and bend it back so that it makes a long cylinder. Make sure the edges overlap a bit so Redon (that hermetic sensualist whom Barr shoved over to the sinister side of his graph, and whose influence he reduced to a dotted line) and Rousseau (the outsider whose hard edges somehow qualified him for positioning on the right-hand side, above the hyper-rational Constructivists) lie one atop the other. Take a long pin (ideally an Art Nouveau hatpin from 1900 that was made of a new metal alloy later essential for the production of satellites) and pierce the cylinder at the Redon-Rousseau intersection. Push through until the pointy end comes out at the dense cluster of lines where Orphism is snuggling up to such utopian developments as De Stijl, Suprematism, and the Machine Aesthetic. The objects in "Artist's Choice: Trisha Donnelly" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York can be plotted along that hatpin.

In Donnelly's installation, objects of utopian disappointments and expired modernities are staged in dense juxtapositions meant (seemingly without irony) to encourage their reinvigoration. Items drawn with enthusiasm from the museum's usually repressed stores of Symbolist painting, ornithological photography, and fin-de-siècle decorative arts share exhibition space with once-futuristic design specimens such as a pair of polarized

sunglasses from ca. 1946 (displayed near the floor) and a glass vase from 1978 (displayed on its side to look like a glistening eyeball proceeding through space, trailing its optic nerve like a comet's tail). Anachronistic stowaways that have been hiding in MoMA storage rooms for years have been brought out and made to shake hands with Donnelly's mystical modernism: A small, round Coptic tapestry from the seventh or eighth century rhymes in both spirit and form with the floating orbs of a František Kupka painting and with several large, colorful diagrams of microchips, whose dizzying and symmetrical depictions of circuitry work, under Donnelly's comparative power, as psychedelic technomandalas.

Walking through the exhibit, the viewer, like the hypothetical hatpin, traces slanted, oblique trajectories through the museum, even as she strikes through the core of the place: The three galleries Donnelly chose were on opposite ends of the museum and on two floors, so to visit the different spaces the viewer passes through, and thus connects, the center of the museum with the weird stuff the artist exhibits on the edges. Donnelly also establishes a four-dimensional vector through MoMA's eccentricities and central traditions by way of the recorded audio tour. When visitors enter Donnelly's galleries with guides pressed to their ears, they are not privy to explanations of the show by the artist or by the curators Laura Iloptman and Cara Manes; rather, they hear the

congenial voice of Robert Rosenblum as he leads museumgoers through the rooms of MoMA's 1980 Picasso retrospective in a recording created for that show. Listening to Rosenblum's languid observations about *Two Women at a Bar*, 1902, while staring at Eliot Porter's photographs of birds in Donnelly's installation, the viewer suffers vertigo in the profound temporal disconnect enacted between the seen and the heard. The viewer is also haunted by the spaces of institutions past: In the floor plan of the post-2004 MoMA, the Gallery 4 about which Rosenblum spoke no longer exists—it is not the Gallery 4 in which Donnelly is exhibiting Porter's photographs, yet the art historian's voice makes the two spaces eerily coexist.

Archetypal themes and forms pass through and link the three galleries, too. This is where the exhibition makes an operatic show of art's strain for triumph and ostentatious defeat—a binary that has obsessed Donnelly ever since she appeared at Casey Kaplan gallery on horseback ten years ago to announce the surrender of Napoléon. The belief in universal archetypes

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alone expresses an expired idea, but the specific archetypes she chooses tend to dramatize art's sway between heroic yearning and failure. Take, for example, the figure of the pyramid, which recurs from Massimo Scolari's delicate depiction of a floating pyramid to the triangular motifs of a Bruce Conner inkblot drawing to two black pyramidal air ionizers from the 1980s (one from the MoMA collection, the other purchased by the artist for inclusion in the show, where it is plugged in and purifies the room). These triangular solids act as cryptic keys with which one may unlock the exhibition. The pyramid's soaring tip versus its solid weighty base, its aspiration for immortality versus its rootedness in death—these establish the axis of both transcendence and collapse around which objects of the show pivot. Hence the room of Porter's photographs showing birds either nesting or in flight; hence Alessandro Becchi's *Anfibio Convertibile Couch*, 1971, lying prostrate beside Joe Goode's stairway. Needless to say, such urgent symbolism is breathtakingly silly. Yet the exhibition manages to dazzle; it overwhelms (and maybe even uplifts) the viewer with the brilliant beauty of its overreaching. And with this exhibit Donnelly legitimately challenges (even as she enacts) Hegel's declaration that art, after a certain point (after the fall of Napoléon, as a matter of fact), no longer establishes a world in the highest sense. Who could have imagined that MoMA would be the place from which to excavate such Delphic possibilities? And now, how can one see that museum in any other light? □

"Artist's Choice: Trisha Donnelly" is on view through April 8.

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View of "Artist's Choice: Trisha Donnelly," 2012–13, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Foreground: Alessandro Becchi, *Anfibio Convertibile Couch*, 1971. Background, from left: Joe Goode, *Shoes, Shoes, Shoes*, 1966; Michael Lax, *Modulion 10 Ionizer*, 1980. Wall, top left: František Kupka, *The First Step*, ca. 1910, oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 51". Photo: Thomas Griesel.



Eliot Porter, *Osprey, Great Spruce Head Island, Maine*, 1976, dye transfer print, 15 1/2 x 12 1/2".

