

Trisha Donnelly, Serpentine Gallery, review: 'a calculated non-event'

Trisha Donnelly's uninspiring exhibition left Mark Hudson staring at the lighting vents

★★★★★



Column (Assemblages) IX' by Cerith Wyn Evans at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery in London

By Mark Hudson, Art Critic

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Trisha Donnelly likes to let her work speak, or not speak, for itself. Relatively little known in this country, the 40-year-old American artist doesn't permit explanatory wall panels, written gallery guides or even press releases in relation to her exhibitions. And that's an attitude many gallery-goers will applaud. No more ponderous explicatory texts? No more of the sense of the curator standing between the viewer and the work? Perhaps this rule should be applied to all exhibitions.

The problem with Donnelly's Serpentine show, however, is that it does little to inspire you to want to find out more. I found myself examining the gallery's lighting vents before I was out of the first room, not because the exhibition makes interesting use of them, but because there is so little else to look at.

A speaker emits a variety of sounds from a bell-like electronic jangle to ecclesiastical organ music. A semicircular plaster plinth projects from a wall. Elsewhere we get two slabs of stone

with inscrutable machined grooves cut into them, and various washed-out wall projections, some moving, including speeded up clouds and some kind of rippling fluid, which appear designed to be as unremarkable and uninvolved as possible. Oh and a section of plaster wall-panelling has been removed to reveal the bricks beneath.

My instinct to examine the lighting vents turned out to be close to the mark. An online 'director's introduction', informs us that Donnelly makes a habit of tinkering with exhibition venues, removing window frames and door panels, adjusting lighting, so that the exhibition becomes an interaction with the space and the viewer's experience of it.

But this is hardly novel. Artists, filmmakers and writers have been playing with our perception of 'the medium' for decades. Donnelly's exhibits may be designed to challenge our ideas about artistic intervention, about how much an artist needs to do for a work to qualify as art, and how, if at all, are we supposed to react to it. But it's difficult to imagine many people's perceptions being changed by this calculated non-event of an exhibition.

Cerith Wynn Evans's show in the nearby Serpentine Sackler Gallery (three stars) appears at first sight similarly dauntingly opaque. But compared to Donnelly's it's a riveting sensual cornucopia. Evans first exposure was in the early Eighties, as a no-budget, Derek Jarman-inspired New Romantic film maker.

His work has since taken a more conceptual turn, but he's still preoccupied with the interactions of sound and image, light and language.

A text in that most grossly over-ubiquitous of contemporary art materials, neon lettering, draws us round the gallery walls with a poetic, but baffling description of the experience of light. Naked neon-tubes lean against walls, while various chandeliers go on and off in unfathomable relation to sounds which merge into each other as you move around the space: the rasp and clatter of traditional Japanese Noh music, the sigh of some hanging flutes, which appear to function of their own accord and a speaker projecting the anonymous roar of deep space. A group of potted tropical plants and two chunks of amethyst stand in a huddle, as though waiting installation in a garden.

There's a rationale behind this apparently obtuse arrangement of elements, about comprehension and interpretation, inspired by Evans's experiences among Japan's impenetrable codes and as a native Welsh Speaker in a world of English – though it may leave you not much less puzzled. A Seventies-style retro-cosmic chandelier flashes out Evans's accounts of Japanese Bunraku puppet theatre in morse code. These are spelt out simultaneously on a nearby screen for the benefit of the non-Morse fluent in an English that still feels as though it requires translation.

Exerting a quirky, meditative mood, this exhibition at least convinces that there are depths to be revealed if you give it time, that it draws on the artist's deeply felt experiences and that unlike Donnelly's exhibition it isn't just more generic, professional contemporary art – another exhibition created for the sake of having an exhibition.

How we moderate

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