
TRISHA DONNELLY

Air de Paris

'I'm still not sure if something happened, or if I just happened to miss it [...] Seeing Donnelly clad in all black, going to "hide" her stroller in the Air de Paris storage behind those thick, white vinyl curtains was a great moment though,' a friend mused some two weeks after the opening of Trisha Donnelly's solo exhibition in Paris, adding: 'And she really is beautiful.' Though somewhat cursory, the comment resonated for its reliance on personal affect as a way to discuss the exhibition – using experience, rather than comprehension, to navigate the limits imposed by the artist's distinctively ambiguous practice. The elusiveness of Donnelly's presence in the space, combined with a series of characteristically restrictive elements (no press release, no titles, no descriptions), was both exciting and disorientating – not unlike being blindfolded as an act of seduction. As exclusion and anticipation built up, desire emerged as much more than just a constituent element of the viewing experience. It is tempting to evoke (and slightly distort) Maurice Blanchot's precept about the work of great libertines: for passion to become energized it is necessary that it be constricted.

Exercising control in order to liberate thinking was encouraged further by the literal obscurity of the works in the space. Difficult to decipher, and even more difficult to recollect precisely, the elements of the show – six projections in darkened rooms, an audio component and a dim drawing, lit only by the surrounding works – are filtered in memory through personal impressions and perceptions. In one of the rooms, a resounding ping went off at regular intervals, like a signal redirecting focus. The projections were devoid of immediately recognizable forms: an amalgamation of slowly shifting images of ethereal clouds, dark liquids and what was possibly a close-up of exposed photograms, depending on who you asked. Faintly rendered in graphite, the drawing is a delicate composition of abstract form, and is as perplexing as the rest. The tension and ambivalence aroused in each respective experience began to influence the discourse that followed, adding to its overall mystery.

Insofar as this anxiety of unknowing is part of the work's seductive value, and an articulation of its affect, a superficial reading would suggest that its reception is little more than relational. Yet Donnelly's intent seems far from reliant on, or even interested in, a social context. Conversely, the work hinges on a material reality that is dependent on its reticence and indistinction. The projections at Air de Paris, for example, were set in alternating focus, though only one seemed projected in crystal-clear definition. I was told that it might have been the result of an effect in which a subtle blurring of the lens actually sharpens the projected images. An arresting thought, surely, which brings to mind something Christopher Wool once declared of a painting: 'The harder you look, the harder you look'. That is to say, Donnelly's obscurity is deliberate and operative, and any desire to unravel it will necessarily be negated. Still,



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as the laws of attraction go, this exclusion only stimulates the desire to pursue; it engenders an obsessive chase after both the provenance of the mystic apparitions that are Donnelly's images, as well as the intuitive and impulsive sentiments they evoke. It is a body of work that gives you permission, in a sense, to be carried away by your thoughts and intuitions.

It is this paradox – that denial and restriction cause insurgency, revolution and longing – which Donnelly ultimately champions. She shows that to exercise her power is to also be seductive, insofar as the seduction is both intellectual and impassioned. In a performance at Casey Kaplan in New York in 2001, Donnelly rode into the gallery on a horse, announcing herself as a messenger sent to declare Napoleon's surrender. If this could be seen as prophecy, then its realization could be found at Air de Paris. The very expectation of an event comes to stand in for the performance itself, yet in a Beckettian legacy, as nothing seems to happen, a sense of desperation ensues. Here, it is the visitor who must surrender, firstly, and predictably, to their lack of control and, further, to the sense of freedom that comes with accepting defeat. After a period, spent fully immersed in the exhibition, my friend asked: 'Shall we go?' We agreed to, yet did not, or could not, move.

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