

OPENINGS

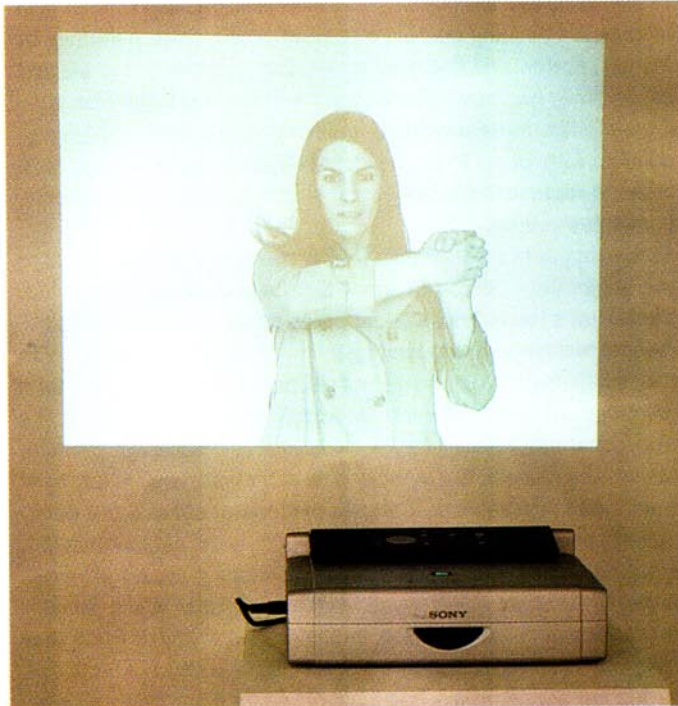
TRISHA DONNELLY

JOHN MILLER

Word had it that the artist, dressed as a Napoleonic courier, rode into the gallery on a white horse, read a message of surrender, turned around and rode out. You had to be there. The rest of the show made no mention of it and the artist never photographs her performances. Even if you were there, you might have missed the wolf howl that was supposed to play intermittently. The serial drawings of simple green tubes or cylinders proved no less elusive. The checklist said "see front desk for title," and, on request, a gallery assistant would obligingly play

In *Canadian Rain* (all works at Kaplan 2002), a DVD projection, she repeatedly executes a series of martial arts-like gestures. At the end of each sequence of gesticulations, she points to a spot on the wall behind her. She stares straight into the camera, making eye contact that is not eye contact. Her movements are overdeliberate, quavering. A fan blows her hair, just as an approaching storm might. The press release laconically states that the

artist is "creating" rain in Canada. On an adjacent wall were two photos. The first, *Canada*, could be anywhere. The grainy atmosphere could be rainy, misty, or even sunny. The second photo, *The Black Wave*,



Left: Trisha Donnelly, *Canadian Rain*, 2002, black-and-white digital video projection, 5-minute loop.

an MP3 drum sequence. In short, you might have come and gone without ever realizing you had missed anything at all.

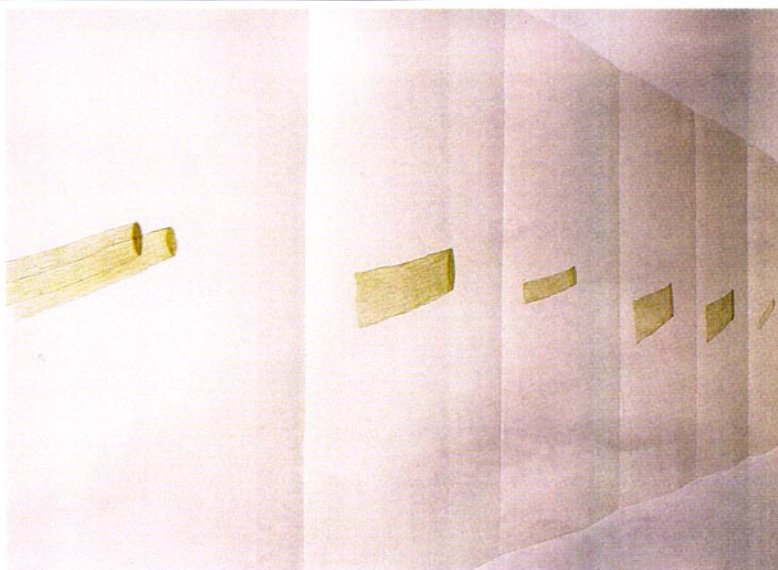
Although Trisha Donnelly's solo debut, at Casey Kaplan in New York, was all about belief structures, the work itself is full of baffles and feints. Seeing is not necessarily believing. Instead of asking viewers to suspend disbelief, she prods their credulity, pitting humdrum artifice against deadpan preposterousness.

was also specified by the press release: "The unbroken wave in deep water that occurs before and after a storm at sea." Yet, as purely visual information, the photo fails to substantiate anything. Moreover, a cursory Internet search for "black wave" yields plenty of goth bands but no ocean storms. If photography, as Michael Taussig put it, is sympathetic magic in a modern key, here cameras seemingly produce effects in other cameras. You see a rain dance on one wall and,

as if proof that it worked, photos of a shower and a sea storm on another. Such an understanding relies on supplementary press material, which serves as a caption at one remove. Thus, promotion, by establishing the artist's quasi-magical prowess, becomes integral to her overall aesthetic. The job of the wall is to correlate these otherwise disparate images.

Word of mouth divides Donnelly's audience into those who saw a performance firsthand, those who know it only through words, and those who are oblivious.

Performance art is thoroughly enmeshed with photography, but performance needs photography far more than vice versa. What photography always really needs is a historical subject, something significant enough to guarantee its own significance. Allan Kaprow,

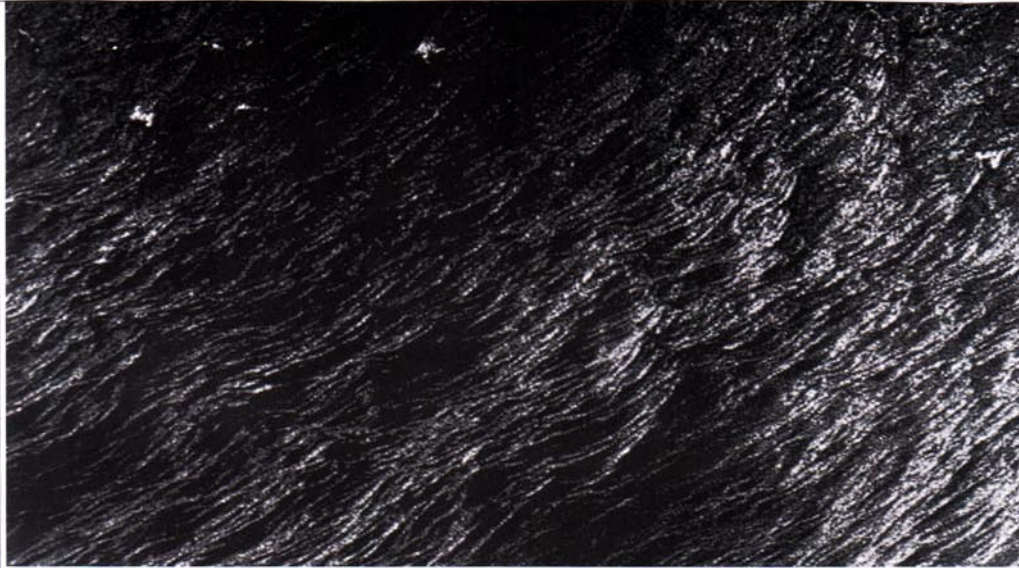


Right: **Trisha Donnelly, untitled***, 2002, 12 pencil drawings on paper, each 30 x 22". *Title is an audio CD.

for one, distrusted the camera because it seemed to frustrate his quasi-archaic rituals. He wanted ritual to integrate art and life. Conversely, Yves Klein exploited the camera as an instrument of publicity. For years his Icarian photocollage captioned "The Painter of Space Hurls Himself into the Void!" 1960, fooled everyone—until he published a second version of the image. Someone noticed that the bicyclist who appeared in

the original was now missing from the picture. Void, indeed! Perhaps Klein wanted to be found out. Despite his persistent appeals to the fantastic, his grasp of the medium proved more pragmatic than Kaprow's. If anything, taking pictures, especially family snapshots, has become *the* contemporary ritual, bar none.

In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers.

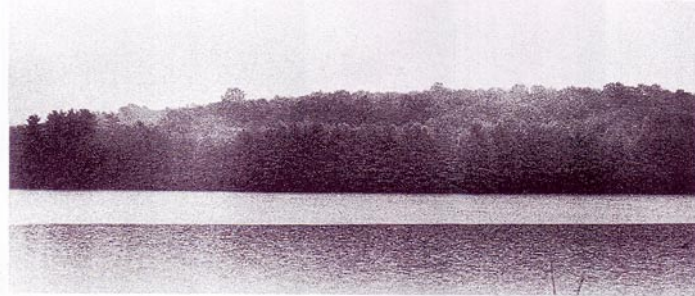


Because Donnelly treats the camera as a ritualistic instrument, she rules out using it to document her performances. Instead of manipulating photos, she exploits photography's inherently pliant effects, taking its fictions at face value. Her demonstration at Artists Space, *How to Groom a Horse*, 2000, in effect taught the audience how to groom a slide projection. Of course, here too, you can't take a picture of what's not there, even if everyone pretends to agree that it is. In sharp contrast to photodocumentation, word of mouth offers a more contingent form of promotion through its less indexical mode of address. Word of mouth effectively divides Donnelly's audience into those who saw a performance firsthand, those who know it only through words, and those who are oblivious. If photos always promise vestigial contact, the word is the death of the thing. Contact and immediacy are exactly what the artist denies us. Appearing on horseback she declared she was only a messenger, thus absolving herself of all blame, i.e., by transforming event into message. Yet her surrender statement struck an oddly defiant chord: ". . . 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 it will be useful.' The emperor has fallen and he rests his weight upon your mind and mine and with this I am electric. I am electric." The artist surrenders to the audience. Whereas entertainment ordinarily convinces the audience it's not really there, Donnelly effects a role reversal. Unbeknownst to the gallerygoers themselves, they have been locked in low-intensity warfare

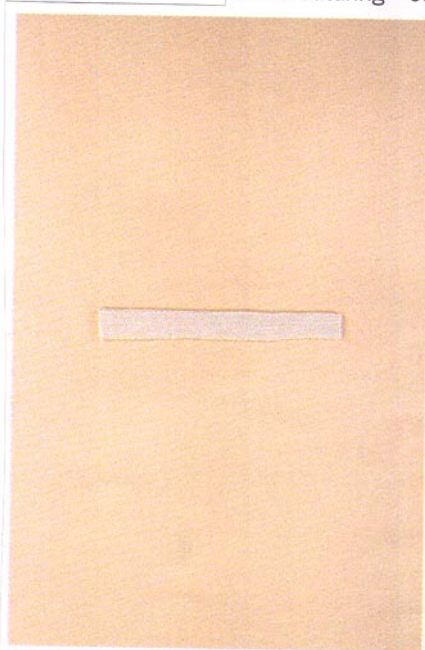
in a minimum-security prison. This they are surprised to discover; they are surprised to have won. If history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce, the theatrics of Waterloo are now exhausted. But, as another mode of repetition, mimicry confounds such facile oppositions. Taken together, they are more like alternating current—or everyday life.

Donnelly belongs to a generation of West Coast artists taken with Bas Jan Ader's paragon of incommunicability, self-mythification, and antidocumentation. Her work, shown at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art, Le Consortium in Dijon, and *Air de Paris*, among other venues, may also concern more muted historical tendencies. An untitled video from 1999, for example, collates a gamut of MTV performances by Joey Ramone, Kim Carnes, Weather Girl Izora Rhodes, David Lee Roth, Dionne Warwick, and Iggy Stooze, among others. Donnelly contends that every singer makes a characteristic gesture—or tic—at the song's high point. These she reenacted while jumping on a trampoline, at the peak of a bounce. In slow motion she floats in and out of the frame, beckoning inscrutably. The reconstituted ecstasy is loaded

Clockwise from left: **Trisha Donnelly, *The Black Wave*, 2002**, black-and-white photograph, 50 x 60". **Trisha Donnelly, *Canada*, 2002**, black-and-white photograph, 16 x 20". **Trisha Donnelly, *Eye Model*, 2002**, cotton on paper, 36 x 26".



with unconscious affect. *Eye Model*, shown at Casey Kaplan this year, is a device for historical amnesia. It looks like a sweatband (who said the '80s revival was over?) designed to serve as a sleep mask. The aforementioned serial drawings of nameless green tubes, for their part, play on the notion of the obscene: literally, that which is away from the scene or offstage. The drum pattern/title alludes to Serge Gainsbourg's "Love on the Beat"—"beat" being a homonym of the French slang for penis (*bite*). The suturing—or de-suturing—of title and work suggests suspending the patronym and points to an anonymous women's history.



Last year Donnelly took part in Jens Hoffmann's performance series "A Little Bit of History Repeated" at Kunst-Werke Berlin (see *Artforum*, March 2002), but she seems more preoccupied with unrealized histories than with the past per se. Writing in this magazine, Robert Smithson once claimed that "the ponderous illusions of solidity, the non-existence of things, is what the artist takes for 'materials.'" For Donnelly, this is less a polemic than an actual working method. □

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