

Trisha Donnelly employs the immaterial – esoterica, occult ritual and paranormal phenomena – to explore the material world of consumer experience
by Jan Verwoert

The Other Side



Left:
Untitled
2005
Pencil on paper
100 x 70cm

**Opposite page and
overleaf:**
Untitled
2004
Pencil on paper
Diptych: each 91 x 61 cm

If the temperature in a room suddenly drops, the chances are a ghost is about to appear. Of course, what will happen next no one can predict, but there are spells and charms you can learn – for example, the ideal time to summon a demon is on a Tuesday, at 11 am or 1 am. This, along with other practical information, is available from the manuals in the *Sixth Book of Moses*, an anonymous guide to black magic discovered around 1600. Encounters with the unknown have always involved some kind of ritual. Aleister Crowley maintained that occultism was a question not just of belief but also of practice, and believed it didn't matter whether you were into magic, drugs, sex or yoga, as long as your method worked for you. In 1969 Anton LaVey, in turn, promoted his *Satanic Bible* as 'a primer on materialistic magic'. In conversation Trisha Donnelly has dubbed this thoroughly pragmatic attitude towards the invocation of higher states of consciousness as an 'anti-materialist materialism'. I think this might also be the most apt phrase to describe what her own work is about.

In a variety of media, including performance, drawings, photography, video and sound pieces, Donnelly explores the relationship between the allure of occult experience and the material gestures, ciphers and icons by means of which it is conjured up. Contrary to much current art which draws on the legacy of psychedelic culture, Donnelly rarely relies on direct historical references: she never uses album covers, rare documents or the paraphernalia associated with the cults of excess of the late 1960s, for example – although the spirit of that age is a tangible presence in her art. What sets Donnelly's approach apart is the way she works through the immanent logic of anti-materialist materialism at a structural level by inventing gestures, ciphers and icons that articulate and question the very conditions required for the invocation of a physical epiphany.

The recording of a majestic organ concert, *Untitled* (2005), was played during the first few minutes after the doors opened each day at Donnelly's recent exhibition at the Cologne Kunstverein and again during the last minutes before the doors closed. In contrast to this solemn music, the show itself consisted of a comparatively cool installation of few selected drawings, photographs and a video projection. What was most notable, therefore, was the tension between the deep dark sound and the wide white room, the sacral air of the music and the sober milieu of the exhibition space. As the times of the concert meant that its audience was limited to those who either came early or stayed late, the piece played on the twin anxieties that overshadow the experience of any event like this: did we miss anything, and what happened after we left?

The crucial tension between sound and space was sustained in *Oh Egypt* (2005), played after the organ concert at irregular intervals on the massive sound system in the gallery basement. The piece comprised a recording of a voice – slowed down to such a low pitch that every vowel was a boost of bass frequencies – uttering the words 'Oooh Eegypt'. As the voice filled the room, it seemed to designate the space as a potential site of mystical experience. Yet, at the same time, it denied the actual possibility of this experience taking place, here and now, by assigning it to another time and place, an imaginary elsewhere – Ancient Egypt. Like a lost soul in search of a body, the voice from the basement spoke as much of the desire to make the supernatural real as of the impossibility of such incarnations. The humour of the piece lay in the wonderful cheapness of the sound effect, reminiscent of the subliminal messages you hear when playing a record backwards or a B-movie dubbing voice. It underscored the fact that the secret of a good hair-raiser lies in the grungy materialism of its technological effects. If you don't see the strings attached, the trick won't work. (This is something George Lucas used to know but forgot when he went digital.)

The video *Untitled* (2005) went further towards capturing the essence of the materialist magic of effects technology. It showed a still image with the green tinge of a picture taken by an infra-red camera, a close-up of a stuffed animal, a wild cat (perhaps an ocelot) with big black eyes, baring its teeth. Every so often the image suddenly shook, as if the beast was momentarily brought to apparent life by an invisible off-screen force, emphasizing





the fact that animation is the art of making inanimate things seem alive. On the wall opposite the video booth was *The Redwood and the Raven* (2004), a small photograph of an old woman in a black dress and headscarf performing ceremonial gestures in a forest. Her movements were recorded in a series of 31 photographs, presented one by one on each successive day of the exhibition like a film shown frame by frame over a month. A spirit not unlike that of a Kenneth Anger movie was conjured up and translated into a ritual staged by the woman with silent grace, a nameless ceremony to evoke a presence whose nature has yet to be disclosed. Next to the photograph a pencil drawing, *Untitled* (2005), depicted a dark, curved shape, a piece of unidentifiable stuff with an uncanny materiality; the dense texture of the graphite made the object look simultaneously flat and rounded. This mysterious sense of corporeality was echoed by *The Grounding* (2004), a black and white photograph of a strange bone structure – perhaps the rib cage of some prehistoric monster.

What characterized the exhibition as a whole, however, was that the eerie feeling evoked by the individual pieces stirred but never fully dominated the otherwise sober atmosphere of the white cube that provided the setting. Moreover, the pious mysticism was effectively leavened with a good dose of humour, for example by the inclusion of the cartoonish drawing *Untitled* (2005), which showed a sombrero hovering in mid-air like an indecisive UFO. Donnelly deliberately reduced the degree of mystery to just a subtle awareness of the possibility of an occult experience, a sense of the ineffable produced by a series of gestures and images, all of which had a distinctive material and corporeal quality.

Metonymic substitutions for the body are a recurrent motif in Donnelly's drawings. In a show at Casey Kaplan in New York in 2004 she installed complementary drawings on two sides of one wall. One depicted what appeared to be a dented piece of chest armour, while the other revealed the contours of the thing like a negative imprint on a veil. Two photographs of heraldic swords, *Untitled* (2004), were installed on each side of a doorway. *Bend Sinister* (2004) is a drawing of a blue reflective rectangular shape, which could equally well be a blade or its sheath, a glass vial or a mirror screen. Ciphers of things that reflect, shield or penetrate the body were thus linked to a situation of passage – a possible one through a door and an impossible one (except for ghosts) through a wall. Seen through the eyes of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the veil, shield, screen or blade correspond to the phallus, an empty material signifier of the threshold between the inside and outside of the body, self and other, absence and presence. As such, it is the key to the mystery: the arcane knowledge that the secret cannot be unveiled as the secret is the veil. Its sole function is to bestow meaning on the divide between the disclosed and the yet undisclosed, and thereby to provide the symbolic frame for rites of passage that stage the transition from the profane to the transcendent as a ceremony of initiation or transgression, under the sign of the phallus.

In this light Donnelly's video and live performances can be seen as attempts to share the secret of the secret, without giving it away. In the video *Rio* (2002), for instance, the artist's face is profiled against the soft glow of a lamp as she lip-synchs the words to samba love songs on the soundtrack and moves her hands in a flurry of explanatory gestures in sign language. The video *Untitled (Jump)* (1998–9) shows her bouncing into the frame from a trampoline off-screen. At the apogee of each jump she throws a pose and mimics the facial expression of various rock stars – from Iggy Pop to Dionne Warwick – in the climactic moment of their stage performance. In both works Donnelly stages a pedagogy of ecstasy as she invokes the secret of the untranslatable experience of love and rapture in the very moment of its translation into a body language of signs, grimaces and poses. In the video *Canadian Rain* (2002) the artist gazes at the viewer, repeatedly groping at thin air before pointing at the wall behind her. It is a ritual Donnelly conceived to make rain in Canada. In an untitled performance in 2002 Donnelly, dressed in the uniform of a Napoleonic soldier, rode into the private view of her show on a horse and announced

Right:
*The Redwood and
the Raven*
(detail)
2004
31 silver gelatin
prints
18×13cm



Dressed as a soldier,
Donnelly rode into her
private view on a horse
and announced herself as
messenger sent to declare
Napoleon's surrender.



Above:
Untitled
2005
Videostill

herself as a messenger sent to declare the Emperor's surrender. As the bearer and revealer of the secret, the courier comes to embody the gravity and intensity of the experience of revelation. Accordingly Donnelly ended with the lines: 'The Emperor has fallen, and he rests his weight upon your mind and mine. And with this I am electric. I am electric.' At the opening of the Cologne show the horse appeared again, this time *sans* rider, shrouding the fate of the messenger in mystery.

By working through the physical rhetoric of opaque signs or gestures by which the secret of occult experiences is invoked, Donnelly delineates the existential concern of the practical philosophy of anti-materialist materialism as the quest to create other ways to experience experience. In contemporary consumer society exclusive experiences are a hot commodity supplied by event agencies. An event today is 'quality time' packaged as a product. In her work Donnelly challenges this dominant logic, not through any idealistic pretensions but by proposing a counter-materialism in the form of a physical language of the *omen*. The omen is an intense sensation of an incomplete experience, as in all its intensity it only announces the potential advent of the real event and thus reveals that it has not yet happened and possibly never will. As they address you like omens, Donnelly's works preclude you from consuming experience in the event and instead make you experience the un-consumable *as* the event.

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