

NEW YORK

Trisha Donnelly

The Shed
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If you're reading this magazine, you're no doubt familiar with the choreography and decorum of an art museum visit. None of this applies at The Shed, New York's newest, and therefore most contentious, arts institution. It's a grey cube model designed for the layman and visual art is but one part of its expansive programming, which includes theatre, concerts, and lectures.

Trisha Donnelly is a bold first choice for an institution with populist aspirations and with the ambitious goal of showing only newly commissioned work. She's no megastar and has always been opaque and evasive about assigning meaning to her work. Unlike other New York exhibition spaces aiming to pull large audiences with household names like Warhol or Kahlo, The Shed seems to believe – much to its credit – that its audience can tolerate, or even enjoy, unfamiliar material.

It's unclear though whether this inventive programming and commitment to accessibility is enough to untether The Shed from that which spawned it: the new Hudson Yards development, a glossy playground for the ultrarich on the far west side of Manhattan's belly. The project itself, with well-documented shady funding, stands as a glass-and-steel exclamation point to the city's income inequality problem and housing crisis, tinging The Shed's woke messaging with irony. Is it all just bread and circuses? But admittedly, at the very least, it's a new kind of circus, a welcome proposition in a stagnating art world; it is creating a model for an art experience yet untested.

It takes an army of staffers to guide visitors through the startlingly unintuitive architecture towards the sound of Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen* that emanates from Donnelly's show. We're guided through the dark, behind

bleachers-style seating looking out over The Shed's impressive concert hall as techs ferry equipment around the stage below and lighting designers make adjustments. It's a large space, the only light coming from a narrow gap in a wall constructed to obscure the windows, and as is typical of Donnelly's work, there's no context offered. One feels in the wrong place, a backstage littered with props waiting their turn. Two massive tree trunks fixed to dollies with bright orange straps enjoy most of the light shining through the crack. Behind them are the speakers responsible for the deafening sound. Tucked into the back corner is a mess of tree branches. Too dark to photograph, this show will have no life on Instagram. Everything is exposed but nothing is clear.

Slinking through that gap, I emerge into a sun-drenched space with windows that frame the Yards: the new architectural folly, the Vessel, luxury condominium buildings, a shopping mall. It looks like the exposition of a dystopian science fiction movie – the scene just before our hero realises this seemingly perfect society is rotten to its core. Donnelly seems to acknowledge this, at once obscuring the view and highlighting it as an object of observation in itself. The detritus in the gallery now appears as the last of the natural waste waiting to be hauled out of this false paradise, the opera music a dirge.

The installation dares the viewer to make sense of the raw displacement of the trees and the beautiful music rendered near intolerable by sheer volume – and there's pleasure in surrendering to the frustration of its impossibility. This disarming show seemed a perfect start to a disarming institution. But as I went to leave, an attendant approached and launched into a thorough explanation reportedly prescribed by the artist herself.

The music is sung by Leontyne Price, the first African-American prima donna at New York's Metropolitan Opera. It's the amputated branches of the trees

making that mess in the corner. We are permitted to touch. *Carmen* was chosen because its titular character is a rebellious woman murdered by a jealous man. The gleaming gap in the wall is a vaginal entry. The sacred feminine nature, I infer, is quite literally penetrated by the male beam of industry.

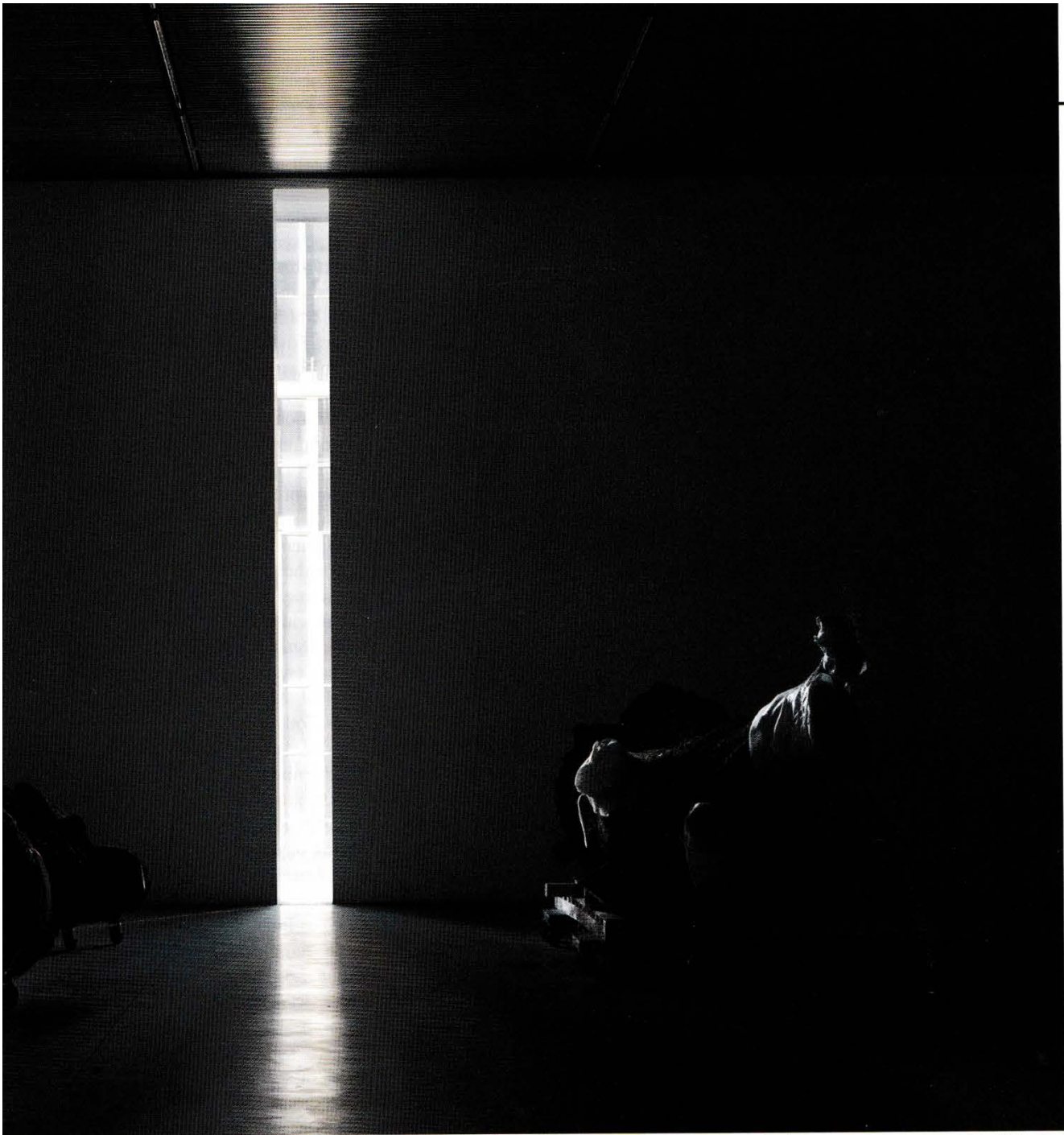


Photo: Dan Bradica. Courtesy The Shed

View of "Trisha Donnelly", The Shed, New York

The work was better without this exegesis. In the spirit of The Shed's aspirational populism, it narrowed a fascinating confusion into a series of trite allegories, an effort to provide accessibility and human connection. The effect was to collapse a pleasant curiosity into a catalogue of metaphors, and viewership

into a series of forced socialisations. After interacting with a multitude of institutional employees, I felt less welcomed than managed, like a child on a school trip.

But that quiet viewership, that choreography and decorum, is itself managed, a learned set of behaviours, taught to children like me who grow up

to write art criticism. And while it's comfortable for the aesthete, there's nothing to say it is or must remain the only mode of being with art, and that is precisely the provocation offered by Donnelly and The Shed: it disarms, but quickly conciliates.

Allison Hewitt-Ward