

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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RIOT MATERIAL

ART. WORD. THOUGHT.

The Beguiling Desolations Of Trisha Donnelly

MARCH 14, 2020

at Matthew Marks Gallery, NYC

by Brian Block

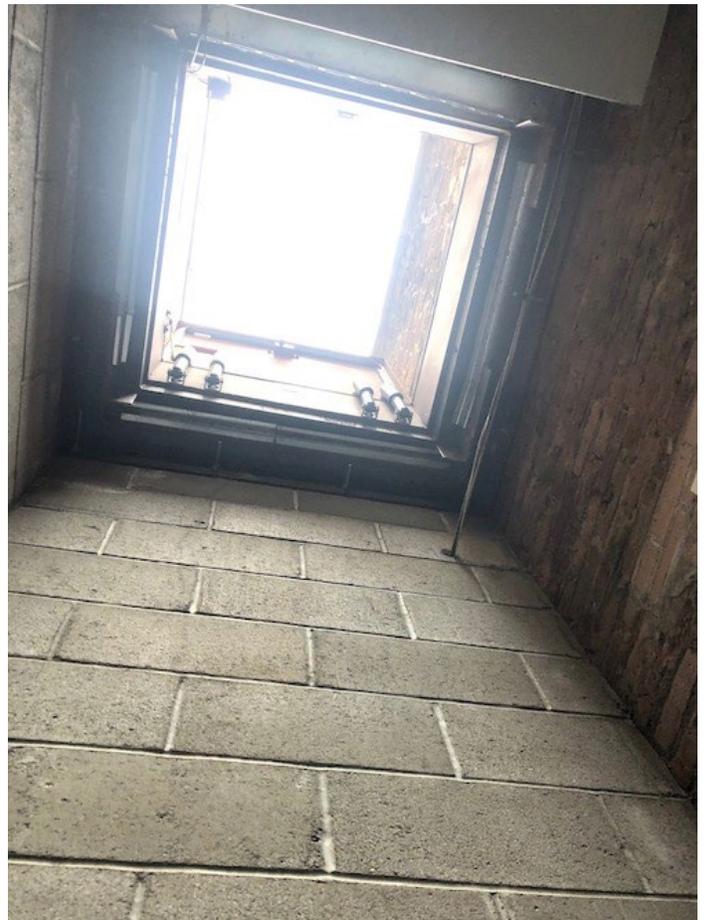
In this era of pervasive promotional storytelling, Trisha Donnelly consistently chooses to go the other way and expunge. Her works carry no titles, her exhibitions no names, and her press releases only a few facts. This calculated act of liberalizing the viewing field works to intensify the abstracting power of the white cube toward the discrete objects and artist's interventions on view. Indeed, what remains most compelling about Donnelly's practice is her expert crafting of distinctive analogue *mise en scène* that finely reframes the show's perceptual field. Far more gripping than any particular artwork of hers, it is this clandestine manipulation of the gallery space itself — as if it were a fabric in her medium — that she wields to captivating and occasionally frustrating effect.

Ten stone sculptures make up the bulk of the artworks on view at Donnelly's most recent exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery's two Chelsea spaces. There are also three projected digital images of her familiar



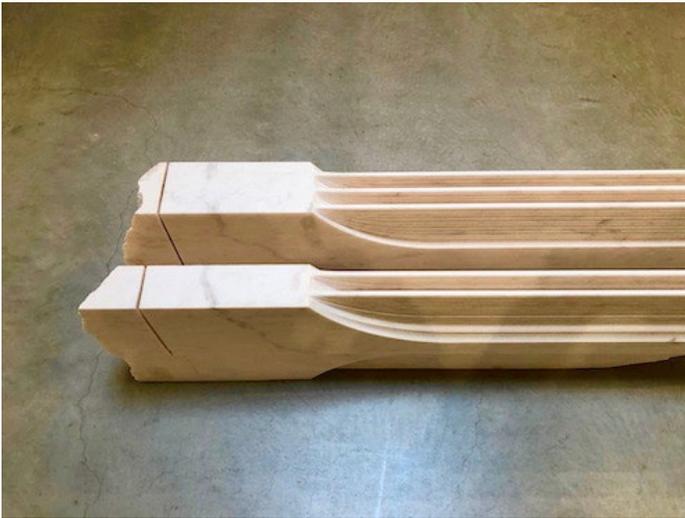
piston-in-liquid motifs and one small print. The stones are long rectangular slabs either laid down as plinths or made to stand totem-like — reminiscent of historical memorials, of property markers, and pointedly of the white cube's own kinship with archaic sacred architecture and spaces of suspended time. All but one of the stones appear scored to varying extent with mechanical blade kerf cuts and linear incisions that elicit a sense of haunting accidental beauty. What intention may exist behind the kerf cut method or the patterns they form in different stones is left to conjecture.

The ambling visitor also finds that the long, narrow back room of the 526 West 22nd Street gallery had been informally excavated, the two end doors pried ajar, the lights turned off and the metal roof vent left open to the winter sky. It feels as if one has entered into the very subconscious of the space only to find it deserted though pockmarked by previous usage. This mildly transgressive unmasking functions as a kind-of Wizard of Oz mnemonic, but more lastingly as a curious spectral registration of the artist's presence in this most artificial of settings; as well as a sudden, unexpected seeping in of the here and the now in the formidable abstraction machine that is the white cube.



Block, Brian. "The Beguiling Desolations Of Trisha Donnelly." *Riot Material*, March 14, 2020.

A real pleasure in Donnelly's exhibitions are the mental puzzles and riddles, the telling apart of useful clue from sheer fortuities. A pair of antique brass nautical lanterns not listed as artworks? That unfilled hole in the wall the size of an electrical outlet? One's interpretive senses are summoned to operate on high alert, and this is a distinctively generative quality of her work. One is reminded of the immersive theater performance *Sleep No More*, in which visitors don masks and wander through a building where different scenes of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are unfolding simultaneously. Here, subjectivity's longing for a master narrative is fractured not by spatiotemporal constraint but by a structural ambiguity that Donnelly cultivates and sharpens with perverse relish: the essential undecidability in reading artwork.



And when said artwork is deployed by a prestigious institutional space such as Matthew Marks, one is tempted to conclude that while Trisha Donnelly's aesthetic program may run exactly counter to Andrea Fraser's — Fraser's *Open Plan* (2016) left entirely bare a floor of the glistening new Whitney Museum, while filling it with audio from prisons — the lesson on the politics of the white-cube-as-capital is one and the same.

Riding the classic gap between object and intention all the way to the metaphorical bank, there is no question that Donnelly's self-exegetic muteness has deliberately courted a mystery that gallerists and writers of all stripes have spun into a bona fide mythology. As in fashion or courtship, nothing activates desire around art quite like demurral. Donnelly was recently featured in a book about artists who have retreated from the art world. The book's title: *Tell Them I Said No*, her own response to the author's inquiry.

When do the results of an art practice fall short of inspiring good faith? When is there enough *there* there? The intermittently frustrating journeys that Donnelly's *mise en scène* repeatedly summon us into are beguiling abstractions of exhibitions. They are hikes along the philosophical crestline demarcating something from nothing — meandering but rarely without reward. Her work makes the convincing case that art exhibitions operate essentially via forms of manipulation akin to film, albeit with a starkly different phenomenology of the container, economics of the stage, and critical knowledge generated.

