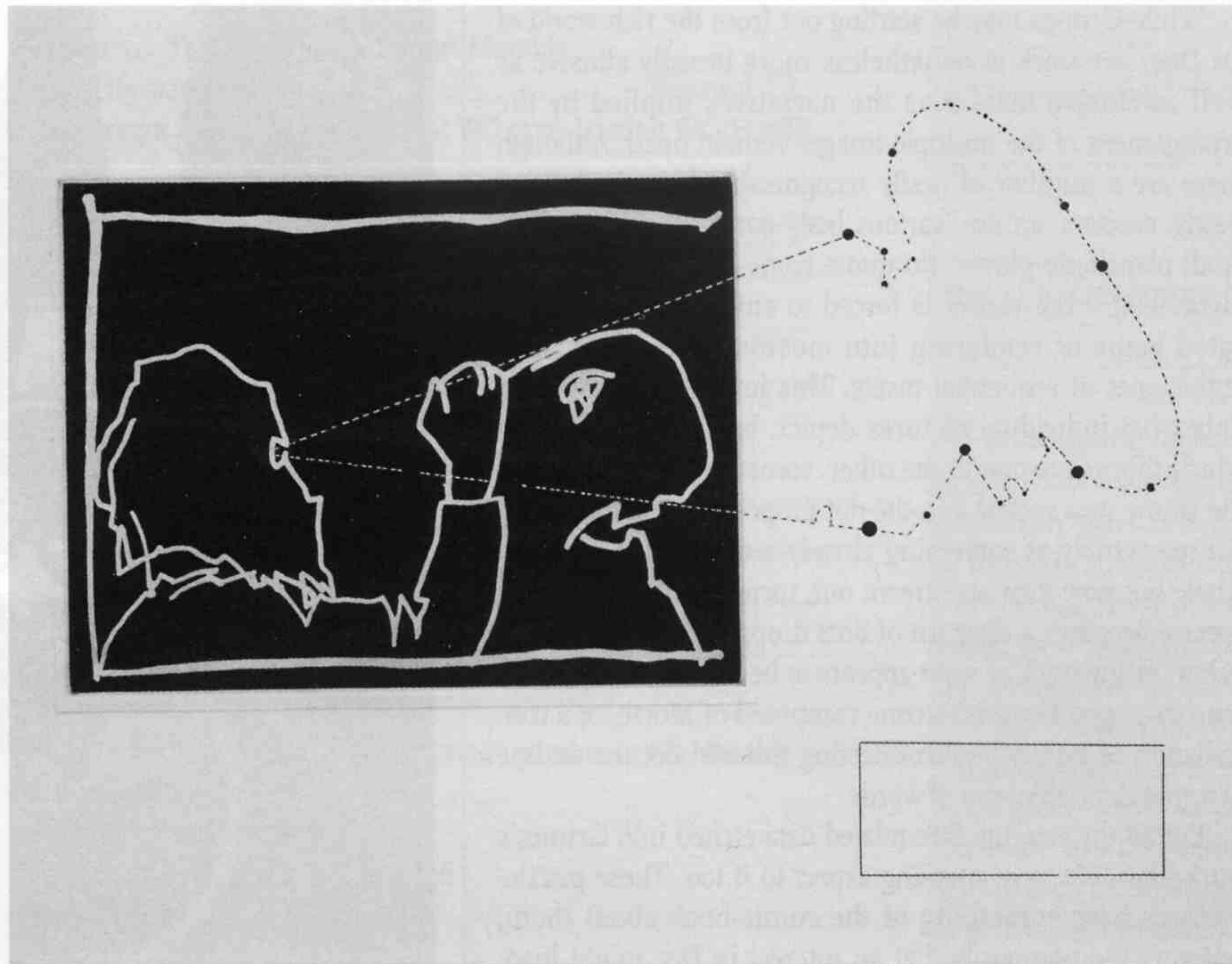


Oona Grimes
ccc # 2 2007
etching and Letraset



■ Oona Grimes: Conversations with Angels

Danielle Arnaud London November 2 to December 16

Oona Grimes's 'Conversations with Angels' borrows its title and its point of departure from the Elizabethan philosopher, astrologer, geographer and secret agent John Dee (1527-1608), in particular from a series of so-called angelic conversations enacted by Dee and his assistant Edward Kelley in the 1580s. These exchanges, purporting to be communications with angels or spirits, took the form of séances in which Kelley, allegedly the bearer of psychic abilities, would gaze into a crystal and report to his collaborator whatever he saw there, the latter meticulously recording this. One of the spirits, that of a little girl calling herself Madimi, communicated with Kelley and Dee over a seven-year period, on at least one occasion escaping from the crystal and playfully dancing around the shelves of Dee's voluminous library.

Grimes has presented a series of etchings that refer to, but do not directly gloss, elements of the angelic exchanges. The work is divided into three categories: 'aaa', 'ccc' and 'ddd', which stand, respectively, for 'astrology alchemy angel magic', 'calculating conjuration' and 'doctor dee's drawings'. In the first category each work is made up of a series of small rectangular images laid out in columns or other regulated groupings. These inset pieces are in the main formed of white lines on black backgrounds, the support of the whole rendered in an off-white tint. The piece titled *aaa* # 1 & 2, 2007, for example, contains within it 30 images of

various sizes, a few of which are connected by mathematical signs. The drawing itself is highly stylised, representing figures and objects in outline form only. In this and other works sequences of images repeat and are occasionally reversed, perhaps in an allusion to Kelley and Dee's complicated technical procedures. Richard Deacon (not the artist), in his book on Dee, has suggested that the conversations involved the invention of an extremely elaborate system of codes and translations, making use of a grid into which Dee would insert letters of the alphabet as conveyed to him by Kelley, the individual parts of each message being transmitted in reverse order. Such a painstaking system of communication might be read as analogous to the multilayered operations, the twists and turns involved in the making of works of art. It also recalls ideas about artists being the bearers of esoteric information; Dee's relationship with the Elizabethan establishment was precarious, his zealously guarded independence often attracting criticism and complaint.

The aforementioned letter-based classifications are printed in the show's catalogue in mirror-writing, a device pointing to Dee's use of mirrors and other light-related devices in his work, as well as to his close involvement with the English intelligence service during its formative years. Deacon has proposed that part of the function of the angelic conversations consisted not so much in attempting to converse with the spirit world as in developing useful systems of encryption, Dee's investigations into the occult providing the perfect foil for the consolidation of these more practical, politically loaded experiments in communicative forms. The parallel with artists inventing and disseminating novel but legible methods of meaningful exchange is obvious.

While Grimes may be starting out from the rich world of Dr Dee, her work is nonetheless more broadly allusive as well as elusive insofar as the narratives implied by the arrangement of the multiple images remain open. Although there are a number of easily recognisable forms – hooded heads, scissors, an axe, various body parts, 'knobbed sticks [and] planchette gloves' (to quote from Iain Sinclair's catalogue text) – the viewer is forced to enter into the complicated game of rendering into meaning these laborious anthologies of sequential insets. This involves decoding not only what individual pictures depict, but also the ways in which they relate one to the other, sometimes spilling out of the frame in a sort of join-the-dot proposition for the potential reassembly of something already seen, already rendered whole but now torn up, strewn out, turned round. A stylised spectre becomes a diagram of dots dropping into the picture below, or the track of what appears to be the line of sight of a man in a hood becomes a cone composed of Morse, or a constellation of stars whose connecting threads plot the outline of a speech bubble void of words.

For all the weighty Dee-related data etched into Grimes's work there is a very amusing aspect to it too. These puzzle-pictures have something of the comic-book about them, relieving the pomposity that an interest in Dee might inadvertently conjure up. ■

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