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Leopards in the Temple

This group exhibition takes its name from a parable by Czech writer Franz Kafka, a thinker and visionary whose work repeatedly came to mind in discussing this project early on with participating artists. Focusing as it does on moments of metamorphosis, paradox, and inversion, the exhibition borrows from the nature of the parable an ability to promote multiple readings of succinct forms, destabilized imagery, and extraordinary occurrences.

As with many of Kafka's short stories, the parable envisions a metaphor and image that immediately takes hold while also remaining distant and estranged; here, one has only to think of the transformation of traveling salesman Gregor Samsa at the outset of *The Metamorphosis*, the forever tunneling builder in Kafka's late story *The Burrow*, or the hoary figure of the Hunter Gracchus (in a story of the same name) whose burial ship is never allowed to call into port, to recall that Kafka's is a world where something decisive has already occurred. In this respect, the adjectival "Kafkaesque"—which has entered into common parlance as a placeholder for the atmospheric, portentous, and vaguely mysterious—fails to encompass something signature regarding Kafka's mode of expression, namely that the impetus or trigger is already in place yet often remains unnamed. Not unlike the symptom or symptomatic, the enfolding of the image or metaphor that takes place in this register reaches back in order to take shape but without a detailed report on its origin. As with the parable in question, the suddenly manifest yet retreating image intercedes even as it dissipates:

"Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony."

What readily appears to be a parable regarding the interplay between form and change (and certainly it is that) finds Kafka beginning with an indelible image—the intruders are already inside the gates going about the business of undoing—only to deftly shift toward a rapid sequence of repetition, exhaustion, and eventual incorporation. In short, the overturning of convention and form is quickly codified, absorbed, and becomes part of the ritual. In this regard, perhaps this makes it as fitting a parable for art history as for art making. And yet the nature of the aphoristic is that it troubles the space of meaning rather than providing resolve. In outlining a scenario regarding the inversion and exhaustion of formal convention, Kafka's parable acknowledges just that while also opening up an irritation or second-guessing, a gap to be returned to, considered, and played with. In other words, the parable creates an adjacency in its very telling. What is

there to be learned from the sequence? Is there something yet to be found, fugitive remnants, some “vital residue” beyond incorporation, to use art historian Jacob Burckhardt’s phrase, some extended significance that remains open and unresolved, not unlike iconologist Aby Warburg’s notion of *Nachleben*, meaning as it does both “afterlife” and “survival?”

By using Kafka’s parable as an entry point, *Leopards in the Temple* brings together a divergent group of artists that return to distinct formal vocabularies and art historical trajectories but always with the adjacent relationship of borrowing and unsettling rather than wholesale attempts at either remaking or deconstructing. Protean moments where materials elide, transform, and overlay take place in the work of Lothar Baumgarten, Nina Canell, Patrick Hill, and Kitty Kraus, while the rules of image production and circulation are triangulated and problematized in the painting and sculptural configurations of Lucas Knipscher, Strauss Bourque-LaFrance, and Kerstin Brätsch and Adele Röder’s DAS INSTITUT. Kathrin Sonntag and Nina Hoffmann (working in collaboration) and the collaborative duo João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva present slide and film projections that explore the uncanny, paranormal, and illusionistic through depicting acts of magnetism, doubling, and transference. And sculpture is framed and distributed as an effaced and often hermetic artifact in the work of Latifa Echakhch, Aleana Egan, and Lucy Skaer. Engaged with art historical references and cultural frameworks that range from Constructivism and Arte Povera to post-Conceptualism, from alchemy and ethnography to investigations of personae and entropy, the artists in the exhibition share an extra-linguistic interest in moments of translation and a resistance to fixed forms.

—Fionn Meade