



KING'S LEAP

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Ellis and Parker von Sternberg

New Works

January 13 to February 19, 2022

Ellis and Parker von Sternberg's exhibition at King's Leap offers a series of demonstrations. The subject of their work, much less the actual objects inhabiting the space, is the default of social relations that encircle artists, gallerists, and viewers within critique. Through this, the brother-artist duo aims to demonstrate that in order to maintain a position of criticality, the art going public is required to endorse one of two positions: *inherent to the process of aesthetic judgment is there a requirement for more cruelty, or negligence, of art itself? Are these one in the same thing? How does this make us feel?*

The von Sternbergs are suspicious, always have been: where is it precisely within this process, they ask, that the form and content of any given artwork is sacrificed in service to the formation of a viewer's own opinion?

1

Before entering the gallery, the audience is met with blacked-out windows and a legal disclaimer. It states that upon entrance to the gallery, individuals waive their right to claim ownership over the images that will be produced by actively recording security cameras within. It is before the show even begins that the artists execute their first demonstrable act: the viewer must either consent to their likeness being recorded and used for and by the artists or they are not permitted entrance. The desire to perceive, and its subsequent opportunity to opine, comes at a price. This, the artists claim, is *equitable*.

Upon entry, there is a leather couch and coffee table. These articles of furniture belong to the gallerist, Alec Petty, and are on consignment for the duration of the exhibition. For the entirety of the show, the von Sternbergs requested Petty give up his living room furniture and his comfort.

Crowded close to this lounge is a hoard of PTZ night vision cameras mounted to glass coffee tables. As a viewer walks through, these inanimate and subtly roving devices follow their movement. This transduction of one part of the world (the viewer's body) to another part of the world (the perception of

KING'S LEAP

the camera) is only an objective material index, but it irreducibly implicates the viewer alongside and within the artist's practice. The brothers' contracts explicate our active participation in a dynamic of power present in an art gallery, and these sculptures follow through on what now can be understood as a promise. *What are you really willing to give up in the eyes of another? If it is not offered, will it instead be taken?*

2

In the gallery's backroom, a series of framed 4 x 6-inch prints hang, either single or diptych. The images are messy, unto annoyance, but it is at least clear that each contains a corpse: images from crime scenes, images from accidents, taken for evidence, intended to be void of aesthetic decisions.

Found by the von Sternbergs on internet message boards that traffic such pictures, the photographs are printed and delivered to Pranayama Art Inc, a specialty frame shop in New York. Ellis and Parker asked the employees to design frames in whatever style they liked, *to get creative*, so long that they did not disclose how the images would be presented (this being none of the brothers' concern). The results are careful and chameleon-like. No frame mirrors the next, with changing matte, wood, size, and material.

The von Sternberg brothers enforce a second moral quandary upon the viewer: how are we to receive and interpret these works? Are these images real? If so, ought they be consumed as aesthetic objects? Is it thus that aesthetic reasoning is correlated to moral reasoning? Are the von Sternbergs themselves culpable of aestheticizing a heinous and tragic image, or are the framers who were willing to take up the job? Where, why, and how do we apply culpability? Rather than the works on display, the von Sternbergs preemptively acquire the inevitable judgment by an audience as their primary material; *interpretation as an act of violence made by the subject is returned in full.*

3

In the basement viewing room, the von Sternbergs show four sculptural works. Encased in PVC plastic are what the artists' claim are human bones ranging from differing individuals' torsos and limbs. The surface of the sculptures is glossy enamel and glitter, sparkling to make clear a distinction between the *content* of the work and its *form*, but which is which? Bones or the descriptions of them, inner materials or outer appearances, the packaged or the packaging?

The largest, *Untitled (4)*, sits on a leather couch, consigned in the same way as the gallery owner's upstairs. This couch was loaned by Collin Leitch, a New York-based artist who opened King's Leap with

KING'S LEAP

Alec Petty and departed the gallery in 2019. This couch becomes its own sort of corpse, acting as the support, both physical and social, for the von Sternbergs' artistic practice, a post-mortem piece of evidence from the gallery's history dragged out under the gallery lights. Crucial to their practice is the acknowledgment of relationships inherent to the construction of exhibition-making, a kind of mutual parasitism.

As the viewer can neither determine whether or not there are, in fact, bones inside the von Sternbergs' sculptures, albeit that they look to contain such items, they must thus consider one key problem: How is it that we simply presume our experience of art is not only intensively accurate (read: true) but that our experience is the *primary function of art itself*. In order to distinguish these sculptures as acceptable or reprehensible, good or bad, ugly or pretty, we first must ask why we relegate art objects as inherently legible *for us alone*.

4

It is with these sculptures, as the results of a simple gesture thought up by the brothers over their phone conversations that the final demonstration is made: within the dialogue between the giving and taking of reasons, within the dialogue between suspicion and trust, which ultimately forms the dynamic relationship of our judgment, there is the obligation to determine actual critical *and* aesthetic positions. And in order to do so, there must be the acknowledgment of an *always* resistant aspect, one that forever acts in opposition to serving the viewer and their comfort: an aspect that forces reconsideration of conventions. This is a point that the von Sternbergs exploit at every opportunity.

Ellis and Parker von Sternberg believe that art is a gift, and that a gift is only ever truly a gift when it delivers unto its recipient the opportunity for liberation. However, it is often hard, sometimes impossible, to remember exactly what it is we might need liberation from.

Ellis and Parker von Sternberg (b. 1990 & 1988) are an artist duo based between New York, NY, and Minneapolis, MN. Previous exhibitions include Gallery Albany (Albany, NY), New York Chain Suitcase Brussels Show (Brussels, BE), and Triest (Brooklyn, NY). Ellis von Sternberg received his BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Parker von Sternberg is licensed to practice law in Minnesota and received his degree from the University of Minnesota.