LOST IDOLS
Koenig Galerie, Berlin

To deify is to portray one as if of god akin status- a being inhuman, generally metaphysical or otherwise inaccessible (Turcan, R. and Tommasi, C., 2005). In other words, to deify is to assert that which is worldly as unworldly. Infamously, such claims have taken the form of conceited efforts by tyrannical governments to perch their leaders, themselves or ideas on divine pedestals in order to consolidate control over various populations. With the benefit of hindsight, these examples appear only hollow and manipulative. However, this raises a difficult question: how is consensus derived on the validity of any such bout in the face of no empirical evidence? Furthermore, are these accepted decisions definitive, and, if not, are inquiries of divinity broadly unproductive? LOST IDOLS poses this challenge through the presentation of artworks heralding from both dead faiths and the since demystified, alongside a counterweight of contextually critical early-modern and contemporary pieces from Francis Bacon to Joseph Beuys; Alberto Giacometti to Roger Hiorns. Viewed thematically, and with a consideration of each work's context in relation to one another above individual interpretation, this exhibition constructs an existentialist narrative on the nature of meaning reinforced by its station at Koenig Berlin: formerly St. Agnes Church, this gallery acts as an additional instance of reappropriated symbolism and a testament to its problematic implications on the integrity of said consensuses on the deified.

To deify is an act characteristic of the search of necessary truth in a world fraught with contingents, and yet is an act often retracted and met with consistent contention, rendering this intent void while also mounding an increasingly widespread barrier of scepticism regarding claims of this kind into the 21st century. This exhibition examines how such conflicts may have occurred, and in doing asks whether divinity is therefore a meaningful label. This latter address in particular, however, is not a novel source of debate. As early as the 1920s, a philosopher group, named the Vienna Circle, adopted a stalwart opposition against metaphysical claims like that of deification, crucially coining the branch of epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge), logical positivism. Logical positivism, in this case, refers to the belief that all knowledge must be explainable through empirical (physical) evidence, and thus that sense-experience and scientific process are the only two means of acquiring meaningful beliefs (Hodgson, B, 2007). If this is to be believed, how may, say, claims of the divine be verified and thus hold meaning? There are potential objections to the supposition that this is a worthwhile position either though. Meaning may not be solely found in its correlation to physical proof. If we consider Ludwig Wittgenstein's thesis that language's weight is beheld by its practical function within different circles [language games] (Wittgenstein, L, 2009) then such claims need not empirical verification to hold meaning. LOST IDOLS' exhibited examples of reused iconography reflect this argued subjectivity. However, arguments following Wittgenstein are potentially too permissive in terms of which claims can

be defined as meaningful, as they suggest any belief can remain so as long as it is socially recognised. Alexandr Deyneka, displayed artist, was an acclaimed member of the Soviet socialist realist movement: an enforced propaganda vessel through Joseph Stalin's regime. Artists associated with this campaign glorified Stalin as an infallible father figure to the peoples of the USSR, unfaltering in the face of the mass terror sanctioned under his command. Therefore, what separates veneration of the since condemned from that which maintains its popular support? Is there a limit as to what can be deified, and, if so, where does it land? Joseph Beuys, personality key to his practice, presses this notion. Further, if such defences of divine claims are yet to secure their correlations to objective, empirical evidence, and if this is not a barometer for meaning, is a deemed objective truth obtainable; does meaning exist? Hiorns and Bacon here represent this nihilistic attitude, and question the audience on whether deification is, thus, productive. LOST IDOLS aims to cultivate scepticism, however, and consequently looks to allow for more open interpretation. Jean-Paul Sartre argued that meaning is only made through human choice, this being the core tenant of existentialism (Sartre, J-P, 2007). The show exemplifies this philosophy through Giacometti, a friend of the philosopher, whose works sit to remind the audience of this prose on entry and exit to the exhibition (Lord, J, 1985). This motif is an indication to the audience of the exhibition's credence to the theory.

Upon entering the former congregation, the viewer is met with *Walking Man I* and *Walking Man II* by Giacometti. These 1960 bronze casted sculptures depict, as their titles suggest, walking men a little over 6 feet tall each. In their existentialist context, the unreasoned walk of these sculptures is metaphor for humanity's will to create meaning. *Walking Man I* facing the direction of the show thus operates as pretext to the following attempts at deification that comprise the body of the exhibition. Inversely, the later produced *Walking Man II* strides towards the wall behind- the direction of the walk is indicated as inconsequential, and therefore said deification is implied to be the same.

On the right-hand side of the gallery, two pictures from James Lafayette sandwich Joseph Beuys' *Felt Suit*. The pictures in question were taken at the 1897 Devonshire House Ball, a celebratory event in honour of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee whereby the elite of late-Victorian and, thus, British imperial society amassed for a historically and mythically themed fancy dress party (London Evening Standard, 1897). The celebrations were grand, and the Queen remained an admired symbol of a powerful empire yet to collapse. A function hosted to commemorate one who was as intrinsically bound to imperial conquest was inherently in the interest of the prolonged reign of the empire which has since diminished. Lafayette's displayed photographs are of one Lady Wolverton dressed as the direct embodiment of the British Empire, Britannia. At such an event and in such costume yet within decades reach of the empire's accelerated decline come World War One, LOST IDOLS, in hindsight, recognises the irony of the subject being merely fancy dress.

A Joseph Beuys *Felt Suit* acts to intervene Lafayette's portraits of Lady Wolverton as Britannia. One of one hundred made in 1970, it is, as the name suggests a suit made of felt: his prolific use of which was allegedly inspired by an occasion in the Second World War whereby Beuys, as a Luftwaffe pilot, was shot down over the Crimea before being tended to by Tartars with fat and felt wrap (Shultz, D, 2005). While this is anecdote is widely considered fiction, it aided considerably in the construction of Joseph Beuys as a character. The *Felt Suit* is emblematic of this character, with it being tailored to Beuys himself. LOST IDOLS does not aim to suggest an intent of self-deification behind this piece, nor ask for significant consideration of its formal elements. In this context, the suit represents its creator, therefore disrupting Lafayette by not only referencing costume, but also by asking for a distinction between real, though inflated, characters and unearthly idols.

The left of the gallery is bare besides *The Stakhanovites*. Painted in 1937 by Aleksandr Deyneka, the scene glorifies the Soviet industrial workforce's prosperity amidst the second of Stalin's Five Year [economic] Plans. Portrayed are approximately two dozen 'Stakhanovites': workers celebrated by central government as highly productive, named after model Soviet miner Alexei Stakhanov (Siegelbaum, L, 1986). They are broadly dressed formally in pales and whites, implying wealth accompanied by innocence or purity, and are surrounded by festivities in the red that connoted party communism. The workers walk frankly, forward towards the viewer; progress is constant. An audience may therefore be led to believe that the Soviet Union was host to thriving populations, yet this was not the case. Thus, in LOST IDOLS, this represents the demystified- a fabricated utopia in the name of Stalin's unjust veneration.

The central column of the exhibition initially features two works with the subject of a 'good shepherd', one of the Roman cult of Mithras and the other of Jesus Christ. These works' contribution to the exhibition is one of the question of reappropriation and how this may grey a proposition's credibility.

Now marks a shift in the exhibition as the audience reaches the two closing pieces. Roger Hiorns' *Untitled*, 2008, dominates the centre back of the gallery floor. It is dust, an atomised jet engine. An object built to fly is reduced to something wholly impractical and without utility. Its position in LOST IDOLS is, then, metaphorical: much as the former artworks displayed each possess weakened credibility through revelations on their provenances and coherency, Hiorns' piece represents a similar inability to, figuratively, take off.

At the far end of the gallery hangs *Study of a Bull* by Francis Bacon. Although Bacon was noted a nihilist who thus believed in no higher power nor meaning (Dineen, S, 2022), his views can be interpreted as more ambiguous in this, his final completed painting. The bull was a persistent motif of Bacon's work- indeed he once famously posited that bullfighting was 'a marvellous aperitif to sex' (Pulver, A, 2022), and his depiction of such matters date back over twenty years prior to the displayed work with his *Study after a Bullfight* iteration series- it spoke of humanity's deemed erotic synonymity

with animality and, in the context of show fights, the insignificance of suffering. In *Study of a Bull*, the bull is not so lively. It stands tentative and plain; no longer kicking and sprawling but fading into an obscure black and white screen. The bull, it seems, is deteriorating as if dying, yet into a brightness, potentially symbolic of a life after (as such colouration connotes). Alternatively, it is a study in ego: Bacon was anxious of his legacy and in death the bull [himself] exists on. Or, it may confess futility. Bacon himself could have considered his life's work to be ultimately worthless on the cosmic floor. Meaning is left obscure. It is crucial the exhibition's conclusion is left open so as not to attack an audience's beliefs.

References

Biltcliffe, P. (2005) 'Walter Crane and the Imperial Federation Map Showing the Extent of the British Empire (1886).', Imago Mundi, 57(1), pp. 65. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40233960 (Accessed: 26 March 2023).

Dineen, S. (2022) 'Bacon: Man and Beast at the Royal Academy review', City A.M. Available at: https://www.cityam.com/bacon-man-and-beast-at-the-royal-academy-review/ (Accessed: 11 April 2023).

Hodgson, B. (2007) 'Logical Positivism and the Vienna Circle' in C. V. Boundas (ed.) *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Philosophies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 97- 98.

London Evening Standard. (1897) 'The Ball at Devonshire House', *London Evening Standard*. London: Evening Standard Ltd.

Lord, J. (1985) 'Sartre and Giacometti: words between friends', The New Criterion, 3(10), pp.45. Available at: https://newcriterion.com/issues/1985/6/sartre-and-giacometti-words-between-friends (Accessed: 11 April 2023).

Pulver, A. (2022) 'Francis Bacon called bullfighting 'a marvellous aperitif to sex': artist's bestial fascination explored in new show at the Royal Academy of Arts', The Arts Newspaper. Available at: https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/01/26/francis-bacons-fascination-with-beasts-is-explored-in-new-show-at-the-royal-academy-of-arts (Accessed: 6 April 2023).

Sartre, J.-P. (ed.) (2007) Existentialism Is a Humanism. Translated from the French by C. Macomber. Yale University Press. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv15vwkgx (Accessed: 11 April 2023).

Schultz, D. (2005) 'Joseph Beuys' in *Art Monthly*, (285), pp 22.

Siegelbaum, L. (1986) 'The Making of Stakhanovites', 1935-36, Russian History, 13(2), pp. 261. Available at: http://www.jstor.org/stable/24655836 (Accessed: 11 April 2023).

Turcan, R. and Tommasi, C. (2005) 'Apotheosis' in Jones, L. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1, 2nd edn.2 Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 437-441. Available at: https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/apps/doc/CX3424500183/GVRL?u=walamp&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=684f8aa0 (Accessed: 28 Apr 2023).

Wittgenstein, L. (2009) *Philosophical Investigations*. 4th edn. Translated from the German by P. Hacker and J. Schulte. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, pp. 55. Available at: https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/reader.action?docID=514408# (Accessed: 11 April 2023).

Exhibition floorplan