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Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys
Emperor Ro: The Report of a Coup in Belgium
By Lisa Yin Zhang



Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys, *Emperor Ro: Report of a Coup in Belgium*, 1993. Installation view: Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York, 2021. Courtesy the artists and Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York.

A stuffed monkey sits behind a comically large, burnished-wood desk, trailing a long, stuffed arm authoritatively over the armrest of a chair. Recalling an intimately scaled history museum cared for by a small but dedicated staff under a shoestring budget, it comes with a helpful didactic text. “This desk was discovered in one of the secret cellars of a badly battered villa in the neighborhood of Jodoigne,” it tells us. “The white monkey was a gift from his brother on the day he was born, and was his closest friend during his entire life.”

For Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys’s first collaboration at Maxwell Graham/Essex Street gallery, the artist duo restages a seminal exhibition documenting a fictional 1990 coup in Belgium by a so-called Emperor Ro. Originally formulated in 1993, a year after the the Soviet Union fell and popular revolts arose in its former territories, their exhibition is a probing, absurdist, and tragicomic parody of war, terrorism, and civilization-building.

The coup began, the exhibition tells us, on December 12, 1990, when the branches of government fell into the hands of Ro. Three consoles playing reruns of ROTV—the regime’s official TV channels—are on view. On the entertainment channel, ROTV3, we see state comedian Guido de Belder hosting his nightly program, “Guido’s Evening”; on ROTV1, we watch film footage of his arrest within his damask-wallpapered home for making a joke of poor taste; nearby in a wizened wood display case a set of balls are stacked in tetrahedral formation—a prop from said joke.

It took me a minute to determine that these events were a farce. Maybe it was the description of “Maggy Kap,” a.k.a “the Machete,” a sadistic gym teacher brought in as an interrogator at Sector 4, the infamous Roan torture center, which swung the pendulum in the direction of satire. Or perhaps it was the bright-orange Fanta bottles on the desk, which resonate too easily with a certain modern-day orange-colored strongman.

Indeed, 2021 United States is an interesting time and place to reprise this exhibition, which was acclaimed in 1993 Belgium as a merciless depiction of a parallel-reality Europe. Are we meant to draw connections between our own country and the rise of Ro? To identify the fictional 1990 fall of Belgium with the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the toppling of the Haitian regime, or the collapse of a US-backed government in Afghanistan? It is simultaneously not enough to look upon Ro’s ravings as the comic stylings of a fictional lunatic, and too much to ask an installation from 1993 to orate parallels this far in the future.

Still, the network of associations it generates is unnerving—a fictional rendition of a real-life restaging of an absurdist play with no heroes, no meaning, and certainly no end.