

Fiamma Montezemolo _____ The Secret
September 21 _____ October 1, 2016
Mapping the City, Part 3 _____ Kadist,
3295 20th St, San Francisco



Works in the exhibition

Neon Afterwords, 2016
LED lights and text
three Borges books
and blue tape
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and IIC,
San Francisco

The Three Ecologies, 2015
Kilim rug, cacti, mulch
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and
Magazzino Gallery, Rome

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_____ Kadist, in collaboration with the San Francisco Italian Cultural Institute (IIC), is pleased to present *The Secret*, a solo exhibition by Fiamma Montezemolo. The exhibition consists of two installations: *Neon Afterwords*, produced by the IIC and commissioned specifically for this project, and *The Three Ecologies*, first shown in 2015 in the Magazzino Gallery in Rome but never before shown in the United States. *The Secret* is the third and final installment of Mapping the City (mappingthecity.org), a project of the IIC curated by Marina Pugliese with the goal of furthering exchanges between Italy and the Bay Area in the field of Visual Arts.

_____ Straddling the interstices of art and ethnography, the self and the other, *The Secret* reconsiders the thesis from Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Anthropologist," to question the role of research in contemporary art. Though never made explicit by Borges, we are led to infer that "the secret" alludes to a fundamental and universal impulse to understand the other and ourselves. In the story, the journey to uncover the secret is undertaken by protagonist Fred Murdock, an everyman character described as having no identifiable characteristics whatsoever: "(...) There was nothing singular about him, not even that feigned singularity that young men affect." As a graduate student immersed within academia, Murdock was conditioned to expect that through research any subject is both knowable and explicable. In other words, his scientific mind was trained to view the world objectively, to believe that for every question there is an answer, and with enough investigation by a "subject" (him) an "object" (the secret) can be defined. Tasked with unlocking the secret by his professor, Murdock embarks on a journey to the American prairie, to live among a Native American tribe still practicing "certain esoteric rites."

_____ Two years pass and the inverse paradigm presents itself—Murdock discovers the secret, but he is both unwilling and unable to describe what it is or precisely what he experienced to learn it. Enlightened by a new system of knowledge, and a new set of values, Murdock's former objectivity has eradicated, replaced by a reconciled outlook on the indefinable. The secret therefore enacts its own definition at the same moment that it is undermined. The subject has become the object and the perspective informing the ethical and moral questions initially directed towards "the other" have spun around to confront "the self."

_____ Montezemolo invites her audience to replicate Murdock's expedition by offering different pathways to embark on their own journey within the gallery. In the entry, the original Borges story is displayed in the space of the gallery, disrupted by a series of key erasures. Recalling the Italian artist Emilio Isgrò these omissions compel us to ask questions about what information is presented to us. Montezemolo's redaction of these few, but crucial elements from the enigmatic narrative heightens the mysterious proposition the exhibition title implies. By raising more questions than answers, the artist concedes agency to her viewers to make their own determination and to decide which direction to take next.

_____ One direction leads to cacti with sharp spines emerging from a large Kilim rug, resting on fragrant layers of mulch. Through the construction of a physical space that appears welcoming but is substantially dangerous, *The Three Ecologies* represent three distinct spatial layers: the natural indicated by cactus and tree bark; the social designated by the rug as a traditional site of meeting and prayer; and the symbolic space of the art gallery, a site for questioning representation, activated by the presence of the viewer. The work's title refers to the text by Felix Guattari on the fleeting coexistence of a social, environmental, and psychological ecologies. The image is aesthetically and physically inviting and calls to mind a certain conviviality of relational aesthetics—the smell of the pine, the colors of the rug and cacti—yet it is equally physically precarious—the bark's equilibrium is inconsistent and the proximity of the cactus represents a close threat, which introduces an element of conflict.

_____ The other direction takes us to *Neon Afterwords*, a physical journey to the interior of select fragments from Borges' narrative. Enticing the eye with a cool blue glow, Montezemolo literally immerses the viewer in between the missing/erased sentences from the text next door. Illuminated in LED and suspended in the air, the scale of the sentences has a dream-

like monumentality which recalls Lucio Fontana's environments of the '50s and the '60s. Placed out of order and at various heights, the construction of one meaning is possible, but it is also multiple, contradictory and incomplete. In this scenario, who is playing the role of the questing ethnographer? Is it the "single protagonist, nothing singular about him," who benefits from the work, or is it the artist, who provides the environment for these possibilities? Are the "esoteric rites" the tribal rituals or experience of the viewer, lost in the search for allusive and fragmented meaning?

_____ One particular excerpt, "He came to dream in a language that was not that of his fathers," hints that *Neon Afterwords* may be an auto-analytic piece. The artist, born in Italy but since 2002 relocated between Mexico and the United States, is immersed in research in and about another territory; here she too dreams in a language that is not her own, feeling unable or unwilling to reveal the secret of her experiences, except by inviting us to enter into the same process of questioning she confronts as an artist and anthropologist. Aware of the unveiling of her own disciplinary identity through field research, does the artist share her bewilderment with the viewer through the text's deconstruction? Ultimately it is Murdock who reminds us "the secret is not as important as the paths that led him to it. Each person has to walk those paths himself."

—Marina Pugliese and Heidi Rabben

Program info

**Wednesday,
September 21,
6-9pm
Opening Reception**

**Saturday,
October 1,
5pm talk
Artist in conversation
with Lucia Sanroman,
Visual Art Director,
Yerba Buena Center for
the Arts, San Francisco**

Credits

Artist: Fiamma Montezemolo
Curators: Marina Pugliese and Heidi Rabben
Production and Installation: Pete Belkin and Benjamin James
Special Thanks: Paolo Barlera, Broadmoor Landscape Supply, Cool Neon Funhouse Creations Inc., Italian Cultural Institute, Magazzino Gallery, David Moretti, Francesco Muzzi