Oliver Laric, “The Hunter and the Dog,” 2014, detail

PART-TIME BODY

Ana Teixeira Pinto on Oliver Laric at Tanya Leighton, Berlin

Metamorphosis is a puzzling thing. In insects and arthropods as well as some amphibians and crustaceans, the embryo can develop into an organism dissimilar to its progenitors, before molting into its mature biology in an abrupt and conspicuous way. Mammals, on the other hand, are barred from this degree of shape-shifting, which for the warm-blooded, can only unfold over millennia. In the animated film, “the mythical potential of moving between species,” as Tom Gunning has described it, is unleashed.[1] Ultimately defined by its use of metamorphic motion, animation is metaphor incarnate, the hypostatization of deviancy onto the concreteness of the physical body, stretched and strained to the limits of recognition.

“To be titled” (2014), Oliver Laric’s most recent video project, on view in Berlin this winter at Tanya Leighton gallery, is a compilation of animated characters undergoing a process of sequential transmogrifications. Sourced from a century-long tradition (in which Japanese anime featured most prominently), the video displays a loop of continuous transformations: bull-into-

Oliver Laric, "To be titled," 2014, film still

minotaur-into-android, Pinocchio-into-jackass, frog-into-commode, girl-into-winged-demon, and several takes devolving grown men into embryos. Here, matter is dynamic and all form is provisional. Hands typically morph into roots or claws, humans into gruesome beasts, and the mechanical into the organic. Breasts can open to become horrid jawlike *vagina dentate*, while gender boundaries prove elusive. Out of a sphere of digital clay, we see the figure of Hermanubis – the classical hybrid of Anubis, the Egyptian jackal-headed god of the underworld, and the Greek Hermes – slowly taking shape as the animated counterpart to "The Hunter and his Dog," a sculpture installed in the gallery's lower level, an amorphous mass of pigmented polyurethane congealed into three slabs, taking the form of John Gibson's "Hunter and Dog," (1938).

Among the classical traditions that Laric mines – together with other neoclassical works, Gibson's sculpture features often in Laric's œuvre – even the gods can be cast as unstable. By contrast, the transmogrified form and the metamorphic in modern art (abstraction notwithstanding) are mostly associated with the regressive sentiments prevalent in the work of the Pre-Raphaelites and the Symbolists. In film theory, animation and the conventions of plasticity it champions were also largely overlooked. Firmly rooting the genealogy of cinema in photographic indexicality, historians such as Siegfried Kracauer, André Bazin, and Stanley Cavell placed the moving image within the strictly analytic tradition of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge. Only recently have scholars, including Lev Manovich, Tom Gunning, and Esther Leslie, prompted by the surge in usage of digital effects, begun to challenge this ontology, with Manovich claiming that cinema can be described as a subgenre of animation, instead of the other way around. Rather than capturing motion, the digital camera generates visual data: a polymorphic continuum of informational flow, which, eliminating the clear distinction between actual image and rendered image, brings animation, together with its grotesque transgressions, back to the fore.

As "To be titled" makes manifest, these transgressions, though clearly not naturalistic, can offer a realistic depiction of social alienation and self-estrangement. Commenting on property rela-

Oliver Laric, "To be titled," 2014, film still

tions in Mickey Mouse (to offer one key historical example), Walter Benjamin noted that "here, we see for the first time that it is possible to have one's own arm, even one's own body, stolen."[2] In Laric's video, a boy turns into a coffee vending machine (from the animated short "A Coffee Vending Machine and Its Sword" by Chang Hyung-Yun) codifying the precariousness of part-time labor as the possession of a part-time body. The flow of transmutations comes to a halt with a drawing of Reynard tending to his fallen friend; the anthropomorphic fox of folklore, having been revived in more recent times by "furries" subculture as a "fursona" – a zoomorphic identity that allows the fandom to bypass normative gender roles.

Cartoons are political subjects, and (to cite Gunning again) the "portrayal of the protean body" based on a "fantasy of metamorphosis, change and mutability, unconfined by the forms of actuality" can carry the progressive promise of "a transformation that could be undergone by all – politically, socially."[3]

But metamorphosis is also a metaphor for the artistic process, for the ability to generate a progeny that radically differs from the tradition from which it springs. Where Andy Warhol wanted to be a machine, Laric's tormented, feral characters want to be (in Bruce Lee's words) liquid, like water.[4] Whether or not we are still trading in Warholian currency (appropriation, debasement, iconophilia) is not that clear. "To be titled," seems at odds with the tendency to pictorialize everything the post-net generation inherited from Pop art – and yet it does still fetishize its subject matter.

"Oliver Laric," Tanya Leighton, Berlin, November 22, 2014–January 17, 2015.

Notes

1 Tom Gunning, "The Transforming Image: the Roots of Animation in Metamorphosis and Motion," in: Suzanne Buchan (ed.), Pervasive Animation, New York 2013, p. 66.
2 "Mickey Mouse", fragment by Walter Benjamin, 1931, from a conversation with Gustav Gluck and Kurt Weill, Gesammelte Schriften, VI, pp. 144–145.
3 Gunning, op. cit., p. 55.
4 Quoting Bruce Lee, Laric titled his first solo show, in 2012, "Be Water My Friend."