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REVIEWS MAR. 27, 2015

Oliver Laric

BERLIN,
at Tanya Leighton

by Hannah Black

Oliver Laric: Untitled, 2014, 4K video, approx. 5 minutes; at Tanya Leighton.

The human is not a fact derived from biology, but a cultural category whose boundaries and definitions are constantly being reworked or violently maintained. Recent protests against police brutality in the United States have highlighted how racial categories operate as vectors through which entitlements to social benefits and even life flow. Processes of racialization mark the boundaries of what is taken for human, and are a terrain of struggle.

Oliver Laric's show did not explicitly engage with these politics, but seemed haunted by their foundational questions. A long essay by philosopher Rosi Braidotti, which functioned as something halfway between a press release and an artwork, ends by praising Laric for his consideration of "nomadic becoming," but notes at the outset that able-bodied straight white masculinity, like Laric's, is an unmarked term, and the capacity for the sort of self-transformation imagined in the exhibition relies on the disproportionate freedoms granted by structural violence.

The triad of polyurethane casts on pedestals in the downstairs room was created as part of Laric's ongoing project with the Usher Gallery in Lincoln, UK. Three-dimensional scans of the museum's collection are available online, and from these Laric has selected an 1838 sculpture by John Gibson, *The Hunter and the Dog*, and recast it three times as a brightly colored relief. The gesture can be read as either a utopian attack on the artwork's singularity, or, less optimistically, as an attempt to bolster the failing citadel of Western classicism with new technology, much as markets dream of better algorithms.

An untitled animation in the upstairs room presents a series of decontextualized and fragmented images, a procedure familiar from Laric's "Versions" video series. Laric has excavated moments of transformation found in what the gallery describes as "over 100 years of animated film and videos." Casting a ragpicker's eye on this century of movement, Laric has filleted out a robot morphing into a car, an Egyptian statue accumulating detail, a snake becoming a dancer and so on. In "Versions," a digitally generated voice opined over the images; here, the soundtrack—sparse sound effects and an instrumental version of Justin Timberlake's "Cry Me a River"—is an atmospheric surround that doesn't quite coincide with the mutating figures.

The history of animation that Laric draws on includes the polyvalent wildness of 1930s cartoons, in which humans become objects becoming humans becoming animals. Racial categories were part of these cartoons' raw material. From Betty Boop to singing crows, the animated figures could circulate black culture without employing the problematic vessel of black people, a white fantasy that recurs again and again (Miley Cyrus was a favorite at this year's Art Basel Miami Beach).

The repetitive arpeggio of the Timberlake cover made its own circular progressions. The original is already half a copy, its title borrowed from a musically unrelated Ella Fitzgerald song in which she musters a self-defensive sneer against a man who "nearly drove me out of my head." Timberlake doesn't seem in danger of being driven anywhere but deeper into himself; the fatal vulnerability of the Fitzgerald song is gone, replaced by a steely masculine fury at being treated as fungible: "Girl, I refuse / You must have me confused / With some other guy." Emptied of its romantic significations, of any voice at all, Laric's rendering of the track signals only the miraculous circulatory possibilities of pop music, ostensibly stripped bare of particularity.