

“Invisible Enemies & Enemies of the Invisible”

We have passed to the other side of the affective mirror where fear 'reflects' only its own Cheshire-cat-like occurrence, at the phenomenal vanishing point, where it is without.

- Brian Massumi, Fear (The Spectrum Said), 2005

The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving. The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification...but... the unification it achieves is nothing other than an official language of universal separation.

- Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 1967

The past is prologue.

A child riding the bus begins to put on make-up. The cheeks become soft-white, clown-like, out of place. The lips are rendered redder and redder. They are not just a stereotype; they are a way of life. The child, they say, is father to the man, and so appears Sanford Biggers, on the same bus, perhaps on the same day, applying the make-up yet again. There is no linear transition here. Time is not the issue. Rather what is at stake is the timeless: the improbable possibility that a series of events could detach themselves from cause and effect, and simply play out again and again. How do we stop them from doing so?

Biggers continues on his journey. He is applying the make-up in the bathroom now; he is ready for the show. “Showtime!” While he is preparing, the smile is hanging in the tree. And next to you, there in the gallery, is another, unnatural tree. Southern trees bear strange fruit. But it is not a body blowing in the breeze, hanging there. It is bright white light bulbs like bright white teeth. It is big red lips like make-up and Bert Williams. We never see how Biggers gets tied up, but all of a sudden there he is, tied to the tree: his enslavement occurring like the cat’s grin – without an actual cause, forced by the structure of a seemingly timeless presence.

Indeed, Biggers’ halved Cheshire smile was not a coincidence in this context, as each work dealt (at some level) with the fragmented effects of unmoored events.

Rakowitz’ piece took its title from the literal translation of the name of the street which ran through the Gate of Ishtar in Babylon. His three-part installation involved an original sound recording, a timeline, and a series of reconstructed artifacts. Each dealt with the looting of treasures from the National Museum of Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Rakowitz attempted to reconstruct, out of papier-mâché, a number of the still missing artifacts, as well as a timeline looking at previous lootings of Iraqi goods, most notably the removal of the Gate of Ishtar itself to Berlin in the early 20th century.

Like Biggers’ work, Rakowitz’ instillation similarly points toward various understandings of the meaning of a grin without a cat. The title provides a sort of mandate against reasoning which proceeds from the precepts of invisibility. Yet invisibility is not what is at stake here. It is not some invisible hand (alone) which has stolen the artifacts from the museum, or rendered America structurally racist. What is suggested here is something more radical. Rather than reading the saying, “the invisible enemy should not exist,” as a military maxim. I think it its better understood within the context of Rakowitz’ work as an ethical injunction: one should not conceive of an enemy that does not exist.

The falsification of the enemy in the political discourse leading up to the invasion of Iraq was precisely the invention of an aggressor in spite of no actual attack. Rakowitz’ timeline, from Berlin excavation to Hussein’s nationalist fabrications to the looting of the museum, is a reminder that although an invisible enemy was constructed, a real force-field of humans, archives and relations exists. That actualized field of interaction is what the presumption of an invisible enemy erases.

The fight against an invisible enemy is perhaps one of the best ways of engaging the work of the show’s

an important frame for the evaluation of his work. Those familiar with Trecartin’s films only from YouTube or Ubu may find the exhibition at the gallery surprising at first. While the trademark video features of speed, cutting, a warm palette, youthful vivacity on the PG side of porn, destruction, over-exuberance, and the attempted hijacking of corporate culture remain, they have also been translated into the gallery space. The solitude of internet immersion is thus pushed into the community of the gallery space, only to refract viewers back into monads – the work is unapproachable except in an individual seat with headphones on.

The space appears as if Trecartin went on a shopping spree at Ikea, tore up the goods purchased, and re-assembled them in a haphazard order. As is frequently noted in the context of his frenetic production, the model of the artist working a year to get the brushstroke or the symbolism just right is laughable. And yet, at the same time, the ready-made is equally disavowed as a limited project that cannot contain the sweep of postmodern capitalist culture.

But if, as I want to insist, there remains something troubling about Trecartin’s work, it is not in the liberatory sense of troubling gender or the market, as his work has frequently been understood. Rather, we have to remember the simple knowledge that it is precisely in the most pernicious forms of capitalism where everything is troubled – where all that is solid melts into air and where transgression at the crossroads of fluidity and creation is precisely the new spirit of capitalism.

Without getting into the regressive debate of a potential “outside” to capitalism, one need only remember the injunction we’ve read through Rakowitz: the invisible enemy should not exist. Capitalism in Trecartin’s work is allowed to stand precisely as a series of affects and gestures unmoored from their actual contexts. Biggers’ examination of the racialized American past and Rakowitz’ reconstructions of archival control and manipulation both show us the body of the cat where we think we only see a grin. They remind us that the supposed fantasy world we live in has in fact been constructed through institutions of power, dominance and often hatred.

Trecartin, meanwhile, is working in the world of grins without cats, effects without causes, affects without agents. There is nothing wrong with this move per se, and there are a variety of appreciative ways to engage the works Trecartin has made viz-a-viz queer politics, media specificity, representations of a contemporary condition, just to name a few. But in the context of a show alongside artists who have taken up and reminded us about such pressing concerns in the present, it seems inevitable that Trecartin’s work be read as I have: as an entertaining, provocative, transgressive but ultimately (and for these very reasons) spectacular exhibition, in Debord’s sense of the term.

The distance between Trecartin and Biggers, for example, is well underscored in the difference between the ends of the two videos. Trecartin’s almost narrative-less party scene looks almost the same at beginning and end – there is just more stuff and it has been re-arranged. Meanwhile, at the end of Biggers’ video Shuffle, the artist, now untied, walks up to the tree where he was previously held hostage, sits down on the grass, and stares at his former captor. Then, without any gravitas, he gets up and walks away. The difference is clear: Trecartin re-arranges the matrix; Biggers and Rakowitz disassemble it. I guess it should be obvious by now who was announced the winner of the prize this past Thursday.

-Avi Alpert



Installation view of Cheshire, 2009, Aluminum, Plexiglass, LEDs, tracer and timer, Courtesy of the artist Courtesy of the artist and Michael Klein Arts, New York

It should not have been a coincidence that the embodied form of Biggers’ techno-smile, turned on its side and cut in half, was among the first things visitors to the Temple Gallery in North Philadelphia would have seen this past month at the Jack Wolgin Fine Arts Prize show. Biggers’ trilogy of works were set beside Michael Rakowitz’ The invisible enemy should not exist and Ryan Trecartin’s P.opular S.ky (section ish) in competition for a \$150,000 purse.

youngest (and only Philadelphia-based) finalist, Ryan Trecartin. Trecartin’s meteoric rise within a consumerist-dominated art market is certainly cause for concern in evaluating his work. But the equally quick backlash to dismiss him just on the basis of that fact will get us nowhere. Trecartin’s position within this show, then, alongside two slightly more mature and constructively engaged artists, provides