It should not have been a coincidence that the embodied form of Biggers’ techno-smile was without a cat’s grin – without an actual cause, forced by the structure of the seemingly timeless presence.

Indeed, Bigger’s halved Chesire-cat 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’ installation 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 of interaction examination of the racialized American past and capitalism’s unmoored from their actual contexts. Biggers’ reconstructions of archival control and capitalism 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 space where the spirit of capitalism is laughable. 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 effects 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 looks 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