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Oliver Laric. *Year of The Dog*; installation view, 2018. Metro Pictures, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. Photo: Genevieve Hanson.

Oliver Laric: Year of the Dog by Noah Dillon

Of everything that has risen from democratized international digital communications, one of the most surprising must be the existence and development of new identities such as otherkin, furies, transhumanists, and similar contemporary therianthropic communities, which experiment with and adopt lives and characteristics that are, fundamentally, inhuman. Perhaps Donna Haraway foresaw the kind of imagination required for these communities, writing in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (1991), “We find the themes of modern America reflected in detail in the bodies and lives of animals. We polish an animal mirror to look for ourselves,” though I think this desire for reflection is more widely human than strictly “American.”

An exhibition by Austria-born, Germany-based artist Oliver Laric, *Year of the Dog*, his first solo with Metro Pictures, features a mirror of the kind Haraway describes—and which those aforementioned communities have constructed, exposed—with three polyurethane sculptures and a short digital video. Taking its name from this year’s Chinese zodiacal classification, which describes people as imparted with qualities associated with certain animals, the exhibition features images of beasts, humans, and hybrids woven into a visual and phenotypic pastiche.

Whereas many cinematic visions of post-human bodies, such as *RoboCop*, *Avatar*, *The Thing*, *Videodrome*, even *X-Men*, etc., emphasize technological destruction followed by technological reconstruction, the characters in Laric’s high-tech artworks model mutation, evolution, and morphism. As with his work in the 2015 New Museum Triennial, *Untitled*(2014–15), Laric here appropriates from cartoons. In animation, humans and fauna interact and meld seamlessly; he leverages the form’s porous distinctions between sapiens and other beings, real or invented.

The sculptures, each called *Hundemensch* (meaning “dog-man,” all works 2018), are multihued variations of a single image: a naked humanoid dog, as from anime or mythology, crouched on the ground, cradling a hound in its arms. The image distantly resembles a *pietà*, but the species’ relationship is unclear: Intimate? Ward? Savior? Is the dog-man the canine’s master, or comrade? And how do humans relate to the supernatural humanoid creature, compared to the mundane but ananthropic pup?

The video, *Betweenness*, is a series of vignettes rendered in black-and-white line drawings. The juxtaposition of these brief sequences sketches a narrative of the animation’s history, and humanity’s future.

For instance, in one iterated sequence, a walking polygonal model successively resolves into Ducky, a character from *The Land Before Time*, a 1988 animated feature about anthropomorphic dinosaurs trying to escape ecological catastrophe. (Another synchrony: Ducky was voiced by the late Judith Barsi, who also portrayed Anne-Marie, a girl in an intimate relationship with an anthropomorphic dog in 1989’s animated kids’

movie *All Dogs Go to Heaven*.) A later sequence of evolving polygons resolves into a clip of Bambi, the deer, leaping through void, white space.

Several sequences involve humans morphing into animals: man into donkey, man into monkey, man into pig, dinosaur into man. In one clip, a feline-woman licks a male torso affectionately, though it's unclear if her ministrations are sexual or salutary. A lot of the imagery is evocative, if not clearly descriptive.

Along with growth and mutation are images of pathology, death, and decay: a fly struggling on its back, praying mantises, wolves tearing apart something erased, a sucking mosquito, a plant withering, bacteria multiplying. Even some more innocuous images, such as a tree frog or a cast of crabs walking, look mournful of a world in which both are threatened with extinction, or in which some of these species are already gone. Dr. Moreau-ish beings that will never exist are tinged with of another sadness: of a missing link.

Mushrooms appear frequently, growing and opening. Some seem to be particular species, such as gourmet trumpet mushrooms (others smile and dance). These, along with the specific citations of childhood movies, snippets of MRIs, and anime, situate the video squarely in the contemporary West, and in the hegemony of international capitalism, where technological goods and services, cartoon entertainments, and chimeras appear (at least superficially) surprisingly international, fungible, transmissible. Those who preach tranquility about climate change often assert the possibility to evolve or engineer a relief from doom, and Laric's images seem to both goad such latent fantasies and identify them as fantasies only.

At the end of the video, the music stops and a silent procession of ants crosses the screen from right to left, carrying various objects, mostly leaves and twigs, though among them one can find the outlines of a human stomach (in miniature), a jaw, a femur, Great Britain, a fetus, crab claw, a key. They're reminiscent of the opening scene of Liu Cixin's sci-fi novel *The Dark Forest* (2008), in which an anthropomorphised ant is the sole witness to a meeting that marks Earth's twilight epoch. Are Laric's insects

engaging in humanity and culture, devouring its remains, or porting it to a new territory?

It's hard not to ascribe human motives and psyches to non-human beings—the oneness of all things is our presumption that each, even inanimate objects, are just like us, have similar experiences and motives, rather than being afforded the autonomy of radical differentiation—like a dog supposedly ashamed of its shit on the rug, a cat called “haughty,” a malfunctioning digital device with a frowning face on its display, a captive ape who lives like a suburban child.

In 2011, Adam Lanza—who would soon perpetrate the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, one of the worst mass murders in U.S. history—telephoned *Anarchy Radio*, a show hosted by John Zerzan on Oregon’s KWVA-FM. Lanza wanted to discuss a 2009 incident in which a chimpanzee named Travis, born and raised in suburban United States, mauled his caretaker’s friend. The ape was shot and killed by police. Lanza expressed enormous empathy for Travis, describing his having been prescribed Xanax and daily human routines that were wholly aberrant, and which denatured the ape and forced him into a psychotic outburst.

Lanza was likely imagining (wrongly) this incident as emblematic and justifying of his own violence a year later in which he murdered 27 people and committed suicide. Nonetheless, his identification with a non-human primate, and with a fantasy of a lost nature, is not at all uncommon. I know a lot of people—and you probably do, too—who scorn contemporary life, screens, prescriptions, authority, domesticity, etc., as perverse, unnatural, and ovine. Like life is too human *and* also not human enough. People dream of a natural life close to animals and imagine animals as being like people, rather than acknowledging that people are animals. I’m not sure what a “natural life” could actually be, or that such a utopia has a solid form in the popular imagination. I think that just as the hunted bird is subordinate to the intent of a domestic cat (a human invention), all of our relationships to other creatures are at heart very confused fantasies involving projections upon them and allusions to them. Do we take seriously that some animals wantonly murder, that some have driven others to extinction? Does the ape or ant or dog project itself into our position and wonder about dressing and

fucking like a person?

Humans are primates. We're the first apes to develop certain tools, which become metaphors of ourselves: pets, written language, movies, AR-15s, coal-fired power plants, etc. We may be the last, too. We're not special, just speciated; and we're discovering our own coming fossilization. Laric's work is not anthropocentric, and reminds us that life will outlast humanity, will continue to evolve and colonize niches in our wake. He gestures at some of the possibilities: mutation, extinction, mechanization.

I had a cat until recently. She and I never got to talk about any of this stuff—geopolitics and global warming, how she experiences catness, or people, or how we relate. (Maybe this is reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein's assertion that "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.") When she got very sick and I had to finally put her to sleep, I made a decision I couldn't explain to her. And that gulf goes for Lanza's mythologized monkey, and Bambi, and an ant, and on and on. That gap between one species and another is awful, filled beautifully and indigently by the imaginary.

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