

# BROOKLYN RAIL

## JUNE 17, 2020

### AP: ASSEMBLED PERSONALITIES



Alex Da Corte, *Slow Graffiti*, 2017 (still). Courtesy the artist, KADIST collection.

Musing on the accumulative, highly malleable nature of individual and social identity, the works in the Kadist Video Library's most recent online "episode," AP: Assembled Personalities, provide a trenchant framework through which we may examine the confluence of material and virtual practices that define our current reality. The selections of Rudolf Frieling, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Curator of Media Arts, carefully echo the technical and thematic operations by which each work functions, convening a complexly interconnected program of five videos culled from KADIST's online library. The exhibition's premise is especially apt in the current moment, which finds much of the world set to accelerate the already-breakneck pace of the digitization of interpersonal and professional exchange.

Alex Da Corte's absurdist exploration of 21st century alienation, *Slow Graffiti* (2017), anchors the manifold themes of the show in the spotless white void of contemporary art's usual space of presentation by setting its scenes against a minimalist, blank backdrop. Placed at the center of the sequence of five videos, the work remakes Jørgen Leth's *The Perfect Human*, a 1967 black-and-white short that depicts the titular subject as a stylish, wealthy, white man and his similarly characterized female partner. In *Slow Graffiti*, Leth's alluring couple is replaced with a single actor in prosthetic makeup reminiscent of Boris Karloff's famous portrayal of Frankenstein's monster (a creature who is himself an assemblage of multiple cadavers). Rather than the elegant, austere black-and-white of Leth's original, Da Corte chooses a vivid, colorful palette reminiscent of contemporary design studios. The loneliness and despair encapsulated by the monster of Mary Shelley's original gothic is also expressed in Da Corte's modified voiceover script (references to "the

perfect human” are replaced with “the monster”), and this mood belies the lighthearted atmosphere conjured by the vibrant props and playful choreography.

Da Corte’s stratified appropriation is a central conceit of AP: Assembled Personalities, with each artist using their referents as raw fodder for the ideas they seek to express in their film. Bookending the presentation are videos that riff on the genres of film and literature, examining the relationship between the natural world and “civilized” culture: Guy Ben-Ner’s *Wild Boy* (2004) and Li Ran’s *Beyond Geography* (2012). Li and Ben-Ner’s works share a critique of the modern conception of the civilization vs. nature dichotomy, as well as an open-ended examination of the behaviors and abilities that comprise a “cultured” individual (in the most fundamental sense, i.e., language, grooming, rituals, etc.). Where *Wild Boy* examines the foundational development of human behavior in early childhood and how it evolves according to environmental influence, Li’s documentary-style film expresses a more pointed criticism of the patronizing approach to studying indigenous tribes isolated from the global community.

Keren Cytter’s *Untitled* (2009) is, paradoxically, the most earnestly dramatic video of the exhibition and, perhaps fittingly, also the least affected. Here a theatrical ensemble performance restages the central action of John Cassavetes’s *Opening Night* (1977) with moving sets and scenes enacted out of the audience’s sightline. Shot with handheld cameras that move about the stage, the film’s editing and direction further disrupt the boundary between the stage, the live audience, and the viewer. The actors’ realistic execution of the dialogue and drama of the script heightens the tension arising from the multiple valences of reality that converge in the space of Cytter’s frame.

Mark Leckey’s *Made in Heaven* (2004) may at first seem like an outlier in the program, devoid as it is of any imagery of human subjects, or, for that matter, any “real” space. With the smooth precision of simulated camera movement, the single, 2-minute shot sails about a virtual replica of Leckey’s studio. Perched atop a pedestal in the room is Jeff Koons’s 1986 sculpture, *Rabbit* (or rather, a digital rendering of it); as the shot slowly zooms in on the object, we see that the polished chrome finish reflects the room around it and nothing else. Whereas the architectural and sculptural elements of the scene are executed with a precise material logic, any sense of realism is undercut by the absence of a camera in *Rabbit*’s mirrored surface. The film thus emphasizes its own artificiality (it would be impossible to make a “real” version of the work shot in the physical setting it depicts), a trope that Koons himself has explored for much of his career.

Where the assemblage impulse engaged by many 20th century artists often sought to collapse the hierarchical distinction between highbrow and lowbrow materials, the works presented in *Assembled Personalities* reveal the increasingly blended realms of virtual and physical reality. Taking the artist’s studio as a common site of action, each work examines how—or even if—this convergence of digital and material elements amounts to something more than the sum of its parts. If we apply the comparison of IKEA furniture laid out in Frieling’s introduction—the notion of “some assembly required”—to this question, then we must also consider that these artistic personas are flimsy and not designed for lifelong use, an apt comparison to both the fluidity of identity and the rate of technological obsolescence brought about by the same social and economic systems that has made the home goods retailer so popular.