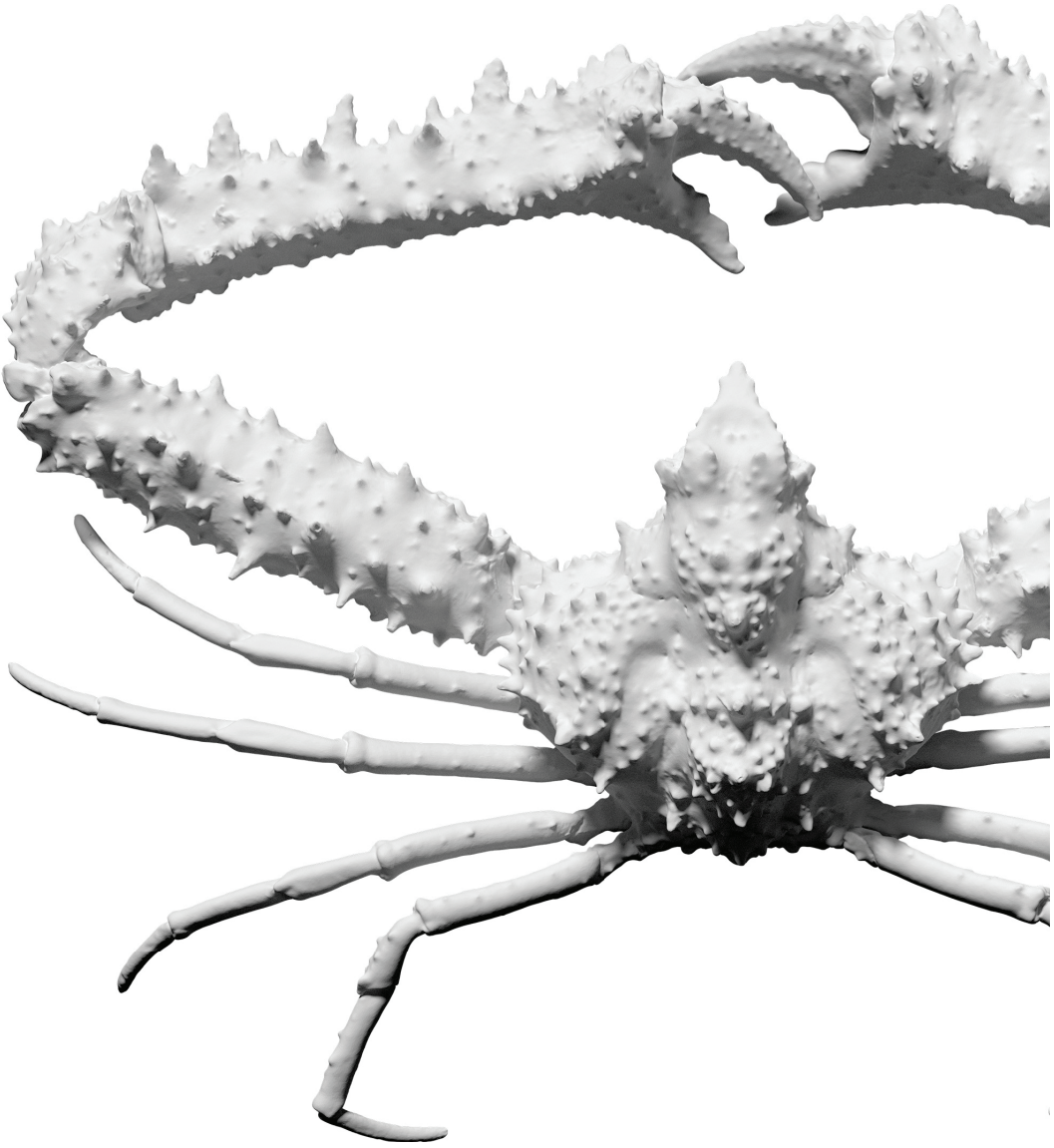
Heuser, Bianca. “Hijacking Classical Sculptures in Vienna,” *Ssense.com* (May 2016).

SSENSE

For every opportunity opened up by technological development, twice as many questions are posed: Who does information belong to? Why does rarity increase value? What does “original” even mean? The Austrian-born and Berlin-based artist Oliver Laric is concerned with exactly these questions. His videos and sculptures play with the formulas and copies surrounding that which we imagine to be unique. Laric is so disruptive in the normal circuits of intellectual property—from importing North Korean sculptures to creating his own high-security holograms—that the stories behind his work sometimes evoke the feeling a heist movie. For an ongoing project, he focuses on the neoclassicist Greco-Roman sculptures that can be found on display at museums all over Europe, as well as molds taken of the faces of celebrities. The 34-year-old creates 3D scans of these cultural treasures to re-cast them, and uploads the scans to his website as open-source data. Now, they can be recreated anywhere by anyone equipped with the required technology. They can be used as home decor in virtual reality environments, or as models for 3D-printed lamps. It is a gesture that shows how old school ideas of originality and preciousness have been completely changed by contemporary technology.

Bianca Heuser spoke with Oliver Laric, who was visited by Lukas Gansterer during the installation of his exhibition “Photoplastik” at the historical Secession art space in Vienna.



Bianca Heuser: How did you go from starting as a graphic designer to being an artist?

Oliver Laric: I had no idea that you can make money in art, so I thought I'd study something practical. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a contemporary art market, but then a collector asked if he could buy the videos on my website. I asked some artists how that works, and that paid my rent for a while.

Which is crazy, since video work has a reputation of being nearly impossible to sell.

Maybe not impossible, but more difficult. Then one thing just led to the next, museum commissions—this and that—until I could slowly live from it. Initially, I just showed work on my website. When I had my first exhibition in a physical space, I thought that I'll just take the work I created for the web and put it in the space. I don't think it worked so well. I started thinking about sculpture as something to put in a space, but still I am more attracted to the image of it than the sculpture itself. The sculpture itself is more of a by-product. The image is the most common perception of exhibitions generally, too. I don't think it's just a market tool, but also an aspect of making work available to people that are not in Berlin, London, Paris, and New York. I experience a lot of art just through its documentation.

What are you showing at the Secession in Vienna right now?

Sculptures. They exist in the space, but also as data made available for free on a website. So most things in the exhibition space can also travel and be consumed and modified elsewhere. I am working with a lawyer to figure out which information can be published. Generally speaking, the author has to have been dead for 70 years. Aside from that, there are moral issues, too, when you're using a depiction of a person. I've been scanning life masks of celebrities that I collected from eBay, which are incredibly detailed and show every single pore—of Christopher Walken, Sigourney Weaver, Ice Cube, Meryl Streep, Robert DeNiro.

When you're using other people's faces, especially those of celebrities who in a way live off of them, there is a thin line between being intriguing and being just plain creepy.

I find it kind of fascinating what the legal limitations are, and how much modification is needed to create a new form. I'm interested in this grey area. These masks are a byproduct of film productions. So if there is a scene in *Alien* in which Sigourney Weaver gets melted in lava, they will use this mask as a dummy. Some of them later land in trash cans, and some studio employee will pick it up and sell it to a subculture of traders.

That sounds really illegal.

I think people are interested in this kind of Hollywood paraphernalia, because it is as close as you can get to your actor of choice. It has really touched their skin! But it also is dead, a lifeless piece of plaster.

Is the status of these celebrities as contemporary icons what links them to your other work, casts of Roman and Greek sculptures?

That's one aspect, but these new classical sculptures are fascinating to me because they act as recipes or compositions for new works. They're continuously re-appropriated for different purposes and can be re-inscribed with new meanings. Their bodies become a stand-in for multiple meanings, and these life masks have that potential inscribed in them, too. Some of the other sculptures in the exhibition deal with the history of the Secession. For example, I tried scanning a sculpture that was in an exhibition here in 1902. It was a monument of Beethoven made by an artist from Leipzig named Max Klinger. After the exhibition, the city of Leipzig bought it and it has been at the Museum der bildenden Künste since. I thought it'd be easy to scan, since the two institutions have this shared history—and the author of the work has been dead for over 70 years—but the director was not very into the idea. In the end, I decided to make the statue without his permission to scan it, which is possible by the use of photogrammetry. Taking photographs is allowed at the museum, and if you take many pictures of a statue you can calculate a three-dimensional model. So I didn't do anything illegal. They couldn't stop me from doing this.

Many of the 3D scans you take can be downloaded from your website. What is the weirdest thing you've ever seen anyone do with them?

Maybe it's not the weirdest, but the one I'm most proud of is this one that appeared at the Eurovision Song Contest in Vienna last year. I almost missed it. Luckily someone tagged me on Instagram. The statue is by a British neoclassicist sculptor from Liverpool, John Gibson. Somebody else made it into a lamp, too.

So you don't have any ownership claims over these scans?

I could, but I'm just happy to give up all my responsibility. To not worry and just let them live their lives, and accept whatever choices they make.

Back to the people who do claim ownership over the artworks you use in your artwork: It sounds like you spend a lot of time trying to persuade them. What's your strategy?

It's a golden handshake. It's just a hundred euro bill and a bottle of whiskey. [laughs] I have a feeling it slowly gets easier with every museum I've already worked with. It's becoming more ubiquitous as a technology, since museums are already scanning works for conservation purposes. It's just the accessibility part that is still relatively new territory. Museums are still trying to figure it out. From my perspective, my work is beneficial to them. It's time-consuming and quite expensive to make all these scans. There is a need for them, too. I put a model up and a week later it's been downloaded a few hundred times, another week later a few thousand times. They spread incredibly fast.

The digital and analog are very much intertwined in your work.

Yeah, I don't view it as such a binary opposition.

Do you think of the digital as an extension of the analog?

Yes, it's just one thing to me. Like I said, my fascination with sculpture is a fascination with its documentation. It's part of the same idea. I also get a bit anxious when something is rare or damageable. It's terrifying for me to have all these sculptures around my studio. Having these digital files, which I can reproduce if they get damaged, calms me down. I'm not drawn to the idea of a single, precious object with charisma, either. It's not the object itself that excites me, but the idea that manifests itself in it. For example, I visited a temple in Japan that is destroyed and rebuilt every 20 years. This has been going on for almost 700 years. There are two plots of land, and for 20 years, this shrine made out of cypress wood will be on one side, and then for the next 20 years on the other. For a few months at the end of each cycle, both exist next to each other. On one side you have the old one, modified by nature for over 19 years, and on the other a brand new, untouched one. It's such a fascinating thing to see. My initial impulse was to pray to the new shrine, but it made no sense, because the spirits hadn't been transferred yet. Two days later, the ceremony had been performed, and people were praying to the new shrine. It was probably the most emotional moment for me in relation to architecture. It wasn't so much about this specific piece of cypress wood, or a millennia-old tree, as it was about the idea of cypress wood. I like to think of my work in a similar way. It's this idea that can be re-performed over and over again, and is not tied to a single precious object. It's a very continuous repetition, too. The building isn't modified. It's been built exactly the same way for 1300 years. You could argue that its current version is much closer to the initial one built in 680 than a building kept alive by the European tradition, which fetishizes patina and decay. UNESCO won't give this World Heritage status. To them, it is 20 years old at most, whereas to Shinto priests, it's 1300 years old.

Questions of authenticity, like ownership, play a big role in your work as well.

It's very flexible. It's changing over time. I think the association in most cases is temporary. Some people in the art world might associate the shape and form of that John Gibson statue with my name, but that might last for maybe 50 or 100 years, and then move on to another name. I don't think of these works I'm making as mine necessarily. I'm just being associated with them.

That's a very modern approach. Ideas of ownership—whether they are concerned with land or romantic relationships—massively complicate things. So what makes them so pressing in regard to intellectual property?

It might be good to ignore that discussion and just take it as a given: That's just how our culture works. I grew up listening to hip-hop and learned that this music I loved already existed in the 1970s and is just being reinterpreted right now.

Like Notorious B.I.G. sampling Sylvia Striplin. It does get complicated, though, when the appropriated ideas cross cultures. Macklemore ripping off a Le1f song is weird, because he is appropriating a culture that isn't his.

Obviously, there are nuances and examples that are problematic.

A lot of the Greco-Roman sculptures at European museums prompt similar questions. For example, Germany robbed Greece of these cultural treasures during World War II and still has not returned them. Do you engage with that problematic?

It's a complicated conversation, because it is so case-specific. If you look at the issues that the Neues Museum has, they are completely different from the ones at the Bode Museum, Tate, or Met. I sympathize a lot with the countries that are making these claims. The only time I have had to deal with this conversation was when I scanned columns from the old Summer Palace in Beijing, which was destroyed in the Second Opium War by the British and the French. All the remnants of the palace went to Europe—even the emperor's dog was stolen and named "Looty," because they looted the dogs.

How tacky!

These objects turned up at auction and Chinese government officials have tried intervening and asking buyers to donate them back to China. Allegedly, there was a Norwegian general in the Chinese army who was gifted these columns. So they ended up in Bergen. As I was contacting them to scan them, they were in discussions with a Chinese businessman who wanted to return them to China, which I think has happened by now.

Your efforts to digitally archive these works as well as the aesthetics of your art bring to mind art's current favorite buzzword: post-Internet art.

Oh, what is that? I mean, I don't care much about the term. I don't think it's very precise. I'm more into the idea of a retronym. Like, for example, when color television was invented, what was previously just called "television" became "black and white television." I think it's better to just call everything that happened before "pre-Internet art". But the art world's interest in Internet-related work is kind of recent. I was surprised at how long this major influence was left out of exhibitions. The art world is very far behind in many ways.

It's like your parents who just discovered Facebook.

But it doesn't upset me much. What bothers me is that so many people who were instrumental in the early years of what could be described as part of this movement are left out of the discussion.