J.J. Charlesworth, "Mark Leckey," *ArtReview*, July, 2014

ArtReview

Mark Leckey

Hito Steyerl   Bosco Sodi   Ryan Trecartin   Bridget Riley

Mark Leckey

What does it mean to 'be' in the midst of things?
In a world where images have become things, in a way that
blurs the gap between self-image and self?

by J.J. Charlesworth   Portrait by Jeremy Liebman

Mark Leckey photographed at Gavin Brown's Enterprise,
New York, May 2014

Mark Leckey is busy printing objects, or perhaps they're copies of objects. It's April, and between phone calls from my car and Skype calls from his kitchen, Leckey explains what he's putting together for *A Month of Making*, a May–June exhibition at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York, which itself anticipates a solo exhibition at Wiels, Brussels, this coming September, and which is a continuation, of sorts, of Leckey's remarkable curatorial project, *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things*, which was commissioned by the Hayward Gallery and toured the UK throughout 2013. For the Gavin Brown show, Leckey is getting together some state-of-the-art 3D printers, which he'll set to work to print out solid versions of already existing objects, objects scanned to become digital information, which in turn will produce new objects: copies, or 'dupes', as he's calling them.

There's always been a restless, impatient enthusiasm to Leckey's exploration of our culture's mixed-up, obsessive relationship with both things and images, and the experience of our own fascination with and enthrallment to them. It's an exploration that has become increasingly ambitious as it has encompassed video, object, installation, 'performance lectures' and eventually, with *The Universal Addressability...*, the business of curating too.

The 2008 Turner Prize-winner first came to attention for his breakthrough video *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* (1999) – a nostalgic elegy for the energy of subculture in Britain during the 1970s and 80s, a kind of biographical recollection composed of other people's footage. Sequences of people losing themselves in the moment were edited in a manner somewhere between documentary and decelerated pop promo. But these were images, also, of people adopting self-images – style, dance moves – becoming images, as it were. And closer in, that video seemed to set up the question Leckey has been elaborating answers to ever since: what it means to be alive in a culture of images, and in some way, to live with and through them, while at the same time flirting with the possibility of becoming other to oneself, to become an object, or a thing. As Leckey declared during a discussion at the ICA a few years ago: 'I don't want to look at things, I want to *be* in them.' It's a desire that seems to resonate with our current moment, in a culture that, though everywhere mediated by images and networks, puts huge store in the transparency of connectedness, of our access to and implication in everything virtual. 'Always on', in the thick of what is seen and said onscreen, we have begun no longer to distinguish between the 'here' of the material and the 'there' of the virtual, the image.

Things, objects, artefacts, artworks: plugged into and playing off the groundswell of recent cultural thinking around the question of the division between man and machine, alternative states of consciousness and the terms of human subjectivity in the age of the network, *The Universal Addressability...* was a wunderkammerlike accumulation of incongruous objects, mixing artworks with manufactured goods, ancient artefacts and ultramodern technology, the real and the virtual: a high-tech prosthetic hand next to a medieval hand-shaped reliquary; a *Doctor Who* 'Cyberman' helmet alongside a stone gargoyle; video sequences from the virtual world of Second Life next to a video essay by the autism campaigner Amanda Baggs. Crisscrossing ancient and modern, *The Universal Addressability...* riffed on the irrationalistic, 'technopagan' return of an 'animistic'

worldview, in which things are no longer merely the inert, passive objects of human intent, but become, in the explosion of the age of the network, quasi-alive, enchanted...

So where does the current interest in 3D scanning and printing come from? "When I was asked to curate a show," he says of *The Universal Addressability...*, "I didn't feel that comfortable with being an 'artist-curator', so what I tried to do as much as possible was to make the curated show into my own work. And one way to do that was to continue the exhibition somehow, to make something out of it. So when *The Universal Addressability* was at Nottingham Contemporary, I had as many of the objects 3D-scanned as I could. Later, I had some trouble with getting the objects printed in Brussels ahead of the [upcoming] Wiels show, so Gavin [Brown] suggested we bring some printers into his gallery [in New York] and do the production there, as an event – what, in the geek world, they'd call a 'maker space'. So we're going to produce those, and the rest of the works I couldn't scan will be printed up as cutouts or something similar – I'm calling them 'generations' or, even better, 'dupes'."

He came up with a nice line for the press release, he muses: "'They might be lossy, they might be "de-generations", but they might be better suited to the world as it is today, because they are more "bits" [data bits] than they are atoms.' But that's getting a bit clever," he says self-mockingly. "I'm doing it more because I *can*. I just want to see what it might throw up, and be a bit irresponsible."

Irresponsibility is definitely one of Leckey's strengths: not just as a suck-it-and-see approach to intuiting what might work, but rather in terms of not taking responsibility for the consequences – political or ethical – of where your intuition takes you. It's to be found in Leckey's particular quest for a kind of affirmation of oneself in the experience of an artwork, even if it reveals the ambiguities and problems of such affirmation and risks the possibility of losing oneself to it. 'Critical distance' is something Leckey has a problem with: chatting for a moment about what he thinks he's going to say on a discussion panel that evening at Tate Modern as part of its Richard Hamilton retrospective, he elaborates: "The big difference between British art and American art is about distance – Hamilton always had to maintain a kind of critical distance, he was never willing to just 'succumb' in the way I think American artists like Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons do. Their relationship is about trying to be as 'integrated' as possible, they're trying to *be* that thing." Whether there's a critical residue in the kind of complicity that Warhol or Koons adopts – with commodity capitalism, with consumerism – has been hotly debated. But one gets the sense that Leckey wants to go beyond this, to provoke and incite further thought about the purpose of taking a step back and the value of throwing oneself in.

Immersion and distance, thing and image, the febrile oscillation between the sight and sound of pop culture and how to step out of it, to allow some reflection, some thinking to take place – all of this is perhaps given its most concise expression in Leckey's 'Koons bunny' film, *Made in 'Eaven* (2004), a CGI mirage in which Koons's iconic 1986 stainless-steel sculpture *Rabbit* is recreated in a simulation of Leckey's London flat. As the virtual point of view wheels around the sculpture, we notice there's no one reflected back in the mirror of its featureless,

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polished head. It is intoxicating to watch, an unreal doubling-up of impossibilities. *Made in 'Eaven* is something to do with desire – having what you can't have, by just plain nicking it – but also a kind of crisis of materiality – of the sculptural object, and of the human body too. It's a work that in many ways anticipates the scorching of the discourses of older media – sculpture, painting, photography, even video – in the critical fallout of the emerging networked culture of the noughties, though Leckey is cautious not to get too caught up in the voguish rush to see everything as entirely converted by the advent of digital culture.

"I'm apprehensive about what we're doing in New York," he says. "One of the reasons is that there's a bit of a rush [among artists] to be the first to get your hands on this stuff [3D-printing technology]. And it's not a question of being involved in a post-Internet-art type of discussion – I'm not interested in that... Actually, it's about the fact that I have a problem with experiencing objects in the world, so I have to turn that object into an image before I can experience it as an object." Rather than being tinged with digital-age anxiety, *Made in 'Eaven* is a celebration – not of an object, but of the desire for it, a form of wish-realisation in which the experiencing subject is removed from its own materiality, and that of the object, for both to exist in a moment of suspension, or resolution, or even oblivion. A sort of ecstasy.

Leckey mentions, half-joking, that he has sometimes thought of himself as 'a bit autistic'. But it's perhaps more the case that autism has become a kind of metaphor for a broader difficulty many of us face as society tilts from one where our relationships are with other people, to one where our relationships are increasingly with things. No doubt that could sound like an echo of Marx's much misused discussion of 'commodity fetishism' – 'a definite social relation between men, that

assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things' – and it's too easy to jump from there into the truism that, hey, we're talking to our machines and they're talking to us. Nevertheless, we soon find ourselves having to think through the consequences of a culture in which the division between man and technology, subject and object, has become a good deal more fuzzy than before, and we may be in uncharted waters... As Erik Davis, the Californian cultural critic whom Leckey cites as a big influence, anticipated in his article 'Technopagans' back in 1995, 'we surround ourselves with an animated webwork of complex, powerful, and unseen forces that even the "experts" can't totally comprehend. Our technological environment may soon appear to be as strangely sentient as the caves, lakes, and forests in which the first magicians glimpsed the gods'.

It's a development Leckey has forayed into previously, with his *GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction* (2010), a performance-into-video in which Leckey voices, through digital modulation, the inner monologue of a black Samsung fridge-freezer, as it tries to explain itself to itself and the world around it, in a doleful stream-of-consciousness that takes the matt-sheened appliance from its own dimensions and internal technology, to ruminate on the world of vegetables and subterranea, eventually finding itself drifting in space, between sun and moon – which recur in the fridge's monologue as the quasi-mythic representation of the hot-and-cold of its heat exchanger circuit.

Leckey's interests might have shifted throughout the last decade – from an obsession with pop culture, subculture and the figure of the dandy in earlier films such as *Parade* (2003), and in his band collaboration DonAteller, with fellow artists Ed Laliq, Enrico David and Bonnie Camplin; to the high/low culture face-off of his *BigBoxStatueAction*

above Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore, 1999 (still), DVD, 15 min.
© the artist. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York

preceding pages A Month of Making, 2014 (installation view). Photo: Thomas Müller.
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performances (2003–11), in which Leckey's giant speaker stack confronts icons of modernist British sculpture, such as Jacob Epstein's *Jacob and the Angel* (1940–1); to his later multimedia performance-lectures, the Internet-driven epiphany of dematerialisation *In the Long Tail* (2009) and its antithesis *Cinema-in-the-Round* (2006–8), with its more reflective inquiry into the physicality of images via, among others, Philip Guston, Felix the Cat, Gilbert & George, Homer Simpson and *Titanic* (1997). And yet between them one can trace the peregrination of Leckey's restless attempt to grasp some form of truth about the predicament of experiencing and being in the current moment, as things, images and selves become interchangeable.

From a critic's point of view, Leckey's tracking and anticipating of the crosscurrents of contemporary culture, his promiscuous remixing of sources from popular culture and 'cultural theory', present an artist increasingly attentive to the relationship between an event and how we reflect on it, the immediacy of experience and its mediation – the loop between art and criticism. And Leckey's work is looped in another sense, working almost always in and out of the work of others: the anonymous footage of Northern Soul and Rave clubs in *Fiorucci*; Koons's *Rabbit*, invoked and wished into being in *Made in 'Eaven*; sculptures by Epstein or Henry Moore in the *BigBoxStatueActions*; Leckey's own figure seen only in reflection in the curves of a stainless steel Pearl snare drum, in the video *Pearl Vision* (2012); the elaborate cultural composites of the lectures; or the scanned, recut objects sourced out of *The Universal Addressability...* Authorship and signature style are nowhere to be seen here in their old guises, and this relates, perhaps, to Leckey's attitude towards how to embrace the experience of the currents that make up a moment in history. "I see myself in a tradition of Pop culture," he says. "I'm a Pop artist – I believe in the idea that you're essentially a receiver, that you open yourself up to, and you allow whatever is current to come through you and absorb it into your body and somehow process that, and that's how the work gets made."

Leckey's current efforts are focused on a new video, a sort of 'memoir', the first glimpses of which were seen in his recent exhibition *On Pleasure Bent* (2013), at the Hammer Museum at UCLA. In the 'trailer' video of the same name, we find a dense collage of brief sequences that might recall a British adolescence through fragments of music and film, invoking an woozy eroticism that drifts between the lattice of fishnet tights and of electricity pylons, the branding of Benson & Hedges cigarettes, cathode-ray-tube RGB dots, Kate Bush and Kenneth Williams. Seductive and seduced bodies of the past, absurdly rendered in the photocollage *Circa '87* (2013), in which Leckey has cut-and-pasted himself, stripped down to his shorts and sat at a snare drum, as an oddly scaled-down figure surrounded by an admiring throng of big-haired 1980s ladies. For all the attention to the impersonal future and past of technology and society in his recent work, it's an awkwardly comical reminder that Leckey's work remains rooted in the problem of remarking on one's own being – on its capacity for memory and for action, for desiring and being absorbed, for being embodied while potentially 'out of its head' – being both subject and object. Of what it means to be in the midst of things. **ar**

Mark Leckey: A Month of Making is on view at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, through 21 June, followed by a comprehensive retrospective at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, from 26 September to 11 January
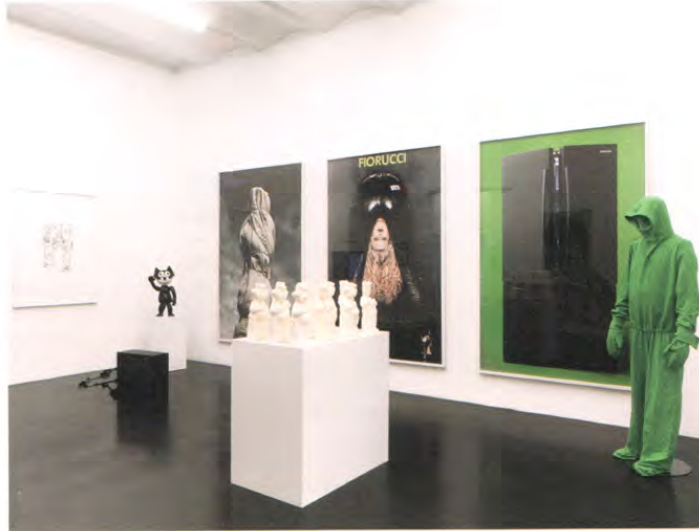
Mark Leckey, *Stills & Trailers*, 2012 (installation view, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne).
Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Berlin & Cologne