

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Charlotte Higgins, "How Mark Leckey became the artist of the Youtube generation," *The Guardian*, March 26, 2015

## The Guardian

Mark Leckey

The long read

### How Mark Leckey became the artist of the YouTube generation

Six years after he won the Turner prize, Leckey remains little known outside the art world – but he has quietly become one of the most influential artists in Britain

Charlotte Higgins



Mark Leckey. Photograph: Sarah Lee

The first time the New York gallerist Gavin Brown, an abundantly bearded, faintly ursine Briton, saw Mark Leckey, he was captured. "We were in the Chelsea Hotel," Brown recalled. "Mark was wearing a V-neck mohair jumper. His hair was some kind of elaborated form of Rod Stewart's, and he wore tight black trousers. This was a time of high grunge, and he took delight in not being that. He was a cocky motherfucker."

It was 1993, and Leckey, then 29, was passing through New York on his way to San Francisco, escaping London. He had been doing a series of "crappy jobs", lost most of his money running a clothing stall at Portobello market, and broken up with a girl. "He was all talk. He hadn't made anything," Brown recalled. "But I'll never forget the way he dressed, the way he walked. I wanted to be around to watch it. So I said, let's stay in touch. It was clear to me that he was an artist."

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In late 1995, Leckey moved to New York, and fell in with Brown's crowd. After the confident, vainglorious 1980s, the city's art world seemed to have turned in on itself: it was a period of self-critique and introspection. Gavin Brown was different. "He had this very frivolous, pop, playful, romantic notion of what art was. I wasn't interested in the other stuff. I was only interested in what happened at Gavin's," said Leckey. Next door to his gallery, on West 15th Street, Brown had opened a bar called Passerby. Leckey hung out there. "He was a flaneur, he was his own artwork," Brown said. "It was clearly only a matter of time."

Fifteen patient years later, Brown watched as his friend – dressed in an elaborately patterned grey Versace silk shirt – accepted the British art world's highest accolade, the Turner prize. As he accepted the cheque from Nick Cave, he declared himself "chuffed to bits". Moments later, he was interviewed by a Guardian critic on video – an encounter that quickly became combative, as Leckey challenged his lukewarm reception in the mainstream press. "I want to make work that has some effect. And it gets called effectless; it was called attenuated and piss-weak. And I don't get that," he said. His emotional nakedness at his moment of greatest public triumph is almost painful to watch, in its mix of self-sabotage and cocksureness. It was, according to Ed Atkins, an artist in his 30s, "confusing the personal and professional in a way that seemed massively ill-judged, but totally moving".

When Leckey first returned to London, in 1997, he had got in touch with the owner of another new gallery, called Cabinet. Martin McGeown, a dark-browed man of lupine charm, who sipped red wine as we talked in a Clerkenwell bar one wintry afternoon, remembered the early days of their friendship – a period, he said, when Leckey almost seemed possessed. "At that time one of his demons was nostalgia," said McGeown. "It haunted him as a kind of condition, a sickness. He was trying to rid himself of it, but also re-experience it." McGeown was certain these ideas and emotions would soon find some kind of expression. He said: "I didn't care what it was – whether a film, a piece of music, a painting, a drawing. I didn't need to know and it wasn't necessary to ask." This effort – to re-experience feelings and things that had been lost, or never really possessed – would come to define Leckey's work.

One evening in 1999, all three of them – Brown, McGeown and Leckey – were at a Cabinet private view. Emma Dexter, then a curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, now head of visual art at the British Council, got talking to Leckey, who argued that the most exciting art form of the time was music video. Intrigued, she invited him to make a work.

What he produced was a 15-minute film that he called Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore. It consisted of edited-together footage of dancers in nightclubs that, on the one hand, charted a history from 1970s northern soul to 1990s acid house; and, on the other, conveyed the pulsing, ecstatic, out-of-mind glory of the dancefloor in a churning, heady rush. The work is perfumed with wistfulness and tinged with ghostliness. It speaks of an evanescent youth: the time codes on the amateur video footage tick away ruthlessly, as eloquent a memento mori as the skull in the corner of a Holbein. The title, Leckey said, was about the notion that "something as trite and throwaway and exploitative as a jeans manufacturer can be taken by a group of people and made into something totemic, and powerful, and life-affirming." He made it in a kind of ecstatic fugue. "I cried while I was making it. I make this stuff to feel joy and melancholy and sweet-sadness."

If Leckey had only immanently been an artist hitherto, this was the moment when the promise identified by Brown and McGeown was fulfilled. Polly Staple, the wirily energetic director of the Chisenhale in east London, a public gallery known for staging exhibitions of young artists on the rise, was then part of the Cabinet crowd and its sometime receptionist. When she first saw Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore at the ICA in 1999, she remembered thinking: "I know that." That visceral, sudden sense of recognition when you see a work of art: that happens very rarely."

Fiorucci gained "cult status", as Frieze magazine put it in 2011, becoming "a touchstone for a generation of British video artists". Atkins told me about the first time he encountered a bootleg version: "At the time I didn't know who made it, and probably didn't even think it was, you know, 'art'. I probably thought it was something better. Which it is. Better, I mean." Fiorucci changed the game. In its sampling – and deeply skilful editing – of found film sequences, it anticipated the YouTube generation's easy manipulation of digital sources. It activated a painful yearning for a recent past just out of reach, rendered almost touchable by the tantalising immediacy of the footage. It expressed a delight in forms of expression that had rarely before been the material of "high" art. And it portrayed subjects – working-class, mostly white, mostly male teenagers – rarely accorded dignity and grace in the wider culture. At the same time, in an art world that could often seem wry, or ironic, or knowing, Fiorucci was different: disarmingly sincere.

**In the autumn of 2014, the Wiels contemporary art centre** in Brussels staged a mid-career retrospective devoted to Leckey, who was now 50. Seeing so much of his work together for the first time was a dizzying experience. He has been more feted in Europe – where major shows of his work will go up this year in Munich, Basel, and Vienna – than in Britain, where he has had only two major solo exhibitions, at the Serpentine and a Hayward Gallery touring show.

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It would be hard to say what Leckey's work looked like, exactly: it seemed fugitive, hard to box into tidy description, each work different from the last. There were films. There was a giant inflatable sculpture of Felix the Cat stuffed ingloriously into a corner too small for him. There was a room suffused with the sickly orange of sodium street lighting, dotted with sculptures of television transmitters. There was a Samsung fridge set against a green-screen backdrop. There was a darkened room, pulsing with some distant threatening soundscape, filled with objects that seemed to occupy the space between human and animal, monster and machine: a prosthetic hand; a medieval reliquary; a Cyberman's head; the phallic sculpture by Herman Makkink that Stanley Kubrick used in *A Clockwork Orange*. On first glance, many of the objects seemed to be precious artefacts, some of them antiquities; closer inspection revealed most of them to be, in fact, 3D prints of the original objects.

What leapt out at me was, first, the feeling that for Leckey, to possess an object meant possessing its image, probably on his hard drive; it was as if the image – imbued with longing for the thing itself – had more power and seductiveness than the original object. And second, his relationship to the world of stuff around him, especially to brands. Instead of critiquing consumer culture, he seemed shamelessly to offer himself up to it. It appeared to go beyond Warhol's delight in Campbell's soup cans or Jeff Koons's perfect, deliciously desirable shiny bunny; it was as if Leckey was seeking a kind of deliverance through objects of desire.

In spite of having won the Turner prize, Leckey has remained little known outside the art world, while his standing within it, where he is revered by many younger artists, seems, if anything, to have grown. Describing his influence, Polly Staple compared him to Paul Cézanne – an artist who spent a lifetime painting apples, card players, a single mountain range, all the time trying to explore the relationship between two and three dimensions to convey the “appleness” of apples, to express shape, weight, body and form in paint. That relentlessness of intent, she said, reminded her of Leckey's quest to understand the relationship between the body and the computer keyboard, between grubby flesh and insubstantial pixel.



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The truly significant artists, she argued, were those who had exploited moments of historical and technological change to alter the course of art. Dürer, for example, had used the technology of Gutenberg to transform access to images via the print. The impressionists and cubists had made a completely new kind of art that responded to the invention of the camera. Leckey, she suggested, was one of these transformative figures. He had a kind of heightened awareness of the generation in which he stood – those whose adult experience was on the junction of the pre- and post-internet eras. As Staple put it, Leckey could remember “the days when you had to warm up the television” but he also swam with sure strokes in the waters of the web.

Through this acute consciousness of the historical turning-point between the analogue and digital eras, he had indicated a route to a generation of younger artists: among them Ed Atkins, as well as figures such as James Richards (who was himself nominated for the 2014 Turner prize), Helen Marten and Camille Henrot. These younger artists had, in different ways, developed ideas about the nature of the image in the internet age; about the way that pop culture could invade their art; but perhaps most of all, about having the confidence to make work that was not wry, or ironic, but raw in its emotional intent. “The big thing that I really respect him for is his attitude to his practice, to his life, to their inseparability,” Atkins told me. “My deepest respect for Mark is reserved for him himself; the work at its best, is simply that – no more or less than his desire manifest.”

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Over the course of three months I interviewed Leckey three times, and on each occasion we sat in precisely the same places in the same room in the apartment he shares with his wife, Lizzie Carey-Thomas, a curator of contemporary art at Tate Britain, and their two-year-old daughter, April. (“He married into the firm,” as Staple mischievously put it.) It was a former council flat in north London, part of an austere red-brick quadrangle that reminded me of a Victorian infirmary. Formal notices (“exercising of dogs is prohibited”) served to emphasise its somewhat institutional atmosphere, as did the proximity of one of London’s large 19th-century prisons. The flat is on the second floor of the block, reached via an open walkway. A couple of moribund plants sulked in pots outside the door. We sat at the scuffed kitchen table. On it was the Apple Mac computer that for Leckey was library, studio and office. He always had a red Moleskine notebook in front of him, and he always wore sweatpants and a sweatshirt, grey-felt slippers, and two gold chains around his neck. He had grown his hair long and no longer had the bleached Rod Stewart do, but he wore a short beard and a pearl drop earring in one ear, which gave him the air of a 16th-century courtier and put me in mind of a portrait that hangs in Tate Britain – Marcus Gheeraerts’s Captain Thomas Lee, fancifully kitted out as half fop, half bare-legged warrior.

On one occasion there was a row of April’s miniature animals – a pig, a cow, a sheep – neatly lined up on the table in front of her high chair, which stood next to my customary seat. It seemed to me that, as a place to make art, this was the precise opposite of Antony Gormley’s lofty studio not a mile away, designed by David Chipperfield, which was a kind of glamorous Nibelheim of assistants busily forging gargantuan metal sculptures. The only clue to the room’s being anything other than an ordinary kitchen was an artwork by him on the wall above the table: a lurid poster of Little Richard, all bouffant hair, pencil moustache and silver shirt. “For me he was ‘the originator, the embodiment of all the potential of rock’n’roll,” Leckey explained. “The idea that you take all the things that are regarded as being worthless, valueless and trite ... And you alchemically transmute all that shit into gold through your sheer belief in it ... So that poster is a icon for me, in the religious sense. It’s a motivational poster.”

**When Leckey made Fiorucci**, he was living in a tiny flat – essentially a room – in Windmill Street, in Fitzrovia. According to McGeown, he had an out-of-towner’s disdain for the suburbs, and it came naturally to him to live in the centre of London, however shabbily. The first time Staple met him, soon after she had seen Fiorucci at the ICA, “he was wearing a bright scarlet, tight sweater with blue denim Vivienne Westwood trousers. They were pintucked, so they had a kind of blouson effect. He wore white Reebok trainers, and a gold chain, and had slightly spiky hair. He had a very particular walk. A kind of 16th-century swagger.” She remembered afternoons loafing up and down the streets of Soho and Mayfair, window shopping.

Leckey talked of Windmill Street as being a kind of “bachelor machine – the idea was that you could get into this state of production; that this was your procreation, just you and the work.” The flat was a notorious mess. On the other hand, said Catherine Wood, now the curator of performance at Tate Modern, “it was totally magical. It felt like another world. You’d step off the street, walk up a crappy stairway. Inside there was one room knee-deep in Mark’s crumpled-up designer clothes and bedding and books. Dirty cups would be pulled out of brown dishwater for your tea. People would appear and shout out for him in the street below. There was a Little Richard poster, and pictures cut out of magazines and stuck to the wall.” In the end, said McGeown, Leckey “wore out” the bachelor machine that was Windmill Street. “You could imagine that as he closed the door for the last time it crumbled inside.” Leckey told me, “The reason I met Lizzie is that I didn’t want it any more. It was horribly lonely, and I didn’t want to be lonely any more.”

When Wood got a job at the Tate in 2002, she asked him to make a performance work. At the time, he had been performing with a band he had formed, called donAteller. She remembered the first gig, at the 414 Club in Brixton. Ed Laliq, then the sole other member, was an androgynously beautiful young man, “wearing large-mesh fishnets and gold hotpants”. Leckey was in “a mac and a baseball cap”. Laliq sang, Leckey lurked in the background providing shouted interjections. The songs were cover versions of tracks by artists like Missy Elliott and All Saints. Some record label people came in, “and clearly thought it was terrible”, remembered Wood. “I thought it was one of the best things I’d ever seen.” Leckey was living out his pop yearnings. “The expectations I had had of subculture had migrated from the music world to the art world. We were art-world darlings for a bit.” For Wood it showed a different way forward for performance art, which at that point was certainly not enjoying the fashionable status it has now. Here was something, she said, that “spoke to the situation we were in” and “did not fantasise a space unblemished by capitalism”. Instead, here was a group of people unashamedly, and joyfully, making art that related to – even wanted to be – commercial pop music.

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When Wood invited him to make a work for the Tate, he came up with something unexpected, and quite different from the donAteller gigs. He borrowed one of the museum's best-known sculptures, Jacob Epstein's Jacob and the Angel, a gargantuan, massy alabaster carving of the biblical figures locked in a wrestling match. He placed a speaker system of similar heft on a pedestal nearby, so that there was a kind of face-off between it and the sculpture. Music poured out of the system: dance music, snatches of dada poetry, bits of Handel's Messiah. It was deafening. "I genuinely thought the sound might explode the sculpture," recalled Wood. "The roof rattled. The Epstein was an iconic work I had looked at 1,000 times. Suddenly it became tender; I thought about the biblical story; I was uplifted. He was possessing the museum – possessing it with our culture. Dare I say it, there was also something spiritual about it. It changed my ideas about what a museum could be and do."

Leckey told me that it was about trying to apprehend the object, trying to relate to it, but having to do so indirectly, almost tacking towards it, because of the sheer impossibility of grasping it directly. Of course he understood the history of modernist sculpture, intellectually; but on another level the Epstein, completed in 1941, was also as distant to him and as bewildering as, say, an Egyptian artefact. His performance was a way of wooing it, goading it, to speak to him. "I wanted to elicit from it its meaning and intention."

A later performance work, GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction (2010), took these ideas further. Now, instead of wanting to seduce an object into offering up its meaning, Leckey seemed to want the object to consume him. The work began with his inhaling the gases used as coolant for a Samsung fridge: a kind of shamanistic ritual in which, in order to understand the fridge, he took on some of its characteristics. The fridge sang back a kind of mournful plainchant: "See, see, see we assemble. See we assemble. See we assemble; Samsung, Viking, Gaggenau and Whirlpool ...". The work, Leckey said, is a kind of fantasy: that he could bring himself into "a state outside of myself, fridge-like, less-human, feeling like an image". As if he wanted to dissolve into pixels.

You could see the work as nodding to the notion of the internet of things – the technology through which objects, especially consumer appliances, will be connected online (such that a fridge might text you when you are short of milk; or suggest recipes from the ingredients within it). You could see it, more broadly, as a reaction to the fact that technology is triggering strange, disruptive new relationships between humans, objects and images; people, animals and machines. When, in January, Leckey gave a talk to a rapt group of art students at the Slade School of Art in London, he said: "This is the best time to be an artist and making work. It is a magical time – I mean it is unanchored and fantastical. It is terrifying and exciting. The access that you have to all points of history, through the internet, is a kind of haunting. The internet is full of ghosts. We don't know what is substantial and what is not." In Leckey's mind, images had taken on the qualities of the material. The properties of things were fatally, disturbingly, enchantingly confused. Real artefacts were better understood as machine-made replicas or arrangements of pixels on a screen. At the retrospective in Brussels, his own lower body was rendered as a 3D print, as if he himself wanted to fade out, or disappear into the machine.

**Leckey was born in 1964.** His "upper working class" parents both worked for Littlewoods, the clothes store and betting company based in Liverpool. School, at a comprehensive in Ellesmere Port in Cheshire, was not a happy experience; his memory of it was that there was little in the way of academic encouragement. Going to university "wasn't on the cards – that means of escape wasn't on offer and no one was bright enough to do it themselves." Most of his friends left before A-levels and did Youth Training Schemes or went into the army. He himself left aged 15. "I signed on. I was a scally. I was a job ... there probably were opportunities for me, but I wanted to run with the bad boys, you know."

He was a "casual" – part of an early-1980s subculture of lads from north-west England who wore dandyish golfing gear: Pringle and Lyle & Scott. "People had only just stopped wearing flares and kipper ties and you have these boys in drainpipe trousers and colourful jumpers and big wedge haircuts. En masse – 12 or more – walking down the street. I look back now and think how clever, how smart to adopt these kind of fashions." For those not in the know, it was baffling – the off-key sight of young working-class lads in luxury sporting brands.

He was trouble. There were nights in the cells. His stepfather gave him a talking to: Mark was good at drawing, and that was a skill worth having. Everything that had been designed had once been drawn. "It wasn't me and him walking arm in arm across the fells with a dog, it was more 'like get your shit together or get out'." A couple of days later he indeed kicked Leckey out. "I was a little shit." He lived in B&Bs for a while, and with an aunt. His stepfather's admonition stuck, though: at length he got himself to technical college, got O- and A-levels, and did an art foundation course.

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As we spoke about his teenage years, he became more and more uncomfortable. He began to worry that I would narrativise this part of his life “as if it were a Mike Leigh movie”. “You can’t talk about this stuff in any real way. It just gets mocked,” he said. He was highly conscious of handing over his memories to be shaped by me – who, growing up in the next county, on the other side of a class divide, had once been terrified by the likes of him and his dandyish mates.

He was accepted to art school in Newcastle. He wanted to be the kind of art student who made it big in a band – “meeting someone like Green Gartside from Scritti Politti”. But “I was profoundly disappointed”. He made good friends, but the “cool kids were definitely not there”; there was a sense of being stuck in the tail-end of hippiedom, with his fellow students reading Tolkien and Mervyn Peake and smoking Red Leb hash. At the time he liked art like Peter Howson’s macho, post-industrial figurative painting. “I was suspicious of art’s effeteness. I still felt I had to maintain my masculine credibility”. Then, in the second year suddenly everything changed: a course on critical thinking was introduced, and the students plunged into reading Hal Foster on postmodernism, and Roland Barthes. “I’d no experience of anything like that before. I’d never read anything academic before. I grew up in a house without books. But weirdly I totally submerged myself in it and tried to understand and thought I had.”

At the same time he was trying to make work. These days Leckey himself teaches students. “They have an anxiety about whether they are an artist and whether they can make art and what art is, and it’s a very confusing time,” he said. “They look for something that looks like art. Something that they can show to other students and tutors and point to and say, this is recognisably art, isn’t it? And so you make something that’s recognisably art, and that’s actually quite easy to do once you’ve learned the tropes. You know, you lean something against the wall. You put something on a plinth that’s a little bit wrong. And people come into your space, and go, ‘Yeah, it’s doing such and such, isn’t it?’ And you go ‘Yeah, that’s what I think it’s doing.’ And you then you go all coy. And then you’ve made art, and then a gallery comes round and represents you.”

Leckey claims to have made only one piece of work at college. “I photographed strip lights in situ on the ceiling and I put them in two speaker boxes, and backlit them. So they were photos of lights, backlit. I don’t know what it meant. It was institutional critique, I believe.” He laughed sheepishly. “It was absolutely everything I have spoken about in terms of making an object that looked like a work of art. I mimicked, and I got away with it. But not to myself.” It was all gestures; no feeling.

It was accepted for New Contemporaries, a significant annual exhibition that shows the best work by recent graduates. “I thought I’d hit the big time,” he said. His piece was installed next to a piece by Damien Hirst. Leckey remembered being in the men’s toilets at the ICA, trying to decide whether to wear trainers or a pair of “slightly too nancy loafers” for the opening party, “then getting out there and feeling immediately deflated. I didn’t know anyone.” The others – Hirst and co – “were having a whale of a time.”

**Leckey was, at the end of last year, editing a film** that premiered at his exhibition at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, in January. It was a memoir, the story of his life, which he was calling *On Pleasure Bent*. He had had the idea for it one late night, drunk, when he had been messing around on YouTube and had come across a bootleg recording of a concert he had seen in 1979 at Eric’s, a club in Liverpool. He’d gone there to see Swell Maps; Joy Division were playing, too, so he saw them by accident. What Leckey had considered a significant but essentially lost and private episode was all of a sudden there, at his fingertips. He realised that he could reconstruct his own history from its traces: from music, from film, from adverts. These scattered shards, which once would have been impossible to reassemble and amass, had now migrated on to the internet as if gathered by an irresistible centripetal force.

He showed me a scene, which he was calling *Pylons and Nylons* – in which a sexually alluring 1960s bombshell sat at a dressing table. Then the scene merged into a pyloned skyline, the reticular shape of the woman’s fishnets echoed in the metalwork of the latticed towers. A closely edited soundtrack throbbed over it. Submerged in it was a childhood memory – clearly an erotic memory – of a friend of his mother’s, who had once entered the room in which he was sleeping during a grown-ups’ party. The passage felt like an attempt to recapture this precious fragment of the past, a fragment that had been colonised by invasive memories of scenes from films or television (there was a touch of the Carry On movies about it). For another section of the film he was reassembling the experience of being at the Joy Division concert; it was a process of collage, he said. He was mosaicing together hundreds of sounds and images. “I’ll go through hundreds of pieces of footage. Getting towards evoking something that feels close to that experience, or something that resonates with it.” He paused. And yet, he said, “These words are wrong.” He never felt that what he was creating was authentic, was true to the lived experience.

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A still from *On Pleasure Bent*, 2015 Photograph: Mark Leckey

He told me about the long Alpine walks he sometimes liked to embark upon with McGeown, the feeling of physical exhaustion that came close to rapture, the sudden appearance of some extraordinary mountain view, and then the creeping sense that the heart is pounding only because the experience had been pre-programmed by Caspar David Friedrich and a thousand others. He was considering how experience is formed by art, by brands, by music, by advertising; how we unconsciously trim and shape our most personal memories to fit the templates we encounter. "I've been fucked up by television. I've been polluted by pop. I've been misled by the novel. They all colluded to create a world that is impossible, that I am always reaching for. It's Gatsby's green light."

Despite these anxieties about whether authenticity was possible, he yearned, he said, for pure feeling. "Art can make you ecstatic, or make you think. I tend to think that the thinking part's been overdone. I like the idea of not thinking, of experiencing something as a body." He wanted art to make him feel less numb. He wanted to succumb – to emotion, and to the material things that contained and created emotion.

**Whenever we talked, Leckey was disarmingly honest** about his desire for adoration. But acting against that desire was a strong seam of unclubbability. He loathed the idea of being pinned down, or pigeonholed, or made fashionable. "There's a very bourgeois way of wanting to describe art, to show that you are conscious of something. 'Oh, he's so interesting – he's the one who makes art with Hoover bags and it's so endlessly fascinating.' No it's not, you'll be fascinated by something else very shortly. I don't want to be that. I don't want to be petted. I don't want to be fucking petted. I had a bit of that attitude when I won the Turner prize. I was bit like, 'Get off me.'"

That deep-seated sense of aloofness, perhaps, was part of the reason he gravitated towards McGeown as his friend, mentor and gallerist, rather than ending up with a larger, more international and go-getting gallery such as White Cube or Gagosian. McGeown described Cabinet almost as if it was a *salon des refusés*. "I didn't relate to them at all," McGeown said of the YBAs. "I wanted to do something different. I thought the work was really provincial." As far as the art market goes, Gavin Brown laughed when I asked him about how well Leckey sold. "I am a mercantile creature," he said. "I often try to tempt him that way, but it never works. When the market and Mark coincide it is a happy thing, but it doesn't happen that often."

The art market favours work that is strongly branded: it prefers, for example, a work by Jake and Dinos Chapman to resemble a work by Jake and Dinos Chapman, just as the luxury goods market likes Louis Vuitton to look like Louis Vuitton. "Mark keeps moving, but the market likes repetition," as Catherine Wood put it. According to Staple, "If your idea of free agency as an artist and a human means you are going to elude definition, then the minute your art becomes commodified you change the rules. Mark changes the frequency. He doesn't come to rest." His relative lack of fame outside the art world had a great deal to do with media expectations and journalistic templates, she argued. "The long game is not revered. It's not an interesting story – artist slowly, successfully builds career asking questions of their work and the world. He's 50, he's respected. He's got big shows coming up. He's had marker points such as the Turner prize. That's a good career."

Wood told me a story that Leckey had mentioned to me, too: back in his 20s, before he had moved to the US, what had made him go bust on his clothing stall on Portobello market was his conviction that he could bring plastic jelly shoes back into fashion – the kind of sandals one wore on the beach in the 1970s to protect young feet from sharp sand. He acquired a job lot and displayed them beautifully with old Ricard ashtrays. No one bought a single one.