

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Danny Leigh "Mark Leckey: from art world outsider to Tate Britain," *Financial Times*, September 20, 2019



## Mark Leckey: from art world outsider to Tate Britain

The Turner Prize-winning multimedia artist on youth culture, his own past and new retrospective



Mark Leckey © Tori Ferenc

Danny Leigh SEPTEMBER 20 2019

The exhibition space at Tate Britain is closed and cordoned off. Walls have been removed. Mark Leckey, the multimedia artist whose new exhibition of video and sculpture is being installed in the freshly cavernous space, sits upstairs with a pot of tea. Even in an

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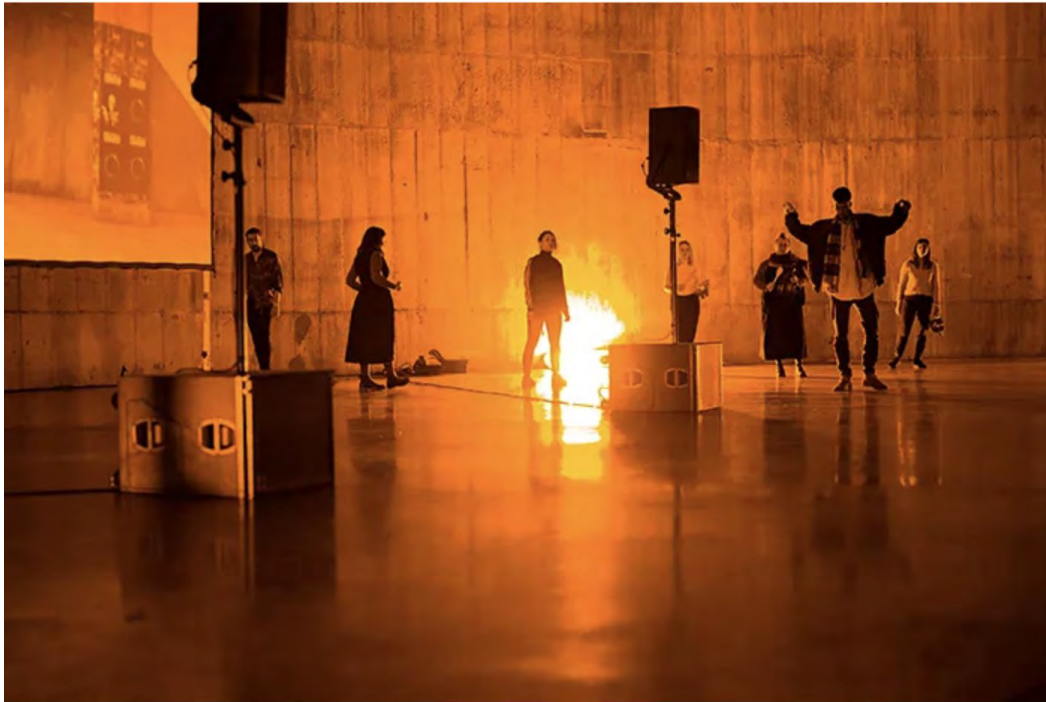
old T-shirt, Leckey cuts a discreetly baroque figure: shoulder-length hair, pearl earring, piratical beard. “At this stage I can’t really contribute downstairs,” he says. “I’ve lost whatever physicality I ever had.”

The show, titled *O’ Magic Power of Bleakness*, is the largest Leckey has ever mounted. New work from this singular British talent will coexist with selected pieces from a 20-year career (a Turner Prize arrived in 2008). If any retrospective is destined to make the subject think about their past, that goes double for Leckey, whose art is already deeply bound up with his life. Included will be “Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore”, the dense, mesmeric video that made his name in 1999, constructed from found footage of British youth subculture. To fit the scale of Tate Britain better, its soundtrack has been lightly remixed.

The process involved a literal piecing together of history. Having made the work in the slapdash frontier days of digital technology, Leckey lost the hard drive that held the film’s snatches of Northern Soul all-nighters and rave euphoria. “At the time you just shrug,” he says. Now, he has had to source and reassemble everything. One obscure jazz-funk track has eluded him. “The problem is I can’t remember what it was. So until I do it’s gone forever.”

The new work has a greater sense of permanence. Most dramatic will be a full-size replica of a motorway bridge over the M53 on the Wirral, Merseyside, a landmark of Leckey’s youth. Is it now a vast monument to the inescapability of childhood? “That’s part of it, yeah,” Leckey says. “But what I love about the bridge is it acts as this incredible metaphor-generating machine. You just press Go and it spits them out.”

Another new piece is “Under Under In”, an audio play Leckey has written for a cast of sculpted teenagers in head-to-toe Adidas. Unlike the fleetingly captured hedonists of “Fiorucci”, their modern equivalents live surrounded by cameras. The real M53 bridge now hums with CCTV, and Leckey speaks with excitement about the rise of “sousveillance” in which teenagers use wearable cameras to monitor, for instance, police harassment. And every kid with a phone can be a film-maker now. “So you’re being recorded but you’re also recording and you’re broadcasting. Which creates an entire culture that was never officially sanctioned.”



'Extended Exorcism of the Bridge @ Eastham Rake' in 2018 © Lewis Ronald

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Modernity as a mad explosion of images, cultures overlooked by gatekeepers — such is the stuff of Leckey’s work. Within the art world, there is a lingering sense that he is an outsider inside. Physically so, in fact. Leckey gestures over the calm white surfaces of Tate Britain: “This place is a focal point of creative practice, isn’t it? Art inevitably arrives here to be celebrated. This is the world I belong to now. But at one point I belonged to another intelligence.”

As a teenager on Merseyside, he became a “casual”, the strange subculture in which young working-class men obsessed over luxury knitwear and high-end Italian sports brands. Leaving school at 15 — he had been known for exiting lessons early through classroom windows — he returned to education to study art in his early twenties, with plans to become a muralist in the style of Diego Rivera. Art school, he says, stripped his confidence. He moved to London and ran a clothes stall in Portobello Market, “visually exaggerating myself so that someone would ask who I was and let me be an artist.”

He all but fled to America. In New York, he met the English art dealer Gavin Brown, who encouraged his ideas and self-belief. Back in London in 1997, he found a country in a new political mood and a post-YBA art world that felt more socially inclusive. “Well, slightly,” he says. “There are always historical conditions involved, aren’t there?” Crucial too was the advent of digital editing technology that allowed him to take an old VHS recording and, with loving invention, cut, layer and manipulate it.

“Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore” emerged soon after, a eureka dance floor collage stretching from the Northern Soul scene of the 1970s and to Acid House in the late ’80s. The result felt celebratory but also impossibly melancholy, a secret history of British youth, lost in music.



'Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore' still (1999) © Mark Leckey

Leckey was unnerved. “I thought it was just this sentimental indulgence. I was terrified of the response.” In fact, the video became a sensation, beginning the strange double life it has enjoyed since — thrilling the art world and a wider crowd beyond, a gallery piece also hosted on YouTube. It was the starting point for an endlessly witty and provocative body of work: videos and installations in which modern totems collided — Jacob Epstein and the Muppets, sound systems and existential smart fridges.

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Leckey talks of his work as “a ghost story”, driven by a digital age that made everything an image, divorced from the original article. The exhibition that won the Turner Prize, *Industrial Light and Magic*, centred on “Cinema in the Round”, a free-range lecture he first gave at the Guggenheim, focused in part on James Cameron’s *Titanic* — a grand assembly of iron and steel, sunk anew as a software illusion.

All of this was wrapped up in the dandyish form of a man who grew up with pop stars for role models while his work defined him as a specialist in consumerism and identity. There was an ancestral relationship to Warhol, but a British tang of class and youth. “As a kid, you’re polluted by branding. Where it gets interesting is the dance people do with that.” What Leckey loved about casuals was the disruptive mischief of teenagers claiming ownership of luxury brands targeting 50-year-old golfers. “You still see that now with grime kids, re-appropriating ideas so that Nike has to follow them instead. There’s a real sophistication to that relationship.”

But more than clothes, Leckey was fixated with memories, a case study of a youth “bombarded with pop culture”. In his video piece “*Dream English Kid 1964-99 AD*”, also part of the exhibition, imagery included a Joy Division concert he attended at 15, an eroticised shard of a 1960s pin-up and news reports of Soviet tensions. The motorway bridge featured too. Leckey is resigned to never shaking off his own childhood. “The truth is, everything under the bridge is haunted. Static.”

Leckey’s relationship with the art world is not a problem, he says. “That internal conflict is still there, but it’s fruitful.” Has he ever considered a whole exhibition on YouTube? “I’ve thought about it.” He pauses and laughs. “But let’s also say I don’t not enjoy being within this space.” Tate Britain specifically? “And the physical dimension generally. Here I can create something more than black boxes with video screens. Something psychedelic. I want to make a space you can disappear in.”