

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Esther Leslie, "Mark Leckey's Anima Mundi," *Afterall*, Summer, 2013

## Afterall

### Mark Leckey's Anima Mundi Esther Leslie



Mark Leckey, *GreenScreen- RefrigeratorAction*, 2010–11. View of the performance at the Serpentine Gallery, London, 12 May 2011. Photograph: Mark Blower. Courtesy the artist and Cabinet, London

'Everything that is in and of this Earth is animated from within,' declares Mark Leckey in the performance *Mark Leckey in the Long Tail* (2009).<sup>1</sup> An old truth finds resonance today. This is what we knew long ago, when we were animists, and seem to want to know again — be we speculative realists, hoarders attuned to vibrant matter, philosophical botanists or New Age mystics. Our world is chock-a-block with selves. Animation shudders through the universe. It is the principle of life and life is a quality held not just by those who can name it. Nature is animate: animals chatter, leaves give out signals, petals recoil, crystals reproduce. Even inorganic matter is animate, if not alive, though it was surely, once upon a time, the kick-start ingredient of life. Animated beings are everywhere. They are manifest in the iridescent sheen of silicate minerals, in the polycarbonate plastic of a CD, in the super-glossy reflection of a chrome drum set or in the shiny surface of Jeff Koons's *Rabbit* (1986).<sup>2</sup> They are there in the jerky dots and lines of live-streamed TV programmes, or in the movement of organic light-emitting diodes on a touch screen. It has all been about animation all along, animation in the expanded field. Leckey's works chase it out from its lurking places, in objects, histories and otherwise cast-off human beings.

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In *The Long Tail*, Leckey uses the form of the artist's lecture to persuade us that it all begins, ends and pulsates with animation. The artist's lecture finds a new rationale (or *irrationalité*): no longer the funding pitch masked as chronological recounting of ever greater deeds, but rather a smoke-and-mirrors display animated by a showman. Using a piece of chalk to draw the long tail, Leckey makes a lightning sketch, a form of primitive live animation used by vaudeville performers in the late nineteenth century. A performer would sketch an image onstage, perhaps a caricature or an object, only to morph it rapidly into another before the audience's eyes. Early animated films often included a lightning sketch that sprung suddenly 'to life' by the trickery of cinematic effects. In *The Long Tail*, Leckey is such a performer. As he scribbles, he summons a phantasmagoria of 2D oddities into appearance. A string of images is conjured up before our eyes. Transformations parade, and more or less plausible connections are made. 'The tail is an anagram engine', states Leckey halfway through the lecture. The tale he tells here is also a long one. It explains how narrowcasting became broadcasting became seed-casting. The long tale is, for one, Felix the Cat's. Felix, an animated feline from New York, was originally a cinema character. In 1928 it became the protagonist of experimental television broadcasts, for which his rotating, 33-centimetre, 3D papier-mâché body was parsed through the mechanism of a scanner to an electric kinescope receiver. Thereby he became immaterial and omnipresent. To be broadcast is to pass through the ether, to circulate without wires: it involves something far less corporeal than film, with its clunky canisters and its images fixed in aniline on celluloid.

Felix is a cat with a peculiarly animate tail, which detaches and leads a life of its own — including in some of Leckey's artworks, such as the 16mm film *Flix* (2008) and the silkscreen print *Tailchair* (2008). It also has a capacity for language, as it curls into exclamation marks and question marks. When Felix the Cat provided the first TV test image, he arrived on screens dotted across New York, measuring five centimetres high and composed of fat grey lines. Miniaturised, flattened, dis- and reassembled, Felix greets us from the other side through the interface of a television set — our pal in the corner of the living room, and the most magical of boxes, in which the lives worth telling are lived on our behalf. Strangely Felix, or his animator, had already anticipated his dematerialisation. In the short animation 'Felix Gets Broadcasted' (1923) — after which Leckey titled an installation from 2007 — Felix is lured into electric wires and squeezed through them to Egypt. These wires, which look on the animation like nothing more than a drawn line, have a power to compress space and transport matter. Technicians strove for improvements in definition, and TV technology moved out of its experimental phase into a domestic setting. Meanwhile, Felix spun on that turntable for a decade, until the late 1930s, when the lines narrowed and the focus sharpened.

A broadcast Felix is the starting point of *The Long Tail*. A flat cartoon character becomes a 3D doll and is then dematerialised to be broadcast through the airwaves. An icon of animation marks the beginning of TV broadcasting, the start of an entertainment culture that would become — and was from the very start in the US context — a commercial culture. Leckey the showman feigns a chancy technical achievement when he emulates the original broadcast — an act that comes to seem like a conjuration. In *The Long Tail*, TV is a 'technology of enchantment', just as animation and film are. The artist actually uses this epithet to refer to Walt Disney's multiplane camera, which segmented a scene into different layers and endowed hitherto flat animation with depth and dimensionality. This was the particular magic of Disney's films: they let the audience peer into a world that seemed to have deep space. The multiplane camera also appears in Leckey's lectureperformance *Cinema-in-the-Round* (2006–08) as part of a broader rumination on the passage between two- and three-dimensionality. There Leckey asks how the paintings of Georg Baselitz or Philip Guston, or the cartoon bodies of Homer Simpson and Felix the Cat, take on weight and thus become sculptural. How do they 'come to life', and become beastly? How does technology find ways to create an illusion of depth out of flatness, and through that roundedness, animated beings?



*Mark Leckey, Mark Leckey in the Long Tail, 2009. View of the performance at the Abron Arts Center, New York, October 2009. Courtesy the artist and Cabinet, London*



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There is a line in Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) that reads: 'Animism had endowed things with souls; industrialism makes souls into things.'<sup>3</sup> It suggests that in the old animistic world there was an abundance of agency. Things were lively, and so were humans. The industrial world, by contrast, has exchange as its principle. Every self, every subject is valued only in terms of its thingliness, its capacity to be objectified and thus exchanged with any other self. The worker is the prime instance of this — liveliness, productivity, decision-making and creativity are converted into an hourly rate and ultimately into a thing called money. Everything becomes things, generalities, each substitutable by or equating to the other. In this process, thought, which becomes another commodity, if an immaterial one, is detached from the self: 'Thought is reified as an autonomous, automatic process, aping machines it has itself produced, so that it can finally be replaced by the machine.'<sup>4</sup> In the 1940s Adorno and Horkheimer were on the tail of computerisation, the dislocation of thought into machinery and the emergence of artificial intelligence. The objectification of human life marks the endpoint of rationalisation. And yet, the Frankfurt School thinkers would be the first to insist that rationalisation does not expunge enchantment. Rather, it has converted into the magic of entertainment and the fetish of the commodity. The commodity is a dead and objectified thing, and, at the same time, it is also an enlivened entity that reigns over mere producers. Both technology and its outputs are enchanted. From film to television to the computer, technology, a product of rational invention, enchants users, drawing them into myth, distraction and the desire for commodities.

Something that Leckey doesn't mention in *The Long Tail* is that another image vied to be the first to be broadcast on TV. When seeking backers for his own version of this technology in 1928, Philo Farnsworth was keen to underscore the financial credibility of his invention. He had already privately broadcast a straight line, but, wishing to make his invention public, he gathered journalists and showed them a broadcast of a dollar sign instead.<sup>5</sup> Might it be the case that the dollar, even more so than Felix the Cat, was to become the prime locus of animated activity as the centuries wore on? The following year, Farnsworth did this trick on a human — his wife — who was miniaturised, dematerialised and broadcast with her eyes shut to protect them from the blinding light. Analogue and electronic TV screens were surfaces of exchange from the start: anything and everything is converted into lines, made flexible, dematerialized and abstracted. Their origin and their end — as well as their pretext, subtext, context and *raison d'être* — are in money.



Mark Leckey, *Felix Gets Broadcasted*, 2007, Digital Betacam, colour, sound, 5min, still. Courtesy the artist and Cabinet, London

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Inside the TV box, powerful equivalences hold sway. The box can absorb and retransmit all things. Everything can pass into it as a signal and out of it as light. This flattening process is also an equalising act. And so can everything pass through the lecture that is *The Long Tail*, and evince equality as a virtue. As Leckey riffles through the image 'box' that replaces today's TV — the computer and its internet — images, anecdotes and moments are blasted into visibility. Nothing need be deleted. Everything can find its place again. If things turn cosmic, as they tend to in Leckey's productions, then this serves only to emphasise the parallels to a chronicler's practice as described by Walter Benjamin, whose own box of tricks contained the files of *The Arcades Project* (1927–40), in which all of Parisian life, from dust to fashion to boredom to lighting design and political cults, could be collated, with nothing discarded.<sup>6</sup> Just as the chronicler recounts events without distinguishing between the great and the small, Leckey in *The Long Tail* assembles Felix the Cat, Wikipedia, Károly Tamkó Sirat's 'Dimensionist Manifesto' (1936),<sup>7</sup> Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* (1968–98),<sup>8</sup> Werner Erhard's 'est Standard Training' (1971–84),<sup>9</sup> Krautrock and cosplay.<sup>10</sup> Each is embroiled in a new train of thought in order to tell a story about how animation is our compulsion, for good or for bad.

Leckey attempts to tap the animist potential of the modern industrial world while conceding again and again that it might all be a rotten fetish, matter trapped in the system and converted into an immateriality which has appropriated life from the living. Often in his practice potentiality emerges from visual affinities. This thing is just like this other thing, and when applied upon it, magical action — or the sorcery of art — will test out how much all might be reconfigured, reimagined, reclassified or unclassified. In *BigBoxStatueAction* (2003–11), a sound system faces off a modernist sculpture, both of equal size and volume.<sup>11</sup> *BigBox IndustrialAction* (2003–12) bombarded a steam chest with sound. Under the title *BigBoxNaturalAction* (2003–12), the speaker is paired with a slab of Rundle rock. The series can be defined as sculpturecollage, or perhaps montage, for that signifies the dynamic connections that are meant to traverse the space between the equivalent objects when one assails the other with immense sounds. An audience listens in as the two monoliths commune in a kind of seance. Do these disparate things relate in terms of scale, value, presence, worldliness, spirituality, claims to subjecthood? Are they more than mere objects, marshalled for the artist's own ends? While the sound system expresses itself according to its nature — loudly — does the other object (be it a classical sculpture, a mass of rock or a redundant piece of industrial machinery) respond in any way, and if so, can we humans listen in to its communicative machinations?

Such connections, visual analogies and elective affinities make for a latter-day Warburgian practice. In the late 1920s Aby Warburg collated reproduced imagery sourced from newspapers, art books, maps and textbooks on large panels, including images of stars and artworks, of bodies and emotions, spanning ancient civilisations to modern life. Initially used in his lectures, the visual panels of his *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–29) were meant on the one hand to demonstrate the ways in which motives were repeated and diffracted across time, and on the other to tabulate humanity's historical oscillations between emotion and reason, magical osmosis and logical distance.<sup>12</sup> In his lecture-performances, Leckey considers the archive of the internet as just such a resource to assess our repeated *idées fixes* and their modulations of affect. Like Warburg, Leckey developed his electronic cartography while preparing his teaching. In his artist's lecture, the dematerialised matter excerpted from cyberspace is organised around new constellations and axes. If we trawl amidst the internet's virtual geographies long enough and juxtapose well enough, Leckey's chart seems to say, we will draw something out of the liveliness of the flattened memes to compose a new history of animated things and selves. This has its Warburgian face too. Warburg wrote of the 'accessory in motion', enthused by the way in which, in Early Renaissance painting, a piece of clothing appears to have a life and will of its own.<sup>13</sup> Warburg proposes a new epistemology for the first decades of the twentieth century: the object is self-propelled, a shifting thing with manifold conceptual links and associations. Leckey reanimates this approach for our own *fin de siècle*. *Cinema-in-the-Round* examines the passage from two-dimensionality to three-dimensionality in art and media. *The Long Tail* dramatizes this move through a constant flux between the flatness of the images on screen and their real-life counterparts — a Felix doll, a blackboard and chalk, a replica of a mechanical scanner, a smoke machine. The screen and the world communicate and collaborate. The audience looks on, amused and bemused, but ready to be convinced that the links are plausible, that the long tail is more than an object, more than an image, more than a metaphor — and something of an animating principle of life.



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Mark Leckey, *Cinema-in-the-Round*, 2006–08, video, colour, sound, 42min, still. Courtesy the artist and Cabinet, London

Those flat figures of electronic media, the cells of a long tail of possibilities, perform a change on us: viewer, creator, consumer and producer all become one, the prosumer. We become part of the long tail. Get broadcast. Broadcast yourself. And as you adapt yourself to the screen and the world of images that you trawl and recombine, be aware that the other real-world objects are doing the same. Leckey's installation *GreenScreenRefrigerator* (2010) plants a black, high-gloss 'intelligent' kitchen appliance in a green-screen room. Images erupt on flat screens mounted on the green wall, from renditions of the fridge's innards to its cosmic travels. The fridge speaks in a robotic voice. 'Standing here out of my mind, I liken myself to other things: a dark mirror; a walled garden; a monstrous insect; a Spearmint Rhino; Don Giovanni's Stone Guest; the staff of Hermes.' The desirable commodity speaks of its own exchangeability, and of a utopia of equivalence. 'Becoming gas, becoming liquid, becoming vapour, becoming, becoming, becoming, becoming...': the fridge is in flux, like all of nature. It is in transition between states. It is like us — homeostatic. Its innards look like veins and arteries, like DNA spirals. 'I sink myself and stand in brotherly relationship to my neighbour, to everything in this place.' Call any vegetable and the chances are good that the vegetable will respond to you, as Frank Zappa said.<sup>14</sup> The botanist is a philosopher. We are all brothers. Animal to vegetable to mineral. We are diamond and coal. And perhaps spirit, just as energy, goes through all types and all states of matter.

Leckey's *The Long Tail* is landscape painting of a new nature. BlackBerry(s), Apple(s), Orange(s), Raspberry Pi(s): these are the new fruits of a digital age. Leckey throws into the mix the seed, the torrent, the swarm. The seed has all the data. The leech takes it and becomes a new seed. The torrent is the large file broken into little parts like raindrops in a storm. The seeds sharing the torrent are a swarm. All this banal activity of peers, non-hierarchical groups of prosumers, generates a landscape of endless possibilities and dimensions. At least in our dreams, our strangely engineered dreams. For all this is stuff of the clouds, of vaporous fuzziness, of bits of light and liquid crystal, flashed on screens and buzzed over networks, passing through vast but unseen high-security, power-hungry data centres. Dystopia threatens. But it is the clouds, the heavens, that have the last word in Leckey's ecstatic, animistic procedures. *The Long Tail* culminates in an orgy of effects and a tall tale of digital spasms of delight. Humans and the machine engage in an incessant grinding action.

After the fireworks, there is a coda, which, through the fate of Felix, underlines the lesson of what we have witnessed. Leckey delivers a nine-point oration on the transubstantiation of the cartoon cat. In the beginning there was a cat, a primal nature at one with the other beasts on Earth. He became a deity in the ancient world, who 'inhabited the Earth and the heavens up above'. After this supernatural existence, he fell to Earth and became a domestic pet. In the machine age he became a cartoon character. This character became an icon and a commodity. Religion fused with money and he became a star, transcendent. Melted into air, he became an electronic image and was broadcast, scattered like seeds into a million cinemas and living rooms. One Felix becomes many Felixes. He beams back from the screen, an angelic 'radiant messenger', as Leckey exclaims at the end of *The Long Tail*, 'of this world and another'. Felix is a new, immaterial nature, a fusion of thought with machinery, that lurks behind our screens and tempts us into a new world of orgiastic communion, equivalence and curiosity, a curiosity that may well kill the cat and us. These are the seeds Mark Leckey wants to sow. The sermon — 'the stringing together of words' (as the etymology has it),<sup>15</sup> the long tail — is done.

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## Footnotes

1. Footage of the performance, as well as of other moving-image works by Mark Leckey, can be viewed online at the artist's YouTube page, available at <http://www.youtube.com/user/MrLeckey> (last accessed on 12 March 2013).<sup>↑</sup>
2. Jeff Koons's sculpture *Rabbit* is (conceptually and literally) at the centre of Leckey's 16mm film *Made in 'Eaven* (2004), while his more recent video *Pearl Vision* (2012) features an equally shiny drum set.<sup>↑</sup>
3. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, p.5.<sup>↑</sup>
4. *Ibid.*, p.19.<sup>↑</sup>
5. See Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image, The Fall of the Word*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.42.<sup>↑</sup>
6. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin), Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999.<sup>↑</sup>
7. Signed in Paris in 1936 by Marcel Duchamp, Wassily Kandinsky and Francis Picabia amongst others, this foundational manifesto for the Dimensionist movement proclaimed 'the artistic conquest of four-dimensional space'. See K.oly Tamk. Sirat, 'Manifeste Dimensioniste', first published in *plastique*, no.2, Summer 1937, available in English at <http://artpool.hu/TamkoSirato/manifest.html> (last accessed on 28 March 2013), in a translation by Oliver Botar.<sup>↑</sup>
8. Published between 1968 and 1972 in the US, and occasionally thereafter until 1998, the *Whole Earth Catalog* listed a wide range of products for sale. Subtitled 'Access to Tools', it was part of the late 1960s countercultural DIY movement.<sup>↑</sup>
9. Initiated in San Francisco in 1971, the 'est Standard Training' congregated thousands of participants in controversial, marathon group-awareness training programmes purportedly facilitating an experience of transformation.<sup>↑</sup>
10. Often used in manga conventions and role play, in 'cosplay' participants wear costumes to embody their favourite fictional characters, thus creating three-dimensional figures out of two-dimensional characters.<sup>↑</sup>
11. This work has been shown in various configurations. In 2003, at Tate Britain in London, the sound system was confronted with Jacob Epstein's *Jacob and the Angel* (1940–41); at Leckey's exhibition 'SEE, WE ASSEMBLE' at the Serpentine Gallery, also in London (19 May–26 June 2011), it was shown opposite Henry Moore's *Upright Motive No. 9* (1979).<sup>↑</sup>
12. See Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012.<sup>↑</sup>
13. Aby Warburg quoted in Spyros Papapetros, 'Aby Warburg as Reader of Gottfried Semper', in Catriona MacLeod, Veronique Plesch and Charlotte Schoell-Glass (ed.), *Elective Affinities: Testing Word and Image Relationships*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009, pp.322–23.<sup>↑</sup>
14. See Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention, 'Call Any Vegetable', on the album *Absolutely Free* (1967).<sup>↑</sup>
15. Doug Lennox, *Now You Know Big Book of Answers*, Toronto: Dundurn, 2007, p.259.<sup>↑</sup>