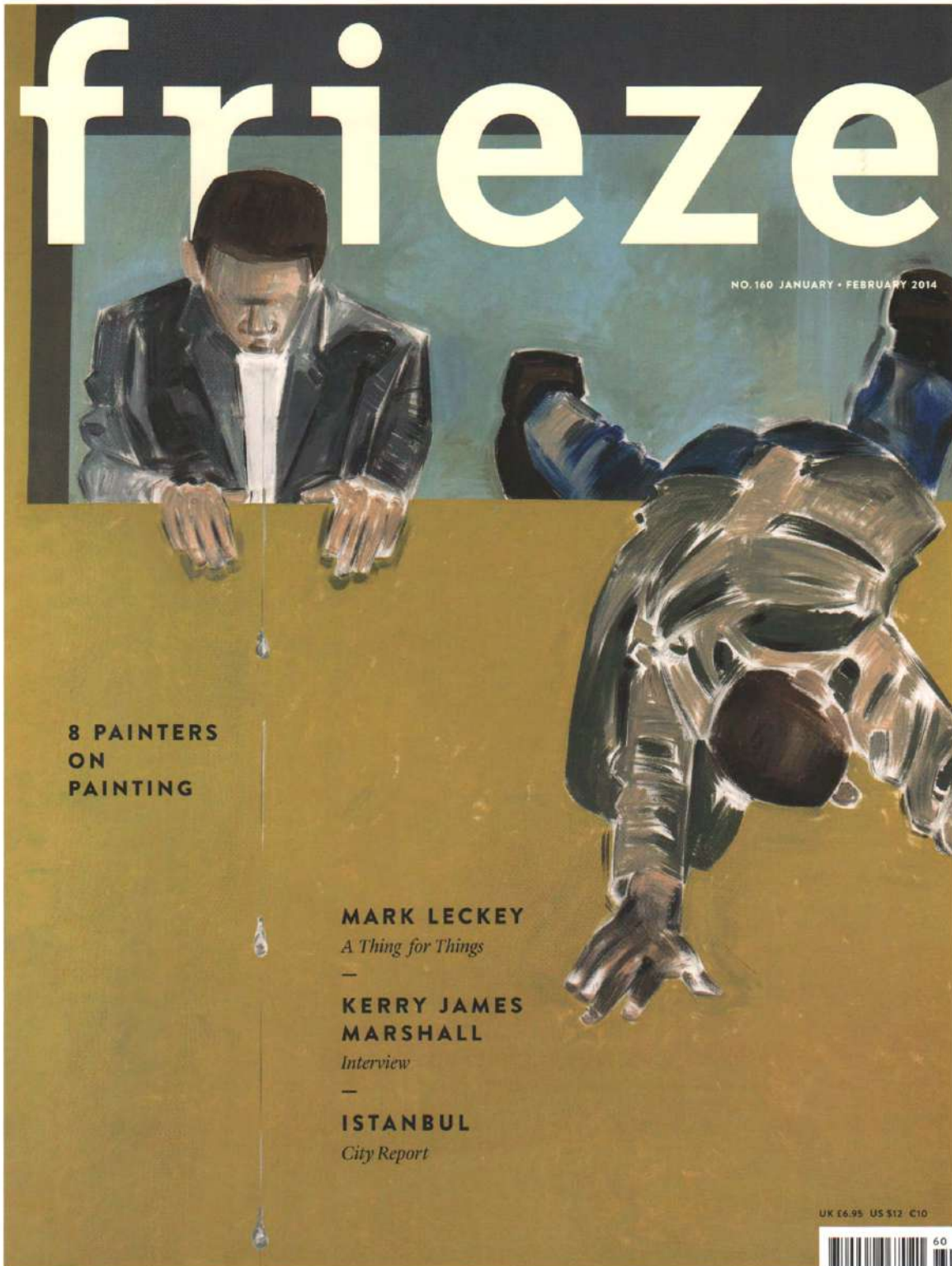


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Jonathan Griffin, "A Thing for Things," *Frieze*, January, 2014

# Frieze



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*A Thing for Things*

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# A Thing for Things

With 'one foot in this world and one in another', **Mark Leckey's** works have a limitless capacity for association *by Jonathan Griffin*

'I smell things. I listen to things. I feel things. I taste things. I look at things. It is not enough to look and listen and taste and smell and feel, I have to do those to the right things, such as look at books, and fail to do them to the wrong things or else people doubt that I am a thinking being.'

Amanda Baggs's YouTube video, *In My Language* (2007), shows her silhouetted against a window, fluttering her hands through the air in front of her. Her motions are repetitive: she rocks back and forth, she jangles wire around a doorknob, she passes her finger through the stream of water from a tap. All the while she is humming – singing along with what is around her, as she puts it.

Baggs does not speak, because she is severely autistic. But she types. Halfway through the video, a digital voice begins to read what Baggs subtitles 'A Translation'. 'My language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret. It is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment [...] Ironically, the way that I move when responding to everything around me is described as "being in a world of my own!"'

Mark Leckey admits that he is, in a sense, envious of Baggs. 'I want to access something close to what she's accessing. For me, I think that's somehow tied up in technology.'<sup>1</sup> The artist knows he is on thin clinical and ethical ice when he says such things, but his awe at Baggs's empathic relationship to inanimate objects is sincere. Autism, it should be said, is still inadequately

understood by the medical community, let alone artists and art critics.<sup>2</sup> What has been clear for a while, though, is that people on the autism spectrum are making major contributions to contemporary culture, particularly through computer programming, a profession that has long been popular with high-functioning autistics. As digital technology comes not only to be the medium through which we transmit information but which actually shapes what we want to say and what we want to look at, Leckey's hypothesis is that we are all being taught to relate to the world in a similar way to Baggs.

A clip from *In My Language* appears inset at the upper-right corner of Leckey's video *PropyaShiv* (2010–13), part of his installation for 'The Encyclopedic Palace' at the 55th Venice Biennale. The video is, ostensibly, a pitch for a touring exhibition the artist curated in 2013 called 'The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things', except that this video is a re-jig of the original presentation. He describes an exhibition that is yet to happen (although by the time *PropyaShiv* was finished, it was already halfway through its three-venue tour) and which is based on the animistic agency of artefacts and images that the artist encountered, by and large, online or in books: 'Things', as he puts it in the video, 'that have one foot in this world and one in another.' Much of this material – a 1960s Cyberman helmet, a clay maquette of a concept car, a mummified cat – seemed caught in limbo between the past and the future, between life and death.

'The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things', 2013, installation view at Nottingham Contemporary

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The forward momentum of Leckey's practice is such that he is prone, perhaps more than any other contemporary artist, to make work about work that he is yet to make. Teasers, trailers, posters, proposals and lectures are all equally useful vehicles for his evolving ideas. In 'The Encyclopedic Palace', Leckey presented videos, light-boxes and 'standees' – those collapsible three-dimensional cardboard signs typically seen in cinema foyers – all promoting 'The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things'. 'On Pleasure Bent' (2013) at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, was an exhibition that Leckey titled after a film that he has yet to finish making; it was represented, in the show, by another standee and a short trailer.

It is natural, for Leckey, that one project should branch into several more, and that new projects contain snippets of past works. He samples himself as well as others; 'The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things' featured a giant inflatable Felix the Cat, a character that first appeared in his work in 2008, as well as the monumental sound system *BigBoxStatueAction* (originally made in 2003, and last configured in 2012) and his film *Made in 'Eaven* (2004) in which he conjures a CGI simulation of Jeff Koons's chrome *Rabbit* (1986) inside his former studio flat. He has spoken of the exhibition as 'a 3D Tumblr', a screen in which objects are flattened

into images against chroma key blue-, green- or red-painted backgrounds and then emancipated into the imaginative and associative ether – what Bruno Latour called a 'parliament of things'.<sup>3</sup>

It is these things' limitless capacity for associations that is thrilling to Leckey. 'The "content" of any medium is always another medium,' wrote Marshall McLuhan.<sup>4</sup> Just as a single YouTube search will inevitably produce endless lists of additional 'recommended' links generated by what Leckey would call an 'autistic' algorithm, so too can things as various as a cartoon animal, a brand of cigarettes or a fridge command infinitely numerous – and intense – feelings of attachment, identity or communality. As Leckey's early film *Fiornuci Made Me Hardcore* (1999) asserted in its title, brands are totems around which communities convene, and consumer goods are transformative talismans. That film, in which Leckey skilfully edited together footage of British youth subcultures from Northern Soul to Acid House, remains by far his most watched video on YouTube, with more than 40,000 views at time of writing – revered, I suspect, by a community of passionate nostalgics who have no knowledge of the rest of his work. 'SEE, WE ASSEMBLE' was the title for his exhibition in 2011 at the Serpentine Gallery, London. Leckey's understanding of the emotional drives within late capitalism is far

more nuanced and reciprocal than the standard oppositional Marxist critique of alienation.

Once objects, sounds and images are made into representations and archived online they become memories in the collective digital psyche, unmoored and susceptible to abuse, manipulation or, more commonly, to fetishization. *On Pleasure Bent*, when it is finished, will be a kind of video memoir, an incantation of those images that are embedded in Leckey's consciousness and which cohere into what he recognizes as his own cultural identity. The title (and font design) is borrowed from a 1967 record by the British comedian Kenneth Williams, who reportedly took it from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). In Leckey's trailer, Benson & Hedges cigarettes, the BBC test card, electricity pylons, net stockings and the song 'Easy to be Hard' from the musical *Hair* (1967) all rub up against each other in an audio-visual collage that is as nostalgic as it is phantasmal.

'I'm bringing out these images from the very depths of my being, and I don't trust them,' he says. 'They're mine and they're not mine. I manufactured them and they've been manufactured for me. They're someone else's too.' Leckey often talks in terms of his surrender to technology – of allowing his brain to be changed by it. That, he says, is his version of Gnosticism. In his performance *GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction* (2010), Leckey huffed refrigerator coolant while a handsome black Samsung fridge-freezer stood against a green-screen background and revealed, via a pre-recorded soundtrack voiced by the artist, its innermost desires and anxieties. The process was a bid for empathic communication with an insensible commodity, an object of desire that Leckey credited with an animistic consciousness. (If such objects are not alive, then how else to explain their pull on us and their need to be loved?)

Leckey is pursued by the impulse not only to possess images – to file them away in folders marked 'man/bodies', 'animals' and 'machines', as he did when preparing 'The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things' – but also to get his hands on them and inside them, to squeeze them and manipulate them. 'I am aroused by images. I love them too much. I am a fetishist,' he told me. There is something overtly sexual about his relationship with certain object-images, as seen in his film *Pearl Vision* (2012), in which he sits beating out a rhythm on a chrome snare drum between his legs. Halfway through the video Leckey loses his clothes, the sampled voices on the soundtrack ('off, on, off, on') become more urgent and the camera begins intimately to glide over and around the surface of the drum. At various points – and it is nearly impossible to tell when exactly – the real drum is substituted by an immaculate CGI drum, at one point allowing the virtual camera to penetrate a rivet and access the drum's interior. Finally, the drum becomes fleshy and starts to stretch and swell.

Leckey has admitted that part of the reason he was excited to convene 'The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things' was that it would give him the opportunity to get close to the objects selected for the exhibition. He is less concerned, however, with the physical objects than with the opportunity to record them visually; he admits to being uncomfortable around certain objects in the real world, feeling that he can only properly grasp them once they have been translated into digital form, when they are 'there and not there' as he puts it. The videos in his Venice Biennale installation documented his process of scanning them in three dimensions, and then manipulating them as they were suspended in inky-black, virtual space.

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1  
Standee for *Oh! Pleasure Bent*,  
2013, mixed media,  
installation view at the Hammer  
Museum, Los Angeles

2  
*GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction*,  
2011, performance at  
Serpentine Gallery, London

3  
*Prop4aShw*, 2010,  
video still



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1  
Drunken Bakers, 2005,  
Digi-Beta still

2  
*The Ecstasy of Always Bursting  
Forth*, 2013,  
scintillating grid, 1.3 x 1 m

3  
*'On Pleasure Bent'*, 2013,  
installation view at the Hammer  
Museum, Los Angeles

4  
*Pearl Vision*, 2012,  
DVD still

5  
*Circa 1987*, 2013,  
offset poster, 33 x 48 cm



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That something can so easily change or move from one state to another is emblematic of possibility, of regeneration and transcendence, but it can also be frightening, humiliating or enslaving. *Transformer RGB* (2012) is a screen made of large red, green and blue LEDs; across its surface, a cartoon donkey in silhouette howls and rises onto its hind legs. Leckey borrowed the looped image from the scene in Disney's animated film *Pinochio* (1940) when a boy is magically (and terrifyingly) turned into an ass. A similar RGB screen, *Transfigured* (2013), is a close-up of the singer Hibiscus, founder of the 1970s San Francisco drag act The Cockettes, whose features are adorned with glitter and red lipstick.

*Transformer RGB* and *Transfigured*, installed in the chapel-like gallery at the Hammer, recall icons of saints or martyrs. They are alternate sides of the same coin, transcendent and transfigured, examples of the 'grotesquerie and indignity' that Simon Reynolds recognizes in the 'cults' of dance culture seen in *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* but which is also evident in Leckey's film *Drunken Bakers* (2005). The latter – which borrowed the eponymous characters from the bawdy comic *Vie*, joining found images with homemade dialogue – is at once an elegant gesture of appropriation and a desperately debased vision of creativity.<sup>5</sup> In his LED screens, 'autistic logic' is the carrier of 'voluptuous irrationalism', to paraphrase Leckey in *PropaShow. The Ecstasy of Always Bursting Forth* (2013) is based on an even more complex and voluptuous system – what the artist calls a 'scintillating grid', also made from red, green and blue LEDs but organized into separate cells which rapidly flicker on and off. This luminescent support is masked with a black and white photograph of a middle-aged man in a floppy hat and a dress, kneeling as if in supplication on the pavement. Only through spots in the fabric of his clothes does light emanate, as if he is possessed by supernatural energy. The photograph is, apparently, of a German comedian, but Leckey is less interested in the image's provenance than in its communication of 'a kind of exultant abjection'. This is the state that Leckey aspires to attain as an artist: a hyper-sensitized negation of the self, achievable through technology, which would connect him to a space that is profoundly open and potentially infinite. Power ON. ♦♦

Mark Leckey is an artist based in London, UK. In 2013, he organized the touring show 'The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things' and had a major exhibition at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA. His work is included in the 2013 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, USA (until 16 March).

Jonathan Griffin is a contributing editor of *frieze*. He lives in Los Angeles, USA.

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but also to get his hands on them and inside them,  
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<sup>1</sup> All quotations of the artist, unless otherwise noted, are from conversations with the author, Los Angeles, October 2013.

<sup>2</sup> There is not even a consensus whether autism should be treated as a curable disorder, a disability or a state of personal difference, like sexuality. The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published in May 2013, controversially groups all forms of autism (including high functioning Asperger's Syndrome) under one diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 1993, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, p. 142

<sup>4</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964, McGraw-Hill, Toronto, p. 7

<sup>5</sup> Simon Reynolds, 'They Burn So Bright and You Can Only Wonder Why: Watching Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore', in *See, We Assemble*, exhibition catalogue, Serpentine Gallery, London, Kathryn Rattee and Melissa Larner, eds, Koenig Books, London, 2011, p. 8