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Jason Farago, "Mark Leckey Captures the Exuberance of Pre-'Brexit' Britain," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2016

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ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

Mark Leckey Captures the Exuberance of Pre-'Brexit' Britain

By JASON FARAGO | NOV. 3, 2016



The installation "UniAddDumThs" at the MoMA PS1 show "Mark Leckey: Containers and Their Drivers."
Credit: Michael Nagle for The New York Times

No one Pauline Kael knew voted for Richard M. Nixon, and no one I know voted for "Brexit." I lived in London for a little over three years, and that catastrophic British referendum of June 23, and the political meltdown, legal uncertainty and racist violence it has unleashed, have obliterated a place I thought I knew, and left the British art world unmoored.

A few days before the vote, the art magazine *Frieze* asked artists and curators to speak their minds on Britain's place in Europe — and every single participant called on Britain to remain in the European Union. What happens now to the art scenes of London and Glasgow, to the schools and galleries, and above all to the young Britons whose futures have been arrested, is unknowable but very unpromising.

The affecting retrospective "Mark Leckey: Containers and Their Drivers," now on view at MoMA PS1, appears almost as a time capsule from Britain before June 23: a sprawling, bopping showcase of musical history, anthropological assemblage and personal reverie. A prodigious aggregator of high art and popular culture, Mr. Leckey is a profoundly British figure, shaped especially by the country's postpunk and dance music scenes. Winner of the 2008 Turner Prize, he stands at the forefront of a generation of British artists who revived the country's art scene, and though this exhibition pulses with the exuberance of the British culture that nurtured him, it can at times feel like a love letter to a Britain that has come and gone. (The show has been deftly structured across two floors of the museum by Peter Eleey, PS1's associate director of exhibitions and programs, and Stuart Comer, who leads MoMA's department of media and performance art. Mr. Comer is American but spent more than a decade in London.)

Running through this artist's work is a passion for the British underground, particularly its music subcultures, which Mr. Leckey examines with both a sociologist's diligence and a diarist's nakedness. Born near Liverpool in 1964, Mr. Leckey came of age as Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Marc Quinn and others found fame under an umbrella designation as Young British Artists. But Mr. Leckey preferred rave nights and obscure vinyl, and sat out that media-confected jamboree. After a few years in New York, he returned to London and was invited to contribute to a show at the Institute of Contemporary Arts on music videos, a genre he found more engaging than most visual art.

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The result was “Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore”: a rhythmic, enthralling video chronicle of Britain’s nights on the tiles from the 1970s to the 1990s. Pasty white kids bob about in workmen’s social halls, and drunk teenagers boogie under strobe lights; Northern Soul fans in bell bottoms give way to ravers with whistles. Mr. Leckey brought the pleasures of Britain’s working classes (specifically from northern England) into elite (and southern) art institutions, and held up popular culture as the truest source of Britain’s creative life. Crucially, the kids danced more often than not off the beat: Mr. Leckey did not synchronize sound to image, which imbued the video with a loss and wistfulness belying its four-on-the-floor beat. “Fiorucci” became a cult success in the turn-of-the-millennium art world, though today, when archival imagery is found in the cloud rather than on tape, it can be hard to remember just how much labor was required to synthesize its night-owl history.



Mr. Leckey treats the cartoon character Felix as an archetype of media distribution and mutation.
Credit Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Mr. Leckey stuck with music with his “Sound System” sculptures, totemlike stacks of speakers, amps and buffers that burble out snippets of vocals, beats and bodily sounds. But by the mid-2000s his approach had grown more omnivorous, and his art began to recycle and reconstitute fine art, popular culture and his own past as elements of a single, undifferentiated stream of content. Lecture-performances such as “Cinema-in-the-Round”(2006-08) and “In the Long Tail” (2009), which screen here on video, mash up art history and economics with fantastical claims, recalling the jumbled but spirited pedagogical interventions of Joseph Beuys. “In the Long Tail,” for example, somehow equates the statistical concept of long-tailed distribution to the tail of Felix the Cat — the silent-era cartoon that Mr. Leckey treats as an archetype of media distribution and mutation. Felix pops up a lot in this show, most uncannily in a giant inflatable version scrunched into a gallery, his chin smushed into his belly.

In 2013, Mr. Leckey’s practice of aggregating high and low culture drove him to organize an ornery exhibition, “The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things,” which treated antiquities, machines, consumer goods and art, by William Blake, Louise Bourgeois and Ed Atkins, as so much commensurate stuff. The Google-addled cabinet of curiosities toured across Britain, and when it ended Mr. Leckey roughly duplicated many of its objects, then placed them on staggered displays that recalled natural history museums. Authentic artworks and copies, unique objects and 3-D printouts, shoes and sex toys are absorbed into a homogeneous presentation of world culture, in which technology has vitiated the very need for museums to preserve significant objects. It’s bracing, like seeing an alien exhibition of our species, though one could do without the related posters and paratexts: Mr. Leckey has a wearying penchant for buttressing his projects with promotional materials for from his earlier shows, and should be confident enough now to let that go. (There are also photographs here of reviews of past exhibitions in Artforum or Frieze; even we critics are fodder for the system.)

Recently, Mr. Leckey has veered back to autobiographical territory. A room-filling sculpture of a Liverpool highway overpass, and a hallway illuminated by sallow yellow lamps used to illuminate British motorways, transform the galleries of PS1 into memory palaces of his northern English childhood. There is also a crepuscular LED display of Britain’s national power grid; watching the lights go out across the island gives a frisson of the Brexit-induced ruin to come.

Most impressive is “Dream English Kid 1964-1999 AD,” which limns the artist’s youth primarily through scraps of video discovered online. We see record shops, washed-out public housing, a shadow walking through London’s Soho; we see clips of Joy Division, the Manchester-born band Mr. Leckey worships; we see the same highway overpass we encountered as sculpture, which on screen appears in a fog-bestrewn black-and-white like something out of “The Third Man.” As in “Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore,” this aching new video gains its power through shrewd editing and a lightly worn nostalgia.

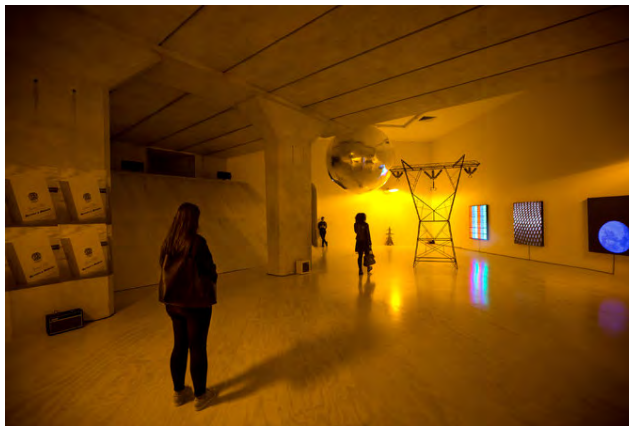
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Unlike “Fiorucci,” this one was made largely through YouTube and other digital sources; what appears to be first-person is actually made of others’ lives.

The melancholy “Dream English Kid” may not have the outward-facing joy of “Fiorucci,” nor the exacting wit of his cabinet of curiosities. But it’s one of Mr. Leckey’s best works. It captures, more than anything before, the gravid, intoxicating atmosphere of Britain in the 1990s that nurtured the most consequential generation of British artists of the last century. Brexit has made the video doubly nostalgic, not only for the last days of analog culture, but for an open, imaginative Britain that has not yet shot itself in the foot.



Left: The video “Dream English Kid 1964-1999 AD.” Right: “Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore,” Mr. Leckey’s video portrait of Britain’s youth out on the town from the 1970s to the 1990s. Credit Michael Nagle for The New York Times



Some of Mr. Leckey’s works were inspired by the industrial infrastructure of his childhood near Liverpool, England.
Credit: Michael Nagle for The New York Times

“Mark Leckey: Containers and Their Drivers” runs through March 5 at MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens; 718-784-2084; momaps1.org.