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Margaret Carrigan, "To Dream the Impossible Dream: Mark Leckey at MoMA PS1," *Blouin Arinfo*, November 22, 2016

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To Dream the Impossible Dream: Mark Leckey at MoMA PS1

BY MARGARET CARRIGAN | NOVEMBER 22, 2016



Mark Leckey, "Felix The Cat," 2013 (Installation view)
(Photograph by Pablo Enriquez / Courtesy the artist and MoMA PS1)

Although I was standing by myself in Mark Leckey's "GreenScreenRefrigerator" installation at MoMA PS1, I wasn't alone. Surrounded by common Samsung devices of every stripe — a refrigerator, TV, tablet, computer, speaker towers, smartphones — it was like I was hanging out with old friends: I use stuff like this daily; hourly, even. I know these objects well. The main difference between the devices on display at PS1 and the ones I have in my home (or at my office, or in my pocket, etc.) is that these were staged showroom-style against an immersive infinity green screen. Oh, and they were talking to me. But more on that part later.

"GreenScreenRefrigerator" is only a small part of PS1's extensive two-floor exhibition, "Mark Leckey: Containers and their Drivers," which opened October 23. The show is the first comprehensive US survey and the largest exhibition to date of the artist's work. It features an array of videos, newly expanded iterations of former projects, sculptural installations, and even a specially commissioned performance to be held in March.

The British artist, now 52, made a name for himself in the late 1990s, due in large part to his breakout video, "Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore" (1999), a compilation of found and sampled VHS footage chronicling British dance-club subculture from the 1970s up to the '90s. Leckey has since been much made over for his pre-YouTube adoption of video sampling and his high-art-low-brow aesthetic that melts history and pop culture into a seemingly irreverent but nonetheless gratifying fondue.

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Mark Leckey
"GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction," 2010-2016 (*Installation view*)
PHOTOGRAPH BY PABLO ENRIQUEZ / COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MOMA PS1

Thankfully, "Containers and Their Drivers," with the sheer scope of work it presents, challenges the common critical extrapolation that Leckey is an overgrown wunderkind who used to dance his face off in clubs and now just makes jovial giant Felix-the-Cat inflatables. It does, however, unequivocally cast him as Don Quixote of the Digital Age. The wall texts of the exhibition paint Leckey as a wayfaring gentleman on a "romantic search for authentic experience" seeking the sublime in the stuff of postmodern superfluosity.

The iterative "meta" quality of Leckey's work often prevents any succinct description of his practice, which makes it easy to brand him as nothing more than a starry-eyed conquistador of late capitalist simulacra, collecting and reproducing the commodities and digital ephemera of our daily lives and serving it up as a sentimental homage to the post-Y2K human experience. Such an interpretation of his practice is convenient (and, I would argue, one into which he puckishly leans) precisely because it's hard to make sense of all the random crap Leckey incorporates in his work.

To be sure, the seeming randomness and crappiness is intentional. This is most evident in "UniAddDumThs," 2014, which is the part of the exhibition that is an exhibition within an exhibition — a triple exhibition "Inception," if you will. The installation is a touring copy Leckey made of *another* show he organized — "The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things," 2013 — and its display at PS1 is the fullest iteration of the work yet.

For "The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things," the artist created an exhibition based on the oddities he found on his hard drive, which he organized into loosely thematic categories of man, animal, and machine. He then tracked down or otherwise manifested the objects as they exist in real life and put them on display. Before returning them to their rightful owners, Leckey scanned and 3-D printed replicas of the items, which were then displayed in the subsequent touring show, "UniAddDumThs," the title of which is a playful pare-down of the original to underscore its derivativeness.

The installation of "UniAddDumThs" on view at PS1 includes not only the previously shown reproductions, but also new copies of objects that range from movie posters to ancient artifacts, album covers to other contemporary artists' works. While these objects may indeed be organized into "man," "animal," and "machine," their reproduced unoriginalness suggests that there is no categorical distinction — everything is just a copy of something else, made of the same cheap materials that you find in the quotidian consumer goods that make up middle-class life.

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Mark Leckey

"Dream English Kid 1964–1999 AD," 2016 (*Installation view*)
PHOTOGRAPH BY PABLO ENRIQUEZ / COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MOMA PS1

But there's more to Leckey's work than simple commodity fetishism. "Dream English Kid, 1964-1999 AD," 2015, a video work for which he created an entire corresponding multiple-room installation at PS1, proves that the artist is deeply concerned with the authenticity — or verifiable lack thereof — of our very sense of *being*. In the film, he reflects back on his life, from his Liverpoolian childhood up to his early career in London circa 1999 (the video ends with footage of the New Year's ball-drop on the eve of the new millennium). A montage of archival TV clips, YouTube videos, eBay-sourced memorabilia, and reconstructions of personal memories produced using props and models, the video marks the passage of time with a reoccurring image of a cement highway overpass from Leckey's hometown. At first unfettered and clean, the overpass grows increasingly graffitied and trash-strewn, until it's finally tidied up and repainted.

The adjacent installation that accompanies "Dream English Kid" boasts a full-scale replica of the haunting overpass from the film, abruptly transporting you back to the site of the artist's youth. Lit in large part by industrial ochre-hued sodium lights, the room feels hazy, as if you're lucid dreaming or maybe just tripping. You wander around, looking at displaced fragments of Leckey's life: reprinted and blown-up newspaper covers, models of common roadside sights like transmission towers, a 3-D-printed set of the artist's legs in red pants. There's no discernible chronology to the objects' arrangement underneath and around the overpass, it's just a watery soup of scattered memories made manifest.

As you walk toward the far edge of the bridge, you notice a peephole in its wall. Inside, you see a smaller replica of the same overpass you're standing next to. It's like stumbling upon an infinity mirror, which makes you momentarily wonder: Is there an end to the overpasses or do they recur inside each other *ad infinitum*? You reassure yourself that that's probably impossible. But, in actuality, the bridge is countlessly echoed because it's not just the physical replica that is repeated: You remember that the overpass also exists in another dimension (i.e. 2-D) and in multiple iterations, appearing over and over again on a durational loop, in the "Dream English Kid" video.

The implication of the overpass, existing as it does in more than one time and space within the show, is similar to that of all the imitation "stuff" in "UniAddDumThs." What constitutes the real when everything is just a replica? Is there even a "real" to reference? But Leckey takes it one step further by suggesting it's not just the artifacts of our lives that are counterfeit, but perhaps our very existence. Our memories — the temporal fabric of our identities — are constantly being reviewed, re-looped, and reconstructed. Leckey demonstrates in "Dream English Boy" that these seemingly idiosyncratic inner lives can be manufactured and reproduced just like anything else.

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Mark Leckey
"UniAddDumThs," 2016 (*Installation view*)
PHOTOGRAPH BY PABLO ENRIQUEZ / COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MOMA PS1

Back to "GreenScreenRefrigerator" (2010-16), the first work I mentioned, and to which the idea of an inner life is key. To reiterate: The Samsung devices of this installation talk. Rather, just one of them talks — the "smart" refrigerator explains its cooling process to you in a disembodied, digitized voice that streams seamlessly around you through various other devices. A transcript of the refrigerator's monologue scrolls across the LED panel opposite the infinity green screen upon which it sits: "memories," "it's so cold in the dark," "here all of us are still," "I liken myself to other things," "best before best before best before."

The refrigerator's words are funny and melancholic, poetic and practical all at once. They imply that not only is the machine aware of itself, but it harbors the same basic fears and desires that plague humanity. It wants to feel connected to something else ("I liken myself to other things") and it frets over its mortality ("best before best before").

By giving the fridge a voice and suggesting it's aware of its own existence, Leckey forces us to consider our complex, inter-reliant relationship to the increasingly "smart" objects we surround ourselves with and how much we may be like them, or they like us, challenging our anthropocentric superiority complex. In a related 2010 performance, "GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction,"

Leckey donned a green screen suit and huffed Freon so as to insert his body into the installation and liken himself to the refrigerator. For a moment, he was perhaps more machine than man: He figuratively erased his human form and literally processed the same chemicals as the fridge. He also found himself high as kite, so his ability to reason — the Enlightenment benchmark of humanness — was questionable, too.

Given that huffing coolant isn't exactly safe, it's reasonable to assume that Leckey risked his health, if not his life, in his quest to reveal our codependent relationship with machines. In PS1's presentation of "GreenScreenRefrigerator," the suit and coolant canister from the artist's 2010 performance are on display. Alongside the myriad other devices, they remain static: mere effigies of a man. Leckey may not be our era's Quixote but instead its Sancho Panza, whose everyman's wisdom and self-sacrificing actions offer the closest thing to reason in an unreasonable world.