

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jennifer Krasinski, "Mark Leckey's Retrospective Showcases the Seductive Creep of Nostalgia," *The Village Voice*, December 8, 2016



## Mark Leckey's Retrospective Showcases the Seductive Creep of Nostalgia

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BY JENNIFER KRASINSKI



Leckey's *Circa '87* (2013) *Mark Leckey/Gavin Brown's enterprise New York/Rome*

Turner Prize-winning artist Mark Leckey has always been possessed of the mischievous spirit of Pop — "pop" as in "the popular," of course, but also as in "to puncture," "to let the air out." Of the same generation as the notorious "Young British Artists" who, beginning in the late 1980s, kicked up a scene in the art world with work concocted to shock and sell at the same time, Leckey found his spotlight later, in 1999, with a thumping, elegant, found-footage video, *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*. Using images and sounds taken from British dance clubs from the northern-soul to the acid-house eras, Leckey composes and captures a palpable euphoria: of bodies on the dancefloor, of the particular pulses of the music — and of nostalgia's seductive creep when looking back at days long gone.

"Mark Leckey: Containers and Their Drivers" is the artist's first American survey, filling two floors of MoMA P.S.1 with seventeen years of the films, videos, installations, sculptures, and collages, and all the matter in between, created by his oddball and muscular mind. The installation — boldly theatrical if a bit pummeling at times — presents Leckey in light of how he "pops" the world, changing the shape and gravity of objects and images, and how it all weighs upon us.

Take his cheeky and hypnotic *Made In 'Eaven* (2004), a silent video-cum-16mm film of Jeff Koons's *Rabbit* on a pedestal in the middle of Leckey's then-studio in London, which might just be the most brilliant critical essay ever composed on the artist. Koons created his iconic sculpture in 1986, flawlessly fabricating an inflatable toy rabbit in stainless steel, "inflating" the object's value, giving it a heavier presence (literally and figuratively), transforming it into a work of art. Leckey's camera floats around the otherwise bare, dingy room; it zooms in on Koons's sculpture to capture the space reflected in its pristine surface. The camera, however, is nowhere to be seen in the reflection — Leckey's reveal that the scene isn't real: It's computer-generated. In this animation, this manifestation, *Rabbit* isn't heavy. It isn't really even here at all. It only *appears to be*.

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For Leckey, animation is as much a condition as it is a medium. As images are brought to life, he sees them edging closer to thing-ness — acquiring a particular volume around which to wrap his head. In the witty performance video *Cinema-in-the-Round* (2006–08), he lectures on the evolution of the cartoon cat, from Krazy Kat to Felix the Cat to Garfield. Felix was the first of his kind to be merchandised; he was a fiction that became stuff. Later, a toy Felix was used by RCA Studios to test an early form of television transmission; a return of stuff to the realm of fiction. Leckey returns to Felix again and again in a game we might call "Wag the Cat," making him the smiling mascot for thinking through the tangible versus the spectral. He's in part the subject of another lecture performance, "The Long Tail," from 2009, here on view as a video. Felix's face also appears in a collage, on a balloon that dances along the ceiling. There's even an oversize inflatable Felix crushed into the corner of one of the galleries, a plate of offerings (money, liquor, handwritten messages) placed at his feet.

Television's long reach is relatively quaint compared to the sticky, twisting tentacles of the internet, and for *UniAddDumThs* (2014), Leckey performs as a kind of flâneur on the information superhighway. The installation is a re-creation of an exhibition the artist put together in 2013 titled "The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things," for which he surfed and searched the web, amassing a digital image archive that he then transformed into a motley collection of things. Artworks by Jim Shaw, Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober, and others lived alongside a mummified cat, a thirteenth-century reliquary shaped in the form of a hand, a model for a concept car carved out of clay, and other, more banal objects. Before the exhibition ended, Leckey scanned and printed (in both two and three dimensions) what he could of its contents. *UniAddDumThs* is an aggregation of these artifacts — these facsimiles, these preservations, all hauntings of the "real" objects. Here, all has been divided into three taxonomies — man, animal, and machine — and displayed so coolly that each and every bit of this stuff looks as though some kind of rigor mortis has set in.

In Leckey's hands, objects aren't just deadened; they are, in some cases, harbingers of death. In *GreenScreenRefrigerator* (2010–16) a black Samsung "smart" fridge stands like a monolith in front of a green screen, delivering a kind of existential anatomy lesson in a synthesized staccato. (It's Leckey who provides the voice.) "See we assemble," it repeats for a few beats. Mounted to the walls around it are a Samsung smartphone, a smart television, and other branded gadgets. The fridge explains how it's in a perpetual state of becoming, what with its cooling system transforming liquid into vapor, the cycle going around and around again, each revolution propelling its evolution. It's a chilling piece (pun intended) when one thinks that the rise of artificial intelligence is predicated on human obsolescence. We know that Siri, for example, can refuse orders, and the self-driving car already killed someone. What's the use of the future if we're building it so as not to be a part of it?

One of the more mournful works is *Dream English Kid 1964–1999 AD* (2015), an eerie auto-biopic Leckey constructed from archival footage and YouTube clips — a bookend, in a sense, to *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*. In it, he constructs a quasi-self-portrait from sights and sounds not his own: a Joy Division performance; images of nuclear bombs exploding and a candle going out; shots of an underpass near where Leckey grew up, and more. In these post-Brexit days and in our freshly trumped America, is nostalgia a kind of poison — a cause, or a symptom, of the toxic nationalism that's been simmering beneath these surfaces? Or is it a balm, something to remind us of better days? Watching the random images flicker by, one gets the strong sense that we'll be better off from now on if we keep looking forward.

## **'Mark Leckey: Containers and Their Drivers'**

MoMA P.S.1

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