

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Miranda Sawyer, "Mark Leckey: 'There has to be a belief that art has this power, this charisma'," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2019

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Interview

Mark Leckey: 'There has to be a belief that art has this power, this charisma'

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Miranda Sawyer



Artist Mark Leckey photographed outside his home in north London. Photograph: Suki Dhanda/The Observer

The Turner prize-winning artist on the influence of rave on his work, and reconstructing part of the M53 for his new Tate Britain show

When I arrive at the block of flats where artist Mark Leckey lives, he's leaning over the walkway balcony, shouting down to the photographer. His six-month-old baby has only just settled and Leckey is reluctant to do the interview and pictures in his flat in case of waking her up. So he comes down to us.

It's a bit drizzly. Leckey strides around the children's playground in the centre of the flats, in sunglasses and a big, belted overcoat. He looks piratical, with his beard and long hair and single pearl earring, or like a jumble-sale 17th century nobleman. Other residents peer at him, unbothered; one has a chat as she passes. She overhears Leckey telling the photographer that he's from Ellesmere Port, near Liverpool. "My parents are from there!" she says, dragging a kid's bike along. "We need to talk!" "We do!" says Leckey.

Photos done, Leckey and I tramp the streets, searching for an interview-friendly cafe. Leckey lives on Caledonian Road, just north of King's Cross in London, and we have a choice: old-school caffs, corporate chains, new vegan efforts. We walk 10 minutes to one of the latter and, as we do, we talk of now and then. Now: children (he has two with his art curator wife), and how London is changing, shiny hipsterism slotted next to longstanding grottness. Then: what living within the grottness was like.

In the 1990s, Leckey lived in Brixton, south London. He wasn't at all happy, but he makes it sound fun. He and his friends squatted in a house and the landlord let them stay. But then the landlord decided to build a car park in the basement (of a modest terraced home) and they had to live around that. "It's hard cooking when there's no kitchen floor, so you're one floor down from the cooker," says Leckey. He puts his hands above his head, acts it out. He's funny.

Later, I realise that this mixture of past and present is very much part of Leckey's art. His work is hard to categorise (he gets bored doing the same type of art over and over), but he often remembers his previous life and uses technology to bring those recollections into now - not shiny and new, but dragging emotional detritus and strangers' videos and "did this actually happen?" with them. His first successful video work, *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*, made at the end of the 90s, used found footage of 1970s northern soul dancers, 1980s casuals and 1990s ravers. At the time, much was made of the video's historical connection, of how the English working class have long sought refuge in nightlife and dancing, but what stayed with me was the video's spookiness. It was eerie, uneasy, mournful. The camera froze on faces, wound back, showed them again. It was a bit scary.

I mention this and Leckey agrees. "I always think of *Fiorucci* as a ghost film," he says. "I was thinking the other day about how *Fiorucci* was made in the same year as *Blair Witch Project*, with the same technology. I started it in 1997, because it was only then that you could get desktop computers that were strong enough to run video editing software. That work is about memory and also what happens when these experiences have been recorded and then they're played back."

Leckey has a major show coming up at Tate Britain, which feels like an acknowledgement. Over the years his career has stopped and started, taking in music (he was in bands including donAtelier), comics (he once made art about the Drunken Bakers in *Viz*) and film (he was professor of film studies at Frankfurt's Städelschule). He won the Turner prize in 2008, with work that included a lecture about film and video, as well as a piece that used photo slides and made them into a 3D representation of his old flat. "I want to transform my world and make it more of itself," he said. He's not a household name, but Leckey has plenty of admirers of his wonky, real-unreal art.

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In 2016, another of Leckey's videos, *Dream English Kid 1964-1999AD*, won the Tiger short film award at the Rotterdam film festival. *Dream English Kid* was triggered by his memories of seeing Joy Division at a matinee performance in Liverpool, when he was in his early teens. On the internet, more than 30 years later, he stumbled across some audio of the concert and wondered if he could hear himself in the crowd. Impossible, obviously, but it was a kick-off point; he made a half-hour film about his life from birth until 35 - "my memoirs" - but only using footage that he found online. "I have a knack for looking for stuff," he says. "I'm good at it, I always have been; I'm one of those people that can find things."

In *Dream English Kid*, a motorway bridge kept reappearing. This was the bridge that was at the end of Leckey's garden when he was growing up in Eastham, also near Liverpool (his family moved to Ellesmere Port when he was nine). He and his friends used to mooch about under the concrete structure, eat sweets, mess around, with the M53 thundering over their heads: "Everyone going somewhere. And you're static, you're stuck." There wasn't much to do. Once, he and his sister, aged eight and six, were chased by a gang of skinheads.

He's recreating that bridge for the Tate show. One of the galleries will be taken over by the grey struts and slab underside of the motorway, revealing the space beneath, so that walking into the room will make you feel a bit like young Leckey did, hanging out, waiting for something to happen. "It's like a theatre set," he tells me. As with many Leckey works, there will be sound. He's written a script, which he's got children to speak, and then other children to act out. He's editing the spoken part down so that the recording becomes more like music. The video will play and the voices will come out of a 16-channel surround sound system. "The bridge will be generating all this noise."



The Eastham Rake motorway bridge, recreated in *Dream English Kid*, 1964-1999AD. Photograph: Mark Leckey

Art-spotters will notice that Leckey has used this bridge before. In *Dream...*, it was a motif to represent time passing. But in the Tate show, which is called *O' Magic Power of Bleakness*, it's telling a far stranger story.

When Leckey was 20, he went back to college to take his O-levels (he'd dropped out of school at 15). As part of his English study, he had to write a composition about childhood and he wrote about a "supernatural encounter" he had underneath the motorway bridge. He and his friends, all around eight years old, used to sit at the top of the concrete slope, on a ledge just beneath the motorway. And one time he saw an elf. "Or a fairy, or a pixie, or something..." he says. "It appeared and it kind of giggled at me."

Actually, Leckey's told this fairy story so many times, he says, that the remembering of it has become mixed up in the actual event, in the way that anecdotes overlay the truth or a photograph erodes your mind's-eye view. "But I can still feel an energy when I think about it," he says. "It wasn't malign, but it was mocking. And I just became obsessed by that encounter. This bridge was this entity, a sort of municipal entity, that hosted this supernatural experience."

His older daughter - she's eight, the same age he was when he saw the fairy - is really into fairies at the moment, so that's a factor, too. I ask him about the script that the kids act out. It's about a changeling, he says, and it uses the cliches of an urban drama to tell the tale: "At the end, there's this supernatural riot."

Leckey likes the combination of the fairy's other-world magic and the bridge's real-world engineering. He relates it to being into acid house and hardcore when he was younger.

"There's something about being lost in music," he says, "which seems organic and wonderful, whereas the idea of being lost in technology is more gridded and rational. It's more disturbing. But it's when the two come together that I've had the most ecstatic experience. Like acid house and that really rigid 303 repetitive bassline. The deeply inauthentic can actually bring true joy. It's why I make music as well as art, because music is where I've experienced that feeling the most. And that's why I use technology as well."



Felix the Cat, by Mark Leckey, at the Walker art gallery in Liverpool, 2016. Photograph: Fabio De Paola/The Guardian

Now that he doesn't go dancing any more, he accesses that intense experience in other ways. Sometimes from making art: "The reason to make work... no, not the reason, but the power I get from it, is that when I'm editing I get lost in it. I get consumed and that's what I want." He used to get a mad rush from running: "I don't do it any more, but about 10 years ago there was a period when I used to run and start laughing like a maniac. And singing. I'd be running along, singing. I'd get very twitchy with my hands and fingers (he starts making angled shapes with his fingers) and I'd be running like that, twitching and laughing and singing."

"It's not escape," he says. "There's a word that's the opposite of transcendence... Imminence. Transcendence is above, imminence is within. And you're in it. When I'd run, I'd feel like the world would come rushing in on me and it was completely overwhelming."

I wonder if people who come to the exhibition, who stand under his motorway bridge, will have such an experience. "Well, I want you to be taken into an altered state," he says. "If people got lost too, that would be magic."

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If all this is making him sound a little hippy-esque, that's not really what Leckey's about. He's not interested in having an authentic "experience". In fact, he doesn't really believe that you can have such a thing, given humans' self-consciousness and the way that the media dominate our inner picture of how life should be. He has, instead, "an investment in fantasy or magic". It's why he makes art. "There has to be a belief that art has this power, this charisma, this potency," he says.

We talk about *RuPaul's Drag Race* and how something deeply unreal and fantastical can be powerful. "There's no real experience there," he says. "But something's being made true. It's truth produced out of illusion and that excites me." Untouchable truth and powerful magic, made from concrete and synthesizers and painted-on faces. It's how many urban lives are created.

Leckey's background was part urban, part not: Eastham and Ellesmere Port are overspill towns, across the Mersey from Liverpool itself, on the way to Chester via the M53. His parents worked for Littlewoods. Leckey's first love was music and he hopped through various pop subcultures in the way that kids did back then: a punk, a mod, a rude boy, even a new romantic. "Yeah, for about a week," he says. "There's still a kid in Liverpool who, whenever he sees me, calls me Spandau."

At 15, he became a casual: one of the label-wearing, wedge-flicking, swaggering hooligan peacock boys who dominated the north-west when I was growing up. Casuals were working-class lads (called Perry boys in Manchester) who loved football, fighting and brilliant sportswear. Leckey was a casual until he was 19.

Now he regrets it, but he also recognises that there weren't many options. "It was either be a casual or get beaten up by casuals," he says. He didn't fight much, himself - "I was too pretty" - but he got into trouble with the police and went to court a couple of times for stuff he didn't do. "It was a waste of time," he says now. "I wish I'd been strong enough to be a geek."

He moved away from this life when his mum's new husband, a self-educated docker, took him aside. He stood Leckey in the lounge and said: "Everything in here, somebody drew it before it was made." And something clicked. Leckey went to college, got his exams and ended up at art college in Newcastle. The summer before he went, he went to work in Brighton and landed slap bang in the 1988 Zap rave scene. He loved it. But when he arrived at Newcastle only one other student, a girl, had been raving too. He would sit in Rockshots nightclub, turning his nose up at the rare groove tracks until the DJ played Black Box. Then he and the one other raver would get up and go mad until the track ended.



Extended Exorcism of the Bridge @ Eastham Rake, exhibited at Tate Modern in March last year.
Photograph: Mark Leckey

This unease with others, this inability to fit in and find his post-casual crew, followed him down to London, where he moved in 1990. Though he had some initial success - his work was shown at the influential New Contemporaries show - London was soon in thrall to the YBAs (Young British Artists) and Leckey felt like "some rube from the sticks, very provincial". These days, he sees that his difficulties were partly class-based: very few of the new art crew were working-class northerners, especially not ex-casuals. He was in a club of one. Leckey struggled with depression, partly induced by a serotonin depletion from too much raving. He got money through odd jobs. He took part in police lineups at Brixton police station. He was a cycle courier. He sold jelly sandals on a stall at Portobello Market.

"Really," he says now - we're walking around the streets again - "I think I just didn't get lucky. You need luck in London or you're fucked."

He left and went to the US and in New York his luck turned. He met Gavin Brown, still his US gallerist today, and with his support made headway in the States until *Fiorucci* made his name in the UK.

Is he surprised that he didn't stick with music rather than art? "Well, I still love music," he says. "I listen to all sorts and I still make music and I have a monthly show on NTS Radio. I'm obsessed with this particular sound, at the minute, a tape hiss R&B sound... But art has enabled me. Art has more purchase on my life just now."

Leckey has become, over the years, thoroughly enmeshed with the art scene. "Yes," he says, "I'm in the art world. You don't necessarily have to be, as an artist, you can be slightly removed from it, but I like it. I like the discourse around it and the gossip, I like a bit of that. I like the measure of it, the way it measures the contemporary. You'll see something and you go, 'That's it, that's now, that's this moment, you've found that.' I like that."

But he has his reservations. He remembers the 90s excitement around art - "It suddenly went from twee to sexy. There was an energy, a terrific energy, to it. And I aspired to that" - but now he feels that it's losing its way.

"The contradictions that it managed to sustain, it can't sustain those any more," he says. He's talking about art's relationship to money. "Its relationships, its sponsorship. Also the narrowness of its demographic."

"I don't want to be ungrateful," he says. "But with art, the better you do, the closer you get to power and it gets more corrupt. More morally unsavoury. It's moved too close to dirty money, dirty power. Who's engaged with it, who's buying it... When I went to art school, I was trained in the idea of becoming this, like... sovereign being, right? Answerable to no one, almost Ayn Randian. And that seems... not right?"

We've walked the long way round, back to the Caledonian Road. Traffic rumbles. Leckey says goodbye at the tube station and makes his way home, to sit in front of his computer and edit what he finds, sampling and cutting and moving around; using technology to create something new and old, remembered and imagined and un-ordinary. Something with the potential for magic.