

Janus Høm, "The Difficulties of Exorcism," *Kunstritikk*, May 2, 2017

Kunstkritikk

The Difficulties of Exorcism

– I have realised that technology has less to do with magic and more with a kind of eeriness, says Mark Lecky, who sees his works as a kind of exorcism. The exhibition opens in Copenhagen tomorrow.

By Janus Høm 02.05.17 Interview Artikel på dansk



Mark Lecky, *Pearl Vision*, 2012. Video still.

Mark Lecky was among the first artists to enthusiastically fling out his arms, letting himself be possessed by the new spectacular spirit that smart phones, wearables and all the new digital platforms let loose upon the world.

For example, there was the time when Lecky (b. 1964), speaking fluent SmartFridge, channelled a refrigerator's recognition of its artificial intelligence. Circling this fridge draped in a green screen drape, coolants circulating in his lungs, Lecky divulged the thoughts that go through such a device and what it gossips about with its smart set of friend.

With this approach – where the artist does not take an outsider's view, but turns himself into a medium that channels the agendas and issues of contemporary life – Lecky undoubtedly inspired a generation of artists and their views on what being critical means. But as the digital platforms have made themselves more insistently known, Lecky has increasingly felt that as a medium you may as easily be possessed by eerie spectres as by magical spirits.

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Kunstkríttik has spoken to Leckey during his preparations for banishing just such an unwelcome apparition. The exorcism can be witnessed from tomorrow as the National Gallery of Denmark (SMK) in Copenhagen presents his most recent production, *He Thrusts his Fists against the Posts but Still Insists he Sees the Ghosts*. It features a special place from Mark Leckey's childhood outside of Liverpool: the ramps underneath the M53 overpass in the town of Ellesmere Port.

I had an idea. I thought, in the spirit of how you work yourself, that it would be fun to aggregate your answers from earlier interviews for all the background information – instead of asking you what you have been asked a million times. That way, we have more time to talk about things that concern you right now.

Janus, that is the best possible thing you could have said to me. I've got into a rut when it comes to questions about how I started. Especially how I made *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*.

Fantastic. As for the exhibition at The National Gallery in Copenhagen, what are you showing?

I am elaborating on a piece that I did at MoMA PS1 in New York recently. It will be the bridge I built there, almost exactly the same, except there's nothing in it apart from yellow lights. The bridge is a life-size copy of a freeway overpass. When I was a kid, about eight, we used to sit under the overpass and eat sweets and be a bit naughty. I have this very vivid memory of thinking I saw a pixie underneath it, and it wasn't until I was about nineteen that I realised I hadn't stopped believing in it. When I was a little older, I would take magic mushrooms. Everything would go orange. I want people, when they come into the space, to feel both polluted, in its sickly, yellow glow, and that they've moved into this altered state; a state that's akin to what music does — where you get lost. In a way it is sinister, it is a ruin. These yellow lights inside the bridge are sodium street lamps, which are normally used to illuminate British motorways. Finally, for the end of the PS1 show I also did a performance, a kind of exorcism. I will make a version of that, but this time it's a sound recording. This time it's going to be more like a musical or a radio play. Maybe 5.1 surround sound, immersive sound.



Mark Leckey during performance. From: *Mark Leckey: Containers and Their Drivers*, MoMA PS1, New York 2016. Photo: Derek Schultz.

How are you taking this version of the work further from the performance?

At the moment I am pursuing rhetorical devices. There's a Greek term, pleneasm. It's where you put in more words than necessary. So you would say "darkest black" instead of just black. They're all for emphasis. And, this is one of my favourites, anadiplosis. That's when you repeat elements from the line you just said. For example, "when I give, I give to myself". It's to make it more repetitive, more musical; I steal a lot from music. Rhetoric is really for finding a rhythm or patterns.

What's the function of that?

So you don't get bored. But also, it just makes it a little bit more sing-song. I think there are too many words in art. Since I'm a "talker" as well, I'm trying to find a better way. There's always that drive to make music for me. I think music works much better than art does. So that's going to be a big element in Copenhagen. Music, youth, exorcism. Everyone can produce an image. Everyone can make video. The tools are available to everyone. And sometimes it feels like, for art, it is more about its critical or theoretical role. But in the end, artists aren't that different from any other image-makers. I don't believe art is in advance of the rest of culture. Not to me. It's much more horizontal, and if art is not in advance of anything, then, what is its claim?

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Mark Leckey. Foto: Rine Rodin.

How do you find information yourself?

Way back, I didn't make art for a long time. I did web design in America in the very early days in the '90s. I had a kind of earlier technical awakening than most. Certainly more than most people in the art world. That technical interest actually came from my interest in music. Through music I found a sort of auto-didactic thirst for information.

That's a nice expression.

Well, I grew up with music at a time, in the early '80s, where a lot of information was passed through the graphic design on record sleeves, through posters, etc. You know, bands were using all of the packaging of the record to distribute communiqués. I learned about Gramsci from Scritti Politti. You learn about Russian constructivism from, you know, everyone. That was an early education, sort of pre-art school. It made me very aware of how to collect information essentially. It's a kind of Gnosticism, you have to go out and find these kinds of clues in order to build a picture that you hope will bring enlightenment at some point. It's a non-institutional way of learning. So when the internet came along, I was ready for that.

Are you on Facebook? Are you on Instagram?

I'm on Instagram, not on Facebook.

A lot of people find that what they search for is always limited within their own so-called echo chambers. If you search for information through the links that come up in your Facebook feed, it's going to be a quite limited experience of the world. So being good at digging out information is really a special asset.

If you're a political activist, for example, then you need to understand the arguments being put forward by the Right, by Libertarian groups, by Maoists. You need to be able get your tentacles out there. And you can. You can find this information. But it has to be coming from a very strong core, from a position that needs to be defended and understood. Otherwise you're just at sea. You're lost. The idea that an artist is some kind of seafarer of information, just throwing their net out, trawling the information, and just gathering it in in an interesting way — that seems untenable now. I go on Twitter and I follow people to the extreme left and the sort of medium right. I can't follow the extreme right; it's just too fucking ugly. But you need to know what your enemies are saying, and you need to know what your peers are saying.

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Mark Leckey, *Circa '87*, 2013. Framed offset print.

We should relate this to the work you're showing in Copenhagen. In your body of work Dream English Kid, of which the National Gallery shows a segment, it all circles around nostalgia; reanimating your personal past.

If we go back to music or the footage from that time, it affects me. I make the work I make in order to satisfy something in myself. But at the same time there's a hope or a kind of desire that it affects others in the same way as it affects me. It's a sort of a request: Does this do the same thing to you as it does to me? Is this as powerful to you as it is to me?

I like this word, exorcism. It's one I use a lot to describe what I am doing myself these days. You have described your enquiry into your past as an exorcism of your own pathologies. This is what the work at The National Gallery is trying to do too, right? You're in a way exorcising your relationship to that bridge from your youth. Is that an eternal struggle? Or is there ever a resolve? Is there a point where things are truly exorcised?

No!

No?

I mean, that's the compulsion to make work. It is to exorcise these things that haunt me. That's why I make most of the work I have. And consequently, that's why nostalgia figures a lot. I feel incapacitated by nostalgia. Unable to be in the present. But now, now it's become just work. It has become a process. I'm less convinced by it.

You're not convinced by it?

No. It could become just a kind of shtick. I struggled a long time to make art. The way I was able to begin to kind of produce work was by exploiting my own pathologies. At the time I just thought of it in terms of "work with what you know", and I still stand by that. Because, in art education and within the art discourse, in that orthodoxy, you're always pulled away from yourself. You're always pulled away to theory and history. There's always something pulling you away from yourself. I don't think work is interesting if it isn't manufactured through a body, through a singular experience.

You said you're afraid that your exorcising could end up turning into a shtick? That's incredibly important to be sensitive towards.

Yeah, it becomes a mechanism. Basically, I found a mechanism; a kind of machine that can produce. As long as you and the machine have some synergy, then, great. But at some point the machine even fits into a greater machine, and everything starts to work really well together. Everything becomes very efficient.

That's a problem?

Yeah, because it's no longer about you. After doing PS1 I exhausted that kind of way of working: The exorcism approach. I can't really go much further with that.

So this is a time for a time out?

I feel very disengaged from art at the moment. I think art has become very conditional in a way that doesn't interest me.

What does conditional mean in this context?

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That it's not about objects. It's about the context, the conditions — what produces that object. I keep coming back to Michael Fried. Do you know Michael Fried?

"Art and Objecthood"?

Yes. I think there's a warning that he gave. At that time his essay was understood as being reactionary. But I think if you go back and look at what he was saying, it's like "YEAH!". He was right in that everything was becoming about everything but the art work. That the art work just becomes a support. I'm not interested in doing relational aesthetics either. I'm not interested in doing everything through the lens of art. That doesn't seem valid. I mean, it is interesting; it's not uninteresting, I just don't get excited by it. At the moment I want to make something in the non-professional realm.

Do you have anything in mind?

It's quite vague... Music. Youth. Working with musical youth. I don't know, I might go on doing some youth work basically.



Mark Leckey, *Dream English Kid, 1964-1999 AD*, 2015, stillbillede. Photo: Mark Blower.