
ASPIRING TO THE CONDITION OF CHEAP MUSIC

Interview with Mark Leckey

Dan Fox

DF: Your new work, *On Pleasure Bent* (2014, see p. 9), is a memoir of sorts. Could you talk about your interest in music when you were growing up in Liverpool?

Mark Leckey: The first record I bought was “Lily the Pink” by The Scaffold, and then I had a liking for Status Quo that lasted about three months until I discovered post-punk. By then it was 1979 and the first records I went out and bought were Gary Numan’s “Are ‘Friends’ Electric?”, “Gangsters” by The Specials, and “Shaved Women” by Crass. I used to go to this club in Liverpool called Eric’s. Unbelievably, they used to do a matinee for kids. I remember going there to see Swell Maps supporting Joy Division. I didn’t know anything about Joy Division at the time – I went to see Swell Maps – but once I saw Ian Curtis start doing his thing onstage I was enthralled. In 1979 I experienced that amazing post-punk peak. I was a punk, a mod, a rude boy, and a casual all within a year or two and then I got into the dance music of the time that was in the charts and discos: McFadden & Whitehead, The Fatback Band, Anita Ward’s “Ring my Bell,” et cetera. Much later I got into the dub reggae of that time, too.

DF: Where were you living when acid house broke in the United Kingdom in 1988?

ML: I was studying at Newcastle Polytechnic. In the summer of 1988 I went down to Brighton to get a job and fell into the rave scene there. This is just anecdotal, but I used to go to a place called The Zap Club in Brighton. I remember opening the door onto the dance floor there and seeing this room full of dry ice. A lad with a huge smiley face symbol painted on a cardboard mask loomed out of the fog. It was like entering into a well-established ritual, and I just plunged in. I had this incredible three months in Brighton, and then returned to Newcastle. I had a plastic Jif lemon sprayed gold on a chain around my neck, and only wore papal purple like a member of the clergy. The problem was that I was about the only one in Newcastle who’d been raving. Things moved slowly back then.

DF: Did you have a sense at the time that it was a major youthquake?

ML: I did. I felt I was missing out like crazy up in Newcastle. I knew something was happening. When I did manage to go to a rave a bit later, they had changed a lot. It seemed much heavier and darker but the music I love now more than anything is from that time: hardcore, darkcore, jungle. That was when the really exciting music was being made. To me it’s got that DIY rawness of the *Nuggets* compilations – 1960s garage rock, combined with this absolute modernist desire for a systematic derangement of the senses. And it’s all I listen to now, Ardcore and show tunes.

DF: What attracted you to it at the time? Was it the technology behind the music?

ML: I like my music autistic; repetitive, mechanical, with a set pattern. Then I like that pattern to break down and a new one to emerge. My body likes it. I like the sense of music controlling you, and you give yourself up to it. That’s what I learned from raving; that if you succumb, things start to happen on another level. It’s not all resistance.

DF: You made your film *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* in 1999 (pp. 230–235). What interested you about rave when you were

making that video? Was your drive to make it purely archival and historic, or was there something else motivating you – say, trying to capture the collective experience of the time?

ML: I made *Fiorucci* partly to exorcise ghosts as I've said, and partly to deal with a chip on my shoulder; to rectify what I felt was the kind of dismissal of that kind of music, that it was seen as being a bit dumb. I also wanted to make a music documentary but in a different way, more like an essay. As for collective experience, I never felt so involved in the collective nature of rave. *Fiorucci* is made by someone who is usually slightly off to the edge of the group, observing. There were a few times when I got completely lost in the music, but I always felt as if I couldn't quite abandon myself to it like others seemed to be able to. Where I grew up is across the Mersey from Liverpool, and so I always had this sense of being on the periphery: the action is always happening over there, and you're just slightly outside it. But if you look at the history of pop, and possibly art too, that's where everybody's from, isn't it?

DF: Absolutely. I've always felt as if I just missed something. I was a couple of years too young to experience acid house and the summer of 1988, I moved to London just as the heady days of the 1990s art scene finished, and have now moved to New York as it's getting hypergentrified. There's always this sense of turning up late to the party and all the interesting people have left. But it's a common experience. I wonder if it's ever possible to recognize a "golden age" when you're in it. Is it only identifiable in retrospect?

ML: I think you can recognize it. I knew at the time that something was happening during acid house. I always remember coming out of a rave at eight in the morning, midweek and everyone else was going to work. We were in Boots, the chemists, and the song "Big Fun" by Inner City came on the store radio – and we all just started dancing in the middle of the aisles. And some customers were enjoying it and we annoyed others. I felt that kind of countercultural energy then, and was definitely aware of something "happening." Whether that's good to know, I am not sure. It's often enhanced by drugs, which creates a kind of madness in the group. Awareness comes with its own problems.

DF: I thought about that during Occupy Wall Street in New York. In addition to the protesting, there seemed to be an extra layer of self-awareness about the way it was being documented. Some were photographing and filming Occupy as if making a collective selfie; always with one an eye on the history books, romanticizing it for future generations who might see Occupy as another May 1968. Social media and technology has really exacerbated that. Was that the case in 1988 when you were dancing in Boots?

ML: When we were raving at the chemists we were definitely self-aware, very conscious that we were channeling previous countercultures. But the impulse to be transgressive was stronger than the narcissistic one. It was still – "Fuck you, squares!" I'm not sure that Oedipal impulse is so central to music and fashion anymore. At least, I don't think it's a vehicle or force for generational friction in the same way that it was. Now you would perhaps think it was a flashmob participating in a T-Mobile advertisement. That's not to say that "it's all over, everything's been co-opted." It's more that the idea that hedonism as a countercultural force just isn't powerful anymore.

DF: It's ironic that the baby boomers who were part of the 1960s and 1970s countercultures are those who pioneered the technology that eventually destroyed pop music as a cultural force.

ML: There was always a democratizing impulse in rock 'n' roll and technology, and it's a current that runs through that generation, I think. But the impulse was a kind of libertarian one, too. It's like the argument you can make about British punk. It was reacting against Thatcherism and free-market politics, but also absolutely embodying it. It's left and right at the same time. A book came out recently about the digital revolution called *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder*, and that title alone for me exemplifies that type of thinking.

DF: A recurring motif in a few of your videos is the image of your silhouette. It's in *Parade* (2003, pp. 198–201), and it appears toward the end of *Trailer for On Pleasure Bent*, standing in the wings of a theater stage. It reminds me of something you wrote in the catalog for *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* (2013), about technology "dispossessing objects of their shadows." Do you feel you've been dispossessed of your shadow? Do you feel haunted, somehow? I don't mean that in the sense of "hauntology," but more literally. You mentioned that with *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*, you were trying to exorcise ghosts.

ML: There's definitely something about exorcism in the work, but it's more about trying to embed myself in that footage. I'm trying to make myself present, so that I feel like I'm there. A ghost is like that, I guess – it's ambiguous what its "here-ness" is. I make all of this stuff so I can get involved, and the more involved I can get, the more exciting it is for me. It becomes like an urge to cohabit, to copulate, or get inside

DF: Get inside or cohabit with what?

ML: Here's a better way of putting it. I'm trying to experience a particular moment. In *Parade*, for example, it's a moment of absolute glamour. When you're making and editing video, you're very actively involved and because of the possibilities of the technology – you have all your peripherals; camera, scanner, microphone, plus Google, YouTube, et cetera – you can kind of feed yourself into it. The footage demands that. My psyche demands it but the technology wants it too – it's leading you toward it. I've noticed a lot of video lately in which hands are involved; hands trying to get "in there" and manipulate this phantom matter. I feel there is a kind of a phenomenological perplexity – your body is beguiled by the technology and it makes you feel that you can do that. Reach in, touch it.

DF: Does this relate to what we were talking about before – how acid house and hardcore music seizes your body?

ML: I think the Roland 303 drum machine, which helped make so much of that music, is an astonishing sound. It's so clearly mechanical and yet it has this organic, bubbling fluidity to it. It just synthesizes in your body perfectly. It's truly cybernetic – man and machine in harmony. There's this idea that technology is very cold and distant, and that everything human has been excised from it, but that's not true. That's the greatest lie.

DF: Running throughout your work are ideas relating to animism, anthropomorphism, or a man-machine interface. In *BigBoxStatueAction*, staged at Tate Britain in 2003, you used a sound system to try to communicate with Jacob Epstein's sculpture *Jacob and the Angel* (1940–41, see pp. 47, 49). It reminds me of the final scenes in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, in which the scientists attempt to speak to their alien visitors using a giant synthesizer. It's about trying to find a language to get inside something.

ML: *BigBoxStatueAction* is the best way of describing it. There's an object – in this case, a sculpture – that I want to experience as fully as I possibly can. All sorts of noise stops me from doing that: art history, the museum, class. I didn't understand the Epstein sculpture. I found it a very baffling, confusing piece of work; like Modernism is an ancient language I can't connect with. I couldn't relate to the reasons why this sculpture was made, so I wanted to address it. At the time I just wanted to put together two equivalences, two big things, but what I've realized since is that the only way to address something is to mediate, to go through something else in order to address something directly. You have to tack toward something using all these mediating devices.

DF: Is that why you've recently been using 3D printers, such as in your show at Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York?

ML: I'm trying to make them more real to me. Assembling all the objects for *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* was very interesting in a way I didn't expect. I got to know most of the works through Google and would then arrange them in PowerPoint before making a mockup in Photoshop, so I got to know these objects quite well; I had an investment in them. When it came to the show and we would unwrap the actual artifacts from the crate and I would feel, "Oh, that's not the thing." Of course the items would still have qualities that were magical and powerful but they weren't as enchanting as they were on my desktop. To be able to replicate them is to possess them again somehow. They feel more mine now. I've repossessed them. To remake some of these objects using 3D printing is to take a long-ass route around, so I have some kind of intimacy with the objects, and feel less alienated by them. I think it is genuinely a transformation in our neurological make-up that we struggle with objects. I don't get them, in the way that I get images.

DF: Your generation and mine grew up with music packaged in a physical form – cassette tapes, vinyl or CDs, with printed artwork. They were things you could possess. Your copy of an album would be exactly the same as your friend's copy, but it would still be yours, in a sense. But for most of us as teenagers, looking at art was often as pictures in magazines or books; reproductions of someone else's objects. It was something far away, whereas music was in your grasp. Not only that, music was something you could make yourself, understand from the inside. Was that an impulse driving the music you made yourself, in donAteller, or Jack Too Jack? You can "grok" music – understand it intuitively, empathically – by producing it.

ML: I think so. It's the same with the 3D printers. You're trying to replicate that first rush, that first thrill. All these things are quite childish. What you're talking about with music is quite possessive; it's not just about owning the object, you also get very cliquy and territorial. Like fans who demand that bands stay true to what they, the fans, believe is the bands' musical direction. You don't find that in art, it's something that art is much cooler and aloof about. Art sees that as a kind of childish, impulsive attitude, but I want it. I like that drive to own and know something. You possess it, and it possesses you. You're in thrall to it. It creates an incredible space to think through, and that's what music did to me: I could think through music.

DF: I can really relate to that. Unless you come from an extraordinarily privileged background in which you're growing up around artworks, your first encounter with art is often through postcards and books, or making your own images at home. As a teenager I covered my bedroom wall with postcards and posters, and they were just as good really, if not sometimes better, than the art they were reproducing ...

ML: ... except for paintings. Paintings are always better. I try to ignore painting because there's something magical and woo-woo about it. That's a different experience, and one I've enculturated myself to, taught myself to appreciate. But you know, I saw *BigBoxStatueAction* as just a different form of art appreciation. It was like another way of reviewing a piece of work. At the end of the performance I understood the Epstein far better than when I went in.

DF: "A different form of art appreciation" is a beautiful description. I think one of the attractions of music for me is its ineffability. It's beyond language. You can talk about cinema, visual art, or literature, and use language to grasp them. That's much harder to do with music. Often the best description of music is music itself. You can write about it in the technical language of music theory, but that doesn't really get to its essence. Yet because it's disembodied, because recorded music is so easily distributable as a form, it's highly vulnerable to being sucked into a technology-driven network of curation and reference, more so than objects.

ML: There's that famous Walter Pater quote: "All art aspires to the condition of music." I like to change it to: "I aspire to the condition of cheap music." I think music works at its best when it's dumb. I don't like complicated music, and I think if anyone can make a dumb but incredibly affective piece of music – like, say, the Ramones – then they're geniuses. That's the essence of music. I guess it's a matter of taste, but for me it's about a reduction into something tangible. When music becomes like matter. Reggae does it in an obvious way, through bass; frequencies that physically effect your body. But I don't know "where" music is. You say it's ineffable and disembodied, but when you listen to music, it's still a recording, a secondhand experience. Music has a very confusing state of being.

DF: I guess one way in which it becomes matter is through audiences. Music should be, at its best, a very sociable thing. This reminds me of *March of the Big White Barbarians* (2005, pp. 153–157), a film in which you hear a group chanting over a succession of images of art in public space. As with *BigBoxStatueAction*, it seems to be an invocation, a public ritual.



ML: But the thing with *March of the Big White Barbarians* is that we don't actually go to the sculptures. We're never there; we're just singing about these images. With the sound system it's different. I like the idea that the boxes are just part of a system that also includes the DJ, the MC ...

DF: ... a cybernetic system?

ML: Yes, it's very cybernetic. What I love about the art world – apart from all the things I hate about it! (*laughs*) – is that it's possible to organize something like *BigBoxStatueAction*, to bring all these people together. *BigBoxStatueAction* felt like a ritual in the museum. It wasn't Institutional Critique; it was just about the possibility of a museum, a sculpture, and the art world. I like it when the art world is quite local; you can just bring together people that you know, or who you might not know but know who they are. It's not about the public; it's about my network. The trouble with that is that it can seem horribly snobbish, but then if we go back to music, it was always thus.

A couple of years ago I was talking to students about deprofessionalization. I told them they'd have to be aware that nonprofessional artists with access to making and distributing work were going to start entering into their space. But I don't know if that materialized. It's astonishing really how the digital has enhanced the art world's rarefied status rather than democratized it. Art is very conscious of its own borders and boundaries, and retreats very instinctively.

DF: That was always one of the attractions in music; the attraction to loof, seemingly impenetrably cool subcultures.

ML: The art world itself is by no means underground, but it can foster something within it that you could call a subculture.

DF: Art also has very powerful administrators. It knows how to shut things down with social codes and language. It certainly requires a specialist knowledge, shorthand ways of talking and looking, like any subculture.

ML: I think so. The work I'm making at the moment is very British. It's full of all these British cultural references and yet the first place I'm going to show it is in Munich. But I'm not thinking about that. I'm more thinking about you when I make it – not you specifically, but someone like you.

DF: So when you make for other cultural contexts – say, Germany, or the United States – you're not worried that it's too culturally specific?

ML: No. The thing is that British popular culture has a lot of currency. It's probably the most recognizable pop culture, aside from the American. I think if let's say a piece of music is affective, then you can comprehend it, even though you might not get all the references. Some people might understand what that vocal line is saying, and some might not, but it's also about timbre, the resonance of what's being used. This is how I deal with songs I don't understand from another culture. I look it up, because this thing has got inside me, and I want to discover what those references mean, because of their sound or the way they look. I think of myself as an ambassador for crap British culture!