A sculpture of a red telephone handset with a coiled cord, standing on a black base. The handset is rendered in a stylized, almost anatomical form, with a thick, rounded body and a curved earpiece. The cord is a thick, orange-red spiral that extends from the handset and loops around the base of the sculpture. The entire piece is set against a plain, light-colored background.

Nottingham
Contemporary

The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things

Curated by Mark Leckey

27 April — 30 June

Free Entry

For more information

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The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things

A Hayward Touring exhibition
Curated by Mark Leckey

*Kathy Noble, Head of Exhibitions, in conversation with
Mark Leckey*

Kathy Noble: As an artist, why did you want to curate an exhibition?

Mark Leckey: Putting objects in a room and moving them around, in itself, is not that interesting to me. Instead this exhibition is a station for me, on the way to another destination. Part of a longer project, or series of ideas, that I have been working with. Curating enabled me to assemble real world objects and art objects together in categorised systems. This idea originally evolved from my interest in cybernetics. The first book on cybernetics was by Norbert Wiener and was called *Cybernetics: Of the Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1961). The idea of cybernetics is to study everything as a form of system, and that these systems – whether, human, animal or machine – are somehow all equivalent.

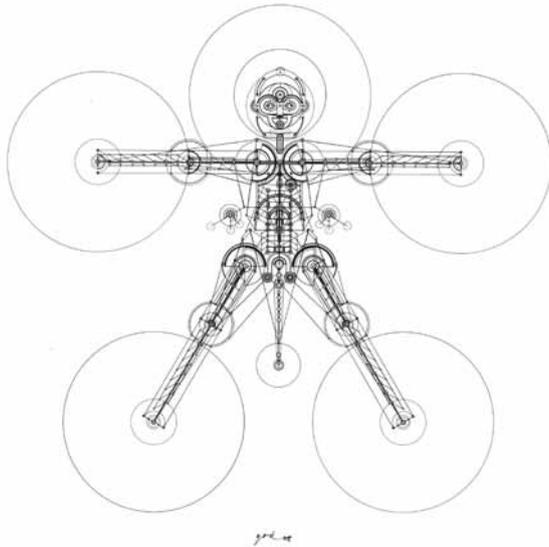
KN: So a human being is a system in the same way a machine is a system?



ML: Exactly. Anything can be understood as a system. The individual object or being has its own ecology and they exist within a wider system.

KN: Was Wiener a scientist?

ML: Yes. He came to the concept of cybernetics by studying how to maximise the efficiency of gunners in the Second World War. He thought about the body and the gun as one whole entity, a kind of composite machine. He saw each element as an equivalent component within the system, as parts of a greater whole.



François Dallegret, Ted's Opera Cosmic Space Suit, 1968, Courtesy the artist © the artist

KN: Does it form a kind of methodology for living?

ML: Yes, but it's extremely logical and procedural. It's quite reductive, a pure science, with a disinterested unemotional aspect to it. What I like most about early cybernetics is that it is a rationalist way of approaching systems. As it developed it was transformed in the 70s. They call this "second order cybernetics", which is more complicated. The word "cybernetics" comes from the Greek word for "steersman".

KN: What is a steersman?

ML: It's a pilot for a boat. As a pilot you have a goal and an objective to reach that goal in the most efficient way. That's essentially what cybernetics is – a way of making the signal from you to your objective as strong as possible, by reducing the signal-to-noise ratio. It's a way of understanding things in terms of components and parts, and how these interrelate. That could be a computer circuit or a university system or faculty. In second order cybernetics it grew to involve social and emotional relations, something closer to the "human relations movement".

KN: So first order cybernetics does not deal with emotional and social relationships?

ML: No, it's quite cold and rational. In the 70s, it moved away from purely subject and object relationships and towards an understanding of a human-being's relationship within the world, creating systems within systems within systems, as a form of network.



Mark Leckey, *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things*, installation view (detail) the Bluecoat, Liverpool 2013. Photo Jon Barraclough

KN: Which leads us to the internet's relationship to your work and this exhibition. As you've previously explained, the exhibition is a space where the virtual world and physical world come together for you.

ML: That's what my performance *In The Long Tail* (2009) was about. I am fascinated by the moment of change we are living through now. Cybernetics arose from a logical, emotionless procedure and was reborn as a kind of cosmic "hippy" idea in the 70s. These two ideas have merged together within the internet. It has a logical engine, but within that structure or mechanism, anything can happen – it is very libertarian, where irrational things can occur.

KN: So by setting up these structures of animals, men and machines are you creating a basic logic, akin to that in

cybernetics, within which you hope other irrational things happen?

ML: Yes, that's a good way of putting it. Within this reduced system weird complexities can occur, where animals can be both tiny and colossal and paper or flesh – yet they are still animals.



Mark Leckey, ICA, 2008. Photo by Mark Blower.

KN: How were you drawn to the artists' works in the show? Was it for purely aesthetic reasons or an interest in the artists themselves?

ML: I wanted them to fit into a scheme that I had. I decided right at the beginning I wanted these simple themes.

KN: So your logic for selecting the different works and objects came primarily from wanting things that looked a particular way?

ML: Generally artists that I do have an interest in aren't in this exhibition. That would have been another exhibition. That's the show I decided not to do.

KN: That would've been a more traditionally curated show.

ML: Yes, I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to just go "this is what I like and this is my taste", because I would just see it as an exercise in how sophisticated my taste is and I thought that would be quite boring to do. It's the trap of curation isn't it?



Mark Leckey, *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things*, installation view (detail) the Bluecoat, Liverpool 2013. Photo Jon Barraclough

KN: I feel that as an artist you have a form of permission that a curator or art historian would not be allowed to have – well not institutionally anyway.

ML: That's where it gets interesting.

KN: The permission an artist has?

ML: Yes definitely. That seems to me key to what curation could be.

KN: Your exhibition is positioned as an exhibition curated by Mark Leckey. However, the way I perceive it, especially speaking to you now, is that it is a Mark Leckey solo exhibition. Particularly when you describe it as a "station" on a journey to another art work.

ML: Yes. There are two things. One is this idea of permissiveness. As an artist you're given permission to – in some ways – pervert things.

KN: Yes, you are able to have a form of irreverence that curators are not normally granted.

ML: Which I find really exciting. And the second thing is this idea of artists making exhibitions – and whether it's "curated", or part of their own artwork. The more things I do, the more I realise I want everything to be part of the work, whatever form that takes. As an artist you're looking for some kind of autonomy, essentially. You're looking to make yourself sovereign. I want to do all of it. But not in a megalomaniac way ... it just seems necessary. This feels more urgent now because machines are teaching us to be like this – by giving us more opportunities and tools. Essentially it's about cutting out middle men, which is also the logic of the internet. In the virtual world you do everything yourself. You're a producer, you're a consumer,

you can do everything. Obviously that can be quite frightening, as it's destabilising for the art world as we know it – and I don't know if I want an art world without professional curators. Yet, I want to become both producer and consumer, maker and viewer.



Left: Cyberman Helmet, 1985, Courtesy Chris Balcombe

Right: Singing Gargoyle, England, c. 1200, Courtesy of Sam Fogg, London

KN: So you've made this exhibition for yourself?

ML: Yes, I always make stuff for myself. I make things so I can look at them. That's essentially why I make art. Because I'm... I was going to use the word "voyeur" but I don't like that. I can't remember the word they used to use in Freudian film theory, but I'm an obsessive "looker of things"... I think it's scopophilic?

KN: Scopophilia – a love of looking at things?



*Jim Shaw, Dream Object (Digestive tract sculpture), 2007.
Courtesy Simon Lee Gallery, London*

ML: Yes, I'm scopophilic. I like to look at images and objects... So this exhibition began as a process of aggregating these things in a plastic, malleable way virtually, by gathering everything together in folders on my desktop and collaging them together. Once it has to be realised physically, you come up against the limitations in the real world and of institutions – curators, conservationists, money, space and many other obstacles. Yet for me, it's an opportunity to do something else.

KN: How do you see the relationship between the objects that have a social purpose and the artworks? You seem to have an irreverence for the artworks, as if you don't care if they are artworks at all?

ML: I'd like to be as irreverent as possible with them, as disrespectful as possible. But I'm also enamoured by all of those objects – artwork or not – and on a scale of value there are some that I really love and some that I'm less enamoured by. What excites me is the idea of treating them badly, and not respecting them as individuals that are presented as discreet objects that have their own aura, in a traditional white cube gallery.

KN: So artworks are just objects like everything else?

ML: Not really, as they're not. I've chosen them because they have some resonance. I just want them to do things to each other and I want to do things to them. So they transform, or transcend their object-hood.

KN: Do you care about what the artist who made it thinks it means or what someone might write as a piece of

interpretation?

ML: I do. But in this instance I'm pretending I don't as I want to ignore the preconceived meanings or imposed meanings.



Installation view of Hand Reliquary, 1250-1300.
Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Photo: Mark Blower.



Mark Leckey, *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things*, installation view (detail) the Bluecoat, Liverpool 2013. Photo Jon Barraclough

KN: What happens for you when these objects all come together?

ML: They make a form of mesh. I want them to create a form of energy between them – a system. My system. I am trying to convey that these things can be used. Or have relationships.

KN: Once you amassed it all together in the Bluecoat, what did it do for you as a viewer?

ML: For me, as a viewer, the bodies section works the best.

KN: Why do you think it worked best?

ML: Because it suggests – in a simple way – a body that is greater than all the parts that are on display. All those elements become subordinate to something greater than themselves. The whole becomes greater than the parts.

KN: So the totality of the image is important to you?

ML: You can talk about it in terms of networks and cybernetics or you can talk about it in terms of totems and the relationships between man, and animals and objects. In order to create something amongst them that symbolises who they are. In the way that native Americans would select or nominate an animal to represent their clan, as a totem. That is a symbol that holds them together.

KN: I wanted to ask you about Felix the Cat. He has appeared in your work in different ways before. What does he represent for you?

ML: He is like my totem. My avatar. My talisman.

KN: Why Felix?

ML: I came across an archival image that depicted a three dimensional doll of Felix, sitting on a gramophone turntable, surrounded by mechanical equipment. It was such an extraordinary, strange combination of things. I looked into it and found out it was an image from 1928 and discovered that the equipment is an early television, that was filming this doll of Felix in order to broadcast it. That doll of Felix was the first televisual broadcast image in North America. I thought that was magical. I liked that it was a two dimensional cartoon, that became a three dimensional doll, that then became this electronic entity that got broadcast out into the ether. It went through stages of transubstantiation.

KN: Does that relate to how you described this exhibition? As being one moment in this chain of transformations of idea, to image, to object, to virtual, to object and back again? Is this transmutation of Felix from idea, to two dimensional cartoon, to doll object, to televisual image and back again a good analogy for your approach to the exhibition?

ML: Yes exactly. And I like that transformation of matter, or of states. They're technical, but also alchemical and magical. No matter how much you recognise the logical process, it still has this supernatural quality to it that I find both exciting and terrifying. I feel like it's a portent – a sign of something momentous or calamitous that is coming in

the future. The more we rely or are surrounded by these technologies – or these devices, the more inclined we are to magical thinking. And it's a strange paradox – the more technical we become, the more we boomerang back to a superstitious, pre-modernist way of thinking. We're back in a world where things are greater than ourselves, and we are no longer central to that narrative.

KN: During the Bluecoat exhibition you scanned all the objects. Was this your original intention for the exhibition, to make a virtual version?

ML: Sort of. This comes from my earlier work *Made in 'Eaven* (which is in this exhibition in the *Animals* section), for which I couldn't get hold of the real Jeff Koons bunny sculpture. So I made a fake version of it, for that film, in order to see what it would feel like to have that object in my flat. There's no critique in that thing. It's just kind of "fan art" in a way... I just love that thing and I just wanted to see what it did in my flat... then I could enjoy it, I could enjoy having it in my grasp and that's what I want to do with this exhibition.

KN: So the exhibition's going to have a whole other life?

ML: Yes I hope so. It's going in a virtual flat-pack guise to the Biennale in Venice as a film.

KN: It really is like your totem *Felix the Cat*: idea to image, image to object, object to virtual and back again.



Mark Leckey, *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things*, installation view (detail) the Bluecoat, Liverpool 2013. Photo Jon Barraclough

Selected Descriptions

Mandrake root, 1501-1700

The Mandrake is a herb with a large brown root, believed in the ancient world to cure ailments of all kinds. Because of its resemblance to the human form, fables and stories surround the Mandrake. It was believed to harbour magical powers, to grow under the gallows of murderers, and to shriek with terrible groans when dug up from the ground. This example was probably carved by hand to enhance its resemblance to a mother holding a child.

Louise Bourgeois

NATURE STUDY, 1984 (2001)

In this hybrid form, half-animal and half-human, Bourgeois combines elements of male and female sexual parts. The breasts cover the male genitalia as if protecting them like “a mother protects her children”. This is one of a series of sculptures by Bourgeois called Nature Studies, which relate to her family and themes of motherhood – the body, copulation and pregnancy. She made two versions of this work to match her favourite phrases: a “pink day” (a good day) and a “blue day” (a bad day).



Louise Bourgeois, NATURE STUDY, 1984.
Courtesy Hauser & Wirth and Cheim & Read

Dog Space Suit c. 1950s

This Russian high-altitude space suit and pressure helmet for dogs was developed as part of the Soviet space programme during the international space race in the 1950s. In those days no one knew how the human body would react to low pressure high altitude conditions and so a series of experiments were conducted in which dogs were sent very near to the edge of space.



Dog Space Suit c. 1950s.

Image courtesy of The James Moores Collection and The National Space Centre

Hand Reliquary, 1230-1500

This type of receptacle for sacred relics, popular in the Middle Ages, was known as a “speaking” reliquary because it represented the part of the body it allegedly contained. The popularity of these objects lay in the fact that the faithful could visit the saint’s “own hand” to be blessed and healed. Here, the reliquary sits alongside what is currently the most technologically advanced prosthetic hand currently in the world – the i-limb ultra.

Miroslav Tichý

Homemade camera, 1960s

This camera was assembled using junk that Czech artist Miroslav Tichý found on the street. He used this primitive yet fully functioning equipment to take surreptitious photographs of women – sometimes through windows or fences, or in a public park or at swimming pools – while he wandered around the city of Prague in the 1970s.



Miroslav Tichý, Homemade camera, 1987. Courtesy Tichý Ocean Foundation

Jakob Mohr

Beweisse (Proofs), c. 1910

Mohr was an Austrian farmer and merchant who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia. This drawing represents what Victor Tausk, a psychiatrist and disciple of Sigmund Freud, described in 1919 as an “Influencing Machine.” Tausk claims that the threshold between the schizophrenic mind and reality disintegrates to the point where a person believes that they are being controlled by “machines of [a] mystical nature.” Mohr’s drawing depicts these x-rays, wires or other invisible forces coming from a box controlled by someone else at a distance.

Richard Prince

Untitled (hood), 2007

A key theme in his work, Prince’s fascination with cars was inspired by a trip to Los Angeles in 1987 where he witnessed first hand the power of the muscle car in American culture. “It was the perfect thing to paint,” he said. “Great size. Great subtext. Great reality. Great thing that actually got painted out there, out there in real life.” He admires muscle cars for their inherent sculptural qualities - the curved lines and gleaming painted finish - and by repurposing them, turns an everyday consumerist object into high art. You can just make out the faded logo of the Pontiac Firebird.

Dwight Mackintosh

Untitled, 1994

Dwight Mackintosh began making art late in life, after spending fifty-five years in mental institutions. His drawings, prints, paintings and ceramics are most recognisable by their repetitive, flowing lines and “x-ray” views of the mechanics of the human body as well as machines such as cars, buses and trains.

Hapi Canopic Jar, c. 664-332 BC

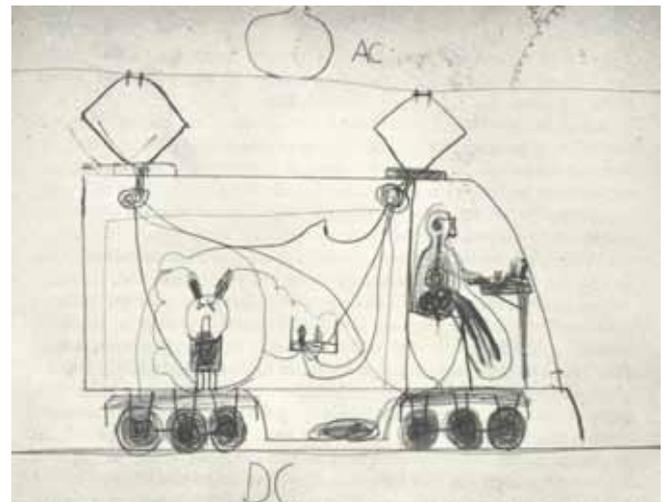
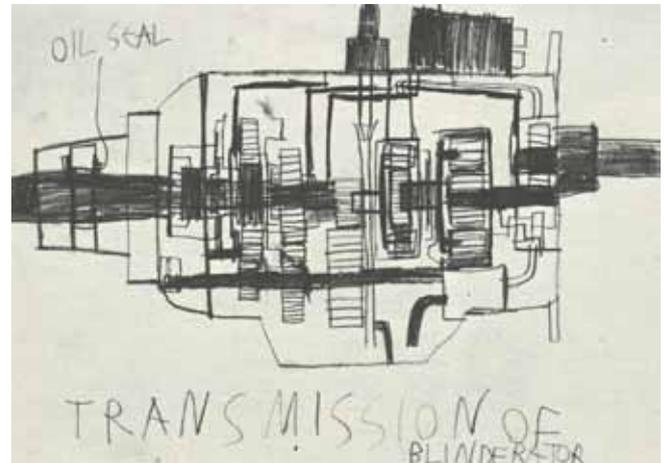
In Ancient Egypt, during the mummification process, the inner organs of the deceased were removed and kept in urns called Canopic jars for use in the afterlife. There were typically four jars representing the four sons of the god Horus. Alongside a human-headed one was a falcon, a baboon and a jackal, each meant to protect specific organs. Hapi, the baboon-headed demi-god on display here, looked after the lungs.

Joey the Mechanical Boy

Transmission of a Blinderator, 1950s

“A human body that functions as if it were a machine and a machine that duplicates human functions are equally fascinating and frightening.” – Bruno Bettelheim, 1959

Joey was an autistic child who lived in the United States in the 1950s, and believed that he could only function as a machine. In order to eat, sleep and breathe, he would plug himself in with wires and motors fashioned from masking tape, cardboard and other paraphernalia. His drawings often showed him in his technological domain.



Boli, 2013

This animal form crosses the threshold of the spiritual and physical worlds. The Boli (or Boliw) comes from the Bamana culture of West Africa, where it acted as a “portable altar” and was handled only by the most powerful man in the village. Made up of many layers of wood, vegetable matter and sacrificial materials from animals (blood, hair and bones), the offerings were believed to give the Boli power and were used to control the spiritual world for the benefit of the whole community.



Boli, Mali

Model of a cat to demonstrate reflexes, 1940 - 1980

The role of nervous reflexes was demonstrated using this wooden cat, whose joints are articulated and eyes much enlarged. It is believed to have been made by British physiologist Sir Charles Sherrington (1857-1952), who was a Professor of Physiology at the University of Liverpool for 16 years. What would now be deemed controversial, he undertook neurological research on animals and his contributions helped understand the nervous system.



Model of a cat to demonstrate reflexes, 1940-80. Courtesy Science Museum, London

Marguerite Humeau

Lucy, *Australopithecus Afarensis*, -4,4 -1M years ago, 2011
“Lucy”, a relatively complete fossil skeleton discovered in Ethiopia in 1974, is one of the earliest hominids ever found. It is believed to be about 3.4 million years old, and could be considered the missing link between apes and humans. Through extensive research of the skeletal remains and interviews with doctors and palaeontologists, the artist has recreated the shape of the larynx, lungs and windpipe to produce the “voice” of Lucy. Is this the sound of something from the animal kingdom or ancient mankind?



Nottingham Contemporary

Logo by Evan Holloway

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Visit our website to read the full Mark Leckey interview
www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/art/universal-addressability-dumb-things

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Courtesy Generator Projects © the artist 2012
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