

The Life and Times of Milton Keynes Gallery
By Mark Leckey, Martin McGeown and Milton Keynes Gallery

Milton Keynes Gallery
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Interview with Mark Leckey and Anthony Spira

AS: When we invited you to do a project about Milton Keynes Gallery's ten year history, why did you choose not to do a classic curated show of artist's objects?

ML: I didn't want to hand pick a show that reflected my obvious good taste and discernment. But mainly I kept thinking about what happens to art objects when they enter the immaterial realm, when they get digitised and go online. I didn't just want to move solid stuff about so it all works well together, when you can potentially do more interesting things with digital images that are mutable and pliant.

AS: In one of the installations, a pink fabricated model of the Gallery is positioned on a revolving plinth in front of a green screen which is filmed by a video camera. The live image of the rotating model is projected onto the gallery wall using technology which overlays the green screen with an assortment of background images. What was it about this green screen technology that appealed to you?

ML: I was looking at this website – <http://vimeo.com/8337356> – and marvelling at how even the most banal street scene is now done as a composite. The real world is just not up to the job. I liked the idea of the Gallery being able to project its fantasies and breathing life into them; a building inhabiting its own imagination.

AS: What are the images used in this piece and why?

ML: A broad range of people including Hermann Finsterlin, J. D. Williams, A. R. Penck, photos of Second World War bunkers by Paul Virilio, a bit of Michael Asher and Belgian Symbolism. These are the building's fantasies, as if the building is dreaming of other buildings and other possible ways of being.

AS: Does this work relate to Milton Keynes itself, when the city was a blank canvas for the utopian aspirations of the founding fathers of the city?

ML: I guess it comes out of that. Anything could have evolved out of the idea of Milton Keynes. At the beginning of the main film –*Vache Concrete* – there is a quote from Borges via [MK Gallery's first Director] Stephen Snoddy from the opening statement for MK G in 1999. 'Where is the plan you are following, the blueprint?'... 'The sky is filled with stars'. 'There is the blueprint', they say. Anything was possible, and all those images represent the possibilities of architecture, of thought.

AS: Is there an element of disappointment in the simplicity of the Gallery's box-like shape, given the original ambitions of Milton Keynes? And at the same time is there enthusiasm at the ability of the imagination to transcend basic materials (steel, glass concrete), etc.?

ML: I think Michael Craig-Martin really nailed it when he drew a big drawer on the façade of the building. The box-like shape is as mundane and yet as secretive and promising as a drawer. It's both municipal and erotic if you like. One of the titles we had for the show was 'MK G empties its drawers'.

AS: You have also made lots of small models of the Gallery out of different materials. What is this about?

ML: If you look below you will see a reference to the Sci-Fi film 'Solaris'. The models are little replicants of the building, produced by the building itself. It's making these reproductions of what it thinks it looks like but they are all a little bit off as it doesn't have a clear idea of what it really is.

AS: In the Middle Gallery, there is a series of large-scale prints, enlarged from original drawings by Viz cartoonist Lee Healey that seem to provide a different way of envisaging the Gallery's past.

ML: I worked with Lee before on the *Drunken Bakers* video and Martin had done some cartoons with him after that, where he asked Lee to draw some scenarios that Martin had imagined, so he could just see what they would look like.

AS: So the drawings are interpretations made from verbal descriptions of the Gallery and numerous past events held there, some of them jumbled up in time.

There's also a new video in this space called *From the Long via the Link to the Middle to the Cube*. It's actually a CGI rendering with an incredible likeness of the building but just a 'bit off'; a disembodied, mechanical eye smoothly panning through the institution.

ML: I wanted the Gallery to film itself in quite a narcissistic way, admiring its own white-walled perfection and potency. Like Patrick Bateman in 'American Psycho'.

AS: Another wall-based installation is comprised of hundreds of thumbnail images, representing almost every exhibition staged at Milton Keynes Gallery over the last ten years. How did you select these images? Why are they so small? Are you mimicking how Google images might work – an almost random index that creates a sense of information overload?

ML: Yes I wanted it to be like Google or your own desktop. That's how I organise images mentally now, as thumbnails. I also liked seeing the works miniaturised; it gives me the same thrill I always get out of seeing those little Kellogg's variety packs. They become quite fetishistic. It's the same with the mini galleries.

AS: The main piece in the show is a twenty minute film called *Vache Concrete* made exclusively from found images, texts, audio and video sourced from the Gallery's archive. Who is doing the film's voiceover?

ML: It's a text to speech editor – so it's a computer voice, but a quite sophisticated one, like a slightly hammy British actor. Me and Martin just scoured all the material available on MK, from press releases to stuff on the internet. The narrative is random except for the beginning and the end.

AS: How did you choose the film images and what was the process for the narrative? Did you feel inhibited about using other artists' material? The title references Magritte's 'vache' period. It feels like a dream with the conflation of images following strange logical systems...

ML: The process was set up to be quite mechanical – I wanted the computer to do it. So the narration generated itself out of the press releases and catalogues. There are certain phrases or words it just cannot say properly, it just gets too illegible, which partly determined what went in or not. Basically whether it sounded right or not. For the images, I had to include the human hand as computers can't process images the way they can text and numbers. So I created a system of 'best matches'; images with walls, images with animals, all images with walls and animals, that sort of thing. 'Vache Concrete' is a bad pun on the concrete cows of MK and the kind of concrete poetry the press release cut-ups create. 'Vache' is from Magritte's 'vache' or cow period when he made these very plastic or plasticine-like paintings. Weird amalgams all soft and runny, and that's what I wanted when I was editing, to make all the works malleable and plastic. Magritte is included because Gavin Turk made a sculpture based on one of these paintings that was in an early MK G group show.

And yes I felt very inhibited about using other artists' work but I just kept thinking that it's all just 'stuff' that's going into this exhibition process and what I'm doing is just creating more of that 'stuff'. So it sort of equalizes everything. Everything just becomes matter.

AS: Why did you choose this big open screen system of display for the film? It seems quite lo-fi like the green screen piece. Does it relate to the subject, visualising a kind of deconstruction and reconstruction of the Gallery's past?

ML: We wanted the film screen to be a machine in its own right, as if it had assembled itself so that it could transmit these memories of the Gallery. The Gallery built the screen itself, to its own specifications.

AS: There is a neat joining up of form and content, most visibly at the end where the mechanics of Broodthaers' slide-projector piece *Bateau Tableau*, 1973, is replicated in the film, which eventually leads to the dissolution of the image and the raw canvas...

ML: That Broodthaers piece was another influence, how it transforms a painting into simple 'stuff', into its physical components. I wanted the film to be very mechanical, so that a computer appears to be doing the processing. The computer doesn't care about what paintings and sculptures represent: it's just information, more material to be logged and stored.

AS: A number of images merge in the film, as if the memories are scrambled and confused.

ML: This follows on from what I've just said: the Gallery itself is a machine and it's unaware of what all these artworks mean, or even what they are for. It is all just data. The Gallery, in this sense, is quite autistic.

AS: One of the cartoon images in the Middle Gallery contains a large finger prodding the building which seems to be a good motif for the show. Is there an element of institutional critique to the show, where taxonomic systems are undermined through 'absurd' organising principles?

ML: I don't know whose hand it actually is. I don't know if it's like the old animator's hand that used to enter into the frame and threaten to erase the character, his very own creation. Or if it's like Monty Python's foot, a kind of editorial God foot. I guess they are both the same, the hand or foot, of the artist at work. I think that's what we set out to do: to animate the Gallery, tickle it into moving and squirming, to make it come to life. Not be so rigid. Also I wanted to see the building as a cartoon character, in the way that a cartoon character has to react to 'absurd organising principles' and inhabits 'a world of innumerable and elastic dimensions and limitless possibilities, in which every tree and stone

has not only potential life but a complete set of emotions'. That's a quote about Felix the Cat.

AS: Obviously Felix has appeared a lot in your work. How does this show relate to your other work? Also to the 'Long Tail' theory?

ML: I think my work is all basically the same, from *Fiorucci [Made Me Hardcore]*, onwards. I always feel I'm trying to inhabit an image, to be inside it. With this show I felt like I was immersed in the mind of the Gallery – or the idea of the Gallery in its own mind.

I think we are living in an age where inanimate things become increasingly alive to us – a 'smart' car can only become smarter – and architecture and institutions are becoming more aware of what we want from them. You get this weird return to a form of animism, where everything is in some sense 'alive'. That's what the Long Tail talks I did were all about, this cybernetic system that allows machines to learn from us in order to satisfy our desires. This then creates a reciprocal state of machine generated desire and increasingly sensitive machines.

AS: Could you say a bit more about your interest in science-fiction? The camera work in *Vache Concrete* clearly echoes moments in 'Blade Runner', '2001: A Space Odyssey', 'Solaris', etc.

ML: Well all of those films are about inorganic, or unnatural, sentient life forms which as I've said is the whole idea behind the show. MK G is like Solaris, the planet. It absorbs our unconscious thoughts and desires and makes them into material things – transforming thought into matter – which we then physically encounter. This can produce something amazing and unknown or something just plain horrible and wrong. That's what an art gallery does.

AS: Would you be interested in returning to the Gallery in ten or fifteen years and making a new work with the updated archive?

It will be exactly the same, just more of it.

Interview with Mark Leckey and Milton Keynes Gallery Director, Anthony Spira, May 2010. © The artist and Milton Keynes Gallery

Milton Keynes Gallery
900 Midsummer Boulevard,
Milton Keynes, MK9 3QA
www.mk-g.org



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