



Mark Leckey, GreenScreenVegetables, 2011
Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin

TECHNO-ANIMISM

by Lauren Cornell

Lauren Cornell interviews four artists – John Kelsey, Katja Novitskova, Jacolby Satterwhite and Mark Leckey – about their perception or preoccupation with our relationship with the non-human world. The conversation sets forth from Mark Leckey’s upcoming exhibition “The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things”, which explores techno-animism, and then widens to explore the idea that the capacity of matter to self-organize has generated living things and man, and therefore – in the final analysis – technology, commerce and forms of competition that are “artificial” yet totally attuned to those of the biological world.

Animism has been a focus of several recent exhibitions and has become a preoccupation among artists. Anselm Franke's show "Animism" traveled internationally, with a final stop at e-flux in New York. dOCUMENTA 13 was so much about the world looking back at us, with all things deemed outside of history of humanity—plants, animals or machine—seen not as being activated by our gaze, but as acting and evolving in concert with us. Mark, the new show you're curating, "The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things", extends this conversation but takes it explicitly into the realm of how our perception of things has changed in light of technology. Can you talk about the ideas motivating the exhibition, and how you feel this state of perception towards things has changed?

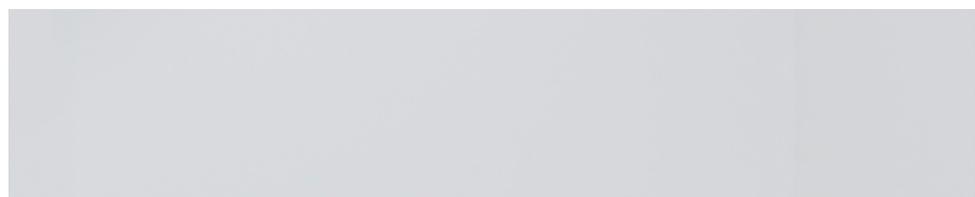
MARK LECKEY: The idea behind the show, or the thought that holds it together, grew out of a talk I gave called "In The Long Tail", and part of what I was talking about was something I'd originally got from Erik Davis' brilliant book *Techgnosis*, which is how the more pervasive technology advances. The more computed our environment becomes, the further back it returns us to our primitive past, boomerangs us right back to an animistic world view where everything has a spirit, rocks and lions and men. So all the objects in the world become more responsive, things that were once regarded as dumb become addressable, and that universal addressability—a network of things—creates this enchanted landscape. Magic is literally in the air. And that is an altered state, and an endlessly productive one. As an artist that's all I care about, I need something generative. The other thing that fascinates me is that the networks and devices we all use are written and produced by these very logical, mathematical processes—algorithms assembled by autists—which then generate the undisciplined and voluptuous excesses of the digital realm, whether it be video or music. Something vital and mortal emerges from something as cold and lifeless as code.

To answer your question more directly, I'd say what it means for me is that you can talk about, or rather involve yourself with objects, without continuous recourse to concepts and critique. Not only approaching them as though they are only organized by language, by us. You can try and empathize with them on a whole other level.

Jacolby and Katja, do you feel animistic ideas are at play within your work, and how so?

JACOLBY SATTERWHITE: There is an animistic attitude in my practice. The soul and spirit of my videos, photographs and drawings are objects. I pair my mother's drawn crystalline abstractions of objects with family photographs to demonstrate how personal mythology is embedded within the objects around us. A recurring theme I notice when making these juxtapositions is that there is an inherent performativity in family photography amplified by still life, and architecture. The objects and architecture contextualize the bodies in the pictures. They are a default platform for body politics. To push the potential of this concept, I traced hundreds of my mother's drawings and developed a CGI architectural space for me to re-perform and re-purpose the objects and memories using my present body.

KATJA NOVITSKOVA: The awareness of "things acting and evolving" on their own is one of the main inspirations in my work. Somehow I like to start with a cosmology. The current scientific understanding of our world is that innate properties of matter allowed it to self-organize into galaxies, organic life, dinosaurs, humans and eventually via us into books, microchips and digital images. Life is a never-ending run of form-finding procedures based on variability and selection, both sexual and environmental. Our modern civilization is an emergent result of the survival challenges our ancestors had been facing for millions of years. This cosmology allows me to look at human-made artifacts like computers, consumer brands, and the expanding digital environments as forms equally material with rocks, trees and animals, co-existing in complex ecologies of matter and value. Although we are a dominant species driven by constant need for perceptual stimulation and costly signals, we are intensely more—not less—interconnected with nature. It is in this sense that I see how returning to the notion of "animism" is relevant. Bonding with nature can also mean making digital collages with stock images of technology found on the Internet.





Katja Novitskova, *Innate Disposition*, 2012
Courtesy: Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin

You mentioned “consumer brands”, which leads me to ask how this notion of animism plays within the logic of consumerism, specifically in regard to brands which lend higher meaning to objects (i.e. sneakers become Nikes and water becomes Poland Spring). I ask, in part, because of a current, perhaps related tendency that eschews a more critical or deconstructive view of advertising in favor of an embrace or acceptance of brands as somewhat of an organic part of our environment.

MARK LECKEY: If you are making work that involves products or brands, it is always assumed to be a critique, that there is some kind of post-Marxist framing going on, but that always felt to me like just trying to overcome your real response towards those things, or rather an attempt to suppress your own false consciousness. Which seems

things, or rather an attempt to overcome your own false consciousness, which seems like an exhausting, endless, and in terms of actually making anything yourself, ultimately thankless task of applying oneself to theory. The feature of Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism that always gave me pleasure was the way he told it as a fable—the table that dances on its head—and reading that both as a 19th century folk or morality tale and as the lived reality that it is for us now; the brute fact that inanimate objects do come to life. Actually I feel like we are living in a folk story now, surrounded by talking utensils and shape-shifters.

The other way I'd put it is that "Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore". You can have an over-investment in a brand, I don't mean in an obsessive trainer-collector way, but as an excess of energy charged to a brand that has been unconsciously nominated as a totem which then allows a kinship to build around it. So that embrace you speak of is a passionate one, it's intense and productive, not just consumptive. That's what the 20th century saw happen in the development of subcultures.

JACOLBY SATTERWHITE: Objects no longer have one specific purpose. When consumers purchase things they are persuaded by the efficiency and features in an object's packaging. With competition increasing, these features become more nuanced and ridiculous. A simple analog shaving razor can have over 100 types of self-lubricating properties, described in dense language. I never know why I choose a toothbrush at the pharmacy, because the properties, design and branding around toothbrushes are so heavily convoluted. This relates to my practice, because the drawings I use are associated with an obsessive attempt to remap and deconstruct objects through diagrammatic blueprints.

Working from drawings of hybrid objects in my 3D animations inspires me to perform in a way that queers the meaning of the object, dissolving the political potential of the object in relationship to my body. In my video *Country Ball* (1989), for instance, I model cakes to a scale where they become heroic towering skyscrapers resembling the Tower of Babel. These cakes have bondage contraptions installed on the roof, where I am found voguing inside. A gesture like this reflects how contemporary society pollutes objects' meanings with history, politics and social anxiety; however, in my video you can't really associate my narratives with any of these meanings, as I am opening them up, incorporating them in a personal mythology and showing how they are resonant with meaning beyond their function.



Jacolby Satterwhite, *Country Ball* 1989, 2012
Courtesy: the artist and Monya Rowe Gallery, New York

KATJA NOVITSKOVA: Commerce, similar to biology, is based on selection and competition where environment and attraction play a crucial role. Brands are real, singular entities with their own histories and capacities. Although extensions of

ourselves, they have material bodies, they impact our imaginations and emotions. Commerce has become a huge ecological and geological force, and today the Internet is where it is culturally liquefied in images, in social and financial transactions. I really think it is time to drop or at least question such standard notions in critical theory like commodification, fetish and desire. They don't offer much meaning within the "animistic" worldview. An understanding of commerce and branding in terms of morphogenetic transformations of matter, intensive differences in value and evolutionary or neuro-psychology suggests a need for new forms of criticality. Instead of semiotic deconstruction, we render and participate in the life cycles of brands; instead of diagnosing a perversion in our relationship with brands, we expand brand ecologies, their aesthetic and actual impact.

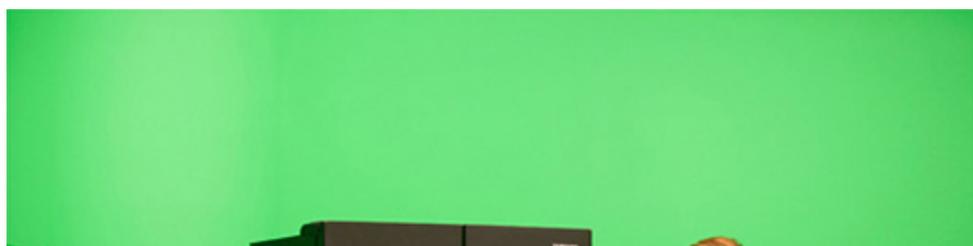
I recommend Agatha Wara's writing on brands as ecological entities in DIS magazine (<http://dismagazine.com/dystopia/evolved-lifestyles/32718/what-does-nike-want/>). She curated my work into a show at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard alongside Timur Siqin; we all spent some time talking about these things, and I believe she is able to articulate some of our thoughts much better than I can.

Right, I saw that exhibition. And I was struck by the influence of the philosopher Manuel De Landa on both your work and that of Timur. De Landa's ideas about material complexity seem key to this renewed engagement of animism you're describing, Katja, one that seems to break notions of animism away from the previous fetishistic or exoticizing connotations. Yet I must admit to being wary of how this framework, when applied to visual art, can sidestep ideas regarding power and representation. Can you discuss how De Landa's ideas play into your work?

KATJA NOVITSKOVA: In the last couple of years De Landa's work has become one of my conceptual tools in making art and systematizing my intuitive worldview. According to De Landa the key word in any contemporary materialist philosophy (and I think the kind of animism to which I relate is a materialist animism) is morphogenesis—the birth of form. Whether it is the birth of the form of mountains, clouds, plants, animals, flames—everything has form, interesting forms, driven by self-organizing properties of matter. His lectures on population, intensive and topological thinking have given me a great deal of insight into this new version of materialism. I also make use of his notion of assemblage. I find it inspiring how De Landa critiques and unfolds Marxism; he has a whole different method of approaching common things like "capitalism" and "society".

I also wonder if this renewed interest in animism could be said to evolve out of a self-imposed kind of mysticism, where the less we understand our environments—specifically our technologically enhanced environments—the more inexplicable or even magically hyper-real they appear to us. This is dramatized in certain artists' work: Shana Moulton presents a character Cynthia who is unable to make sense of the constant advertisements delivered to her; instead of decoding their inherent messages, everything around her, from appliances to kitsch sea shells, comes alive. Do you think this reinvigorated interest in animism, of 3D objects possessing spiritual qualities, is connected to a deeper kind of confusion or inability to decode the interfaces or information environments around us?

MARK LECKEY: I don't think decoding is the most interesting thing for an artist to do. Art doesn't need to be more discursive. That there is some kind of divine or magical presence residing within inanimate objects is something that has been off the table in art for a long time. Approaching an object as if it has some essential property that the artist then attempts to draw out of it isn't something taught at art school anymore. But now I feel we've entered a strange new sensory realm; the vivid and mortal sensations created by the convincing visual surface texture of HD, the warm regard you feel towards your stamped metal devices, or the aboriginal shudder you get watching ASMR videos on YouTube. Paradoxically cold autistic cyberspace takes us back to an appreciation of sensuality.





Mark Leckey, GreenScreenRefrigeratorAction, 2010
Courtesy: the artist; Cabinet, London; Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York

KATJA NOVITSKOVA: I think this confusion and inability point to a question of intensity of experience and generational plasticity. I imagine most children and teenagers have no problem decoding or relating to 3D renderings or televisions, app interfaces, touchscreens and other new forms of technology. They are open to the perceptual intensities at work: the high resolution of the screen, 3D shadings, the touchscreen, the glossiness, the smartphone or tablet artifacts themselves. For them all these things belong to the natural world and they expect them from it: the famous anecdotes of babies trying to zoom into paper magazines. So if the turn to cosmology associated with animism is based on a feeling of being intimidated or mystified by technology, it becomes just another way to register a generational shift. Being in the moment of this shift is very exciting: what we knew as natural reality is actively acquiring new qualities, new assemblages are being born (for example a cat playing an iPad game shot on a smartphone camera, uploaded, shared and viewed by millions of people).

JOHN KELSEY: I like your idea that vigor comes with illegibility, and that problems with codes cause worlds to come alive. It makes me think of Deleuze & Guattari's concept of schizophrenia, relocating delirium within capitalist decoding and recoding (of bodies, materials, territories, etc). In *Zelda*, the Fitzgerald biography, there's a description of Zelda having a nervous breakdown in the cinema. It was a close-up of an octopus that traumatized her, causing her to run out of the theater, to go crazy... This was in France in the 1920s, so I imagine the film was by Jean Painlevé, because I've seen his silent octopus footage from that time and it's pretty terrifying (one of these films was actually included in the Animism show, I think). Anyway, the point is that film technology does not animate an octopus or cause it to come alive, it re-animates it by giving it a new format. Zelda's experience, beyond the psychosexual content of the octopus itself, is about this strange new scale, the translation into light and flatness, the deadness of the screen and of the audience consuming this image. Delirium is a giant octopus in a theater, a projected, public octopus. But I don't see any confusion here, I think Zelda was reading the situation perfectly, so perfectly that she herself comes alive, abandons the passivity of her seat and exits the theater. Zelda is animated along with the octopus. Meanwhile, her husband F. Scott was oriented in a more conventional way by this same technology, falling for mass-produced young film starlets, like the *jeune-fille* in *Tender Is the Night*. He was also able to identify himself with the profession of writing, which Zelda was never allowed to do because it was too threatening to her husband, even though she was probably the better writer, and he stole a lot of her material. Clearly there's a connection between her inability to express and actualize herself within the confines of her marriage to an insecure, alcoholic narcissist, and the delirium that increasingly animates and desubjectivizes her in these "out of control" ways. I guess I'm saying a couple of things here. Animation is "coming alive" but it's also death, a deadly passage. And there's something liberating in this moving-death that uproots us from our seat, our couple, our identity, etc. And there is no animation or animism without decoding/recoding.

This new kind of physical paradox in artistic labor is also relevant. The way many artists work now—as you describe it, Mark, "sitting at our desktop surrounded by tools" while actively participating in a realm so much larger than ourselves—can be said to augment

actively participating in a realm so much larger than ourselves—can be said to augment our bodies or physical capabilities, and to extend and enmesh our desires and fantasies with an intimate, infinite kind of space that is both totally mundane and constantly titillating. In your lecture “touchy feely”, Mark, you discussed how this creates a new kind of sensory experience, one that is displaced and mediated. How do you think this “touchy feely” experience changes your process of making work?

MARK LECKEY: I have always felt awkward in my interaction with the outside world, with trees and rocks or tables and chairs or animals and people, and I have always accepted that alienation as an inevitable part of the contemporary condition. Everything I read reaffirmed that state over and over again. The modern world is an alienating world. So I can never access something directly; it has to be mediated somehow. But I’ve found that a well-chosen intermediate can amplify the quiddity of something, so I feel present with it and become passionately entwined with it. And this sensation seems to increase the more it is augmented through technology.

JACOLBY SATTERWHITE: Being physically static in the studio does influence my sensibility for creating digital space. Currently my performance sessions in front of the green screen are the most aerobic part of my studio practice. When I transfer and alter that data, my initial desire is to amplify and heighten the intensity of each gesture. This may be a reaction to the ratio of time that I am sitting stationary, animating and editing, versus the time I am moving. I am constantly at work creating multiples of “me” on various scales; shapes, colors and purpose are composited in spaces with endless possibilities. Because of the endless resources of images, textures, references and sound bites offered on the Internet, the digital atmospheres I choose to perform in restrain themselves with a careful selection of drawings as initial prompts. These prompts are pulled from the Internet. For instance, the video *Reifying Desire 5* references drawings of toiletries and vaginal care products. This immediately sends me to Google, searching for art historical references of female bathers in a salon. Thus the viewer is bombarded with references to Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*. This type of neosurrealist play yields massive digital space and endless possibilities. It keeps me poorly postured at the computer, which actually may be the most physically demanding activity, not performing.



Jacolby Satterwhite, *Reifying Desire 5*, 2013
Courtesy: the artist and Monya Rowe Gallery, New York

There have been several generations of artists now who make work—paintings or sculpture, for example—that is articulated as existing within a network, be it communal, cultural or conversational. A latest iteration of this connects contemporary art to the logic of digital culture: its representations, its flattening tendency, random associated linkages, endless versioning as images are born anew in new contexts. Do you believe that physical artworks can carry over the distributed effects of the Internet into the gallery, or perhaps resonate with an animistic quality of belonging to something larger?

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KATJA NOVITSKOVA: The network effects of actual art installations and shows are not happening directly in the gallery but rather online in the form of documentation shots, reblogs, likes and other forms of distributed attention. I think all art that has been shared online becomes “Internet art” on a basic image level. What is more interesting, though, is how the expansion of the Internet and digital technologies in our environment influences the choice of materials, forms, themes and other parameters in the visual arts, creating feedback loops and ripple effects between works and their extended online existence. I started to think about the ecological/evolutionary meaning of art caused by to the way it is being shared and expressed online. Namely through its visual trend-making capacity, its development based on variations and continuous tweaking, its origins in community-based peer competition. Aware or unaware, but in a natural way, most younger artists are playing with this. The “shift in artists’ attitudes” can be also called a “shift in parameters”. My recent book, the Post Internet Survival Guide, was one of the first attempts at capturing this.

JOHN KELSEY: I don’t see much of a distinction between gallery space and social media space. Don’t contemporary objects and their makers move in both spaces simultaneously? The work we do and the way we do it is what causes these spaces to merge and overlap. What artists are doing now, intentionally or not, with painting or printing or whatever, is abandoning an old type of urban space and an old type of relationship that happened in that space. Meanwhile critics and curators favor the artists who both thematize and perform this abandoning-via-connectivity in their work, because what we want is art objects that are like any other functioning smart device. There’s a growing demand for smart art, and artists everywhere are meeting it.

In relation to this, Mark, in your understanding of techno-animism, is it more a subjective or an individual view, or do you see it as operating within an expanded kind of network?

MARK LECKEY: I’m very suspicious of these kinds of ideas of “Transitive painting” or “Contingency”, as I think they either just resign themselves to entropy, albeit in a funky way, or they move only so far away from “autonomous objecthood” that a painting has to come with a free CD and a reading list. If there is anything generative—and that’s all I care about— in the idea of animism, then it’s got to be related to thinking of objects, entities, your environment in a way that isn’t wholly conceptual. The animating power of the Network conjures up other ways of thinking of things: similar to Surrealism’s “dream objects” or the Aboriginal Dreamtime, or even to an autistic empathy with all things non-human. It’s a kind of fetishism that I find fascinating.
