

Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard: Romeo Echo Delta

Kate MacGarry London 10 November to 17 December

In his book *Dancing Naked in the Mind Field*, the Nobel Prize-winning biochemist Kary Mullis describes his encounter with a glowing green raccoon in the woods outside his holiday cabin: 'It's what science calls anecdotal, because it only happened in a way that can't reproduce. But it happened.' That he uses the word 'reproduce', which could be interpreted in a Benjaminian sense, is serendipitous; its technological overtones, suggesting how the myth of paranormal experience depends on its mode of dissemination, is apt. In the absence of proof, the credibility of the representation is all. The relevant question – was it ever there? – exposing our will to credulousness.

This is fertile ground at a time when artists, stranded in the air-conditioned anterooms of uncommitted Postmodernism, find themselves longing for the bracing beliefs they are unable to summon for themselves, and willing to settle, as a compromise, for analysing the fictions those beliefs generate, and the media through which they are conveyed. The artistic duo of Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard shine a light, by turns ironical and compassionate, on our methods of mediating paranormal experience. Empathy is vital in counterbalancing an investigation into human susceptibility that could easily shade into condescension, with the artists as disillusioned semioticists plumbing the absurd depths of our fascination with little green men or little green animals. Science fiction, an essentially modernist form, is here less an idiom than a metaphor for the ever-expanding virtuality of the contemporary mass media.

For their project *Romeo Echo Delta*, the duo literally shone a light – a red laser beam – into the night sky over Merseyside at 10.30pm this Halloween and simultaneously planted a fictional version of a regular talk show onto BBC Radio Merseyside, during which the presenter's chat with X-factor finalist Maria Lawson was disrupted by scurrying reports of a mysterious light issuing from the direction of Mars and causing people in its vicinity to vanish. The half-hour recording that can be heard in this gallery presentation was not the broadcast version of the show but rather one deemed by the BBC too liable to arouse fear in listeners. The original features the voice of DJ Lee Bennett, who was subsequently replaced by an actor. This is a stunt that operates in a paradoxical no-man's-land between creating an illusion and trying to make sure nobody is fooled.

The conjunction of the Mars reference with the use of radio recalls Orson Welles's 1938 adaptation of HG Wells's *War of the Worlds*, also

broadcast on Halloween. It caused widespread panic, unlike Forsyth & Pollard's intervention, which says something about the quality of Welles's fiction, or the decreasing popularity of radio or how much more primed we have become to mass-media artifice – probably the latter. When Lawson claims to be a qualified 'media analyst', remarking that 'reporting has taken over from the actual event', and using words like 'self-perpetuating', we are alerted, if we were not already, that Forsyth & Pollard are engaged in generating media-savvy irony at the possible expense of gullible northerners who might be fooled. Whereas there was an oblique air of functional political commentary about Welles's broadcast – taking place during the paranoid run-up to the Second World War – *Romeo Echo Delta* is shaped to evince a credibility that is always merely academic. The inclusion of local radio personalities among the actors bolsters verisimilitude, but only for local listeners, and it is not they but art viewers, in a gallery in London, at which the spoof is ultimately aimed. That the recording we are listening to is not the one that was aired emphasises this disjunction. Presented with a soundtrack devised to function in a particular context (on local radio) and in a particular time and place, the gallery visitor is cast as the cynical bod, chuckling from his remote vantage at the duo's command of media stereotypes, such as the parapsychologist with the posh BBC accent, wheeled on to provide 'vigorous analysis' of 'the scare'.

The gallery installation – a long trestle table strewn with portable headphones under a photograph of a silhouetted ventilation shaft disguising the source of the laser – resembles a dimmed student study room, and reinforces the status of the installation as objective and post-event. Absorbing the viewer and the space of viewing into the work's theatre, irony is shown, like fear, to be uncontainable once it is released, its knowing, patronising tone only alleviated by the inventive comic detail of the writing: 'If you bumped into an alien in Birkenhead, what would you show them, where would you take them? Give us a call on ...' 'Birkenhead', in this context, is not just a synonym for the pathetic and marginal, it is a kind of universal elsewhere, a locus of what is other, as it was in the Smiths' song 'What She Said', a much more urgent paean of fear and desire for what might be happening just beyond the range of your knowledge, vision and means of representation: 'It took a tattooed boy from Birkenhead to really open her eyes.' #

WAVE PRICES is an artist and critic.

Iain Forsyth &
Jane Pollard
Installation view

