Plastique Fantastique: A Friends' Rendezvous @ Mars Year Zero

Dilston Gallery, London, UK

I recently Skyped someone on his phone in Japan. Sitting at my laptop in London, I watched as a gigantic ear reared up and filled the screen in front of me. I talked to the ear; the ear talked back. Such surreal weirdness is now quotidian as digital technology serves up decontextualised images, manipulated selfies and deepfake videos in a slop of sinister magic. Part human avatar, the giant speaking ear might make an appearance in a film by the artist collective Plastique Fantastique. Their latest work inside a converted church in Southwark Park, London (incidentally, one of the first to be built of concrete) – now Dilston Gallery – is *Mars Year Zero*, an assemblage of beribboned totems, paintings of futuristic folk costumed creatures, a lightbox tableau vivant and a 34 minute video projected onto the wall of the erstwhile altar.

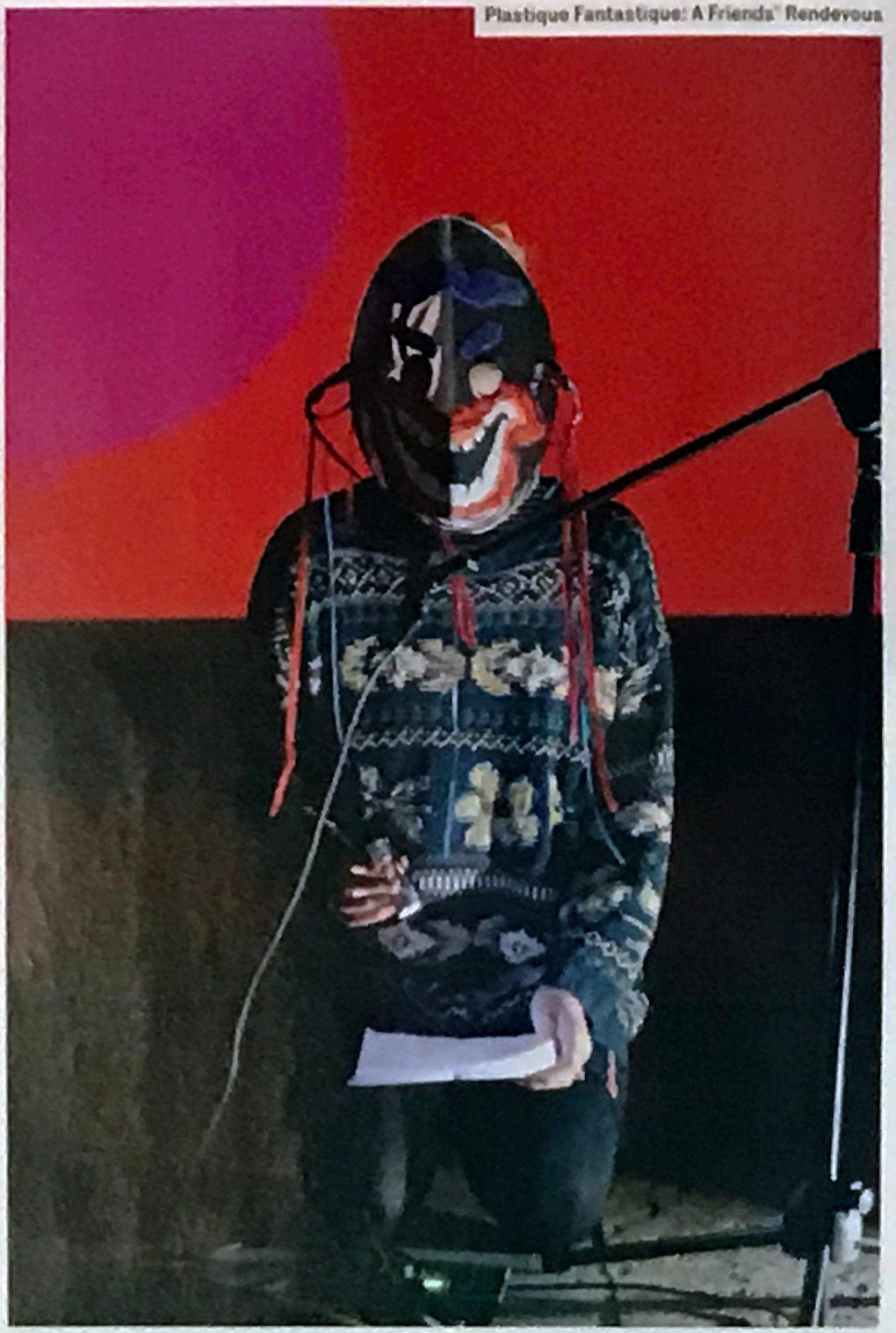
In the Catholic Church, the altar is the sacred place of transubstantiation, the turning of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. In Plastique Fantastique's practice, transformation occurs in performance: "We are attracted to being objects or things or parts of a machine for the duration of a performance," Plastique member David Burrows explained in one interview. Through fictional rites enacted by folkloric sci-fi avatars, they seek to show our evolutionary path and its unfolding dramas, washing back and forth between past, present and future time.

The video *Mars Year Zero* is divided into five segments: Data/Animals/Ritual/Contact/Departure. It charts the odyssey of three tech-animals (molecular-headed, ribbon-masked or in shades) and their guardian Cimon, a floating computerised pod with a *Toy Story* face. The party escape from their space station hovering above the earth like a giant dragonfly and land on Mars among pinkish rocks and rubble. In this arid landscape, atom-head, ribbon-crown and shades construct a shelter, find evidence of previous civilisations, make music and conduct a ritual libation of their laptop. We witness their attempt at communication with the creatures they encounter using sign language and symbols (not unlike Extinction Rebellion's hourglass logo). The creatures, resembling lemurs and meerkats at Regent's Park Zoo, pay scant attention. Could it be our friends have landed on Earth and not on Mars?

The melange of global technology with archetypal mythology, cryptic rites with primeval music-making, intergalactic colonisation with climatic migration, animal, human and machine hybridisations (brilliantly anchored in the rapacious Musk dog) capture the zeitgeist and sit comfortably within current art world preoccupations. I am reminded of one of Mark Leckey's video installations in his exhibition at Tate Britain, *O' Magic Power Of Bleakness* and the homemade props of *Monster Chetwynd*.

Following the *Mars Year Zero* screening, art students gather round their tutor David Burrows to give a series of performances. This is an uneven section: their youth makes them gauche and untransformed, inhibited by the masks and anxious about the words. If, as some believe, at some future date, there is a digital dark age where the mixing desk explodes and the technology rusts and crumbles about our giant ears, we'll see a surge of small localised gatherings off-screen and on the high street, and once more we'll go a-mumming and dance from door to door and sing a song and down a pint in a rescued pub as long ago we did. So the circle turns.

Deborah Nash



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