



Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera: *Fauna*, an installation (1988, detail)

Believe It or Not

BY KIM LEVIN

"PROJECTS": JOAN FONTCUBERTA/PERE FORMIGUERA. The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, through August 9.

A larger fossil specimen of the primordial bird *Archeopteryx* has been discovered in West Germany, and paleontologists believe it should dispel any lingering notion that these fossils were an elaborate 19th century hoax." This from *The New York Times*, Friday, June 24. "The specimen was found in a private collection in Solnhofen. It had been misidentified for years as the skeleton of a small dinosaur." An understandable error, as the news report explains.

"If *Archeopteryx* was a bird that looked something like a dinosaur, *Compsognathus* was a dinosaur that looked something like a bird. Indeed, similarities between the two species have influenced modern thinking that *Archeopteryx* was the supposed 'missing link' in reptile-bird evolution and that dinosaurs were probably ancestors of birds."

June 24 just happened to be the day I saw the installation in the "Projects" room at MOMA.

"*Fauna*," announces the wall label. The first specimen, recorded in photographs and detailed scientific field observations, looks something like what's sometimes called a pissclam and other times a quahog: a mollusk with a protruding part. On closer inspection, it has the shell of a scallop and its protruding part, on which it hops, resembles a human arm. Its behavior is eccentric too, according to the accompanying scientific text. Classified as a mammal, "it appears to lay but one egg a year."

Other bizarre creatures follow, meticulously documented with x-rays and crabbed German script (and typed translations), hybrid creatures with Latin names and odd habits. *Reptilia-ratidae* (a whistling birdlike reptile), *Alopex stultus*

(a lead-armored, two-legged, radioactive fox that camouflages itself as a shrub). The faded notecards are full of data, evidence, statistics. They record curious courtship rituals and less-than-thriving behavior in captivity. By the time I got to the one-headed two-bodied hermaphroditic sheep (*Hermefrotaurus autosestarius*) that copulates with itself, I was giggling out loud. So were other spectators, though one serious man was halfway around the room, standing in front of the web-footed, snake-tailed squirrel (*Myodorifera colubercauda*), stuffed and under

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glass, when it dawned on him and he exclaimed incredulously, "this has got to be a put-on." No. It's not a put-on, it's serious art, an elaborate fiction addressing the prevailing issue of authenticity.

This latest move in the simulation game comes from Catalan Spain. A collaboration between Joan Fontcuberta (who made the photographs) and Pere Formiguera (responsible for the pseudoscientific notecards, drawings, maps, audiotapes, and specimens), the work's a photo-Conceptual narrative convincing in every detail, right down to the video piece—a TV news report on the life and findings of the forgotten Professor Ameisenhaufen (born in Munich on May 5, 1895). It goes into all kinds of convincing documentary detail about this wartime German scientist, whose discovery in the 1940s of unknown animals that don't follow the laws of evolution this exhibition claims to document. It interviews a church theologian (who talks about genetics versus the Creation), a shocked ecologist (Greenpeace suspects "coverup for a huge scandal"), and the two artists (who relate a tale of finding the professor's archive in an attic in Glasgow). It also discusses the ethical questions of biogenetics and refers to German

pre-World War II experiments with animals.

The pseudocumentary program even has convincing commercial breaks. You may have to strain to hear them: the *Projects* room reverberates with exotic whoops, clucks, and shooooo-eets, because there's a button at each display that turns on the animal's characteristic sounds. There's even a vitrine displaying the fictitious professor's journal (volume VII of 15 rediscovered), family photos, mementos, and illustrated books, including aged snapshots of a horned rabbit and of "aerophants taking off," which he determined to be a hoax.

Questioning authenticity, no matter how cleverly, isn't quite enough anymore. Appropriation and simulation are yesterday's news, and these two Catalan collaborators know it. What makes their installation more than a put-on is that it questions broader issues and assumptions. Modern history for one: its cruelties, its anomalies, its blind spots. (The professor's habitat of Nazi Germany, with its division of homo sapiens into different species, is a not insignificant detail. That two Spanish artists dreamed up this semi-Surreal parable isn't irrelevant either, considering that Spain remained under the thumb of Hitler's collaborator Franco until rather recently.) Natural science for another: its faith in codified data and irrefutable evidence, its pretense of objectivity, its disdain for unman-made nature that lies at the heart of modernist thought. The modern church, which still refuses to acknowledge Darwin. And the nearly extinct modern artist, who so confidently at the start of the century assumed the role of Creator. *Fauna* questions the idea of progress, which doesn't always coincide with impulses to preserve and survive. In a way this show can be read as a postmodern warning: look what mutant monstrosities nature, with a little help from science or art, is capable of. ■