

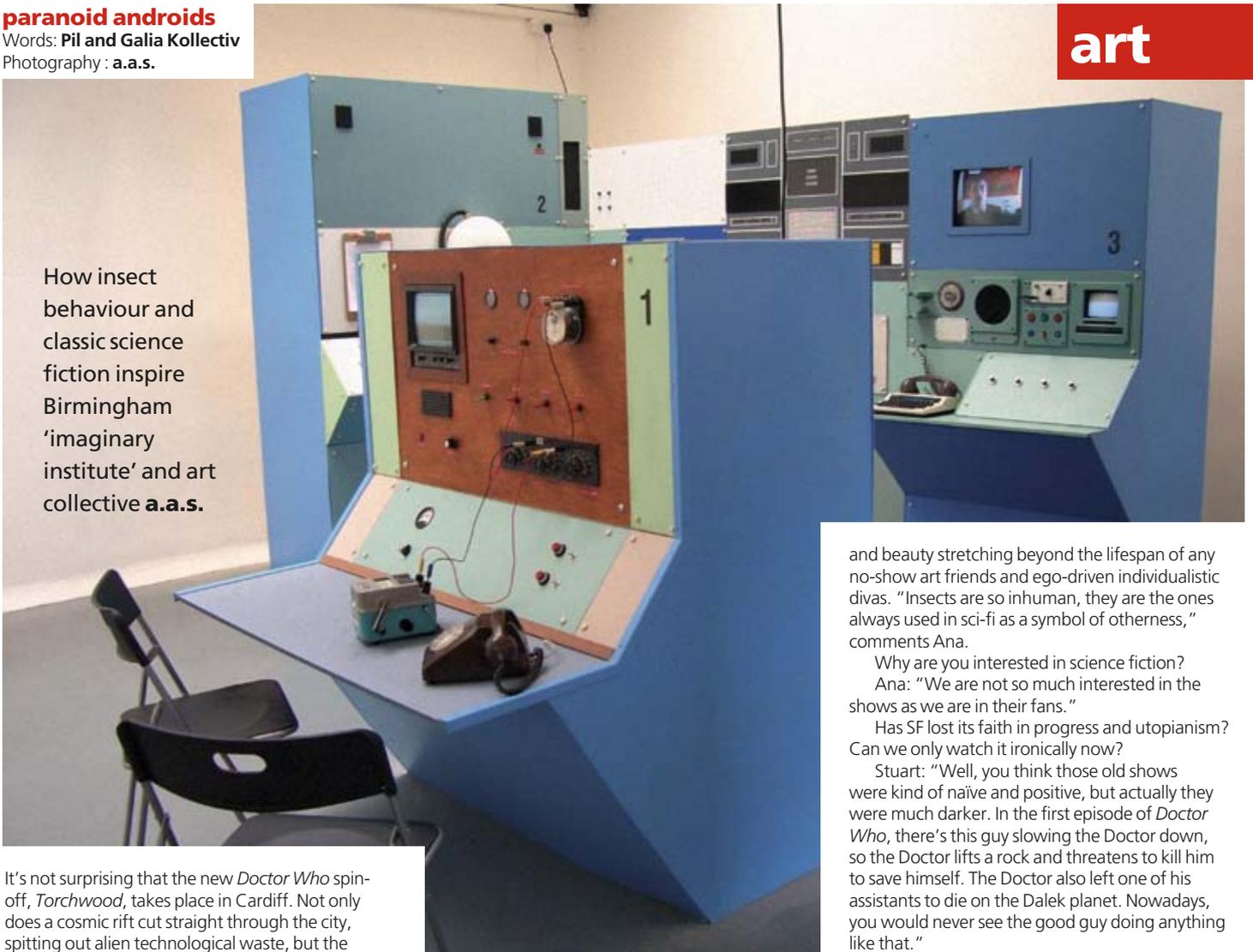
## paranoid androids

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# art

How insect behaviour and classic science fiction inspire Birmingham 'imaginary institute' and art collective a.a.s.



It's not surprising that the new *Doctor Who* spin-off, *Torchwood*, takes place in Cardiff. Not only does a cosmic rift cut straight through the city, spitting out alien technological waste, but the previous *Torchwood* was run from London as a semi-fascistic organisation destroyed in the second war with the Cybermen. The Cardiff branch, on the other hand, is a close-knit group of five individuals and a collection of bizarre objects stored in a rundown warehouse.

What better analogy can one have to the dialectics of power and periphery? London produces an army of efficient market pleasers, paranoid about competition and cynical about making money from their artwork. Elsewhere – or, more precisely, in Birmingham – people like a.a.s. are making some of most imaginative art around, seamlessly crossing over art, music and a host of curatorial projects without worrying about the divisions that arise in the capital. Outside of Birmingham, you are most likely to encounter a.a.s. through their tangled web of internet sites, which proliferate around their various sub-projects and solo endeavours and splinter groups like the tendrils of a disrobed Dalek, archiving their various incarnations as demented scientists, musical insects and robots in disguise. Much of their output – from the lovingly constructed 'Quatermass Code' control room (pictured above) to the tribute to *Star Trek* cutting room floor victim, Gary 7 – draws on science fiction for its weird and wonderful aesthetic.

For core members Ana Benloch and Stuart Tait, a.a.s. are first and foremost an imaginary art group: an open-ended collaboration ready to swallow up and spit out temporary allies. As Stuart explains: "We started working in a group called proto-mu as a possible route to enlightenment. The idea was that if Mu means 'nothing' then proto-mu will be the moment just before becoming your own Mu, the moment before becoming enlightened."

Ana: "A lot of what we did with that group had to do with taking apart the process of making art, putting on shows. This was also when we became interested in the audience's experience in the show rather than just making art works."

Stuart: "In one show, we just had ideas for art works. We had a massive gallery space with just scraps of papers with some writing on. We more or less left the group on the steps of Tate Britain when we went to one of the Stuckists protests against the Turner prize. We did a counter-demonstration and gave them our award for best conceptual art. There was a bunch of people saying they'd take part, but in the end it was just me demonstrating and Ana filming me. That's when we realised it was up to us to keep it going."

So why work under the guise of a group?

Ana: "We wanted to get away from the link to the individualist artist."

Stuart: "We invented a.a.s. as an imaginary puppet master."

Ana: "It's like an imaginary institute."

Stuart: "That's why we started doing the *Insectoid* project – where we wear insect masks and act like insects. Individuality and being told what to do is part of human nature. We were looking for non-hierarchical structures. We're now thinking of building a colony, spending two to three weeks together as a group and building a nest..."

The music of *Insectoid* is terrifying. This is perhaps more to do with personal phobias than anything else, but it is also a testament to the project's success in sonically mapping out a posthuman environment, a clicking, ticking, antennae-rubbing terrain of creepy-crawly horror

and beauty stretching beyond the lifespan of any no-show art friends and ego-driven individualistic divas. "Insects are so inhuman, they are the ones always used in sci-fi as a symbol of otherness," comments Ana.

Why are you interested in science fiction?

Ana: "We are not so much interested in the shows as we are in their fans."

Has SF lost its faith in progress and utopianism? Can we only watch it ironically now?

Stuart: "Well, you think those old shows were kind of naïve and positive, but actually they were much darker. In the first episode of *Doctor Who*, there's this guy slowing the Doctor down, so the Doctor lifts a rock and threatens to kill him to save himself. The Doctor also left one of his assistants to die on the Dalek planet. Nowadays, you would never see the good guy doing anything like that."

## 'We invented a.a.s. as an imaginary puppet master'

Ana: "At the same time, people still have a kind of faith in scientists. We often dress up in lab coats as part of our Milgram project and it's amazing to see the kind of authority that gives you. The name is a reference to Stanley Milgram: a psychologist who carried out experiments into obedience to authority. At one of our exhibitions, we dressed up the security guards in gas masks and wore the lab coats. People totally ignored the guards and came directly to us to ask questions."

Would you like to be nominated for the Turner Prize?

Both: "Of course!"

Why?

Ana: "Why not? We'd get paid to do other things. We already work with education institutions and we're involved with galleries, so it's just another type of institution."

Stuart: "If confrontational avant-garde artists are really good, they'll be absorbed into the mainstream. The mainstream market is like the robot in *Terminator 2*: when you shoot a big hole in it, it goes straight through and its body closes up again. We're more interested in the possibility of changing the art system from within."

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