

# **BLAST THEORY**

## **THE POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF INTERACTIVITY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the practice of interactivity in the later work of Blast Theory – *Kidnap* (1998), *Desert Rain* (2000), *Can You See Me Now?* (2001), *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003), and *Day of the Figurines* (2006). Based on two frames of reference, the historical artistic and activist legacy of engagement, and the contemporary theories of interactivity, the research explores the ways in which a meaningful relationship is constructed between the work of art and the viewer/participant. By focusing on the specific content in which each of the works aims to engage the viewer/participant, the form in which this engagement is deployed in space and time, and the resulting process of meaning production on the part of the viewer/participant, this exploration attempts to conceptualise the company's practice through the relationship between the politics and aesthetics of interactivity.

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# PART ONE

## Introduction

*The purpose of art is not to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake us up to the very life we are living.<sup>1</sup>*

John Cage

Although it might seem to have astrophysical connotations, the name Blast Theory stands for ‘Blast Theory, Bless Practice’<sup>2</sup>. In 1991, three founder members of the group - Matt Adams, an English graduate with a background in theatre, Ju Row-Farr, a visual artist, and Nick Tandavanitj, a polymath with a degree in art and social context, mutually concluded that the prevalent postmodern tendency to scrutinise art (and the world in general) through the lens of semiotics, was ‘politically dangerous’<sup>3</sup>. ‘Seeing everything as signs’<sup>4</sup> was not only drawing artists away from a direct engagement with the world, it was also fostering the production of opaque and, for most of the population, inaccessible works of art. This is why Blast Theory, the members assert, ‘set their stall to be about doing, making and taking action’.<sup>5</sup>

For twelve years Thatcher’s ‘popular capitalism’ had promoted entrepreneurialism and privatisation, unemployment had risen and cuts in funding had impoverished higher education, arts and culture. At the beginning of the 1990s it seemed that some action was indeed needed.

The anti-poll tax rally in London in March 1990, which Adams called ‘the best performance I’d ever seen’<sup>6</sup> and which turned into ‘the worst riot seen in the city for a century’<sup>7</sup> showed

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<sup>1</sup> John Cage quoted in King, B., (ed.) *Contemporary American Theatre*, Macmillan, London, 1991, p.264

<sup>2</sup> Taken over from the British artist Wyndham Lewis, the phrase refers to the ‘theory explosion’ of the 1980s when Continental philosophy first appeared in English translation and was widely read and discussed by academics, artists and activists

<sup>3</sup> Adams, M. in interview with N. Lushetich, Brighton, 2/7/2007

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Adams, M, *Adelaide Thinkers in Residence Public Lecture*, [www.thinkers.sa.gov.au/images/BT\\_Public\\_Lecture\\_notes.pdf](http://www.thinkers.sa.gov.au/images/BT_Public_Lecture_notes.pdf) site accessed 21/4/2007

<sup>6</sup> Adams, M. in a research seminar on Blast Theory, The Central School of Speech and Drama, London, 5/6/2007

some of the wider discontent. Youth's distaste for Thatcherite yuppification of the country found its expression in the growingly vibrant underground clubbing culture. Almost Woodstock-like in number and momentum, acid house and, later, rave parties, were organised in warehouses and open fields all over the country. As in the times of Woodstock, psychedelic drugs and MDMA<sup>8</sup> were being consumed with the aim of 'dissolving the orderly perception'<sup>9</sup> and achieving a 'private' liberation which anticipates an exigency of the social liberation'<sup>10</sup> such as was the case, according to Herbert Marcuse, with the cultural revolutions of the late 1960s. In visual arts, the more than a decade-long lack of institutional support for non-saleable art had triggered off the do-it-yourself (DIY) spirit exemplified by artists such as Damien Hirst. He was the first to introduce the hybrid concept of artist-curator when in 1989 he started organising 'warehouse shows'<sup>11</sup> which, alongside his own work, featured the work of artists such as Tracey Emin, Rachael Whiteread and the Chapman brothers, who were later to become known as Young British Art (YBA). The main characteristics of the YBA work of the time were 'shock tactics' and 'the use of throwaway materials'.<sup>12</sup> In theatre, a palpable shift to collaborative devising practices and a growing tendency towards non-textuality and distinct physicalisation was to be seen in the work of companies such as Volcano Theatre, Théâtre de Complicité and DV8.

If the mission of the artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s, in Britain and the rest of the world, was to liberate art from the constraints of the material, the prescribed and the marketable, in both form and content, or to 'break down the barriers between art and life'<sup>13</sup>, the mission of the 1980s was to 'break down the barriers between the art and the media'<sup>14</sup>. What the practices of the 1990s sought to achieve in their turn was an amalgam of the missions of the two previous decades - the erosion of boundaries between art and life, between art and the media (between high and low culture), and between the different art forms themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk), news 31/3/1990, site accessed 26/6/2007

<sup>8</sup> Methylenedioxy-Methamphetamine, also known as 'Ecstasy'

<sup>9</sup> Marcuse, H., *An Essay on Liberation*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London, 1969, p.37

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Exhibitions held in 'found' spaces

<sup>12</sup> Stallabrass, J., 'Artist-Curators and the New British Art', *Art and Design*, vol.12, nos.1-2, January-February 1999, p. 78

<sup>13</sup> Goldberg, R., *Performance Art*, Thames and Hudson, Singapore, 1988, p.190

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

From their inception in 1991 Blast Theory have embodied all these tendencies. The idea of eroding the boundaries between life and art, which holds an important place in their work, is largely indebted to Situationists International (SI). Led by Guy Debord, the author of *The Society of the Spectacle*, which expanded Marx's concept of the fetishism of commodities to all society, the SI were a group of artistic and political agitators active between 1957 and 1972 in France and the rest of Europe. Their programme consisted of 'creating practical activities and constructing situations'<sup>15</sup>, whereby a situation was defined as 'a moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization or a unitary ambiance and a game of events'<sup>16</sup>. 'Constructing situations' basically meant intervening in reality by whatever means one found fit, ranging from casual conversations with accidental passers-by to riots. An aptitude for 'constructing situations' was cultivated by practicing *la dérive* (drift) and psychogeography. *La dérive* was a form of random and intuitive accumulation of experiences whose aim was to replace standardised forms of knowledge-reception and knowledge-production. It consisted of a 'hasty and transient passage through as many varied ambiances as possible'<sup>17</sup> while 'dropping the usual motives for movement and action, relations, work and leisure activities, and letting oneself be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and, in particular, the encounters one finds there'.<sup>18</sup> Psychogeography was a strategy for a purposefully 'playful and participatory exploration of the city'<sup>19</sup> leading to 'spontaneous urbanism'<sup>20</sup>, a process of intimate, experientially and emotionally tinted inner mapping of the city.

Both *la dérive* and psychogeography were practiced to entice the 'openness and fluidity of relationships and consciousness'<sup>21</sup>. Both were regarded as techniques for 'accelerating the demise of art and precipitating its realization in everyday life'<sup>22</sup>. Instead of presenting, staging, performing, watching, or in fact consciously creating any form of art at all, the Situationists sought to engage, both in the sense of getting involved (*s'engager*) and in the sense of engaging the other (*engager*) in the sheer act of living. This was rooted in the belief, voiced by Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* that: '[t]he whole life of those societies in

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<sup>15</sup> Ford, S., *The Situationists International: A User's Guide*, Black Dog, London, 2004, p.18

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Chollet, L., *Les Situationistes: L'utopie incarnée*, Gallimard, Paris, 2004, p.19, my translation

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.22

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.36

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Poster, M., *Existential Marxism in Postwar France*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1975, p.384

<sup>22</sup> Chollet, L., *Les Situationistes: L'utopie incarnée*, Gallimard, Paris, 2004, p.36, my translation

which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that was once directly lived has become a representation<sup>23</sup>. The legacy of the SI to Blast Theory is the idea that representation is to be replaced by a ‘directly lived’ experience.

The second characteristic of artistic practices of the 1990s, and an important cornerstone in Blast Theory’s work, is the endeavour to abolish the boundaries between art and the media or, in other words, between high and low culture. The group’s members are committed to ‘reaching outside the boundaries typically addressed by performing arts, visual art or digital art and using forms such as a lottery (in *Kidnap*), or gaming<sup>24</sup> (in *Desert Rain*, *Can You See Me Now?*, *Uncle Roy All Around You*, *Day of the Figurines*). They reason that these forms ‘appeal widely and provide a powerful hook to draw people in’<sup>25</sup>. This desire to ‘appeal widely’ should be understood qualitatively as much as quantitatively. Since popular culture is a prime locus of political projections it only follows that it should be an area of concern for any artist engaging with the social and political aspects of the here and now. And this is precisely what has been Blast Theory’s arena of investigation for the past fifteen years: the manifest and hidden structures of power, the politics of information, civil disobedience, pervasive violence, the vulnerability of trust. In short, the infinite ramifications of the question: ‘How are we to live together in this society?’

In this area of inquiry Blast Theory acknowledge the influence of Erwin Piscator, whose productions ‘expounded the materialistic view of history’<sup>26</sup> by exploring themes such as ‘the history of the German revolution, the conflicts of the oil companies, the inflation, the abortion law...’<sup>27</sup>. Piscator sought to establish a theatrical practice by means of which, in his own words, ‘Decorativeness would give way to constructiveness, Reason would be put on a par with Emotion, sensuality replaced by didacticism and fantasy by documentary reality’<sup>28</sup>. In order to confront and engage his audience in contemplation of their social condition, Piscator employed what for his time was an astounding array of technological devices ranging from revolving stages, cycloramas, moving sets and multiple projection screens. This is another

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<sup>23</sup> Debord, G., *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, New York, 1995, p.12

<sup>24</sup> Adams, M. in interview with A. Dekker, [www.montevideo.nl/en/nieuws/detail.php?archief=ja&id=8](http://www.montevideo.nl/en/nieuws/detail.php?archief=ja&id=8) site accessed 8/6/2007

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Debord, G., *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Zone Books, New York, 1995, p. 57

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 108

<sup>28</sup> Piscator, E., quoted in Willet, J., *The Theatre of Erwin Piscator*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1979, p. 84

point of convergence between Piscator and Blast Theory. Many of the group's groundbreaking works such as *Desert Rain* and *Can You See Me Now?* realised in collaboration with the Mixed Reality Lab (MRL) at Nottingham University, have been hailed as 'the most technologically advanced artworks to date'<sup>29</sup>. Whilst this is certainly true, it is important to identify the way in which technology is used in these and many of their other works. Particularly pertinent in this respect is Martin Heidegger's claim that technology is 'nothing technological'<sup>30</sup> but instead 'a way of revealing'<sup>31</sup> and of 'challenging forth the energies of nature'<sup>32</sup>. It is this challenge that 'gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as standing reserve: Ge-Stell'<sup>33</sup>, and it is the Ge-Stell (Enframing), the 'ordaining of destining'<sup>34</sup> which, according to Heidegger, is the path to truth. He asserts: 'Once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *techne*'<sup>35</sup> and goes on to suggest the realm where the exploration of technology as 'a way of revealing' might occur:

Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art.<sup>36</sup>

Blast Theory's use of technology is a strategy of inquiry. Like Piscator, famous for using multiple projections of documentary footage in order to reveal the materiality of social thematics and in doing so engage his audiences in participation, members of the group use technology to inquire, reveal and engage.

The third prevailing tendency in artistic practices of the 1990s, and a hallmark of Blast Theory, is the quest to further democratise art by effacing the boundaries between the different disciplines. Given their different artistic backgrounds – a theatre maker, a visual artist and a polymath with a degree in art and social context - members of Blast Theory almost had no choice but to work in an interdisciplinary manner. This initial default setting,

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<sup>29</sup> Churcher, N., 'Blast masters', *Design Week*, 29 May 2003, p.19

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, M., *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt, Harper & Row, New York, 1977, p.35

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.4

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.15

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.19

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.34

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.35



which Adams characterised as ‘a positive lack of a frame of reference and common paradigm’<sup>37</sup>, was later to grow into what Steve Dickson named Blast Theory’s ability to ‘fuse paradigms from theater, Virtual Reality, computer games and “real life”’<sup>38</sup>. Much of the group’s interdisciplinary and intermedial<sup>39</sup> thinking, from their early works such as *Stampede* (1994)<sup>40</sup> onwards is indebted to the Fluxus in many ways. The purpose of the Fluxus artists such as Alan Kaprow, Nam June Paik, John Cage and George Brecht in the 1960s was threefold: to efface the boundaries between the different art forms (erected in their opinion by the art market and art historicism), to dislocate artistic practice from institutions and to turn the ‘passive receiver’ of a work of art into an active collaborator in its creation.

One example of the intermediality of the Fluxus practice is Nam June Paik’s and Charlotte Moorman’s *Opera Sextronique*, in which Moorman, submerged in a tank of water, played a ‘TV Cello’ made of three different television screens bowed between her legs. An example of the Fluxus practice of dislocation and audience involvement is Alan Kaprow’s ‘temporal and environmental piece’<sup>41</sup> entitled *Self-Service*. Performed ‘across three different states and over a total possible period of four months’<sup>42</sup>, the score of *Self-Service* contained actions such as: ‘People stand on empty bridges, on street corners, watch cars pass. After two hundred red ones they leave.’<sup>43</sup> or ‘Cars drive into filling stations, erupt with white foam pouring from windows. Couples kiss in the midst of the world, then go on.’<sup>44</sup> The piece was performed entirely by viewer/participants, with no external audience except for accidental passers-by. The influence of the Fluxus can be seen in Blast Theory’s continuous experimentation with intermediality and new modes of expression, and in the temporal and spatial dislocation of the artistic event.

Despite the differences in their practices, what the Situationists International, Piscator and the Fluxus have in common is their insistence on direct engagement, be it with an intentional viewer/participant or an accidental passer-by. It is this legacy of engagement which Blast Theory have developed into both a *site* of artistic practice, and a *material* for artist-audience

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<sup>37</sup> Adams, M. in interview with N. Lushetich, Brighton, 2/7/2007

<sup>38</sup> Dickson, S., *Digital Performance*, the MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2007, p.95

<sup>39</sup> Intermedial artworks deliberately switch from one media to another or use several forms of expression simultaneously

<sup>40</sup> *Stampede*, a performance about the energetics and cohesion of rioting crowds and the implementation of mind-control techniques, used a system of pressure pads that allowed the audience to trigger video recordings.

<sup>41</sup> Kaye, N., *Postmodernism and Performance*, The Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1994, p.35

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Kaprow, A., quoted in Kaye, N., *Postmodernism and Performance*, The Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1994, p.36

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

co-creation. This *site* and *material* are made of three key relationships: between the viewer/participant and the work of art (its form and content), between the viewer/participant and the artist (or performer) and between two or more viewer/participants. The sum total of these relationships constitutes the field of interactivity.

Although interactivity has existed for centuries in rituals, games and performance, (in the Native Indian Rain Dance, the Japanese Tea Ceremony, court games and, more recently, Augusto Boal's 'forum theatre'<sup>45</sup>), its theorisation only came to bloom with

the advent of the new media. Unsurprisingly, most theories of interactivity come from computer scientists, communication theorists and new media and interactive media artists and/or theorists. As media archeologist Erkki Huhtamo aptly pointed out: 'Interactivity has become one of the keywords of the techno-saturated culture of the 1990s. We have seen a proliferation of all kinds of things interactive from computer games to interactive banking, shopping and networking.... This proliferation and simultaneous diversification has obscured rather than clarified the concept and the range of meanings assigned to it.'<sup>46</sup> This is why it may be important to make a few basic distinctions. In the first place, the much advertised interactivity of various digital gadgets is a tautology. 'Interactivity' in the case of a digital device simply indicates the system's operational strategy. A cash dispenser, a camera or a computer can be nothing else but 'interactive'. All are designed to allow me to complete a series of goal-oriented activities. In contrast, engaging in a game of chess with my computer is interactivity of a very different order. What is being produced here is a surplus of meaning<sup>47</sup>. My concern in this paper is with this latter order of multi-layered and open-ended interactivity. Another important distinction to make is that between 'interaction' and 'interactivity' as these terms are often used interchangeably. The interactive media theorist Jens F. Jensen provides the following definition: 'Interaction is a mutually dependent action of two or more agents'<sup>48</sup> whereas 'interactivity is an extent to which agents [human or digital] can participate in modifying either form or content'<sup>49</sup> In *Computers as Theatre* Brenda Laurel, a pioneering researcher in the field of human-computer interaction (HCI),

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<sup>45</sup> A practice where actors first portray a dramatic situation from real life and then invite audiences to intervene, come to the stage and enact their own ideas

<sup>46</sup> Huhtamo, E., 'Seeking Deeper Contact: Interactive Art as Metacommentary', *Convergence The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 1995, <http://con.sagepub.com/content/vol1/issue2>, site accessed 16/4/2007

<sup>47</sup> Compared to the purely functional meaning of a goal-oriented activity

<sup>48</sup> Jensen, J.F., 'Virtual Inhabited 3D Worlds: Interactivity and Interaction between Avatars, Autonomous Agents and Users' in Quortrup, L. (ed.) *Virtual Interaction: Interaction in Virtual Inhabited 3D Worlds*, Springer, London, 2001, p.34

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

provides further elaboration of how this ‘extent’ might be conceptualised, positing that ‘interactivity exists on a continuum that could be characterized by three variables: frequency (how often you could interact), range (how many choices are available), and significance (how much the choices really affected matters)’<sup>50</sup>.

The communication theorist Sheizaf Rafaeli, concentrating on human interactivity as well as HCI, also emphasises the range and significance when he defines interactivity as ‘primarily an experience of causality and temporality: what is exchanged in the process depends on what has previously been exchanged’<sup>51</sup>.

Along similar lines, Marie Laure Ryan, a literary theorist working in the area of electronic textuality<sup>52</sup>, analyses interactivity from the point of view of interactive story structure and concludes that the main distinction to be made is that between ‘low’ and ‘high’ interactivity. She defines ‘low’ interactivity as leaving ‘no mark on the story’<sup>53</sup>, and ‘high’ as that which makes the participant the ‘co-author of the plot’<sup>54</sup>. For Ryan it is the level of the participant’s creative input that defines how interactive a narrative is. Not entirely unrelated to these considerations of signification and the level of participant input, but turning to a very different concern, that of form and structure, Lev Manovich, a new media theorist and artist, differentiates between ‘closed’ and ‘open’ interactivity. Whereas in ‘closed’ interactivity a participant plays an active role in ‘determining the order in which already generated elements are accessed’<sup>55</sup>, in ‘open’ interactivity ‘both the elements and the structure of the whole object are either modified or generated on the fly’<sup>56</sup> in response to the participant’s input.

If at first it may seem that Manovich’s ‘open’ interactivity might compare to Ryan’s ‘high’ interactivity, in other words, that an abundance of creative freedom may result in the participant’s increased creative input, Donald Norman’s differentiation between ‘shallow and narrow structures’ and ‘deep and wide structures’<sup>57</sup> may cast some doubt on this.

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<sup>50</sup> Laurel, B., *Computers As Theatre*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, USA, 1991, p.20

<sup>51</sup> Rafaeli, S., ‘Interactivity: From New Media to Communication’, *Sage Annual Review of Communication Research: Advancing Communication Science*, Vol.16, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, California, 1988, p.111

<sup>52</sup> A research field examining the nature of the literary text in the digital age

<sup>53</sup> Ryan, M-L., ‘Interactive Drama: Narrativity in a Highly Interactive Environment’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.43, Issue 3, John Hopkins University Press, USA, 1997, p.137

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Manovich, L., *The Language of New Media*, the MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000, p. 42

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.43

<sup>57</sup> Norman, D.A., *The Psychology of Everyday Things*, Basic Books, USA, 1988, p.119

In *The Psychology of Everyday Things* Norman, a cognitive scientist, defines ‘shallow and narrow structures’ as having a limited number of choices, each of which is simple. ‘There are few decisions to make after the single top-level choice.’<sup>58</sup> An example Norman provides is that of a dessert menu. Although there may be fifty different choices they all remain choices within the same category, that of desserts. In contrast, ‘deep and wide structures’ can be compared to a game of chess whereby every move has a number of possible counter-moves, each of which opens up a number of possible options in turn. Together they form a complex ‘decision tree’<sup>59</sup>. ‘Closed’ interactivity can thus have a shallow and narrow structure or a deep and wide one. A deep and wide structure offers a very large scope of possibilities while retaining a firm skeleton of consequentiality. As Martin Flintham, a researcher at the Mixed Reality Lab and a long term Blast Theory collaborator explains: ‘Openness of structure and content does not necessarily enhance the participant’s input or their sense of interactivity. On the contrary, too much freedom may result in the participant’s bewilderment and retreat into inactivity. Too tight a structure may do the same. It’s all about orchestration.’<sup>60</sup>

The important difference between non-interactive and interactive artistic practice is that whilst in the former the artist delivers the finished product, in the latter the artist *shapes the conditions* for the work of art or artistic event to arise. ‘The finished product’ does not mean the completed work of art in the sense of its reception and interpretation. Clearly, artworks are made to communicate and be communicated and achieve their full existence only when viewed or read. As Marcel Duchamp aptly points out: ‘The viewer completes the work of art’<sup>61</sup>. However, while the non-interactive work of art engages the viewer in the process of interpretation, the interactive work of art engages the viewer in the parallel processes of both interpretation and production. Because of the complex response it seeks to elicit, the employment of interactivity requires a careful and sometimes complex orchestration.

In the following pages I examine Blast Theory’s later interactive works in terms of *what* it is that these works seek to engage the viewer/participant in, and in terms of *how* this engagement unfolds in space and time.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.121

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.119

<sup>60</sup> Flintham, M., in interview with N. Lushetich, Nottingham, 18/6/2007

<sup>61</sup> Duchamp, M, quoted in Dickson, S., *Digital Performance*, the MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2007, p.559

## PART TWO

### Analyses

#### KIDNAP (1998)

*The major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism. And not only the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini but the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.*<sup>1</sup>

Michel Foucault

In May 1998 a trailer appeared in cinemas around England and Wales. The seductive footage of immense, Texas-like prairies was accompanied by an earnest voice: ‘Have you ever wanted to be on your own for a while? Ever wanted to let someone else take control? ..[...] ... In 1998 a unique event will take place. You will have a chance to be kidnapped! Pay a small registration fee and you are instantly added to the hit list. A lucky winner will be snatched in broad daylight. Held for a short period of time you will be released unharmed. This is not a game. This is not a joke. Call 0800 174336 for details’.<sup>2</sup>

More than a hundred men and women, aged 18 – 58, found this offer very appealing and registered as entrants in Blast Theory’s lottery. Each bought a chance to win the prime lottery prize of featuring as the main attraction in what was to turn out to be, in Gabriella Giannachi’s words, ‘at once a kidnap, a performance and a scientific experiment’<sup>3</sup>. The registration form required the participants to specify their attitude to kidnap by choosing between descriptions such as ‘This scares me but I’ve got to do it’ or ‘You’ll never catch me, I’m far too good for you’<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, M., ‘Preface to Anti-Oedipus’ in Faubion, J.D. (ed.) *Michel Foucault Power Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 3*, Penguin Books, London, 1994, p.108

<sup>2</sup> [www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work\\_kidnap.html](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_kidnap.html), site accessed 16/2/2007

<sup>3</sup> Giannachi, G., *The Politics of New Media Theatre: life*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2006, p.50

<sup>4</sup> [www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work\\_kidnap.html](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_kidnap.html), site accessed 16/2/2007

The optional part of the form required the participants to give a detailed description of their kidnap fantasy and, in a tone of Pythonesque parody of a society ruled by experience economy<sup>5</sup>, to modify their kidnap. Catering for all incomes, this part offered the aspiring kidnappees extra services, such as verbal abuse, at a small additional cost. For those willing to pay more, a story at bedtime, a massage and a hot bath were available. And, for the connoisseurs among experience-consumers, a pricey choice of kidnappee identity was on offer. One could be abducted as a ‘leftist revolutionary’ or a ‘son/daughter of a millionaire’<sup>6</sup>, or choose to cast the kidnapers in stereotype roles warranted by the choice of a uniform, such as ‘New York Cop’, ‘Nazi’ or ‘Clown’<sup>7</sup>.

A month later ten candidates were randomly selected and put under surveillance. Blast Theory did not notify the ‘finalists’ of their success and this meant that the promise of a chance to be put under surveillance still extended to all applicants. In other words, regardless of whether they made it to the ‘finals’ or not, all those who paid a ‘small registration fee’ in fact bought a ticket to an imaginary event, which was to take place in their own mind. This minimal conceptual bond<sup>8</sup> opened up the possibility for remote individual interaction with the project. An entrant/participant now had a legitimate reason to think she was being followed and photographed at any given time, and was ‘authorised’ to play out her fantasy of the event or, indeed, to engage the supposed ‘followers’ in interaction.

The two winners among ‘finalists’, Debra, 27, and Russell, 19, both chosen at random, were abducted on a prearranged date, in a pub and a car respectively. ‘Snatched in broad daylight’, they were blindfolded, put in a van and taken to a sparsely equipped safehouse constructed so to allow for constant monitoring by the kidnapers as well as by a psychologist who remained present throughout.

The live web broadcast allowed for remote viewing, and there was an online chat room where viewers could exchange impressions.

Unsurprisingly, most of the remote viewers related to the event as if it had been provided for their entertainment and kept asking things like ‘why don’t you make them do something to

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<sup>5</sup> A marketing strategy that seeks to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experiences. See Pine, B.J. and Gilmore, J.H., *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business is a Stage*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 1999

<sup>6</sup> [www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work\\_kidnap.html](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_kidnap.html), site accessed 16/2/2007

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> This is a reference to conceptual art where the work of art is often simply a set of instructions or associations given to the viewer / participant by the artist

each other?’<sup>9</sup>. This desire for a spectacle of subjugation, or at least a strategic cat-and-mouse game of domination and evasion, is at the heart of *Kidnap*’s inquiry into the politics of spectatorship in a mediatised society. The question is not only who has the power over whom but who has the power to broadcast the spectacle and what is the targeted effect. For example, during both conflicts in Iraq, footage of desperate, wailing and often understandably vengeful women whose children had been killed, was frequently aired. No such privacy-impinging footage was allowed of the Allied Forces losses. Instead, mothers of fallen soldiers were shown, if at all, several days after the event, to be devastated but nevertheless dignified. The targeted effect of such broadcasting was the reinforcement of the idea that the Allied side was ‘reasonable’ whereas the other was ‘savage and vengeful’. In *Kidnap* the live streaming showed only the victims. The kidnappers were seen only when they entered the safehouse in order to ‘administer’ food to the victims. They came across as reasonable, even gentle, people. The angle the footage offered the viewers clearly invited them to identify with the dominant position. When questions like ‘Why don’t you make him kiss her?’<sup>10</sup> were posted on the web site they were much less an expression of an interest in seeing that happen than to see how the disadvantaged party was going to react. In his memoirs entitled *Laterna Magica*, Ingmar Bergman describes the situation of two little boys who suddenly find themselves alone with a kitten, far from the gaze of adults. Without exchanging as much as a word or a glance the boys ‘agree’ to torture the kitten. The question Bergman poses is ‘where does this taciturn agreement to torture an animal in order to ‘see what happens’ come from?’<sup>11</sup> One can only speculate whether or not this is an evolutionary hang-up dating back to the predator-prey relationship where recognising and taking power equalled survival. However, what is clear is that torturing the kitten is a process of *knowing* power. In *Kidnap* the question raised in the viewing arrangement is: ‘Is ‘the screen’ in a mediatised society the convener of such taciturn agreement and a tool for knowing power?’

Not even the conceptual progenitors of *Kidnap* escaped the view-point-altering and indifference-engendering process mediated by ‘the screen’. Members of Blast Theory admit to watching their victims ‘as if they were a part of show’<sup>12</sup> in the kidnappers’ room, as

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<sup>9</sup> Adams, M., in interview with N. Lushetich, Brighton, 2/7/2007

<sup>10</sup> Adams, M., in interview with N. Lushetich, Brighton, 2/7/2007

<sup>11</sup> Bergman, I., *Laterna Magica*, Meandar, Zagreb, 1991, p.6, my translation

<sup>12</sup> Adams, M., in interview with N. Lushetich, Brighton, 2/7/2007

opposed to being ‘desperately worried about them if they did as much as cough while being physically close to them’<sup>13</sup>.

In *Entre nous: On thinking-of-the-other* Emmanuel Levinas suggests that our willingness to interact ethically with another is intrinsically linked to corporeality and constituted by our direct experience of ‘lived’ time and place in which the ‘concrete other is experienced through a face-to-face encounter’<sup>14</sup>. Ethical social intercourse cannot, according to Levinas, come from a set of received rules, but only from lived interactions with ‘concrete’ others. It would follow that the ‘concreteness’ of others acts as a constant reminder of our own ‘concreteness’, and that this approximation produces empathy. The screen, on the other hand, produces distancing. By juxtaposing ‘the screen as a mechanism of distancing’<sup>15</sup> to face-to-face interaction framed by the captor - victim relationship, Blast Theory initiate an investigation akin to Milgram’s famous obedience experiment.<sup>16</sup> While the remote viewers seem to be given ‘license’ to ‘demand entertainment’ their behaviour is in fact being observed as much as that of the kidnappees. It is only appropriate therefore that Kidnap should have the open form of a scientific experiment with no pre-constructed content.

In fact, only two features were predetermined: the duration of the victims’ captivity and the content the kidnappees had specifically requested on the registration form. As it happened, both Debra and Russell opted for a fairly ‘basic’ kidnap.

Their way of dealing with the 48-hour long position of disempowerment was very different, however. From the moment Debra’s blindfold was lifted and she spotted the camera, she started playing to it.

Compared to other documentary footage of her, her behaviour at the safehouse displays an aura of somewhat constructed femininity. Her strategy for dealing with the unavoidable self-consciousness imposed by 24-hour surveillance was to anchor her movements in a slower tempo and to resort to touch. She is often seen playing with her hair, arranging the bed, straightening her mini skirt or performing long and languid ablutions of her exposed legs. In

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Levinas, E., *Entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-other*, trans. M. B. Smith and B. Harshav, Athlone press, London, 1997, p.7-11

<sup>15</sup> Robins, K., quoted in Clarke, R., ‘Reigning Territorial plains – Blast Theory’s ‘Desert Rain’’, *Performance Research On Maps and Mapping* Volume 6, No.2, Summer 2001, p.47

<sup>16</sup> In 1961 Stanley Milgram set up an experiment at Yale University to test how much pain an ordinary person would inflict on another person simply because they were told to do so by an authority figure, a scientist. The participants in the experiment were told that electricity had a positive effect on human memory and asked to administer electric shocks to ‘patients’ in order to help determine the right amount needed for any particular form of memory loss. The ‘patients’ were actors feigning pain and what the experiment was trying to determine was the level of the participants’ blind obedience to authority



her interactions with her captors, such as when she is being fed, or given a drink through a straw through a hole in the wall, or wakened up in the middle of the night to watch balaclava-clad members of Blast Theory perform a sinister ‘Tarantino-like’<sup>17</sup> dance, Debra remains quiet, demure and vulnerable. Whilst it would be too much to say that she is playing a role, she has definitely ‘taken a line’. In *Interaction Ritual* Erwin Goffman defines the concept of a ‘line’ as ‘a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which [a participant in a social encounter] expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself’<sup>18</sup>. Debra’s ‘line’ is concomitant with what in Foucault’s usage is ‘normative behaviour’<sup>19</sup>, a behaviour which presupposes the gaze of authority and readily displays the ‘norm’ so as to counteract correction. While it is consistent with the authoritarian gaze, Debra’s ‘line’ is also consistent with the common preconceptions about victims of kidnappings generated by the media and Hollywood films. As Ju Row-Far points out ‘all our ideas of kidnappings are glamorous’.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the media status of a kidnapped person combines the aura of victim, martyr and hero. While apparently an object to be ransomed for a large sum of money or sacrificed to an ideal higher than human life, the kidnapped person is being put through a real ordeal. This fascination with ‘realness’ as exemplified by programmes such as Big Brother<sup>21</sup> is according to Nicolas Bourriaud, and in reference to Debord, the last stage of the society of the spectacle whereby ‘we are all summoned to turn into *extras* of the spectacle’<sup>22</sup>, (original emphasis). Bourriaud asserts that ‘After the consumer society, we can see the dawning of the society of extras where the individual develops as a part-time stand-in for freedom.’ In shaping the conditions for a public experiment in power relations, *Kidnap* also offers a trenchant comment on a society where ‘being put through a real ordeal’ has become a commodity.

Unlike Debra, who pursues a consistent ‘line’ of cooperative patience while paying just that little bit more choreographic attention to the arrangement of her feet, or sketching a fleeting pin up position, Russell makes an attempt to play a role. This is largely due to his very

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<sup>17</sup> [www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work\\_kidnap.html](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_kidnap.html)

<sup>18</sup> Goffman, E., *Interaction Ritual*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1967, p.5

<sup>19</sup> In ‘Truth and Juridical Forms’ Foucault defines normative behaviour as a product of ‘disciplinary society’ consisting of ‘supervision, control, correction’ carried out in all social institutions such as schools, hospitals and prisons. See Faubion, J.D. (ed.), *Michel Foucault Power Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 3*, Penguin Books, London, 1994, p.58 – 71

<sup>20</sup> Row-Far, J. in Kidnap documentation video, Blast Theory, 1998

<sup>21</sup> Blast Theory ironically refer to *Kidnap* as a ‘precursor to Big Brother’, Adams, M., in interview with N. Lushetich, Brighton, 2/7/2007

<sup>22</sup> Bourriaud, N., *Esthétique relationnelle*, Les presses du réel, Paris, 2001, p.117, my translation

<sup>23</sup> Bourriaud, N., *Esthétique relationnelle*, Les presses du réel, Paris, 2001, p.117, my translation

personal reasons for entering the lottery as well as the circumstances in which he was abducted. Russell, aged 19, entered the lottery seeking to prove his worth to the world and eager to gain media exposure. However, after the initial consent to being kidnapped, Russell gets ‘cold feet’ and goes into hiding. The kidnapping crew wait for half a day in front of his home and finally find him hiding in a car. Russell is thus kidnapped ‘with his consent’ but very much ‘against his will’<sup>24</sup>. Because of this initial ‘loss of face’ which, in Goffman’s parlance, is a ‘shameful’ loss of ‘the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the ‘line’ others assume he has taken during a particular contact’<sup>25</sup> (such as that of previous negotiations) he tries to re-appropriate ‘face’ by attempting to construct a high status role. His efforts oscillate between a cool and contemptuous ‘dude’ and a cocky rebel who jeers into the camera by way of challenging his captors. These efforts to regain status are undermined by Russell’s constant and severe digestive problems.

He has to be escorted to the toilet frequently and is further disempowered by his captors’ witnessing his disordered bodily functions. As could be expected, the more humiliated Russell feels, the more effort he makes to recuperate the role of the ‘dude’. But the moment the balaclava-clad members of Blast Theory barge in, in the middle of the night, and wake their victims up to watch them dance to Martha Reeves’ *Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide* (as initially requested by Russell on the registration form) he is seen to be seriously perturbed. This is, at the same time, the moment when, unexpectedly, the power pendulum swings to his side as we notice that the members of Blast Theory, faced with his very real confusion and what looks like pain, grow self-conscious in their execution of what was intended to be amusing and comical. During the press conference with which *Kidnap* culminates, Russell remains aloof and contemptuous, whereas Debra, in an interview with the psychologist, describes her experience as very contradictory, at the same time make-believe and real. She asserts that although ‘she never feared for her safety’<sup>26</sup> she felt ‘very nervous every time they [members of Blast Theory] came in’<sup>27</sup>. Equally, while finding ‘nothing that happened jarring in any way’<sup>28</sup> she found the experience utterly puzzling.

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<sup>24</sup> A phrase Debra uses to describe the experience in *Kidnap* documentation video, Blast Theory, 1998

<sup>25</sup> Goffman, E., *Interaction Ritual*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, 1967, p.6

<sup>26</sup> *Kidnap* documentation video, Blast Theory, 1998

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

A constructed ‘situation’, *Kidnap*, is an arena of common enquiry where a maze of spectatorial relationships is created. The relationships between the remote viewers and the kidnappees, between the kidnappers and the kidnappees, between the wider public (who followed the project through the media) and the kidnappees, between the journalists at the press conference and the kidnappers and kidnappees, are all used as a magnifying glass to focus on the question – what power relationships are produced in these *sites* and how?

Because the project does not offer a surveyable, condensed view of power relations, as do films such as Losey’s *The Servant*<sup>29</sup> or Cavani’s *The Night Porter*<sup>30</sup> but instead deploys a set of relational strategies, from the minimal conceptual bond offered to all lottery entrants to the captor-victim bond offered to the winners, *Kidnap* functions as an experiment and a matrix. It is a step further from Augusto Boal’s ‘forum theatre’, where spect-acting is practiced as a way of fostering critical thinking. Instead of asking spectators to come to the stage (as in Boal’s ‘forum theatre’) in *Kidnap*, Blast Theory ask them to come and inhabit a ‘situation’ carved out of life. The interactivity employed in *Kidnap* is entirely open (Manovich) – the challenge to overthrow the proposed structure at any given time is in fact a part of the contract the two finalists signed prior to being kidnapped. According to the contract Blast Theory are legally obliged to pay £500 to any kidnappee who manages to escape.

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<sup>29</sup> The 1963 Joseph Losey film about power relationships between a spoilt socialite and his manservant, based on Harold Pinter’s play

<sup>30</sup> The 1974 Liliana Cavani film about a sado-masochistic relationship between a Nazi officer and a teenage girl spanning over a period of fifteen years

## DESERT RAIN (2000)

*Once all disappears into the virtual we will be faced with the apocalypse of the virtual – a hegemony much more dangerous in the long term than the real apocalypse.*<sup>1</sup>

Jean Baudrillard

Acclaimed by the press of its time as ‘possibly the most technologically ambitious installation ever made’<sup>2</sup> and realised in collaboration with the Mixed Reality Lab (MRL), *Desert Rain* is a performative-ludological hybrid, at once an installation, a film set, a computer game and a performance. Its pioneering exploration of the boundaries of the real and the virtual and, more specifically, of ‘representations of reality in the context of war’<sup>3</sup> is conceptually rooted in Jean Baudrillard’s *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Here Baudrillard argues that after the ‘hot war’ implying the violence of conflict, the ‘cold war’ referring to the ‘coldness of terror’, the Gulf War is an attempt to ‘defrost the cold war’<sup>4</sup>: that it is a pure simulacrum<sup>5</sup>, a conquest by spectacle, nothing but a ‘show off of technological superiority’<sup>6</sup> with predictable results, whereby ‘It would have been interesting to see an Iraqi with a chance to win. It would have been interesting to see an American with a chance to lose’<sup>7</sup>. Although the Bush administration was after a quick victory at minimal cost, the extent to which weapons of mass destruction were used by soldiers who had often only been simulator-trained, raised a lot of questions. A case in point is USS Vincennes, a US guided missile cruiser, equipped with AEGIS, the most sophisticated weapons control system to date, which shot down an Iranian Airbus on July the 3<sup>rd</sup> 1988, killing all its 290 passengers. This was caused by the fact that the crew ignored the ‘indicators that cast doubt onto the AEGIS interpretation of events’<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, J., *La guerre du Golfe n’s pas eu lieu*, Editions Galilée, Paris, 1991, p.14, my translation

<sup>2</sup> Churcher, N., Blast masters, *Design Week*, 29 may 2003

<sup>3</sup> [www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work\\_desertrain.html](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_desertrain.html), site accessed 16/2/2007

<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard, J., *La guerre du Golfe n’s pas eu lieu*, Editions Galilée, Paris, 1991, p.9, my translation

<sup>5</sup> For Baudrillard the simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth, it is the truth which conceals that there is none. It is the last of the successive phases of the image: 1. The image is the reflection of a basic reality; 2. It masks and perverts a basic reality; 3. It masks the absence of a basic reality; 4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. See Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. M. Poster, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988

<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, J., *La guerre du Golfe n’s pas eu lieu*, Editions Galilée, Paris, 1991, p.72, my translation

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.63

<sup>8</sup> [http://en.wikepeida.org/wiki/Iran\\_Air\\_Flight\\_655](http://en.wikepeida.org/wiki/Iran_Air_Flight_655), site accessed 16/2/2007

Motivated by this incident, Blast Theory's investigation in *Desert Rain* focuses on the 'fragility and interconnectedness of the physical and the virtual, the fictional and the factual'<sup>9</sup> and in particular, 'the role of the mass media in distorting our appraisal of the world beyond our own personal experience'<sup>10</sup>.

Upon entering the installation six players/participants are led to into a small antechamber where they hand over their coats, bags and other possessions in return for black hooded jackets. Each is also given a magnetic swipe card with a pixilated picture of a person. These persons are 'targets' and the players' 'mission' is to find their targets within twenty minutes. The word 'mission' (particularly stressed in the briefing) resonates as much with the competitive drive usually solicited by computer games as with the current parlance of international politics. The professions most often associated with the word 'mission' in the media are those of the soldier or the peace worker. Although the participants are supplied with no further clarification of the nature of their 'mission', this scope of roles is implicitly available for appropriation. However, the fact that all 'targets' are Caucasian, just like the vast majority of participants spurs on further confusion: are the 'targets' meant to be captured or retrieved?

Another point stressed emphatically in the briefing is that the players have to 'leave the world together'<sup>11</sup> after they have completed their 'missions', which implies a degree of cooperation. The next space the participants are taken and zipped into are individual canvas cubicles facing a screen of water spray onto which a virtual world is projected. The players navigate their way through this virtual world, consisting of a desert terrain, tunnels and bunkers, by stepping onto footpads which act as joysticks and move the participants' avatars<sup>12</sup> left, right, forward and backwards. The participants are also equipped with headsets and microphones and can talk to other players but cannot see them. Amid the overpowering cinematics of the virtual world - fast tracking shots of computer-simulated maps full of abrupt cuts in point of view, cacophonies of sounds and animated graphics of numbers and navigational signifiers, only the 'targets' have a human shape. For the rest, the computer-simulated cartographic

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<sup>9</sup> Clarke, R., 'Reigning Territorial plains – Blast Theory's 'Desert Rain'', *Performance Research On Maps and Mapping* Volume 6, No.2, Summer 2001, p.44

<sup>10</sup> [www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work\\_desertrain.html](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_desertrain.html), site accessed 16/2/2007

<sup>11</sup> A reference to the virtual world, *Desert Rain* documentation dvd, Blast Theory, 2000

<sup>12</sup> An avatar is an internet user's representation of him/herself, either in the form of a three-dimensional model used in computer games or in the form of a two-dimensional icon used in internet forums. The word comes from the Sanskrit word *avatara* meaning 'incarnation'

representation of the Gulf War terrain is human-less, the participants themselves also being represented by numbers and names only.

In 'Reigning Territorial Plains: Blast Theory's Desert Rain', Rachel Clarke points to the history of cartography as an imperialist project, and refers to Anne McClintock's theory of map-making as 'a technology for possession' since 'the map both preceded and legitimized the conquest of territory'<sup>13</sup>. Logically, however, apart from depicting the territory as surveyable and therefore controllable, military simulations have remained faithful to the cartographic tradition of unnaturalistic design in the age of 3D animation when even the dinosaurs can be made to look realistic<sup>14</sup> in order to minimise any similarity with reality. It is a strategy for defamiliarising and dehumanising the enemy and their concrete living conditions. This, as well as an explicit strategy of disorienting players, is built into the spatial coordinates of *Desert Rain*. While zipped up in their separate cubicles and bombarded by the interplay of immersive visuals the participants are made to lose all sense of distinction between actual physical presence of shapes and objects, and their projections. This disorientation culminates in the appearance of a live performer who suddenly penetrates the rain screen onto which the virtual world is projected and enters the physical world to give the players another magnetic card, thus implying that there is also a world beyond or behind the virtual world.

Throughout the twenty minutes granted to find their 'target', the players can be seen by the members of Blast Theory who are on the other side of the rain curtain, in the control room. 'While some play as a team, others take their mission very seriously and play to win'<sup>15</sup> observes Adams. A Guardian journalist defines her experience as recreating 'some of the fear and disorientation that those on the ground during the Gulf war must have felt. Anxiety makes you start behaving in ways you would never have predicted. When, with time fast running out, I accidentally locate the exit, I head for it, ignoring the others' cries for help.'<sup>16</sup>

Upon the successful completion of their 'mission' the players leave the virtual world 'in an act of ritual purification by walking through the water screen'<sup>17</sup>. This marks the passage to the

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<sup>13</sup> McClintock, A., quoted in Clarke, R., 'Reigning Territorial plains – Blast Theory's 'Desert Rain'', *Performance Research On Maps and Mapping* Volume 6, No.2, Summer 2001, p.45

<sup>14</sup> Such as in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*

<sup>15</sup> Adams, M., in interview with N. Lushetich, Brighton, 2/7/2007

<sup>16</sup> Gardner, L., Blood on the sand, *The Guardian*, 18 May 2000

<sup>17</sup> Giannachi, G., *The Politics of New Media Theatre: life*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2006, p.54

next space, a corridor blocked by a large pile of sand, on the other side of which is a space resembling a hotel room. The swiping of the new magnetic card triggers video footage of each of the participants' 'targets', a journalist, two soldiers, a UN peace worker, an actor, and a tourist, all videoed in the same hotel room where the participants are now standing. In contrast to the cacophonous mayhem of the previous part, the testimonies of these real people are presented in a calm, documentary tone allowing the participants to both take in what is being said and to become aware of what has just transpired. This communal watching also compels the players who had left others behind in the virtual world to spend the following fifteen minutes in the company of the people they had 'betrayed'. Watching the testimonies of these very real people, all of whom are British, further prompts the participants to reappraise their relationship to the 'target' during the 'mission' and pose questions such as 'Was I in fact meant to try and save my target instead of capturing it? Why are there no Iraqis or Americans here? What is implied by all these people being British?' One of the implications of this semantic one-sidedness lies in its relation to Virilio's concept of dromology.<sup>18</sup> Dromology, the science (or logic) of speed is according to Virilio, created by 'Western technological evolution'<sup>19</sup> that has led to the state of there being 'no strategy, only dromology'<sup>20</sup>.

This 'evolution' allows for the power of speed to take over the very essence of the thing whose property it is, so that 'Everything suddenly happens as if each protagonist's own arsenal became his (internal) enemy'<sup>21</sup>. An incident like USS Vincennes' could have happened in any military mission and could have blown away any civilian airplane, including those of the country for whose military benefit the 'mission' was being undertaken.

In 'Reigning Territorial Plains', Clarke draws attention to 'the muddled distinction between the soldier – the implementer of the violent action, and the spectator – the viewer of violent action'<sup>23</sup>. With regard to her personal experience she adds: 'I am caught between the pleasure of control and mobile activity and any moral implication of my activities, the latter sensibility having been flattened by the abstract simulated space that lies before me.'<sup>24</sup> For Clarke, the participant presence in Desert Rain 'fluctuates between the soldier, the traveling nomad and

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<sup>18</sup> Virilio, P., *Speed and Politics An Essay on Dromology*, trans. M. Polozzotti, Semiotext(e), New York, 1986, p.46

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.140

<sup>23</sup> Clarke, R., 'Reigning Territorial plains – Blast Theory's 'Desert Rain'', *Performance Research On Maps and Mapping* Volume 6, No.2, Summer 2001, p.47

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the dandy *flâneur*.<sup>25</sup> These roles or attitudes are derived, in the case of the soldier, from the most common interpretation of the words ‘mission’ and ‘target’ the participant is likely to make. The nomad role comes from Clarke’s contrived approximation between the fact the participant navigates a flat surface through a flat board and Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the nomad as related to flat space and reterritorialisation.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the role of the *flâneur* is derived from Anne Friedberg’s reinterpretation of Walter Benjamin’s definition of the *flâneur* as a ‘mobile consumer of spectacles in the metropolitan crowds of Paris’<sup>27</sup>. Friedberg applies the term to the televisual and internet spectating practices.

She accentuates the mobility of the eye as opposed to the immobility of the body, and contributes a ‘virtual mobile gaze’ to the contemporary *flâneur* who while remaining physically immobile, moves by means of the ‘virtual mobile gaze’<sup>28</sup>. Whilst Benjamin’s *flâneur* goes physically into the world to enjoy spectacular delights, Friedman’s *flâneur* navigates the ‘virtual mobile gaze’ while remaining immobile. Clarke uses the word in this latter sense.

I would argue against Clarke’s fluctuating tripartite role division. The point from which the participants depart in *Desert Rain* is certainly that of *flâneur*-ism, as the motivation for attending an artistic / ludological event is usually that of seeking entertainment or inspiration in one’s leisure time. After the initial titillation of the senses induced by the physical and mental disorientation however, there comes a point when some participants feel genuinely confused and worried. A participant in *Desert Rain* in Rotterdam reports: ‘After about ten minutes I started feeling unstable on my feet. I just wanted to leave. I was totally overwhelmed by the chaos of the event. And yet I didn’t want to be the only one to drop out, so I stayed’.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.48

<sup>26</sup> Here Clarke argues that the participants’ navigation of a flat surface through a flat board (the footpad acting as a joystick) can be linked to Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualisation of flat space as a significant *differend* from the sedentary territorial space established by the state apparatus. She asserts that by ‘negotiating undefined space in a constant state of flux’ the participant performs the process of ‘deterritorialisation’ as well as ‘reterritorialisation’. (In Deleuze and Guattari’s parlance, capitalism as a schizophrenic system subverts or deterritorialises all social arrangements such as the church or the family. However, it also reterritorialises new social groupings since it cannot function without them. It creates both a permanent erosion and recomposition of social structures. See Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F., *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum, London, 2002) Personally, I find the navigation of a flat surface through a flat board too meager an example of Deleuze and Guattari’s complex ideas of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, W. quoted in Clarke, R., ‘Reigning Territorial plains – Blast Theory’s ‘Desert Rain’’, *Performance Research On Maps and Mapping* Volume 6, No.2, Summer 2001, p.49

<sup>28</sup> Friedberg, A. quoted in Clarke, R., ‘Reigning Territorial plains – Blast Theory’s ‘Desert Rain’’, *Performance Research On Maps and Mapping* Volume 6, No.2, Summer 2001, p.49

<sup>29</sup> E. Buitinga, a participant in *Desert Rain* in Rotterdam in interview with N. Lusehtich, 30/6/2007



Whilst subjective impressions vary, the orchestration of experience in *Desert Rain* is aimed precisely at destabilising the *flâneur* in the participant. The presentation of the Gulf War in the media was highly spectacularised and did not differ much from Hollywood films. In order to draw the participant's attention to this uncanny spectacularity (in which there were very real losses of human lives) the authors of *Desert Rain* place the participant in a position of gradually losing the grip on the hierarchy of the situation. In terms of power relations both the *flâneur* and the soldier are high status positions characterized in the first place by confidence. The steady augmentation of physical and mental disorientation effects the erosion of this confidence and thus the role initially assigned to (or taken on by) the participant.

The range of interactivity employed in *Desert Rain*, although very minimal, is so strategically placed and carefully orchestrated as to produce a complex interpretative structure. The participants' interactions in the first part are of two kinds: navigational – with the computer interface providing the basic choice of left /right, forward/backward navigation through the virtual world - and communicational – with other participants via the headsets. However, because of the time pressure stipulated by the 'mission', communication remains almost as basic as navigation, mostly concentrating on guiding other participants to their 'targets'. In keeping with the concept of dromology the participants are compelled to act first and think later. It is on account of this delayed process, which gives scope for the mental retracing of steps and wondering whether things would have turned out differently had the participants acted differently, that the range of interactivity (Laurel) appears to be much larger than it actually is. When retraced in terms of past conditionals, 'what would have happened had I..' the essentially shallow and narrow structure (Norman) of left, right, backwards, forwards seems to have a 'decision tree' (Norman).

Like the Guardian journalist, an anxiety-ridden participant in *Desert Rain* in London <sup>30</sup> had left all his co-players behind in the virtual world and 'escaped' on his own. When a couple of days later, he found a small plastic box full of sand in the pocket of the jacket he had swapped for a hooded jacket in *Desert Rain*, he thought the little memento had been put there to remind him of his cowardice. The words on the box read: '*Estimated at 100,000 grains.*' Below this there was a quote from New York Times on March the 23<sup>rd</sup> 1991: '*It's really not the number I am terribly interested in.*' General Colin Powell. This was a reference to the estimated number of Iraqi casualties. Although the little boxes were put in all

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<sup>30</sup> D. Rovai in interview with N. Lushetich, 19/6/2007

participants' pockets, the participants interpreted them differently depending on when they found them and whether or not they associated them with their personal actions. The strategic placement of stimuli in *Desert Rain* thus enhanced the perceived range and effect of interactivity (Laurel), by allowing for a time-released effect that retroactively projected a possible deep and wide structure (Norman) on the piece.

## CAN YOU SEE ME NOW? (2001)

*As essential as water or the air we breathe, streets are the corridors of the soul and the dark trajectories of memory.*<sup>1</sup>

Paul Virilio

In contrast to *Desert Rain*'s angle of inquiry which seeks to unmask the ways in which 'the virtual impacts the real'<sup>2</sup> in the realm of politics, warmongering and, ultimately, human lives, *Can You See Me Now?* is a playful exploration of the notions of 'space' as established by the interplay of presence and absence. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau points out that: 'Space is a practiced place....[T]he street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is a space by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e. a place constituted by a system of signs'<sup>3</sup>. De Certeau goes on to define walking as an action 'lacking a place'<sup>4</sup> and suggests that it is by means of this action that those who traverse the city move their thoughts, emotions, impressions, and projections through the city streets, thus writing its 'urban text'. 'Space' is, for de Certeau, a collaboratively created semantic dimension of place.

*CYSMN?* is a mobile mixed reality<sup>5</sup> chase game, realised in collaboration with MRL, in which up to twenty online players are chased by five runners - professional performers - who are running through the actual city streets. Playing from anywhere in the world, the online players, are chased by the runners through a virtual model of the city containing not only existing buildings but also those currently under construction or even buildings still in the phase of planning: situated somewhere between the present and the future.

The players have a bird's eye view and can zoom into closer map views. However, the dynamics of the city – the movement of its population and traffic, are absent from the model. In this sense the city carries some of the ghostly emptiness of a city that has been evacuated (usually for some life-threatening reason) or the newness and unfamiliarity of a city not yet

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<sup>1</sup> Virilio, P., *City of Panic*, trans. J. Rose Berg, Oxford, 2005, p.11

<sup>2</sup> Giannachi, G., *Virtual Theatres*, Routledge, London, 2004, p.122

<sup>3</sup> Certeau, M., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p.97

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.103

<sup>5</sup> Being at a site physically while simultaneously viewing a simulated historical reconstruction of the same site via a computing device is an example 'mixed' or 'augmented' reality

populated. The players move through the virtual city by navigating their avatars. The runners in the actual city streets are equipped with handheld computers that enable them to see the positions of online players and receive text messages, Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers which track their positions in the city and transmit them online, and walkie-talkies which enable them to talk to each other. The walkie-talkie communication is streamed to the online players who can thus eavesdrop on the real and 'staged' dialogues of the runners. The live streaming also relays the soundscape of the city – the traffic and the sirens as well as the weather conditions – the wind, the rain and the texture of the terrain the runner may be struggling with, such as gravel or mud. In order to deliberately confuse the online players, the runners exchange rehearsed or improvised dialogues based on descriptions of false whereabouts, or, engage passers-by in conversations that can provide false clues as to what is going on. They also use tactics such as hiding in places where their GPS receivers have no reception in order to appear invisible on the city model. *CYSMN?* is orchestrated in such a way as to allow for context ambiguity, defined by William Gaver as a 'mingling of discourses which disrupts easy interpretation'<sup>6</sup>. However, one of the main goals of the game, in the words of Steve Benford is to 'encourage online players to experience the city through another person, tuning into their audio descriptions of the actual city streets...[...] hearing when they are tired and out of breath and finally, realizing that their online actions are having a remote physical effect.'<sup>7</sup>

A player from Seattle reports: 'I had a definite heart stopping moment when my concerns suddenly switched from desperately trying to escape, to desperately hoping that the runner chasing me had not been run over by a reversing truck (that's what it sounded like had happened).' <sup>8</sup>

Another important aesthetic layer of the game is that when the online players register to play, they are asked to enter the name of a person they haven't seen for a while but still think of. Most people enter names of long lost friends, unrequited teenage loves, family members who have passed on, or ex-partners. When they are caught, the runners shout out both the name of the player and the name of the person whose name they entered. While some players run with the person from their past from the very start, others get so engrossed in the game as to forget all about them. A player from Dublin reports: 'The first time I played, I entered the name of

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<sup>6</sup> Gaver, W.W. et al. *Ambiguity as a Resource for Design*, [www.rca.ac.uk](http://www.rca.ac.uk), site accessed 18/5/2007

<sup>7</sup> Benford, S. et al, *Provoking Reflection Through Artistic Games*, [www.mrl.nott.ac.uk](http://www.mrl.nott.ac.uk), site accessed 16/5/2007

<sup>8</sup> [www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work\\_cysmn.html](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_cysmn.html), site accessed 17/2/2007

my last partner. ...[.] When I was caught, I heard my own name read out – which was fun to hear, but this was then followed by my last partner’s name. I was suddenly filled with emotion and confusion. Was she playing the game as well, did she know I was there, would I try to say hello. The absence of this person from my life was suddenly converted into a palpable presence through the dynamic physical and mental responses of my body to the emotions which came from hearing her name.’<sup>9</sup>

Like the runners, whose live-streamed voices testify to their presence while at the same time underlining their absence, the ‘virtual’ companions’ presence is framed by their absence. My use of the word ‘virtual’ in this context is borrowed from Charles S. Peirce, who distinguished between actuality – the specificity of lived experience; habituality – the tendency of contextualised specificity to influence the subject’s perception of specificity; and virtuality – the subject’s ability to engage in a non-specific contemplation of an object. In this sense ‘a virtual X is something which has the efficiency (virtus) of an X.’<sup>10</sup> One of the examples of virtuality given by Peirce is reason, another is instinct: ‘The instincts connected with the need of nutrition have furnished all animals with some virtual knowledge of space and force, and made them applied physicists. The instincts connected with sexual reproduction have furnished all animals at all like ourselves with some virtual comprehension of the minds of other animals of their kind, so that they are applied psychists.’<sup>11</sup> Virtuality is, according to Peirce, a capacity to act as if the actual experience had occurred, without the experience having occurred.

Although there is certainly a lot more to be said about the relationship between the actual and the virtual, let us for the purposes of this analysis say that the virtual companion with whom the players enter *CYSMN?* is the mental image which has the ‘efficiency’ of an existing person, in other words, it conjures up the memory of her.

Whether the players ‘run with’ their named person throughout the game or not, the moment they are caught and hear the name of their ‘virtual’ companion uttered next to their own name, lends the person a strange materiality. Much like a voice message left on the answering

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<sup>9</sup> Russell, I., in ‘The politics of presence in an intervention into ‘Can You See Me Now?, [www.iarchitectures.com/cysmn.html](http://www.iarchitectures.com/cysmn.html), site accessed 13/6/2007

<sup>10</sup> Peirce, C.S., *Collected Papers*, Vols.5 and 6, Pragmatism and Pragmaticism and Scientific Metaphysics, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960, Vol.6, p.261

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol.5, p.408

machine by person who has left, for a determinate or indeterminate period of time, or has even passed away, the presence of ‘material signifiers’ amplifies the absence of the person.

The concept which embodies this ambivalence par excellence, is the Portugese *saudade*. Defined by the *European Dictionary of Philosophies* as a ‘structurally ambiguous sentiment which dwells at the junction of two emotions produced by absence: a happy memory of things past and a painful desire to see them come to pass again, *saudade* is not only restricted to past events’.<sup>12</sup> Upon seeing a beautiful place, for example, one is as ravished by its beauty as one is pained by the prospect of having to leave. In this sense, *saudade* is a being’s relationship to its finitude where presence always reverberates with absence, it is a ‘corporeal ecstasy’.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to *saudade*, in the era of information technology, virtuality, defined by Katherine Hayles as the ‘cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns’<sup>14</sup>, doesn’t operate on the basis of the presence/absence dialectic, but that of pattern/randomness. Information, which has no materiality or dimension is a pattern, not a presence. Information theorists distinguish between message and signal and assert that what is sent is a signal and never a message. In order to ‘appear materially’ a message needs to be encoded in a signal for transmission through a medium such as letters and words printed in a book.

Hayles compares humans to books in so far as they both have a resistant materiality which has enabled the durable inscription of books and the durable inscription of experiences on human beings. She concludes that ‘[t]he contemporary pressure toward dematerialization, understood as an epistemic shift towards pattern/randomness and away from presence / absence, affects human bodies and textual bodies on two levels at once, as a change in the body ( the material substrate) and as a change in the message (the codes of representation)’.<sup>15</sup>

*Can You See Me Now?* is a complex investigation into the nature of this shift. How can we not only conceptualise, but also understand these differences emotionally? On the one hand the game creates a visceral connection between a runner on the streets of an existing city and

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<sup>12</sup> Cassin, B., (ed.) *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*, Seuil Le Robert, Paris, 2006, p.1115, my translation

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Hayles, N.K., *How We Became Posthuman Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, p.13

<sup>15</sup> Hayles, N.K., *How We Became Posthuman Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, p.28

a player who could be hundreds of miles away, by means of an avatar. On the other, it creates a connection between the player's 'virtual' (Peirce) companion's absence and her sudden presence when she is summoned up by her name in a city that could be a hundred miles away from where she is, or ever has been. Furthermore, a 'space' is created on the virtual model of the city by the players' 'practice' of running and this stands in umbilical connection to the 'space' created by the runners' 'practice' on the actual streets.

Clearly the deployment of interactivity in *CYSMN?* requires extensive orchestration. Not only is pre-programmed content combined with content generated on the fly from the outset (the runners' improvisations with passers-by) but the very structure of the game remains open to change, due to its fast-moving presence in multiple locations in the city. In 'Coping With Uncertainty in a Location-Based Game' Steve Benford et al examine the possible ramifications of uncertainty caused by the sporadic inability of the GPS to report the location, failures in networking or delays in relaying messages. For example, 'GPS inaccuracy' (caused by variable connectivity or networking failure) 'could cause players to appear in impossible places (inside virtual buildings), could result in noticeable unfeasible movements (sudden jumps) or, could even result in false sightings, where a runner would suddenly jump close to a player,

see them and then jump away again.'<sup>16</sup> While pointing to the obvious strategies, such as reducing or hiding uncertainty, the authors also stress the semantic advantage of exploiting it. The direct weaving of uncertainty into game-play, for example by 'requiring participants to actively seek out regions of good connectivity and GPS in order to gain visibility or acquire 'energy''<sup>17</sup>, adds an extra semantic layer to the conceptualisation of presence and absence. Can an avatar, just like a human being, be physically present but invisible to others because of its absence of mind (energy)? In its mutual interdependence of content and structure *CYSMN?* is an example of the ebb and flow of open and closed interactivity. (Manovich)

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<sup>16</sup> Benford, S. et al, Coping With Uncertainty in a Location-Based Game, [www.mrl.nott.ac.uk](http://www.mrl.nott.ac.uk), site accessed 21/5/2007

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.





## UNCLE ROY ALL AROUND YOU (2003)

*If there are radical transformations in the structures of information flow, what will be the nature of the 'social glue' that holds societies together in the future?*<sup>1</sup>

Steve Woolgar

'I'm standing in a red phone booth on the lower half of Regents Street, London. Outside, a drunk-looking man in a tweed suit looks desperate to make a phone call, whilst I'm standing here, holding a PDA<sup>2</sup>, waiting for the phone to ring. After what seems like an age, the call comes, and a man's voice tells me that I have to trust him, and that he has something he has to ask me to do for him. After he finishes the call, I've got to head north, take the first left turn, and get into the white limousine that's parked by the side of the road. I wait in the limousine for about five minutes, then a man in a brown suit gets in and sits next to me. Without saying a word, the limousine drives off, and the man starts asking me questions, looking straight ahead all the time. Have I ever had to trust a stranger? Would I be able to help someone I've never met if they were in need? Could I be at the end of the phone whenever they needed to call me? Could I commit to that for a year?'<sup>3</sup>

Propelling the participants to do some very fast soul searching, these questions, posed by none other than the mysterious and elusive Uncle Roy in *Uncle Roy All Round You (UR)*, reveal some of the central areas of concern of this 'experience that mixes pre-programmed game-play with live performance'<sup>4</sup>.

Realised in collaboration with

MRL, *UR* ventures into the city where the ephemeral architecture of fleeting relationships acts as both the set and the dramaturgical platform for exploring the very basic ingredients of the 'social glue' – trust.

As an attitude of mind that enables us to interact with others without fear, trust has been both greatly enhanced and greatly undermined with the advent of new technologies. For example, while ubiquitous surveillance technology enhances a sense of general security by

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<sup>1</sup> Woolgar, S. in Woolgar, S. (ed.), *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p.2

<sup>2</sup> Personal digital assistant, handheld computer

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous participant in *Uncle Roy All Around You*, ICA, London, May 2003, [www.test.org.uk/archives/000612.html](http://www.test.org.uk/archives/000612.html) site accessed 17/6/2007

<sup>4</sup> Benford, S. et al, *Implicating the City in a Location-Based Performance*, [www.mrl.nott.ac.uk](http://www.mrl.nott.ac.uk), site accessed 20/6/2007

documenting potentially dangerous activities, it also represents a very aggressive intrusion into private lives. Likewise, while the growing openness of virtual networks promotes communication and warrants greater social integration for those who may be suffering from exclusion, for example, it also warrants uncontrollable quantities of potentially harmful content which spreads instantly and worldwide.

Engaging up to thirty online and street players, *UR* is orchestrated by a team of behind-the-scenes coordinators as well as live actors who ‘provoke experiences as much as entertain’<sup>5</sup>. As in *CYSMN?*, online players can access the virtual model of the city globally. The street players are required to turn in all their possessions (wallet, mobile phone, loose change...) in exchange for a handheld computer with a zoomable map of the gaming area. Unlike in *CYSMN?*, however, the relationship between the online players and the street players is a collaborative one, the online players’ role being to help the street players find Uncle Roy within sixty minutes. As well as having help from the online players, the street players navigate their journey through the city by communicating with Uncle Roy. Ranging in tone from poetic to strictly directional and utterly confusing, messages from Uncle Roy urge the players to move on in the game while focusing on particular sites or ‘characters’ in the city: ‘I want you to walk towards the Mall. Watch a tourist cross the road and follow them. There are some hidden steps among the buildings. You have NN minutes remaining’<sup>6</sup>. The frequent indications of specific persons the player should pay attention to, and, sporadic appearances of actors who approach the participant with sentences such as: ‘Uncle Roy informs me you have a problem.’<sup>7</sup> (in case the participant appears to be utterly disoriented) make the players develop serious doubts as to what is ‘real’ and what is staged.

Steve Dickson reports finding himself in a hotel corridor, spotting the hotel cleaners and thinking ‘Are they actors?’<sup>8</sup> While having problems with connectivity, first getting angry with the gadget, then getting angry with himself, he thought ‘Is this part of the game?’<sup>9</sup>. The itineraries of the particular street players vary across the gaming area (roughly one square kilometer divided into regions orchestrated by the coordinating team) but all street players have a fixed number of tasks to fulfill. One of them is to collect a postcard, which, as in the

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<sup>5</sup> Benford, S. et al, *Implicating the City in a Location-Based Performance*, [www.mrl.nott.ac.uk](http://www.mrl.nott.ac.uk), site accessed 20/6/2007

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Dickson, S., *Digital Performance*, the MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2007, p.666

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.667

<sup>9</sup> Dickson, S., *Digital Performance*, the MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2007, p.66

case of the Manchester game, lay hidden somewhere among a stack of Saturday newspapers in a gay bar, the journey to which led the players through ‘a dark, rubbish-strewn street, filled with the fetid smell of decomposing peppers’<sup>10</sup>. Another task is to get to Uncle Roy’s office, decorated in the style of 1970s’ panache, where the street player encounters one of the online players via a live web streaming. The online players in Uncle Roy’s virtual office are asked the same question as is written on the postcard the street players find in a ‘real’ location: ‘When can you begin to trust a stranger?’<sup>11</sup> A satisfactory answer entails the very same series of questions the street players are asked by Uncle Roy in the white limousine at the end of the game, and this series of questions culminates in: ‘Would you be prepared to commit to a complete stranger for a year?’<sup>12</sup> If the online player answers affirmatively she is paired off with a street player who has declared the same willingness to commit to ‘offering a stranger words of advice and encouragement’<sup>13</sup> in a case of personal crisis. Although Blast Theory do not keep a record of whether or not such pairs of strangers ever call on each other in the subsequent course of their life, they shape the conditions and, by doing so, provide the possibility for the game to ‘leak into’ the lives of the participants for an indefinite period of time. The very structure of *UR* is anchored in the interplay of a series of ‘shaped conditions’ and fixed events, and it is this that warrants a wide range of interpretations.

These interpretations further determine the player’s actions and engender reactions from the game (Uncle Roy and the coordinators), live performers and accidental passers-by whose reactions in turn shape the players’ interpretations and subsequent actions. The form of interactivity employed is, as in *CYSMN?*, both open and closed, consisting of a combination of pre-programmed and entirely improvised content. However, because of the ‘elaborate set’, i.e. the city, and its endless dramaturgical possibilities generated on the fly (the person the participant is asked to follow or stop and ask a question is a real person, who unlike the long-lost lover the player in *CYSMN?* is running with, is present right here and now and is going to react), interactivity deployed in *UR* appears to be higher in effect (Ryan) than in *CYSMN?*. It is, in fact, the player who effectuates the *mise en scène*, amid a very rich setting, by means of her own, mutually interdependent, actions and interpretations. The participant in *UR* is required to be constantly both the player and the spectator. From the beginning the game lends itself to two possible interpretational frameworks: an exciting but innocuous treasure

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<sup>10</sup> Dodson, S., Uncle Roy All Around You, *Icon Magazine*, July/August 2004 [www.icon-magazine.co.uk/issues/014/roy.htm](http://www.icon-magazine.co.uk/issues/014/roy.htm), site accessed 26/7/2007

<sup>11</sup> *Uncle Roy All Around You* dvd documentation, Blast Theory, 2003

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

hunt or a mysterious and paranoia-inducing espionage film. Both are implicit in the very first message the street players get from Uncle Roy: ‘Meet me in the park by the lake. I’ve marked your map with the location. Click on the ‘I’m here’ button to confirm you’ve arrived’<sup>14</sup>.

Whereas some players took the first interpretative route: ‘I liked the sense of looking at everyone and thinking that they are a part of this’ or ‘I like the instructions to follow people around’<sup>15</sup>, others took the second and were unnerved by ‘not knowing who was involved and who was watching’<sup>16</sup> or felt that the game induced a ‘sense of fear of strangers’<sup>17</sup>.

This choice of interpretative angle depended largely on the players’ personalities, previous life experience and, not unimportantly, on their familiarity with this sort of artistic work. The tenor of their involvement thus also varied and ranged from hesitation, because, as one participant put it: ‘you don’t know if you’re doing it right’<sup>18</sup> to determination, caused by a sense of ‘mission’<sup>19</sup>, as in the case of Gabriella Giannachi: ‘[I] entered a building block to find Uncle Roy’s office, took a lift to the second floor, rung a bell and then, mistakenly, infiltrated someone else’s party. Panicked by the constant sense that I was running out of time, I convinced a group of total strangers who, it subsequently transpired, had nothing to do with Blast Theory or Uncle Roy, that I should answer the phone ringing in their office.’<sup>20</sup>

This ‘leakage’ and the subsequent ‘spreading’ of an artistic activity into life was a goal much striven by the conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s. These included the Fluxus, who envisaged the final stage of such practice to be the realisation life of as art, but it is also the prime purpose of pervasive games. Defined by Markus Montola, a researcher at the University of Tampere Hypermedia Laboratory, as games which have ‘one or more salient features that expand the contractual magic circle, spatially, temporally or socially’<sup>21</sup> as opposed to traditional games, which are ‘played at certain places and at certain times by players within a magic circle’<sup>22</sup>. In this respect, *UR* is a spatially and socially pervasive game. Spatially, because it is simultaneously situated in the virtual and in the real as well as

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<sup>14</sup> Benford, S. et al, *Implicating the City in a Location-Based Performance*, [www.mrl.nott.ac.uk](http://www.mrl.nott.ac.uk), site accessed 20/6/2007

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Giannachi, G., *The Politics of New Media Theatre: life*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2006, p.57

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Montola, M., *Exploring the Edge of the Magic Circle: Defining Pervasive Games*, DAC 2005 Conference, IT University Copenhagen, [www.users.tkk.fi/~mmontola/publication.html](http://www.users.tkk.fi/~mmontola/publication.html), site accessed 30/4/2007

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

expandable to any place where the street players venture; and socially, because it interferes in life by performing actions (running around lakes, following people) as well as involving passers-by. Interfering in life by breaking ‘the protective frame of the game’ is ‘an ethically challenging style of game design’<sup>23</sup> notes Montola. Apart from being a style of game design, it has clearly also been a part of numerous artistic agendas from the futurists and the surrealists onwards, but what is particularly interesting in the phenomenon of ‘social expansion’ to pervasive games is that some of the multiplayer games are played by tens or even hundreds thousands of people. In ‘This is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics in Collective Play’, Jane McGonigal argues that mixed reality games harness a potential for collective action by developing ‘stereoscopic vision in players’ and a ‘layered and dynamic world view’<sup>24</sup>. What is of crucial importance when an imaginary world ‘leaks into’ the real world is that the actions performed in response to the game are performed in the domain of real life and that they therefore have a resulting impact on real life. Although the impact of these actions may be very small, it is the experience of being able to change reality as a consequence of a commitment to a construct in one’s mind that counts.

When a street player finds herself in Uncle Roy’s limousine and is asked to reflect on the notions of ‘stranger’, ‘trust’ and ‘commitment’ she is put in a position of actively changing a tiny part of her reality. If she decides to commit to this stranger, the limousine pulls up by a postbox and the player is asked to post the postcard with her personal details on it. This means that a couple of days later, every player gets a physical proof of this commitment – the stranger’s address and phone number.

This little act establishes a sort of secret society of two. As in other secret societies, one does not necessarily need to have met other members to know that they exist. Secret members of secret societies rarely declare themselves in flesh, instead they communicate through signifiers. A phone that rings but is not meant to be answered, a blank letter that arrives through the post. The name, address and telephone number of a perfect stranger in the *UR* participants’ physical or digital phone book which otherwise contains names of friends and relatives, is such a signifier. It holds the promise of a year-long parallel reality.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> McGonigal, J., *This is Not a Game: Immersive Aesthetics & Collective Play*, [www.avvantgame.com/writings](http://www.avvantgame.com/writings), site accessed 25/5/2007

## DAY OF THE FIGURINES (2006)

*Community is given to us – or we are given and abandoned to the community: a gift to be renewed and communicated, it is not a work to be done or produced. But it is a task, which is different – an infinite task at the heart of finitude.*

Jean-Luc Nancy

Set in a fictional town that is ‘littered, dark and underpinned with steady decay’<sup>2</sup>, *Day of the Figurines (DOTF)* is a pervasive game whose temporal extension spreads over a period of twenty-four days. Each day in the life of the player represents an hour in the day of the figurine. The players enter the game by attending a physical location, usually a gallery, where they find a board on which are approximately two hundred masterfully executed miniature figurines. In order to create their game persona the players are asked to give it a name, describe a special place from their childhood and name someone they feel safe with. The game persona then ‘finds its embodiment’ in a 1-cm tall figurine and is placed on the starting position. Adjacent to the board is a model of a town, several meters in diameter and made of white sheet metal. The game contacts the players through text messages. Approximately an hour after entering the game the players receive their first message informing them that ‘they’ve been dropped by a truck on the outskirts of a town’<sup>3</sup> and asking them where they would like to go. A wide choice of places is available, ranging from bus shelters, council blocks, timber yards and pubs to hospitals and slaughterhouses. When a player indicates the desired direction by sending a message to the game, a live operator moves their figurine to the physical location on the model. By attending the gallery at any time during the twenty-four days the players can see the physical progress of their figurines. Realised once again in collaboration with MRL, *DOTF* explores emergent behaviour.

Usually observed in beehives and locust swarms, emergent behaviour is best described by ‘cells interacting without central control to produce results which are not explicitly ‘programmed’<sup>4</sup>.

The social fabric in *DOTF* is tenuously woven in time, both by the players’ interaction and their reaction to pre-programmed messages such as: ‘2 men in sharp suits run towards the

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<sup>2</sup> [www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work\\_day\\_of\\_figurines.html](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_day_of_figurines.html), site accessed 15/2/2007

<sup>3</sup> N. Lushetchik’s private archive, *DOTF* Birmingham, 19/5 – 11/6/2007

<sup>4</sup> [www.beart.org.uk/Emergent](http://www.beart.org.uk/Emergent), site accessed 12/5/2007

timber yard with jerry cans. Dou you A: Shout at them, B: Throw a bottle, C: Look for some timber to use as a weapon?’<sup>5</sup>. How the players respond to the steadily deteriorating condition of the town and also their own steadily deteriorating health (for, in spite of their mesmerizing beauty the figurines are already ill at the start of the game) determines how the community is sustained. The universe of the game, its poetics notwithstanding, is purposefully constructed as to be ‘morally ambiguous’<sup>6</sup>.

Unable to attend the opening in Birmingham, I entered the game by email and woke up the next day as Abdul Azizzi, a corpulent and hearty gentleman prone to singing along to maudlin songs. Having been dumped on the edge of an unfamiliar town at 6 o’clock in the morning in drizzling rain, Abdul thought it a good idea to go and warm up in the sauna. But the sauna was closed and there was no one there. OK, try something else: the 24-hour garage. The game responds: ‘You are in a tatty alley, carrier bags have been drenched by the rain, on your way to the 24h garage.’<sup>7</sup> As Abdul explored in the next couple of hours (two days in my life) the impression of the town as a Mike Leigh<sup>8</sup> - meets- Krzysztof Kieslowski<sup>9</sup> began to set in my mind, prompted by messages such as: ‘You come across a pram upturned by kids with a wheel missing’<sup>10</sup> or: ‘You are standing on a sodden tabloid; in the half light you can make out ‘Boob exam scam’ on your way to the Tower Block.’<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Maurizio Capra, an ethnographer working on *DOTF* at MRL compares this process of visualisation to that of reading a book where:

‘After the first few pages words become pictures.’<sup>12</sup> A couple of days later I realise that there is a whole other dimension to the game, namely objects that can be used to do things with such as stepladders, drum sticks, defibrillators and pints of beer.

However, when Abdul picks up a fire extinguisher I get a mysterious message: ‘It feels good in your hand. But are you the kind of person who goes to the Cop Shop to put it to action?’<sup>13</sup>. Confusion of this sort – what would ‘putting it to action’ mean? - is further amplified by tasks such as: ‘A tearful nurse sits in the back of a broken down ambulance. She looks up and

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<sup>5</sup> N. Lushetich’s private archive, *DOTF* Birmingham, 19/5 – 11/6/2007

<sup>6</sup> [www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work\\_day\\_of\\_figurines.html](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_day_of_figurines.html), site accessed 15/2/2007

<sup>7</sup> N. Lushetich’s private archive, *DOTF* Birmingham, 19/5 – 11/6/2007

<sup>8</sup> British film director famous for ‘kitchen sink’ films such *Secrets and Lies* or *All or Nothing*

<sup>9</sup> Polish film director famous for his bleak atmospheres such as in *The Short Story About Killing*

<sup>10</sup> N. Lushetich’s private archive, *DOTF* Birmingham, 19/5 – 11/6/2007

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Capra, M. in interview with N.Lushetich, Nottingham, 18/6/2007

<sup>13</sup> N. Lushetich’s private archive, *DOTF* Birmingham, 19/5 – 11/6/2007

mutter: ‘Please go help someone at a street corner. Go now.’<sup>14</sup> Rainer, a friendly inhabitant of the town, tells Abdul that he’s been rescuing sick dogs. Superwoman informs him he doesn’t look too good himself. Has there been an outbreak of a terrible disease? At the start of the game we were told our figurine could die. Meanwhile Abdul’s health continues to deteriorate until he comes across Margherita who suggests he should go and get something to eat. I hadn’t occurred to me that Abdul could be starved because I neglected to use commands such as ‘use sandwich’ and ‘use vegetable curry’. Somewhat recovered, Abdul keeps meandering around, asking his lovely companions Miss Scarlet and Shinji Ikari to sing him songs and recite poetry. They oblige with admirable virtuosity but, meanwhile, panic and chaos escalate. In what appears to be Cabaret-like<sup>15</sup> montage parallel worlds unfold: a metal band plays at the Locarno where ‘clutches of gamin rockers raid the stage and fling themselves back into the sweaty mass’<sup>16</sup>, a Muslim army appears out of nowhere, helicopters start patrolling the town. Abdul is faced with the task of either A: helping one of the soldiers, B: hitting him, or C: running away. Not knowing what is going on, who is against whom and why, I try to get Abdul out of this as neutrally as possible and opt for running away. The message I get immediately after is: ‘You are feeling mortally ill.’<sup>17</sup> Here I clue into the fact that deteriorating health is also connected with ‘moral’ choices. But how can you make a moral choice if you don’t know what’s going on?

A question reminiscent of *Desert Rain* comes to mind: but do you ever know? For the next couple of days I play somewhat ‘out of character’. Instead of indulging in fantasies of Abdul’s aesthetic pleasure in messages such as: ‘The wind changes direction and smoke and debris swirl violently in the air like strange feathers’<sup>18</sup>, I try to figure out what’s going on. The town appears to be a kaleidoscopic labyrinth of possibilities, where at every intersection something is going on that will in some way determine the future course of events. The imaginary world of *DOTF* is thus sustained, like any society in real life, by the intricate interplay of shifting relationships between the pre-programmed events, the participants’ interpretation of these events, their role-forming in relation to this interpretation and subsequent action, reaction and interpretation.

Markus Montola explains this interdependent relationship in pervasive games in which role-playing is a basis for interaction, as based on three invisible rules: the world rule, the power

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Bob Fosse’s 1972 film about Berlin 1931 using quick inter-cutting between the jovial cabaret scenes and the Nazi takeover of power

<sup>16</sup> N. Lushetich’s private archive, *DOTF* Birmingham, 19/5 – 11/6/2007

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



rule and the character rule, which he defines thus. The world rule: ‘Role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.’<sup>19</sup>; the power rule: ‘The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.’<sup>20</sup>; the character rule: ‘Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world.’<sup>21</sup> Montola goes on to conclude that because a role playing game needs to establish an imaginary world, consisting of pre-formed aesthetic or narrative components (such as locations and objects in *DOTF*) and the participants’ responses to these components, ‘the primary processes of role-playing happen on the level of imagination inspired by communication’.<sup>22</sup>

Whilst this is nothing new in the domain of theatrical practice, where realistic character building is achieved through a process of improvisations placing the character in as many different situations with as many different people in order to ‘configure’ it, it is interesting as a basis for analysis of pervasive games where most participants are not professional actors, nor are they familiar with the notion of ‘character configuration’.

Both Capra and Flintham<sup>23</sup> find that at the start of the game most participants can be placed in one of the following categories: the doers – those who concentrate on executing tasks and, in fact, interact more with the game engine<sup>24</sup> than with other players; the chatters – those who spend most of their time talking and interact primarily with other participants; and the walkers – those who spend time traversing the town and neither execute tasks nor talk to other participants. Although some participants remain faithful to their initial characteristics until the end, many begin to combine doing, chatting and walking as the game goes on. Interestingly, although from a different angle, Giannachi identifies a similar tripartite division of participant roles. ‘The participant is at once a player, a performer and a spectator’.<sup>25</sup> When the participant engages in using objects or going to places in the game in order to achieve specific

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<sup>19</sup> Montola, M., et al. *Breaking the Invisible Rules: Borderline Role-Playing*, <http://users.tkk.fi/~mmontola/publication.html>, site accessed 22/6/2007

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Capra, M. and Flintham, M. in interview with N. Lushetich, Nottingham, 18/6/2007

<sup>24</sup> A software component of a computer game which ‘plays’ pre-programmed content

<sup>25</sup> Giannachi, G. in interview with N. Lushetich, Exeter, 15/6/2007

preconceived objectives, she is playing. When she is communicating with other participants, she is performing. When she remains in a certain place and follows the actions and conversations of others without taking part, she is ‘spectating’. (Whenever a participant reaches a location the game informs her of who is already there. From then on the newcomer can ‘see’ all messages exchanged by participants present in the location).

Another important categorisation offered by Montola is that of the extent of the imaginary role. He differentiates between ‘fully-fledged performative pretence play’<sup>26</sup> where a fully blown character distinctly different from the participant’s is created, and ‘minimalist play’<sup>27</sup>, in which the players take on a role closer to themselves. According to ethnographic research into *DOTF* the players in the first category model their characters either on real life people (the spectrum ranging from persons they admire and/or desire to those they dislike and wish to parody in the game), already existing imaginary characters (such as Batman), and invented imaginary characters (Abdul Azizzi). Minimalist play accommodates for non-specific characterisation. Giannachi’s game persona in *DOTF* Birmingham, Margherita, is an example of minimalist play. Giannachi explains: ‘She isn’t me but neither is she a clearly defined character. I don’t know who she is’.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, because of the temporal expansion of the game over a period of twenty-four hours or its ‘slow pervasiveness’<sup>29</sup>, game personas also get shaped through interactions with others. As in real life, the social roles of the motivator, the negotiator or the recluse are shaped both by the conditions the persons find themselves in and the reactions of other people. For example, the role of the motivator can develop only if the person finds herself in situations where motivation can be exercised and surrounded by people who either need and/or respond to motivating. If neither of the conditions is fulfilled the person may opt for a social role more appropriate to the situation.

What Montola calls the ‘power structure’ of the game - its rules and its modes of orchestration by the game coordinators - is in *DOTF* harmoniously balanced with the possibility of improvisational input. The two opposite sides of the spectrum – *paidia* and *ludus*, as defined by Roger Caillois are successfully meshed. In *Man, Play, Games* Caillois explains: ‘Games

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<sup>26</sup> Montola, M. ‘Breaking eh Invisible Rules Borderline Role-Playing’, <http://users.tkk.fi/~mmontola/publication.html>, site accessed 22/6/2007

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Giannachi, G. in interview with N. Lushetich, Exeter, 15/6/2007

<sup>29</sup> Flintham, M., in interview with N. Lushetich, Nottingham, 18/6/2007

can be placed on a continuum between two opposite poles. At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a sort of uncontrollable fantasy that can be designated by the term *paidia*. At the opposite extreme, this gay and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complimentary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature... I call this second component *ludus*.<sup>30</sup> Capra provides an example of a player who tries to set up a car-selling business in *DOTF*. This is an evasion of one the rules of the game, namely that there is no money in *DOTF* (another repercussion of a feature present in *Desert Rain* and *UR* only here it is the game persona and not the participant who is rendered possession-less). However it is possible to invent situations and objects.

So, a player adds a car-selling facet to his game persona and the car seller invents a car. A prospective buyer who likes ‘the look’ of the car asks if he could go for a drive around the block to test the engine, gets into the car and drives off out of the game.<sup>31</sup> It can only be speculated whether or not the same player re-entered the game with a different game persona and a different mobile phone number. Another factor stimulating *paidia* in *DOTF* is the game’s temporal extension. This shapes the mutually contagious relationship between the game and the participant’s life, thus blurring the boundaries. The blurring of boundaries occurs in *UR* too, but there it is the spatial and social extension that causes the blurring. In *DOTF* it is the timing. Ethnographic research shows that most participants feel bad in real life for quite some time if they have inadvertently let someone die in the game by not having seen their message on time. Likewise, a message from the game arriving at an inopportune moment, when the participant is angry or feeling down, is answered with anger or gloom and this has further repercussions on the flow of the game. The timing of the message thus modifies its content.

*DOTF* is a masterful achievement in terms of the complexity of interactivity deployed. Combining the open and closed form (Manovich), and providing both a high frequency and a wide range (Laurel), it has a high impact (Ryan) whilst retaining coherence and weaving a rich semantic tissue.

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<sup>30</sup> Caillouis, R., *Les jeux et les homes: le masque et le vertige*, Gallimard, Paris, 1958, p.48, my translation

<sup>31</sup> Capra, M., in interview with N. Lushetich, Nottingham, 18/6/2007

## PART THREE

### Conclusion

Drawing on a wide range of heterogeneous practices, from performance art, installation and theatre, to games and scientific experiments, the works analysed in the previous chapter defy easy categorisation. Their open-endedness, interactivity and thus also unstable identity, make them resistant to closure. One thing these works have in common, however, is that they all both thematise human relationships, and are created by means of human relationships. To a greater or lesser degree, the themes of power relations (*Kidnap*), of the impact of the virtual on the real and the lives of real people (*Desert Rain*), of creation of ‘space’ in virtual and actual urban places (*CYSMN?*), of querying trust (*UR*) and creating community (*DOTF*) are deployed collaboratively and relationally.

In *Relational Aesthetics* Nicolas Bourriaud argues the need for ‘relational art’ in the current society where ‘anything that cannot be marketed will inevitably vanish’<sup>1</sup>, and where ‘before long it will not be possible to maintain relationships between people outside these trading areas’<sup>2</sup>. Relational art is an art form which takes as its ‘theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space’<sup>3</sup>, (original emphasis). In other words, what this form seeks to establish are inter-human encounters in which meaning is elaborated inter-subjectively rather than in the privacy of the viewer’s own space of consumption, be that space literally private and isolated or situated within a larger collective entity such as an audience.

Jean-Luc Nancy offers an important distinction between collectivism and inter-subjectivity. Whilst acknowledging ‘the dissolution, the dislocation or the conflagration of community’ as the ‘gravest and most painful testimony of the modern world’<sup>4</sup> in his 1991 book *Inoperative Community*, Nancy nevertheless argues that community retains crucial importance because it

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<sup>1</sup> Bourriaud, N., *Esthétique relationnelle*, Les presses du réel, Paris, 2001, p.9, my translation

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.14

<sup>4</sup> Nancy, J-L., *The Inoperative Community*, trans. P. Connor et al., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p.1

creates a platform from which to ‘challenge the atomizing and disabling forces of political economies’<sup>5</sup>. He goes on to conclude that in order to be reclaimed community has to be redefined. The ‘essentialist’ concept of community’<sup>6</sup> rooted in the idea of a unifying essence such as ‘nation’, ‘people’ or even ‘generic humanity’ whereby the members come into communion through the mutual recognition of their shared essence, is to be replaced by a community ‘without essence’. This community which ‘cannot be presupposed’, only ‘exposed’<sup>7</sup>, arises from subjective and inter-subjective perception rather than from any form of *a priori* collectivism. In fact, it arises through the perception of a lack of collectivism. Nancy’s conceptualisation of individuals, whom he does not call individuals but ‘singularities’<sup>8</sup>, thus implying that there is nothing indivisible and detached about them, is that of permanent mutability rather than of fixed and monolithic identity. Identity is, according to Nancy, constantly negotiated in relationships with others and has no ‘substance’ of its own. A ‘singularity’ is thus a temporary vessel of relationships past and present. Bourriaud expresses a similar opinion when he says: ‘Madness is not ‘inside’ a person, but in the system of relationships in which that person is involved. People don’t become mad on their own because we never think on our own. No one writes or paints alone...[...].But we have to make pretence of doing so.’<sup>9</sup>

A prerequisite for a community without ‘essence’, according to Nancy, lies in the acceptance of the idea of mutability and a receptiveness ‘to the meaning of our multiple, dispersed, mortally fragmented existences, which nonetheless only make sense by existing in common.’<sup>10</sup>

What relational art attempts to do is set up situations in which viewers are not addressed collectively as a social entity but are given agency to create community inter-subjectively, however temporary that community may be. Much indebted to Althusser’s argument that culture, as an ‘ideological state apparatus’, does not reflect society but produces it<sup>11</sup>,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.22

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.17-24

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.28

<sup>9</sup> Bourriaud, N., *Esthétique relationnelle*, Les presses du réel, Paris, 2001, p.85, my translation

<sup>10</sup> Nancy, J-L., *The Inoperative Community*, trans. P. Connor et al., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, pp.xl

<sup>11</sup> In ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ Althusser puts forth a theory of ideology as produced in all social institutions. Because the function of ideology is to maintain the social and productive relations of the prevailing order, it imposes on individuals a conception of themselves that fosters compliance with that order. Conversely, by being aware of this, cultural institutions can shape individuals’ conceptions of themselves different from that of the prevailing order. See Althusser, L., *Essays on Ideology*, Verso, London, 1971

relational aesthetics proposes to be a theory that ‘judges artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce and prompt.’<sup>12</sup>

Although Bourriaud’s theory of aesthetics is as thoughtful as it is insightful, the practical examples he provides as influential in its creation leave something to be desired. A case in point are works by Rirkrit Tiravanija and Andrea Zittel. Whereas Tiravanija is most famous for turning galleries into makeshift kitchens where he cooks vegetable curries for viewer / participants and where the only remaining exhibit is the detritus of these convivial relationships, Zittel makes multifunctional pieces of furniture resembling round hot tubs where viewer / participants meet and engage in conversations, with the artist intermittently present. Clearly, these artworks strive to erode the boundary between the institutional and social space and shape the conditions for a deployment of inter-human relationships, but, they provide no content. In his article ‘A Short history of Rirkirt Tiravanija’ Jerry Saltz describes Tiravanija’s above performance installation at Gallery 303 in New York, as attracting, for the largest part, artists, critics and art dealers engaging in ‘professional gossip’<sup>13</sup>, lamentations on ‘the lack of excitement in the New York art world,’<sup>14</sup> or simply in doing business - trading art and artists. Because of the lack of content the nominally sought after inter-subjective elaboration of meaning remains pure rhetoric while the event turns into a consolidation of the sense of ‘essentialist’ community – ‘we the cultured people’, or ‘we the art world’. The fact that the works’ conceptual purport does not live up to its deployment in ‘lived time and space’ comes about because its aesthetics do not go any further than its politics. The work is considered to be *a priori* political and thereby also automatically emancipatory in effect without needing any further elaboration of form or structure.

In stark contrast to this Blast Theory do not employ interactivity as a value in its own right, supposedly superior to the so-called passive or disengaged viewing. The politics of their works are distinct from their aesthetics. This is not to say that this distinction remains equally clear in all phases of any given work, for one of the main characteristics of a good work of art is a seamless integration of the what, the why and the how, but that it exists at the level of a beginning premise.

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy, J-L., *The Inoperative Community*, trans. P. Connor et al., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p.117

<sup>13</sup> Saltz, J., ‘A Short History of Rirkrit Tiravanija’, *Art in America*, 84, no.2, 1996 .p.83

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

From their very earliest works, Blast Theory use interactivity to foster engagement and care, and, to resist the indifference engendered by the proliferating spectacular practices of the contemporary society. They create structured experiences, ‘lived in time and place’ (Levinas) which facilitate the participant’s appropriation of socially relevant content. The structure of these experiences, however, is always ambivalent. *Kidnap* unfolds in a semantically grey area between make-believe and reality. *Desert Rain* requires of its participants to act fast but on the basis of contradictory information. In *CYSMN?* the situation starts as very fair (it is not the virtual players who chase the real runners in the actual city but the other way around). However, the runners ‘cheat’ by involving passers-by and thus blurring the mental picture the online players have of their whereabouts. In *UR* Uncle Roy both leads and misleads the participants through the city. In *DOTF* the participants are faced with moral dilemmas about which they do not have sufficient background information to be able to resolve.

In all five works there is an oscillation between complicity and antagonism in the participant’s relationship to the content as well as the artists / performers / orchestrators involved in the event. There were moments in *Kidnap* when Russell was clearly not having a good time. A participant in *UR* found the experience as inducing the fear of strangers.

The ethnographic research into *DOTF* reports that not an insignificant number of participants got angry at the sudden appearance of a Muslim army. In short, unlike Tiravanija’s and Zittel’s performance installations, these experiences are not designed as feel-good get-togethers of like minded people. Whilst remaining open to a very wide range of participants and using popular forms such as games (in *CYSMN?* the players can play from anywhere in the world, and anybody who has mobile phone can join in *DOTF*) interactivity in Blast Theory’s work is guided by a fluctuating interplay of harmony, friction and uncertainty. Although all works are initially semantically accessible, the patterns of interconnectedness between the participants and their response to the content proposed by the artists create more complex semantic structures as the work unfolds.

After the initial ‘lead’ provided by Blast Theory (an invitation to enter a lottery and win a kidnap (*Kidnap*), being dispatched on a mission (*Desert Rain*), an entanglement in a chase game with one’s own memory (*CYSMN?*), an implication in a mysterious scenario with Uncle Roy (*UR*), an initiation in a secret society where each of the members has an alter ego (*DOTF*)), the aesthetic deployment of the work is subject to a series of mutually dependent

subjective and inter-subjective actions and interpretations to be gradually woven on the grid of interconnectedness. For although the participants in all mentioned works are encouraged to act individually, zones of the extension of their individual selves are gradually generated by interaction. For example, in *CYSMN?* the online players sense the city through the sounds and speech of the runners. In *UR*, the street players' sense of orientation is shaped by the online players' guidance. The individual perception and interpretation in these cases is sustained by being connected to another.

Blast Theory's practice of inventing relational networks is an attempt to shape the conditions for a non-essentialist community. Based on a tripartite principle of harmony, friction and uncertainty, this practice seeks to find out what kind of knowledge inter-subjective aesthetic experience is capable of producing. If aesthetics is to be taken as a form of thinking through the senses, Blast Theory's audience-collaborative creation of relational art engages the participants in a sensorial contemplation of relationships.

As we have seen so far, many of the relationships engendered by the work, such as those in *UR* or *DOTF*, 'leak' into the participants' lives. Here, their deployment effectively becomes the aesthetics of existence. In 'An Aesthetics of Existence' Foucault suggests that to the 'contemporary crisis in ethics corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence'<sup>15</sup> a process of conscious form giving to the smallest everyday actions, reactions and relationships with others. Interactivity, as practiced by this ensemble of 'digital situationists,'<sup>16</sup> is essentially a contribution towards an aesthetics of existence.

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<sup>15</sup> Foucault, M., 'An Aesthetics of Existence' trans. A. Sheridan in Kritzman, L. (ed.), *Michael Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and other writings 1977-1984*, Routledge, New York, 1990, p.49

<sup>16</sup> Dodson, S., Uncle Roy All Around You, *Icon Magazine*, July/August 2004 [www.icon-magazine.co.uk/issues/014/roy.htm](http://www.icon-magazine.co.uk/issues/014/roy.htm), site accessed 26/7/2007



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