

# *Rider Spoke* and new frontiers in performance

A presentation and panel discussion with Matt Adams of Blast Theory

This event took place at Central School of Speech and Drama on 16 October 2007

## **The Panel:**

**Matt Adams** (MA), co-Director of Blast Theory

**Dr Martin Flintham** (MF), Research Fellow, Mixed Reality Lab, University of Nottingham

**Vivienne Gaskin** (VG), Director of Vivienne Gaskin Cultural Management

**Prof Gabriella Giannachi** (GG), Professor in Performance and New Media, University of Exeter

## **Chair:**

**Prof Andy Lavender** (AL), Dean of Research, Central School of Speech and Drama

## **About Matt Adams/Blast Theory**

**Matt Adams co-founded interactive, independent theatre company Blast Theory in 1991 with Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj. Since then have produced a very impressive back-catalogue of work that, at every turn, explores developments in new media and communications technologies. *Rider Spoke*, their latest project, involves people jumping on bicycles and taking instructions from consoles as they scour the streets around the Barbican. Other recent projects have included: *Day of the Figurines* (2006), a vast multi-player game over 24 days, which relied on text messaging in a strange way; *I like Frank*, the world's first 3G-mixed-reality game, which involved online and street players; *Uncle Roy All Around You* and *Can You See Me Now?*, which also worked with GPS technology. *I Like Frank* came out of Blast Theory's Adelaide Thinkers in Residence project, where Matt was a 'thinker in residence'.**

## Presentation by Matt Adams:

I'll very briefly point to some bits of our history, as a way to give you a very slender trajectory of where we've come to, then I'd like to talk about *Rider Spoke*, to try and describe that piece of work and why it takes the form that it does. By way of giving our history - we've been together sixteen years – I thought I'd mention a number of works that represent the kind of practice that we've made at different times.

In 1994 we made a piece called *Stampede* which originally premiered at the ICA in London: a promenade performance with pressure pads on the floor of the auditorium, where members of the audience could trigger audio and video samples. It was a piece or work about crowds and crowd control and loss of control and the ways in which we are drawn to losing control in a society that is so obsessed by individual agency. It was the culmination of a series of works we'd made that were heavily influenced by club culture and we were looking to fold-in some of the motifs and styles of work that existed in clubs with some of the intellectual rigor of theatre-and-dance-based practice – quite a physical performance, involving lots of us throwing our bodies around in very close proximity to the audience.

In 1998 we made a piece called *Kidnap* which was a very major rupture because it was the first time we'd used the internet and it was the first time that we'd made work that completely stepped outside of the normal structures of theatrical presentation. We ran a lottery, in England and Wales, where we invited people to volunteer to be kidnapped by us. We selected ten of them at random, we put them under surveillance, we toured the UK in a van until we found these people, took photos of them secretly, and sent the photos to them through the post. We subsequently picked two of the ten at random and kidnapped them, holding them for forty-eight hours at a secret location and streamed this entire event onto the net [now archived at [www.blasttheory.co.uk/kidnap/safehouse/hos/hos.htm](http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/kidnap/safehouse/hos/hos.htm)]. This really came out of a series of work about giving up control and looking at the relationship between the audience and the theatre maker, and trying to really configure that boundary as to who might be in control, who wants to be into control, at what point you might give up control to other people, and we ended up with this almost improvisational piece of performance where people from around the world are watching two people in a room on a webcam. This is the piece that *Big Brother* ate, as you can perhaps guess!

The third piece of work I want to mention is *Can You See Me Now?* from 2001. By this point we were working very closely with the Mixed Reality Lab looking at how you might use mobile technologies to create work that exists on the streets, and at how games might provide a format for interactive work. *Can You See Me Now?* is a very simple structure: a chase game, with the twist being that the people who are chasing are running around the streets of the city and the people who are being chased are online in a virtual model of that area of the city. So it

has this one major dislocation, but in every other way, is filled with the resonances of live performance. It has a live audio stream of the three runners as they talk to each other by walkie-talkie on the streets, so it has this very strong live-ness, this very strong theatrical presence, and yet is exploded in a number of ways. It deals with absence and presence and with proximity and distance at a number of different levels.

I want to mention one other, smaller piece of work, because it's important to acknowledge that throughout the series of work that we've made, there are these larger scale performances, which are often collaborations with big teams over months or years, but we also continue to make a range of smaller works that are perhaps intimate but reflect some of our interests in other ways. I want to talk about a piece called *Route 12:36*, which was a commission from the South London Gallery for two bus routes: route 12 and route 36. We were invited to do something interactive for buses and we ended up producing a series of posters with an 0800 number and a question, inviting people who were on those buses over the course of two weeks to ring that free phone number and have a conversation with the person who answered the phone. It prefigures *Rider Spoke* and so is my segue into talking about this particular piece of work.

To explain why we've ended up making the work we've made, which seems in some ways so remote from theatrical practice, it's important to say that my background is in theatre, which I did from my early teens onwards. Both Ju [Row Farr], who is here tonight, and Nick [Tandavanitj] come from different backgrounds. Ju is from a visual arts and dance background and Nick went to Dartington [College of Arts] and did a course called Art in Social Context. He is also someone who is very gifted at physics and maths, so there is a polymath aspect to his background. But I see the work that we do in a very theatrical context. And I want to lay down a sprinkling of things, clues about the context in which we are trying to make theatre today, which those of us who are engaged in trying to think about what theatre might mean need to take on board, and need to think carefully about.

We live in a period of intense identity fragmentation. You'll have to forgive me as I go through these things very quickly and I realise that there are lots of things that you might want to challenge, and that some of them are a bit sound-bite-ish. But I want to set down a range of different things because I think it's important to set out a multiplicity of points of reference. By identity fragmentation, I mean – there are a number of things going on there – the very fact that we create and sustain multiple identities, which is partly technological, partly to do with how you exist online, how you need to generate multiple names for yourself, because in many online spaces, your name is already gone! So you create another name and yet another name, and so on. It's also about the media and how we live in an incredibly fictionalised world, where - if you just think about the example of James Bond, the number of James Bonds in existence, the number of actors, the number of fictional versions of that, the number of ways in which that person has

been portrayed – there's a tightly nested set of fragmented identities that are all employed in different ways for different purposes. And there's also *Star Trek* 'fan fiction'; *Star Trek* has a huge, thriving life, where people are taking those identities and are rewriting them into their own stories, into their own narratives and so on.

Then you've got that idea that we're in a world of blurring between fiction and reality, and this is a huge spectrum of activities. I've picked out the example of lonelygirl15, which for any of you who are not familiar with it, was an identity established on YouTube, I think in 2006: a woman doing very personal diaries to camera, very very compelling; it built up a huge audience and then it was revealed that this woman was an actress. And the point of that was that it pretended absolutely that it was a real thing. And then, when it was exposed as being fictional, some people were very annoyed but many people weren't. Many people felt that this was part of a continuum of playfulness around identity online, that they didn't see as sacrilegious, whereas, in many other spheres of life, we would see that kind of pretence as deeply offensive, in social terms.

Then you've got the idea of multiple communication channels, that we exist in a whole set of different communication spheres simultaneously and that we are inter-weaving different communication worlds all of the time on a daily basis with one another. This is particularly prevalent with people under the age of say 25 or 20, where an ease and facility in operating across a whole set of communication channels in quick succession or simultaneously, is increasingly common. And those different channels have different kinds of affordances: they allow us to behave in different kinds of ways, they allow us to speak in different ways, they allow us to have different kinds of communication with one another and we are only beginning to understand what the secret costs and contours might be of those shifts and changes. We don't really know what it means. People are thinking about what it means for the decline of the written letter, and the rise of email, but this is only one spectrum on which these shifts are taking place, and there is such a collision of inter-nested changes that it will be a long time before we fully understand their full resonances.

And then there is entertainment overload: the idea that every single moment of our attention is owned and possessed in some way, and that if there is somewhere that you are sat doing nothing, someone else is thinking about how to fill that bit of sat-doing-nothing with an advert or a bit of media or something. And people are relentless, ruthlessly looking for every single moment. If you're at the post office, they want to be advertising to you whilst you're in the queue. So that has an impact in terms of how we conduct ourselves, how we occupy space, and it has a big impact, I think, for how we might think about culture.

We are highly mobile; this is a very obvious thing. We travel more often at a local level, we travel more often at an international level and we live in an age where even the very poorest, or very nearly poorest, people in a global society are

also mobile and are on the move. We're time poor, we're in a situation where people's time is under a great deal of pressure, at work, at home and everywhere in-between, and these multiple channels of communication have rushed in to fill all of those interstices in our daily lives – and that only increases the sense of time-poverty. We live in a period of social orientations – this is more of a tendentious statement – but I want to talk about something that reflects how social contours themselves are being re-orientated. It's partly a technological thing, as I'm talking about with online spaces, the idea of online worlds and the very concept, the very hubris of claiming a world online reflects the grasping over-reach of those ideas. 'Online communities' – what do we actually mean when we talk about that?

The other small example I've picked is about businesses and how businesses think about what they're doing, or re-present what they're doing as social goals. Along the lines of corporate responsibility, environmental agendas – Google's motto is 'Do No Evil'. These companies are thinking about themselves as social actors, they're not thinking about themselves as merely profit-centric. Or, maybe just their rhetoric is shifting; only time will tell. Then we have the miniaturisation and technologising of the body. The idea that technology is increasingly miniature, it's increasingly close to our skin or underneath it, any of you who are familiar with RFID, Radio Frequency Identification tags, will know that we are on the cusp of every single object having a representation in a large data sphere and being able to be tracked and to be identified as objects themselves as they move around.

Again this one is debatable in some ways, but I think we have gone through a period where the local has returned. Ten years ago, the rhetoric was all about the information superhighway, the sense in which we were all going to go into endless global communication with everyone, all the time, anywhere, now. And I think what we've seen in the last five or seven years is an increasing understanding that actually *local* is really, really important. And that's partly technological again; it's partly about GPS, satellite navigation, mobile phones, and other forms of personal location systems - knowing where you are. But another example is private equity. The private equity businesses are all tightly clustered in Mayfair. Well, why would that be? These people are multi-billionaires, they can site themselves anywhere; they have absolute communication at the highest possible level. It would make just as much sense for them to be sat in Barbados, surely? But in fact, no, it makes a lot of sense for them to be clustering. And so we're finding that even the leading edge of social changes are actually reflecting lots of local connections, the neighbourhood, and those kinds of ideas.

We're also in an age of the *ludic*, a kind of shift. Obviously that's around games: computer games, console games, online games. But it's also a much wider thing. If you think about Innocent, the people that make those little bottles of juice, their entire business is about playfulness. The bottle is full of little jokes

and gags and fun things. It almost verges on the infantilisation of the population. But it's also about that sense of trying to find playfulness in almost everything. *Big Brother* is always thought of as a 'reality show' but contestants themselves shout, 'It's only a game show.' That's the chant that has gone across several series. They themselves know that it may be reality, but it's also a game, and that the line between reality and playfulness is one that's being constantly eroded. We also live in an age that is incredibly participatory. We have political movements that arise out of nowhere, have enormous impact, and then fall away, like those against the fuel taxes, the one that didn't have so much impact against the Iraq war; what you find is these enormous spikes in the graph where suddenly everyone gets mobilised, or a huge number of people get mobilised in a particular way.

Then we have the whole idea of Web 2.0 and a rise in a whole set of services that are about the way people participate. I've just recently been mentoring on a workshop for the broadcast industry and talking to people in TV. They are terrified because of this huge wave of participatory culture, where people want to speak and do and act with the culture that they receive. They don't want to just passively receive it. This is having enormous impacts. The average age of a BBC 1 viewer today is 56 years old! And the reason that it's gotten that old is because no one under the age of 25 watches BBC 1 at all. So, if BBC 1 is under that level of threat, it has huge implications for all those of us who are in less powerful media positions.

Sorry that was kind of a gallop, but I think it helps to map out some of the connections that you may then see in this *Rider Spoke* piece. Here I flagged a few little ideas. What does that mean for theatre? These are just a few throwaway things about what kind of theatrical things might spring from those observations.

I think that we will see an increase in:

*Distributed theatre*: things that happen continuously, constantly, everywhere. Or participatory theatre. Now, there's a long tradition of participatory theatre but I think the rise of Web 2.0 points us towards completely different levels and extents of participation. Audiences in which you have multiple audiences, pieces of work where you've got multiple audiences. So with *Kidnap*, for example, we worked out that there were eight different audiences for that piece of work and they were all seeing it through a different lens, in different ways, and finding different meanings. I think that is a trend that may well crop up again.

*Long-distance theatre*: a very famous piece of work called *Telematic Dreaming* by Paul Sermon connects two members of the public between the UK and Finland, creating a very intimate, playful performance between those two people.

*Massive-scale theatre*: not just where a few thousand people come together for a

big spectacle but theatre where tens of thousands of people, across the globe, are in some way engaged in some sort of theatrical practice.

*Mobile theatre*: the idea of the author is itself going to be shifted and re-negotiated. And again, this has been a constant discussion over decades, about the role of the author but I think this is a discussion that will continue.

There's a movie being made at the moment called *Swarm of Angels* with, I think, ten thousand people currently involved, who have all put money in and are all helping to shape the structure of the film that will be made. It sounds like a chaotic mess, but I think it will be very interesting to see what comes from that.

*Rider Spoke*, a piece that we've made in collaboration with The University of Nottingham and Sony Net Services, a branch of Sony in Berlin, has been part of a pervasive gaming research project run by the European Union. This is the structure of the piece: you come to the Barbican on your own bike or you borrow one of ours, you get a short briefing, and then you go out onto the streets with an internet tablet, which is basically a mini-computer, mounted on your handlebars. You get a voice in your ear, via an earpiece inviting you to answer a question and look for a place where you want to answer it. So you are asked a question and then you cycle around trying to find a place that you feel is appropriate to answer that question. Then when you get there, you use a little interface on the device to record your answer. Then you have the option of doing that again or starting to look around you to see where other people have hidden their answers and you can find hidden answers that are close to you and listen to them and by moving around you can find others. So, it's a very simple little structure, of speaking, recording and listening. You do that for about an hour before you are asked to come back. The motivation for this piece of work was to ask: what kind of performance can you make in the age of personal communication? How do games create new social spaces? Where might theatre be sited and what form might it take? Can we make a piece that invites members of the public to be co-authors of the work and visible manifestations of it, while cycling around the city? And, can we look at something where an institution like the Barbican is suddenly sited very particularly within the streets that surround it? Normally, the Barbican is a national and international node in a cultural landscape, where people come in from Russia, do their get-in, perform to a metropolitan audience who come from all over London and the UK and then go out again. Well, this piece of work suddenly tightly interweaves the Barbican with the streets that surround it.

So I've talked about questions that we get asked, and that's the heart of the work in a way. And what this sprang from was an observation that to cycle, to be alone, to be in the city at night, are all reflective spaces filled with possibility and meaning for us. And can we harness those three things to draw people into this space, to set this space up for them, and provide it as a platform for people to speak, and perhaps to say things that they might not otherwise say? Here's one of the questions that we asked:

No one tells secrets, at least, not the interesting ones. Real secrets stay hidden and so will yours. What I would like you to do is think about your secrets. I want you to wheel down the quietest streets, and turn some secrets over in your mind. What are they and will you ever tell them? Do they make you ashamed or scared? Don't waste time on the petty teenage misdemeanours or little lies; use this moment to think about the others, the important ones. And when you've done that, stop in a doorway and tell me about your attitude to secrets. Do you have plenty or a few? Do you spill them easily or keep them very close? What role do secrets play in your life?

Martin, I'm sure, will talk a little bit about the scientific side of the work that we do, but I do just want to acknowledge that *Rider Spoke* springs out of a dialogue between Blast Theory and The Mixed Reality Lab. Right from the outset, before the first iota of *Rider Spoke* existed, we were engaged in a process of working together and thinking about the kinds of work we might want to make. Part of that dialogue is about what is interesting us at an artistic level but also interesting at a scientific level, asking, 'In what way might we contribute to the store of scientific knowledge?'

*Rider Spoke* has ended up looking at two particular issues. One is about Wi-Fi positioning: it uses Wi-Fi hotspots for locating you in the city, which is something that has been done very little before and is very little understood – we can talk about why that's important and what's interesting about that later. And the other is about graphing and modelling. *Rider Spoke* generates its own map of the city in real time – we don't do mapping in advance of the city. As each person goes out, their device builds a map of where it's been and each night all of the devices collate their data and we build an ever more sophisticated map of the city, with these recordings dotted across it. But that map has a number of different properties and therefore you need to graph it in very complex ways to actually understand what it is. It's not a map that models to the city itself, it's not a geographical map; it's a map of contiguity, of connections between places.

To finish, I'd like to talk a little bit about the interface and why we've designed it the way we have and what our thinking was behind that. We've chosen three graphical reference points: Mexican votive paintings, sailor tattoos and heraldry. The links between these are to do with invocations, requests, prayers and thanks, especially Mexican votive paintings which are to thank a saint or the Virgin for a particular event that's happened to you or to wish for an event or to thank the Virgin for saving you from harm or danger. This is a tradition that's decades old in Mexico and we commissioned a painting from one of the leading Mexican votive painters as part of this piece of work. They are badges of identity in some ways and ways in which you represent yourself. And they are historical signs of permanence: the painting, the shield, the mark on the skin... Semantically, they're very dense and very heavily coded. So, for example, sailor



tattoos had very precise meanings: you would not get an Anchor tattooed on your arm unless you genuinely were a sailor who had sailed a certain number of miles or been to sea a certain number of times. A swallow is a signifier of land, and you would get into enormous trouble if went around with one of these tattoos that you hadn't, in some way, earned. So it's important to remember in an age of tattoos as fashion that originally they were extremely serious representations of identity. In *Rider Spoke* there is a sign showing you that you can 'hide here', when you arrive at a hiding place, here's a question and you touch the door, saying that you're going to 'hide' here. And then you go inside the room and click on the door marked 'record' to make a recording and when you're done you can play it or re-record and you click on the taxi to show that you're finished and to move to the next screen.

### **Panel discussion:**

AL: I'd like to ask Martin to say something about the work that The Mixed Reality Lab have done with this piece. Matt said that it's a dialogue – even before the bones of the piece were conceived – that's gone on over time. What did The Mixed Reality Lab do on this particular piece that was perhaps a new challenge or that moved this collaboration forward.

MF: Maybe I should preface this by saying a bit about The Mixed Reality Lab and what it is. We're a research group at the University of Nottingham, in the Computer Science department, and we're a bit of a mixed bag of computer programmers – nerds basically – and psychologists, ethnographers, designers and architects. We don't do traditional computer science, in fact many computer scientists frown on us for not being serious enough. But it gives us a good opportunity to actually make stuff and get it out there in the real world by working closely with groups like Blast Theory.

On *Rider Spoke* basically we started with a set of interests that we wanted to explore; we were very interested in exploring Wi-Fi positioning because we've done a lot of work with GPS already, and we wanted to go in a new direction with that. We were very interested in user generated content and how that can sit in a piece like this because, in the past, most of the stuff that we've done has been pre-authored and pre-scripted and I was quite sceptical about user generated content because I think a lot of it is a joke and so I was quite interested to see whether people could actually produce something rich and something novel.

We were also interested in implementing something for – initially a commercial - games console, which is how we ended up with this small, bike-mounted internet appliance. So the way we worked was very much a close, iterative cycle of development which was: we would play around with some technology and come with some broad ideas or techniques and then we would have these workshops

with Blast Theory where we discussed how we could use these things and how they could use them to make a piece and they would say, 'Oh, well we're not really interested in that,' or, 'Yes, we can use this to make something particularly interesting.' So it's not a relationship where we were given a design specification and then we go off and make it and Blast Theory say, 'Thank you very much!' It's more a continual collaboration with us both bouncing ideas of one another until we come up with the final implementation.

We were very interested in this wireless positioning. Obviously, we've done a lot of work with GPS before, particularly *Can You See Me Now?* in 2001. At that time it was something very new to have a mobile device that knew where you were using GPS. Nowadays, most phones have some kind of location awareness, they can show you a map of where you are, or they have GPS built in themselves, but at the time that was something very novel, and I don't think you could get a device that knew where it was, just off the shelf. So, while it would have been much easier to implement *Rider Spoke* using GPS or a GPS-enabled phone, I think we were interested in exploring something else, particularly the idea of Wi-Fi positioning. A couple of exploratory works we had already done had been about looking at what mobile phone cells you could see on your phone at any particular time and that got us interested in the idea of the proximity of different spaces that you can identify by what you can see around you. So rather than GPS, which gives you a very particular notion of position, ie 'You're at this co-ordinate and this co-ordinate,' we were much more interested in how you look at location, which is, 'How do I identify this space? And how do I identify that space again when somebody else returns to it?' We were doing a lot of infrastructure surveying in a way, which was driving around or riding around and then looking at what you can see in any particular place. So, we did a lot of 'wardriving' almost - around Nottingham with mobile phones to build up maps of where you could see particular mobile phone networks or particular mobile phone cells. And then we moved on to Wi-Fi: we started wardriving areas of Nottingham to see what wireless access points you could see at any given place, even in every residential area, you drive down a street and there are twenty access points, all broadcasting, all labeled 'BT Homehub' or something like that. And in the cities it's even denser. So there's this incredibly rich infrastructure, landscape of Wi-Fi that you can then piggy-back onto and try and work out where you are.

AL: And you don't need passwords?

MF: Only if you want to use them. I mean it's a legal grey area at the moment, whether you can legitimately use other people's access, but we don't want to do that, we just want to see if they're there. And they're all broadcasting these signals, most of the time and uniquely identifying themselves. So each one has a uniquely identifiable MAC address that identifies it. So, if I'm in this room for example, I might say, 'I can see ten access points at the moment that are all different routers or BT Homehubs, all around the place. Then I can almost make

a fingerprint out of that and I can say the only place I will see exactly those ten access points in exactly that configuration is in this room and if I go into the next room, I'll see a slightly different constellation of access points. So it's almost as if I can identify this space by that Wi-Fi fingerprint. So that's what we do in *Rider Spoke*, people go around and, every twenty seconds or so, the little device on their bike says, 'What can I see around me?' and constructs one of these Wi-Fi fingerprints. Then, obviously, when somebody else goes to that same place and they can see the same Wi-Fi fingerprints, with a bit of fuzziness to it – we added a bit of inaccuracy just to make sure it was reliable – then we can say that they're in the same place. And if they're in the same place, they can see whatever content or audio or messages that somebody has left at a particular location.

AL: Gabriella has participated in, I was going to say 'performed', *Rider Spoke*. How did you find it?

GG: I found it a very exciting piece for a number of reasons. It sat very well with previous pieces by *Blast Theory* that I'd seen, and some aspects were quite familiar. You encounter an operator who gives you some information about what you need to do. They give you enough information for you to know what you need to do but not quite enough for you to know absolutely what you need to do! You therefore feel slightly uncomfortable and this is something that, I think, is really exciting about *Blast Theory's* work; that having seen so much of it, they are still able to surprise their audience and still make it feel uncomfortable. I felt that there's obviously a trust element: you surrender some information; you have to give the details of your credit card in order to receive the equipment. And that's again something that I've experienced in other pieces.

AL: I was quite affronted when I went.

GG: Yes?

AL: Credit card details!

GG: Yes. I gave the details and felt that I had left something there already. Another characteristic feature is the fact that the work occurs in an urban setting, which is again, clearly linked to working with technology – the majority of technology is in urban settings. So having said all this, these were the aspects that I felt I knew about already. But there were a number of things that I had not expected. The first thing was that usually we walked but on this occasion we were using transport; in fact we were using bicycles and I'm terrible on bicycles! I don't drive, I don't know the road rules, and I don't live in London. So, I had no idea where I was going. I didn't exactly feel liberated but rather in difficulty, negotiating the traffic and even dealing with a policeman telling me what to do. Having said that though, I felt that the piece immediately acquired a 'double tempo'. One had to do with cycling quickly and trying to keep an eye on the console – even though I was told by Ju, who had inducted me, not to do it.

Having to stop in order to play however created a more fragmented, interrupted piece, which was interesting and reminded me of *Day of the Figurines*.

The other interesting thing, which I hadn't thought about until I was in it, was that unlike previous pieces, I had no missions at all. Even *Day of the Figurines*, which many people felt was in some ways a game without missions because you didn't quite know why you were doing this game for 24 days, had specific missions that allowed you to improve your health and survive the game. But on this occasion, I just didn't really know why I was there, and that added a completely new dimension for me. I was also interested in the title, which is *Rider Spoke*, so it's in the past. I felt that the piece wasn't particularly about me speaking but about the rider who spoke already and to whom I was listening (and whom I would become). What was really interesting was that you could see the screen, the screen told you what to do – and the operator was quite clear about that: 'Wait for the screen to interact with you.' You get the choice as to whether you want to listen to somebody else's confession or whether you want to confess yourself. And I found it really hard to choose – I was stood there sometimes for about five minutes, thinking what do I want to do? I also found that, as intriguing as it was to listen to strangers' confessions, I was also very intrigued to listen to players I knew – like Martin's confession for instance. And I found, the moment that I was asked to make my first confession, which in a sense is the one where you say who you are and how you feel, was the moment I found very unexpected, where I had to decide, 'Is it going to be *me* or am I creating a role or should I create a character, even? What do I do now?' And again, that threw me!

So just to draw things together, there's obviously a new space that's been generated with this process. As I was cycling around a part of London that I didn't know, finding myself in all sorts of dark corners and peculiar places, this other space was becoming increasingly exciting and interesting and dominant in the way that I was moving. I was moving on that bike so in that sense I was performing, not only for myself but also for the people who were watching me cycling precariously around London. But this was also social space, because progressively I learnt about the confessions of these other people, some of them obviously creating very different kinds of spaces. So, for instance, somebody was talking about it raining a lot, yet when I was doing it, it wasn't raining. That obviously made you see the city space as a palimpsest, as a layered site, through which you could see one space through another. There was a temporal dimension, again because the confessions came from the past or players that played before you. Because most of the confessions refer to things that happened in the past, such as a party when you were eighteen years old, for me the piece created a temporal augmentation of the 'present moment', if you like, that was unexpected.

AL: Well, I think it's interesting that your experience of this was dealing with 'confessions'. When I did it, my experience was of recording facts that I could

possibly have invented, had I wanted to. But then, at one moment – I don't know if this is always the last question, I thought at the time that it was but it occurs to me now that perhaps it isn't – I was asked to make a promise. And it was quite a moment really because I thought, 'Here's a vow that I can choose to make or not. It might be trivial but it might not be.' Then I was asked to record my promise, which I hadn't expected. So, that was another moment: 'Shall I record my promise, or shall I invent another one and record that or shall I ignore my instruction?' So everything that you've said about this being playful seems perfectly true. But also I thought it had a very neat engagement with what might be questions of value and truth statements and bouncing that back on the individual. And I'm segueing into a question for Vivienne.

Vivienne, you commissioned I think *Uncle Roy, Around You* which I think ended with a similar, almost cataclysmic moment of possible truth and commitment where – correct me if I'm wrong – people were asked to decide whether they would commit to a stranger for a year and then be on hand for that stranger, as and when the person decided to call, if ever they did and I believe some people saw this through and others evaporated. Anyway, you commissioned this work. Why? And do you see connections between it and *Rider Spoke*? What's the arc?

VG: I commissioned it without any money, but that was the ICA way at the time, and still is!

AL: One of *those* kinds of commissions.

VG: Yes. We wanted it but, on the cheap. I sit here as a fraud in many ways, because I haven't managed to go on the bike ride and I didn't finish *Uncle Roy*: I got lost and there was an alarm button and you [to MA] came to my rescue.

MA: Really?

VG: Yes, I've just been thinking about it. So, I'm almost useless and redundant in many ways. But I think I've understood the concepts of it, and it's been lovely to hear about that project today. I think there are a number of relationships, and I'm trying to think about how you position Blast Theory's work. In many ways, it's splintered out into many different areas. They've always been ahead of the game, and I'd say that even if you [to MA] weren't here! They've been ahead of the game in terms of understanding that performance and theatre's relationships with technology are boundless and can be sited and un-sited.

The first way is in terms of this social role it takes. I started to think about in the trajectory of *happenings*, which is a strange way to think about this work because it's very social, but it's a very personal social. I think there is something in the history of happenings that is about the relationship between art and entertainment and didn't have any boundaries or demarcations between the two:

a fusion of those areas. I think there's a social way that art can be played out with fun, with engagement, with entertainment, adapting existing models from the world of entertainment and repositioning them into a more cultural context. You were talking about your interest in club culture and I think there are still trajectories of that coming through.

The second way I started to think about where they resided in our history, if you like, was in interventionist projects: interventions into social spaces, interventions as a political motivation. I think the way you talked about your work to start with had an almost sociological basis, and I think there's a very strong political drive behind what you do, although it's not overt and I think that's probably its success. You [to MA] can argue against this afterwards.

MA: No, I agree with you.

VG: And I think it's about re-stating where we are in our political, cultural context: those things that you researched, about mobility and the lack of the personal and the move back to the local as a result of this. I think when you start putting technology and performance together they start to become quite a political force, quite certainly related to a political background.

I think the third way of thinking about this is more as a social experiment and I think *Uncle Roy* and *Rider Spoke* have a lot in common, as does *Kidnap*, as a strange anthropological and social experiment. Blast Theory end up being these sinister characters. They come across as very nice, they're asking you these lovely questions as you're going on your bike ride or getting lost around St James's Park. But in fact they're gathering a huge amount of data: they're taking the role of the Tesco Clubcard in some ways! They're pushing you into this point of confidence. It's not as simple as a *Big Brother* – it's a way of building up a bond and a friendship with you in the guise of art. Art in many ways has been an excuse for giving away far too much information and elements of self in the past, and I think they play on that quite ruthlessly. And in many ways they take the role of the voyeur and it's an inversion of this traditional set-up where, *we're* up here performing and *you're* a voyeur on what *we're* performing, whether it's Shakespeare or performance or dance or whatever. And in fact they become the voyeur on all the action, they've got the bigger plan, they've got this super Wi-Fi template, they've got this bigger perspective on movements and actions. Then they come down to the personal: What are your secrets? What are your confessions? Are you making promises? And suddenly you're giving a huge amount of self away. So I'd be very cautious about working with these people. They're clever but dangerous. Maybe they're just points to start a discussion rather than anything.

AL: This notion of the voyeurism of the company is interesting. Matt gave a presentation here a while ago and I remember thinking, 'What *Blast Theory* have done is to do away with audiences.' There is no longer an audience in this work;

there are only participants who are *experiencers*. So there are people who get involved and have experiences. But then, of course, when you do that, you are the one that's being observed. I wonder if there's more to be said about that? Is that deliberate?

GG: I felt that in this work the participant is much more of an auditor than it is a spectator because you're listening all the time.

AL: So there are no spectators in this either?

GG: There are spectators but they're not necessarily participating, they're bystanders, obviously. I'm sure Martin and Matt will have something to say about it.

MA: There's a complex set of interrelationships there. I think that, at one level, we are looking to invite people to participate and to create work that is unfinished; we invite an audience to finish that. And yet you've got to be alive to all of the kinds of glibness and fraud that is potentially involved where you set up a scenario where you invite your audience to speak in the work. This is that age-old thing about audience participation. Either you're manipulating your audience to fulfil a pre-authored role, to fit directly into the magician's trick, or you leave it to something that's incredibly wide and loose and 'blancmangey' where, 'everything's ok man, just, you know, let it all out'. And so then how do you structure this conversation? There is a strong historical strand in theatre of doing this incredibly precisely in small ways, in small groups, but we've been trying to create structures that are self-sustaining. One possible trajectory of *Rider Spoke* is that anyone with a bike and their own device could download the software and cycle around Cheltenham or Aberdeen and have this experience or create this experience for one another, and to that effect we would cease to have anything to do with it. It can almost be a self organising principle.

AL: To what end? What have you facilitated?

MA: We're trying to explore what the limits might be. We've always had a strong interest in how you might problematise the relationship between the audience and the performer and in how to give that a new twist. It's almost like an oscillation, a vibration that we all have between the pleasures of listening and having someone present, and that of wanting to speak and articulate something.

Audience Member: I have a question. I think asking your audience to confide in you is very interesting, and I can think of somewhere else that happens – the therapist's office! And that made me wonder what, if any, ethical or mutual responsibility you felt about people recording confessions or secrets?

MA: Well I think there is a very important ethical dimension to everything we make because – Gabriella and Andy, you've talked about this – there's quite a

high threshold: when you come into *Rider Spoke* you put a tremendous amount of trust into us. We send you out into a strange city at night on a bike you've never ridden before with a device you've never used before, and invite you to say things and you can't be entirely sure how they're going to be used. So you're very exposed, not as much as in *Kidnap*, but still! It's a high threshold to invite people to cross. For that reason we take the ethics of what we do very seriously. And, in fact, in works in the past those things that have become said are hidden and lost forever.

For example, we did a piece of work in a gallery in the Netherlands, where people interviewed one another in three booths and we very consciously destroyed what was said; we never recorded any trace of that, never let it leave that space. We thought these were private relationships between these individuals and that to have people watching, observing, would shift it. I don't think it quite extends into our obligations as quasi priests. I love the Catholic reading of this as a confessional process, but as an individual you're choosing at what register you take this. Is this something where you just play with it, is this something where you say something because you've been asked to, or do you treat this as a space where you say something that would otherwise have remained unspoken, and that's entirely up to you and that may shift over time; you may take the piece more or less seriously or you may find one question more engaging than another.

GG: I think there's also something else that Martin was talking about before which is that in our everyday life, information is extracted from us all the time unbeknownst to us. Right now people would be able to know that I'm sitting here based on my mobile phone location, and so on and so forth. And they know what I like to buy and what I eat and where I go. I think throughout this piece information is still extracted through the confession but it is valueless, as far as I can see; it's not commercial information. So suddenly you're at a different aesthetic level of engagement, a level where what you confess, what you say, is not tradable.

MA: But it raises questions of value for the participant.

GG: Of a different kind of value.

MA: Yes, and I think that's partly to do with your understanding of who you're recording for.

GG: Yes.

MA: Because it's clear that just as you listen, others will also be listening. So the question is how do you place yourself in respect to the people who are subsequently going to listen to what you've done, and to me that's where the politics of the work comes from: how do you speak to a stranger, a stranger who



you will have no responsibility to? At some level you are long gone before they will hear it. At what register are you communicating to the strangers who will come after?

AL: I guess one of the tensions here is the extent to which you and the company are the director of this piece, the author, the facilitator, and then the extent to which the people who participate in it are the agents of their own journey through the piece, making the decisions you suggested we might make. As you suggest, one's engagement with the work – playful, flippant, cynical, very serious, or whatever – can change through the journey. Did you feel when you did *Uncle Roy* that you had control, or that you were plotting a journey? Likewise, Gabriella, you talked earlier about enjoying being in a position where there is a degree of danger and you feel uncomfortable, so that balance between people willingly participating and trusting and entering into an act of trust which rebounds on you in various ways, but also enjoying moments of discomfort or surprise, and then being able to negotiate your relationship with seems to be very interesting. How did you [to VG] feel about *Uncle Roy*?

VG: I found it extremely uncomfortable. [Laughs] I was extremely uncomfortable and extremely vulnerable. I think I bought into the concept of the project but also resisted it at the same time, because I didn't really want to become an agent and I also had to overcome inherent fears of audience participation. I was aware that I was audience and a performer and a participator and was visible and was responsible for somebody else and for me! And I think I got really lost! I think there was an element of deliberacy within that, to stop this process happening. My problem with it was that I was over-informed: I knew what you [to MA] were doing. I think it's interesting talking about going in knowing that you're going in, giving this information away and that you know it's fine. Maybe a lot of people who signed up to this don't know it's fine. You're saying you're a respectable art group, but at the same time why trust that? Going back to the project, with the data you've collected so far, can you see the difference in terms of how the audience can be free, and the known to the unknown for example?

MA: I think your experience is very common. People do find it quite uncomfortable and quite scary. The level of trust with which people come is an interesting question, because part of it is to do with artists and creative production: you trust you're going to be treated to something. When you lay out 40 quid to go and see something at National or Southbank Centre, you trust that your time and money is going to be treated well. In this work the trust takes you to another level and I think the fragility and the level of exposure that these pieces demand is a vital part of it, because historically avant garde practice was about shocking or scaring or frightening people, ripping up the rule book or re-framing the work with such violence as to force people to reconsider what they were watching. The days when you could do that in a traditional theatre space are long gone. There is not one thing that could be done on this stage that would do that. Or those who try to do it, do it with a sufficiently visceral overload that the

trick itself is so self-evident. I do think that we try to create work where people are imbalanced in a productive way, and that's where trust and ethics come in to it. If you're going to try to tease and lure people, seduce people into giving something up to you, putting themselves in a position of balance, do you reward them and do you treat them with care and seriousness once you've done that? To us that is one of the overriding principles: there is a tremendous care towards people. When people are wandering around the streets really lost, there's a whole group of us all around that area on walkie-talkies doing everything in our power to ensure that that magic circle of the game - it may be elastic - still exists and there will be people who will gently nudge you back into where you're supposed to be if you wander off track and that sort of thing.

AL: But you had a lot of people playing the game through a computer as well didn't you.

MA: Yes.

AL: And that suggests there doesn't necessarily have to be a centre, but I think there was a centre where people go and play. I presume that Martin and the people from the Mixed Reality Lab are there stoking the technological fire as it were, to keep the whole thing cooking.

MA: Fixing the technological fire I think we call that, don't we Martin?

MF: Re-lighting.

MA: [Laughs]

MF: In the storm, with a newspaper, with a match.

AL: Is there a centre in *Rider Spoke*?

MF: It's very different because, we leave people *to their own devices*. They take this thing and they go out and they're left on their own and make their own way through the city – they make their own recordings. Whereas the previous pieces, *Uncle Roy* and *I Like Frank*, were, as Matt said, a continual process of monitoring what people were doing, making sure they were operating within the boundaries we'd set and if they got lost or went the wrong way then we were there to nudge them back on track. Everything they did was very carefully prescribed in some way. We had to have the technological means and processes to respond to whatever we thought might go wrong with some of these experiences.

AL: So you've taken the fragmented lone agent a step further in this piece. And on the other hand it does feel as though there is an umbilical connection with the voice and the machine in this piece.

MA: But there is no centre. It really is a distributed set of data. The one thing that we are doing in the background at the moment is listening to every piece of audio and ranking it and deciding what goes back in and what comes out. As the work develops we might look at what other mechanisms we might be able to use to enable you to navigate that sheer volume of stuff. There are hundreds and hundreds of recordings. That is where the wizard is behind the curtains!

Audience Member: I was whether it would be possible to access the residue of the performance, or some kind of artefact subsequent to the performance, so that the user could then continue to edit those different codes.

MA: It's a possibility, certainly something that we'll look at. One of the things that we haven't talked so much about is how you make work that's about the meaning of place and specificity of place, and this is what performance ultimately is. The here and now is one of the essential parts of performance and so one of our interests in location based media from 1999 and 2000 was: can you make performance that is actually anywhere and here at the same time? *Can You See Me Now*, which is a chase game, is about our proximity; anywhere and here is where it's played out. We're authoring content for every few square metres of that cityscape to create a rich dense text. In *Rider Spoke*, what we've tried to do is put it in the hands of the participants; you choose where the here is and you choose what's specific to that here. If we were to do anything else with the residue we need to have worked out how we deal with that inevitable ripping away from context. Even the very fact that you had to cycle to find the stuff means that you have an interest, an investment, a level of listening, a kind of detail, a kind of precision of listening that's important. The work rests on that.

Audience Member: To do with the actual physical geographical location as much as the virtual information?

MA: Absolutely.

AL: Some of the questions are geographically specific. You might be asked – as I was – to look through a window and describe what's inside the window, but then express why you find that interesting and might want to travel through the window, for instance. But I understand that in previous works you've used disclaimers or had arrangements where the material that's been generated by individuals is within-game, in-world as it were, and doesn't become available for you to do anything else with, where as that's currently not the case.

MA: That's right.

AL: So there's an accumulation of verbal utterance, which is presumably both banal, everyday, very contextual, splendidly poetic, that becomes available for another manifestation.

MA: Yep. And hilarious and moving...

Audience Member: It's selected?

MA: 'Selection' is perhaps too strong a term. At the moment we're filtering out stuff that is either poorly recorded or sufficiently banal as to really not warrant someone cycling for several minutes to get a recording that says, 'Oh, I can't think of an answer to this one.'

Audience Member: Are the other participants aware that you're doing that?

MA: No. But don't tell everyone.

[Laughter]

MF: Trust goes so far.

MA: Obviously, as with all of these things, there are all kinds of functions that are critical to the way it operates. For example, you will only ever be listening to stuff was created the day before or earlier. We don't have the technical capacity or the budget needed to make it work on real time. So, at the end of the day, Martin and the MRL meticulously copy all of the data from every single one of the 30 devices to a server at Nottingham, then we go through a process of sorting that all out, sorting out any conflicts, then downloading it to all of the machines. So there's a lot of sticky tape and glue, and *Blue Peter* scissors, behind it to make it work.

AL: I'm sure there are plenty of questions at this point. I'd like to ask Gabriella one last question and then open it up to the floor. [To GG] You've said that this work is importantly site specific in a number of respects. You spoke earlier in your presentation about an intention to locate the Barbican very specifically in its London environment. Did you feel that you saw the Barbican differently, or the streets of London differently, when you were perilously on your bike?

GG: Yes, definitely. To start with, I ended up somewhere I wouldn't normally have ended up and did things I would normally not do in front of people. So that's one level. The second level is once you start engaging with the game, making your own confessions, as I was saying before, the way you encounter the space becomes increasingly palimpsestic. So you're seeing one site through another. You're continuously trying to operate yourself between worlds, which is obviously something that is a constant in Blast Theory's work. I was using transport and I was moving either very quickly or having to stop, not necessarily where I wanted to stop, but where the computer was telling me to stop, which made me see things in a different way both spatially and temporally.

AL: It is one of the reasons why we were so interested to do it around the

Barbican. It is one of the most densely palimpsestic parts of London. You have the Medieval street plan: you have Moorgate, Aldgate, Ludgate and the other city gates all around the Barbican. The Barbican itself of course is a reminder of the fort that stood there, and then bomb damage completely wiped that away – it's a place that's completely fractured. It did feel like a very appropriate context in which to cycle.

GG: With all sorts of social activity; people going back home, people having a drink in the pub, people going to a concert, and you trying to listen to the riders!

AL: So it becomes very time-specific as well as space-specific.

GG: Yes, I felt it was definitely playing with the time as well as with space.

VG: With *Uncle Roy*, because you were so engaged – you've got your GPS, your online player, and you've got your defined map – you're aware of your environment but you're not as engaged with it, even though it's absolutely crucial to the piece, that this map has been tracked out in minute detail by these guys, you're still quite fixed in this world, the world between you and virtual. And that's a very interesting place.

GG: Well it was more about presence, because you were constantly reading signs from the bystanders as if they were in the game.

VG: Absolutely.

GG: In this game, you are in a situation of absence because you are listening to somebody who is ultimately not there, or no longer there, but who has left a trace for you – not a real trace, but it is a real sound trace. But it's also about your relationship with the technology that enables you to listen to that trace.

AL: I found it a curiously parallel experience in a way. Not virtual, because we weren't engaging in a virtual world in the way that *Uncle Roy* asks. But somehow, not as I would ever find myself on that particular street close to the Barbican in any other circumstance...

VG: And that's the theatre isn't it? That's the fiction.

AL: There is a place of performance going on there, in my head at least. But this is a moment to ask other people how they found it and what questions they might have about this piece, or more broadly about some of the issues that have been raised.

Audience Member: I'm assuming you're not using voice recognition technology because you didn't mention it, but what is your attitude towards it, in the context of this project?

MA: In the context of this project? I don't feel that we would have any real interest in using it... Do you mean voice recognition as in translating voices into text?

Audience Member: It's just how I'm reading your project. Being about initial stages of a new technology being figured out creatively. And it puts you in a position where sometimes you have to use technology at some point.

MA: We have looked at voice recognition technology to see whether it was something we could make a project out of and the simple answer was that it's too expensive. There's just no way that we can get access to the really good quality voice recognition stuff and the things that are down at the level that we can afford are not useful. But I think what is interesting about what you raise is that there is a sense in trying to stake out the cultural possibilities of some of these technologies. It's one of the reasons we got interested, for example, in GPS. GPS is a military technology that was being talked about and thought of in marketing terms. It's about how you can sell people a frappuccino by pointing out to them that they're near their local Starbucks and beaming them an offer. A lot of location-based media and discussion around 3G networks was all about that. Once we became aware that this was the rhetoric that was going round and round and round about this brave new world that was coming, we thought that surely there might be possibilities to stake out other forms of communication, other ways of using these technologies.

Audience Member: I just wanted to ask you something, Gabriella. I also did *Rider Spoke*. I don't know at what time of the day you did your ride, but I did mine in the evening on Sunday, and the experience I got – I always thought I was a kind of brave person – was not what I was expecting at all! I felt very anxious, quite frightened. I wanted to commit fully to what was going on. I loved the music, and yet there were so many other things that were stopping me from committing fully, which is all part of the experience. There were a lot of people who were alone. I originally booked to do the piece with my performative partner, but my partner was sick so I took my son. My son is 16 years old, and we don't live in London either. The experience for me was really interesting because I suddenly had to look out for somebody else at the same time. And that really directly impacted on a) what I recorded, and b) my sense of self; the risk I might have taken as a single person/performer was very different to the risks that I would take as a mother and somebody looking after someone – possibly a different sense of freedom while I rode about the Barbican at the time. I just wondered: did you ride alone or with somebody?

GG: I rode alone and, as I said, I don't drive and haven't ridden a bicycle since I was eight when I had a major accident. I told Matt I was probably going to die! So I enjoyed it because I had no idea if I could even do it. I spent 20 minutes – that's probably an exaggeration – trying to find somewhere I could ride without

getting myself killed, because I knew I could, easily. Then, at that point, I was able to engage with the piece. But I was also aware that I had to get a train back to Exeter to look after my daughter who was being babysat, so I did have that sense of urgency to some extent, and I suppose I didn't take risks. So the pictures of the rider going freely into the city were not me!

Audience Member: I wanted to find desolate, isolated places where I, personally, would have felt much more comfortable recording my confession, which I did as myself and not performatively in any way. And the device wouldn't allow me to use those places because they weren't up for grabs at that point. There was an occasion where I ended up in a bus stop, which was quite interesting. The Barbican became almost like the beacon: 'I've got to get back to the Barbican!' It was the only place I recognised. It was very multi-layered.

MA: I think your experience is not uncommon and it is really an integral part of these works that they're incredibly vulnerable and fragile to the chaos of the real world. With *Uncle Roy*, we had a few online players who would just delight in trying to ruin the game for the street players, because that's just part of online culture. So they would come in and tell people to go to the wrong place, and insult them, and some people would come back, really upset, having never found Uncle Roy's office at all, and some asshole had been abusing them, so naturally their experience is grim. Thank God we haven't had to do *Rider Spoke* in the rain, but if you go out and it's tipping with rain, that will have a huge impact. So, this is kind of our problem: we're working this line between theatre practice – you know what you're doing, you set up your space, you control that and you give someone an absolutely knock out experience – and the electronic/technologically mediated space – a game space, where people drop in and out, they come with different agendas, they come when they want and how they want and make it what they want. There's an inherent conflict there, and we occasionally fall foul of that on either side. So, you know, it is a real challenge.

ENDS