

Life or simulation? The lines blur ...

AVANT-GARDE
Lenny Ann Low

Almost four years ago a young Australian receptionist was kidnapped from a pub in London, bundled into a van and imprisoned in a secret safehouse for 48 hours.

But she didn't really mind.

In fact, for 26-year-old Deborah Burgess, her sudden disappearance from the Rat and Parrot Pub on July 15, 1998, was a wish come true. Burgess had already paid £10, filled out a kidnap "wish list" and implored her abductors, the London-based art collective Blast Theory, to take away her freedom.

Today two of the kidnap perpetrators, Matt Adams and Ju Row Farr, arrive in Sydney to scout locations for two other interactive Blast Theory projects. The first, *Can You See Me Now?*, is a virtual stalking game between online and on-the-street competitors tracked by satellites. The second, called *Desert Rain*, requires audience members to join in computer-generated conflict mimicking CNN-style coverage of the Gulf War.

The four-member group, whose video installation *Trucold* is on show in the Biennale of Sydney, formed in 1991.

They create work exploring media manipulation and the public's fascination with voyeuristic observation.

Half an hour after being kidnapped Burgess may have wished she hadn't applied to be part of the public's fascination. After removing the pillowcase



Blast Theory ... A kidnapping in the name of art.

on her head, she found herself in a small windowless wooden room with a Net-controlled video camera trained on her and a ladder in her tights.

"For this adventure I'd be happy to be flirted with and have a couple of days of interesting conversation and a fantastic tale to tell the folks back home," Burgess had written on her *Kidnap* application form.

What this investigation into the kidnapper and hostage relationship gave her was a foam mattress, a sleeping bag, stale food and sporadic conversation with a fellow "hostage", Russell Ward, a 19-year-old convenience store worker. That and a lot of time to think.

Viewers on the Net also watched the pair feed each other blindfolded, read a magazine and withstand Martha and the Vandellas' 1960s' hit *Nowhere to Run* at high volume.

"Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Kidnap* was refused funding by all the arts bodies in the UK," said Adams, who co-created the project under the watchful eye of a psychologist, a St John Ambulance officer and a firm of lawyers.