

Art

An Explicit Volume

Octoberfest, London

★★★★☆

The woman lies on the carpet, a rope passing between her crotch and around her body. Her back is to the camera. The first things you notice are the immaculate knots. This is boy scout-standard bondage. The next is her ear, a tiny pink furl that has somehow escaped the trussing.

With the click of a mouse you can download this image from the internet in the privacy of your own home. You are only looking. But what if this woman were dead? Would you still say, "I was only looking," if the image were not of a staged bondage fantasy but of a murder victim? And what if you couldn't do it in private but only in a public space? Would you still look?

The issue of individual responsibility for what we look at, as opposed to state censorship, is raised in the latest piece from Blast Theory. It takes 19 pornographic images from the thousands available on the internet and transposes them into book form. Enter the venue and you are confronted by a row of red seats. Beyond are nine handmade books arranged in a grid and a single computer with a touch screen. The screen invites you to select a title. You make your choice and suddenly the electronic page turner on each of the books whirls into action, peeling back images that have been sliced up like a jigsaw. There is something curiously theatrical about the page turners, like watching a magician revealing the sawn-up lady with a flourish.

Blast Theory's censorship game

If you want to see the image more clearly then you must touch the computer screen, and the pages turn again. The more often you press the screen, the more explicit the image becomes, as the jigsaw rearranges itself to leave you in no doubt of what it depicts. You have gone all the way. The question is how far you will go when you are in a room full of other people, perhaps egging you on to show more, or maybe expressing their disapproval at what you are doing.

Like a lot of Blast Theory's work there is an element of game-playing in the scenario. Staring at the first set of images I am irresistibly reminded of that old TV quiz show *Ask the Family*, in which household objects were photographed at bizarre angles.

The piece's limitations are exposed by the company's own sense of responsibility, which leads them to exclude really hardcore images. This slightly negates the impact of a work whose artfulness lies only in the audience's response to it.

Lyn Gardner

At Tyers Gate, London SE1, until October 21. Details: 020-7223 2223.