

Day of the Figurines

National Museum of Singapore | 6 - 29 December 2006

I was murdered in the National Museum. I was playing “Day of the Figurines”, an interactive art project by the UK artists’ collective Blast Theory, installed for the National Museum’s Opening Festival, 2-31 December, 2006.

“Day of the Figurines” was an interactive artwork that operated as a game, with members of the Singapore public controlling their characters via SMS as they carried out tasks in a fictional town. My character, Ouyang Xun, was killed with a 2-foot by 4-foot plank of pinewood by a certain woman named Miss Biscuit. According to Museum volunteers, this wasn’t too unusual.

“I’ve seen virtual sex scenes, people going on killing sprees, people helping each other for no reason,” said Rohan Narula, 21, an SMU student volunteer who monitors the game, shifting the players’ figurines on the playing board. He noted at least eight victims of serial killers (including myself), as well as some stranger phenomena.

A woman managed to buy a car off another player by performing a “virtual chair dance” via SMS. A player named Tinman began lying to people, saying he had the Matrix-like power to revive their characters if they died. “He became the hero of the town,” Narula recalls.

And the events that occur in the town — a riot because of a visiting Swedish electric band, a Middle Eastern naval invasion, a murder of two lovers in the cemetery — are matched only by the disorienting experience of being a player in this landscape, dashing back and forth between spots to stave off hunger, complete assigned tasks and rescue fellow players with defibrillators.

Blast Theory describes “Day of the Figurines” as an “enquiry into the nature of public participation in artworks”, and it’s been tested and played at the group’s studio in Hackney, as well as in festivals in Barcelona and Berlin. Still, it’s tempting to see the game as a sort of personal mirror to the nation — set in a small, decaying town where explosions routinely occur, without laws to control the gaming community.

This parallel world could be the dark unconscious of Singapore, where people enact their anarchic fantasies forbidden to them in daylight. Or it could be the old Singapore that’s housed in the National Museum itself — smouldering, but alive, bustling with visitors, preserved under the artificial programming of the curators.

Whatever your interpretation, it’s rare for such an experimental piece of art to have such broad, sustained and intimate outreach here. By the final days of the game, there were 140 people in Singapore playing



“Day of the Figurines”, some following the game throughout its 24-day appearance.¹

The National Museum’s recently been criticised for being too “Disney-esque”.² And even I’ve questioned the level whereby artists are given a voice in expressing themselves in the museum’s permanent exhibition.

Still, I’m already impressed by the simple fact that the Museum chose to engage with contemporary art as part of its Opening Festival. As an institution focused on history, the Museum wasn’t compelled to install its walls with video work by Matthew Ngui. It could have stuck to the more marketable art forms of the Festival, such as music, film, drama and non-conceptual visual arts.



But it’s possible that Museum director Lee Chor Lin, a consistent supporter of the arts, might have noticed the dearth of patronage from government institutions for today’s art - the particular offender being the Singapore Art Museum, which has done pitifully little to engage with the local contemporary scene. Which could be why she took the initiative to commission and import strange works, like Twardzik Ching Chor Leng’s magnetic wall, Suzann Victor’s mobile chandeliers and the Brighton-based Blast Theory’s “Day of the Figurines”.

Sure, “Day of the Figurines” isn’t the group’s most exciting project - consider their 1998 work, “Kidnap”, which gave the public the chance to win a lottery to be abducted and placed under Internet surveillance for 48 hours. But its virtual, dystopian landscape, where characters get flipped off by passing strangers and murdered in cemeteries, is plenty strange enough for the Sunday couple who don’t quite yet dare to visit The Substation across the road.

And after all, art is particularly valuable in this country as it suggests there are greater things in the world beyond our petty, pragmatic lives. It alters reality. And “Day of the Figurines” is particularly effective in accomplishing just that.

As the volunteer Narula remarks, observing the players, “They’re really getting into the skin of their characters.”

“They start referring to buildings in the town like they’ve lived there for a long time. They leave their Singapore identity behind and they become a citizen of the town.”

notes

1. The best contender I can think of, coincidentally also featuring 140 participants, was Seelan Palay’s online artwork against the IMF summit, “400 Frowns” 400frowns.lioncitydiy.com.
2. See Clara Chow’s article in Life! Tuesday 23 December 2006
3. See my column in Today, Thursday 14 December 2006

By **Ng Yi-Sheng** in [Reviews](#)

[« Previous Post](#)
[Next Post »](#)