Blast Theory in Australia

RealTime talks to Blast Theory

Desert Rain uses a combination of virtual reality, installation and performance to problematise the boundary between the real and the virtual. It places participants in a Collaborative Virtual Environment in which the real intrudes into the virtual and vice versa. It juxtaposes the real, the imaginary, the fictional and the virtual as a means of defining them.

Blast Theory

Blast Theory, the UK new media performance and installation group is coming to Sydney's Artspace in November to present Desert Rain. Six audience members at a time, physically separated but electronically connected, will actively experience a task—they have 20 minutes to find their target. The setting: the Gulf War. The targets? Find out when you play Desert Rain.

As we fearfully anticipate another war in the same region, the product in part of America's unfinished business with Iraq, its response to terrorism, and its post Cold War assertion of itself as empire, the arrival of Desert Rain in Australia is painfully appropriate, especially given our government's support for the US and the severe limits on information by which to make any judgment about what is happening.

Although Blast Theory are skeptical of Jean Baudrillard's theoretical position, they are nonetheless 'influenced by [his] assertion that the Gulf War did not take place because it was in fact a virtual event.' They cite Paul Patton's observations (about

established and felt significant, as well as covering a whole load of technical hurdles. We can take it further, to a different level of exploration of the city for the public, opening people up to their surroundings, or being able to interact rather than only chase them.

You're very interested in the witness.

Whether you're spectating or engaged is something we've been interested in for 2 or 3 years. An Explicit Volume, the interactive installation we made last year using pornographic imagery taken from the internet and put back into book format, was built around that sense of what level you're implicated through the consumption of culture. There

an archetype, clichés and imagery, and yet it is absolutely real within a certain sense. It's a constant fascination for us, the line between reality and fiction. To what extent is George W Bush playing the role of President?... We're increasingly savvy to those modes...they're artistic expression. Our work looks at that slippery boundary and where playing games, fiction and pop culture bleed into important social and cultural definitions.

What was your experience of Kidnap?

JRF We learned in making Kidnap (RT 27, p30) that we became one level of the audience, even though we were the kidnapers...We were like a front row audi-

ence—anybody who has done that and found that their memory is

its strange to know that the things you do in life are changing your memory, all these things that you do for fun...
Mobile phones are the first devices that yield a ubiquitous sense of presence. There are people we know for whom it is an absolute presence...it never leaves their sides.

JRF Tech is also really good fun, partly in relation to popular culture where you feel you can do anything—it's a play aspect we're into. We take a strand out of that because we know it's fun, not just to think it's a deeply meaningful tool.

MA They are very liberating, aren't they? In a multiple sense, for example George Soros' distributing photocopiers in Eastern Europe in the mid 80s was genuinely liberating in terms of how information was then distributed in a sort of samizdat network. In the same way Playstation has a great sense of fun that you inhabit as a car thief or a killer. In this sense I would never have had any experience of graphic design but for a computer which lent itself to graphic design and allowed me, as a total amateur, to play with it and gradually accumulate skill.

Are you playful in your work?

MA I believe that games can be very serious so there's a sense in which we are about play, in the way that in Kidnap we were pretending to be kidnappers and people who were kidnapped were pretending to be kidnapped. But there's a point at which the line is crossed...so that what you're doing is very difficult to distinguish ontologically from a real kidnap. That's a fascinating thing. It's true of sadomasochism: highly ritualised, very dramatic, structured around audience thing spun around for us in that work and because we had a live chatroom for the online audience to speak to the kidnappers, we were somewhat the pawns in the situation. Their comments implied we were there to be directed from the web to do something "This is boring...nothing's happening..." things we hadn't anticipated hit us in the back of the head. It was before Big Brother—we're big fans of reality TV.

MA The tedium of Kidnap, of watching people passing the time contrasted with the media reality. The web provides the opportunity for the sheer sense of duration.

What about the thrill of chasing people through the streets?

JRF We were on the ground in Can You See Me Now, the audience were online. They were pursued online. We ran a ridiculous number of kilometres. We weren't fit enough for the online players and had to develop strategies on the ground to go after people. The next stage is to put us online and the public on the ground, but we're going to totally change the format because we don't expect the public to be running with 100s of pounds of kit across roads—one for safety and 2 for the cash value of the kit.

MA Artistically we always knew it was a straightforward proposition—it's a chase, it's not artistically sophisticated. But we were interested in seeing if we could get a sense of presence between the street and an online player, that it would be sufficiently compelling as a chase and that's what we the net—that was their offence. Are they responsible for the production of those images by the downloading of them, is [the inference] that at one remove you are responsible for the rape of children? It's an extreme example but it parallels consumer issues like buying Nestlé products [in the context of] Nestlé and Third World mothers.

Blast Theory is one of a number of prominent British performance companies, including Forced Entertainments, Desperate Optimists and the guests of Time_Space_Place (Wagga Wagga, September, see RT52), Robert Pacitti (of the Pacitti Company) and Leslie Hill and Helen Paris of curious.com (see page 21). Blast Theory have been producing performance, installations and television/cinema works since 1991 in the UK and Europe. Their video work TRUCOLD was part of the 2002 Biennale of Sydney.

Desert Rain represents a rare opportunity not only to see the work of a significant British company but to experience a unique interactive installation where the audience is at the centre of the performance. Performances are on the half hour from midday until 9pm. You are promised a brief, but intense experience.

Six Australian performers will participate with Blast Theory in Desert Rain.

Desert Rain, produced by Blast Theory with University of Nottingham, ZKM (Karlsruhe), KTH (Stockholm), NOW Ninety9 (Nottingham) & DA2 (Bristol). Artspace, Nov 12-23. See p7 for booking details. Presented by Artspace, Ilux media arts, Macquarie University and RealTime with the assistance of the British Council and the New Media Arts Board of the Australian Council.