Blast Theory in Australia

RealTime talks to Blast Theory

Direct Rent uses a combination of virtual reality, installation and performance to problemitize 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 presents the real, the fictional and the virtual as a means of defining them.

Blast Theory

Blast Theory, the UK's new media performance and installation group is coming to Sydney's Artspace in November to present Direct Rent. 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 target? Find out when you play Direct Rent.

As we fearfully anticipate another war in the same region, the product in part of America's influence business with Iraq, its response to terrorism, and its post Cold War assertion of itself as empire, the arrival of Direct Rent 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 judgement about what is happening.

Although Blast Theory are sceptical of Joan Baudrillard's theoretical position, they are nonetheless 'influenced by [his] assertions' to the extent that the Gulf War did not take place because it was in fact a virtual war. They cite Paul Pata's observations about Baudrillard's speculations that "while televisual information claims to provide immediate access to real events, in fact what it does is produce information that stands in for the real... As consumers of mass media, we never experience the bare material event but only the informational content which renders it sticky and unreflectable like the disjuncted sea". Direct Rent, say the company, is not designed to demonstrate a theory, rather "to accept its significance in informing our view of the relationship of the real to the virtual and especially in its assertion that the virtual has a daily presence in our lives.

Those who have experienced Direct Rent variously describe it as challenging, involving, somnambulistic and exhilarating. One reviewer called it 'A complex and elaborate treatment of war in postmodern society.' Another wrote, 'I can guarantee that you will come out of it changed and humbled.'

When they were in Sydney a few months ago planning the tour to Australia, RT spoke with 2 of the members of Blast Theory, Matt Adams and Jo Row Farr.

Your relationship with technology?

MA: At one level we regard technology as tools available for the creation of work. Like a paint brush we can use creatively for self expression. But there's also a sense in which we're trying to reflect the environment in which we live. It's easy to see in an Luddish but difficult to do that if you recognize the level of technological change in Westernised countries in the last 10-15 years that has entered our lives. It seems to me that for artists not to be responding to the way in which technology is shifting our sense of space and place and our relationship to the world seems quite unusual.

JRF: I don't get fascinated with how it works or desire to be a deep level programmer. I'm interested in the psychology of the technology, what may or may not be possible. I mean, as something as a public use under-stand, its language, for example using a remote for turning the TV on, but also we can tap into that as a tool for an art work. Mechanically we understand a lot. How can we use that to interact with the user of the technology?

MA: It's an oxygen we breathe. You watch TV and the language of editing is an intrinsic part of your experience and standing from 2 to 4 years of age on. How does it change your understanding, your faith in the nature of being, when you witness 1000 or 10000 fictional lives before you have your own first love?

Why not a show about housing?

MA: We did quite a lot of work around pornography, more graphic, a more literal sense of a similar thing. What is it to understand your sexuality when you see sex from the outside as well as experience it from the inside? That sense of distance is of interest. We're doing now with wireless technology came out of a fascination with how the city is changed by having devices with you all the time which means you never really leave an electron space. 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 because you feel you can do anything—its a play aspect were into. We took a strand out of that because we know it's fun, not just to think its a deeply meaningful tool.

MA: They are very liberating, aren't they? In a multiple sense, for example George Bush distributing photographs in Eastern Europe in the mid 80s was genuinely liberating in terms of how information was then distributed in a sort of societal network. The same way Pavlov 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 Knockup we were pretending to be kidnappers and people who were kidnapped were pretending to be kidnapped, but that's a point at which the line is crossed... so that what you're doing is very difficult to distinguish onslaught of a game that has entered our lives. That's a fascinating thing. It's one of the most important things, highly realised, very dramatic, structured around an archery, cliches and imagery, and yet it is absolutely real within a certain sense... Its a constant fascination for us, the link between reality and fiction. To what extent is George W Bush playing the role of President... We're increasingly savvy to those modes... they are artform 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 Knockup (RF 27, p60) that we became one level of the audience, even though we were the kidnappers, and as a front row audience held by every hand and move of the performance—the kidnappers. The whole audience thing spun around us in that work and because we had a live chautroom 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 happens. 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 theatre of Knockup, of watching people passing the time combined with the media reality. The web provides the opportunity for the sheer sense of duration.

What about the throng of people walking through the streets?

JRF: We were on the ground in Casablanca. We were alone. The audience were online. We ran a ridiculous, immense number of kilomaters. We weren't fit enough for the online players and had to develop strategies on the ground to get after people. The next stage is to put us online and the public on the ground, but we were going to totally change the format because we don't expect the public to be running with 760 of posters of let 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 chaos, 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 chaos and that's what we 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, not being able to interact rather than only chase them.

You're very interested in the western. Whether you're spectating or engaged is something we've been interested in for 2 or 3 years. In Express Volume, the interactive installation we made last year used printed photos 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 was a BBC doco on the Paedophile Unit and the arrest of people for downloading from the net—that was their offence. Are they responsible for the production of those images by the downloading of them, is [the inference] that as one removes you are responsible for the rape of children? It's an extreme example but it parallels consumer issues like buying Nestle products in the context of Nestle and Third World mothers.

Blast Theory is one of a number of prominent British performance companies, including Fourth Wall Entertainment, Deprante Optometre, and the groups of Time, Space, Place (Wagga, Wagga, Wagga, Wagga, September, see RT52), Robert Paccini (of the Faculties Company) and Leslie Hill and Helen Paris of curiosities (see page 21). Blast Theory have been producing performances, installations and television/computer work since 1991 in the UK and Europe. Their video-work INGOLD was part of the 2002 Biennale of Sydney.

Desert Rent 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 in the centre of the performance. Performances are on the half-hour from midday until 8pm. You are promised a brief, but intense experience. Six Australian performers will participate with Blast Theory in Desert Rent.

Desert Rent, produced by Blast Theory with University of Nottingham, UKM (Karlsruhe), KIT (Stuttgart) A0/Time9 (Nottm.; p.312; Berlin). ArtSpace, Nov 12-23. See p.2 for booking details. Presented by ArtSpace, illus media arts, Macquarie University and RealTime with the assistance of the British Council and the New Media Arts Board of the Australian Council.