

New Media Scan 2002

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RealTime^{+OnScreen}

October - November 02 No51

www.realtimearts.net

NEW MEDIA SCAN 2002

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 judgement 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 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 coating which renders it 'sticky and unintelligible' like the oil-soaked sea bird." *Desert Rain*, 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 *Desert Rain* variously describe it as challenging, involving, sombre 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 Ju Row Farr.

Your relationship with technology?

MA At one level we regard technologies 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 it as faddish but it's difficult to do that if you recognise the level of technological change in westernised countries in the last 10 to 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 personality of the technology, what it may do or not do well, as something we as a public now understand, 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 literacy to subvert the use 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 understanding from 2 to 3 years of age on. How does it change your understanding, your faith in the nature of being, when you witness 500 or 1000 fictional kisses before you have your own first kiss?

Why not a show about kissing?

MA We did quite a lot of work around pornography, a more graphic 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.

The work we're doing now with wireless technologies came out of a fascination at how the city is changed by having devices with you all the time which means you never really leave an electronic sphere.

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 photocopies 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 sado-masochism: highly ritualised, very dramatic, structured around



Blast Theory, *Kidnap*

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 kidnappers. We were like a front row audience held by every breath and move of the performers—the kidnapped. The whole audience thing spun around 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

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 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 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), NOWnity9 (Nottingham) & DA2 (Bristol). Artspace, Nov 12-23. See p7 for booking details. Presented by Artspace, dlux media arts, Macquarie University and RealTime with the assistance of the British Council and the New Media Arts Board of the Australia Council