



## ART PREVIEW ARCHIVES

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### Reel to Real

Art mirrors life mirrors art mirrors life...

Writer: SHARMILA VENKATASUBBAN

Good art asks tough questions -- questions that are hard, but necessary, to answer. Such as: Why the hell do we watch reality TV?

There are two standard answers. "I don't know; because it's on" is the first, more evasive, response. "I don't watch reality TV" is the second. Of course, both are outright lies. (And you know it.)

The U.K.-based art collective Blast Theory doesn't set out to discern our television-watching habits: It began making its multi-dimensional interactive art projects long before reality shows became popular. Yet its process of documenting voyeurism strikes an eerily familiar note, one that ends up telling us more about ourselves than the people the art puts on display.

Installed at the Wood Street Galleries, the group's latest work, "Uncle Roy All Around You," allows you to watch a game: Participants are filmed handing over all their possessions in exchange for a handheld computer, and are told to travel around London in search of a guy named Uncle Roy. In the segment displayed at Wood Street, a young blonde woman walks city streets -- meeting obtuse strangers and climbing into limousines where she's asked equally obtuse questions about her relationship to strangers. ("Would you be willing to commit 12 months to someone you've never met before?" Participants must answer before moving on to the next step.) Cops question her activities and people leaning against walls watch her every move, sometimes unbeknownst to her.

Players must accomplish a series of objectives; the first is to meet Roy in the park. So the woman's handheld computer screen shows a map of the area with an icon labeled "me" on it. But when she arrives at the park, Roy sends her another text message, this time asking her to meet him at his office instead. So she heads in that direction. Each time she reaches a destination, she's given another location, and must answer a seemingly weighty question, a query that can be somewhat funny for its lack of context. (For example, "When can you begin to trust a stranger?") The game involves strange human dramas and drama with strangers, just as *Survivor Meets The Real World* might, but without the outlandish bells and whistles such shows employ -- and with a much better soundtrack.

Blast Theory sets up these physical and virtual spaces for both the participants of the game and the viewers of the art -- all in order to explore how we draw distinctions between the viewers and the viewed. The piece is partly a video documentation of street players wandering around London, and partly an Internet game in which online players search for Uncle Roy. In addition to the projections, the installation features computers logged on to the Blast Theory Web in another section of the gallery, so visitors can register to play the game themselves.

That separates "Uncle Roy" from many Wood Street Internet-based art projects -- in which the actual art-making takes place somewhere else and the only thing displayed in the gallery is a computer monitor and lots of wall text. "Uncle Roy," by contrast, is a dark, elegant series of spaces filled with large screens and rhythmic music -- a "real life" enactment of the game you're about to play. The on-screen drama becomes addictive (as television often is) and soon you find yourself fixated on the blonde protagonist -- but not on whether she's going to find Roy. It's her indulgent smile that transfixes us: She knows she's playing a game, and never lets us forget it. Yet we keep watching to see if she will ever cross the line and submerge herself into the fantasy she's agreed to perpetuate.

"Uncle Roy" is less about solving the mystery than keeping it going as long as possible -- all while maintaining the arcs of storytelling and game-playing and exploring dichotomies between play and reality, public and private. That sensation is strikingly similar to those evoked by, say, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a show that -- for all its reality -- succeeds because of the leaps into the artificial the participants make just by playing along. Blast Theory is most interested in discovering places the psychological spaces that technology has created.

That's also the underlying premise of other works exhibited in *Replay*: For example, Raphael Lorenze-Hemmer's "Amodal Suspension" allows participants to send text messages to other people in the skies over a Japanese city by typing them onto a computer screen. And Masaki Fujihata's "Beyond Pages" tests our ability to maneuver through our own aesthetic and technological sensibilities until we "have an experience" with the art on display.

The latter piece consists of a dark room that contains a table and chair, as well as the projected images of a door on the far wall and a book on the table. A small pen-like instrument is attached to the table, and when I first picked it up, I wasn't sure what to do. So I tapped at the illusory book. Nothing happened. Then I drew on it. Still nothing. Then I asked myself, "If this were any other piece, what would I have to do right now to activate it?" That's when my thinking process, rather than the installation that spurred it, became the subject of the piece. And without giving away too much, I'll just say that as I turned the pages of the book, I also wrote it -- just as I constructed Blast Theory's game simply by watching others take part in it.



Masaki Fujihata's "Beyond Pages"

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**Replay runs through Jan. 31 at the Wood Street Galleries, Downtown.  
412-471-5605.**