

NEW YORK

How a Sundance Multimedia Exhibit Nearly Made a Blogger Rob a Bank

By: [Kyle Buchanan](#)
1/21/11 at 8:00 PM



Above: Not the author, but another participant in the game. *Photo: Courtesy of Blast Theory*

I'm pacing around a small ATM vestibule in Park City, and my adrenaline is pumping. It's quiet, and there's something I'm supposed to do, someone I'm supposed to meet. I'm looking for a young blond woman with fur-lined boots, a woman I've met but whose name I intentionally don't know. What I'm *not* looking for is the amiable bald guy in sunglasses who walks in.

"Is that thing working?" he asks, gesturing to the ATM machine.

I stammer that I don't know, then realize how suspicious that sounds. "I'm just waiting for a friend," I say, suddenly improvising, "And it's cold out, so I'm waiting in here." Something in my sock itches.

He nods, smiling, but accurately notes, "Sun's out. It's great."

It's at that point when I wonder whether he knows that I'm about to rob a bank. And if he does, would he understand that Sundance made me do it?

Just a few hours prior, with seventy-four dollars in my wallet, I'm at the Miners Hospital to tour the Sundance Film Festival's New Frontier section, a subcategory of the festival devoted to multimedia and cutting-edge installations. Remember that Arcade Fire video that your friend posted to Facebook, the one that used Google Maps to customize the video to include your childhood home? That's here, and so is *Three's Company: The Drama*, a sitcom deconstruction from peripatetic art student James Franco.

Upstairs, tucked away in a small, dark room, are two quiet Brits standing behind their laptops. Their names are Nick Tandavanitj and John Hunter, and they are part of Blast Theory, an art group that uses technology and interactivity to shake up social norms (and the human guinea pigs that become part of their experiments). They don't have an art project to show, not exactly -- instead, they ask participants to give over their phone numbers. At a certain time, those volunteers will receive a call, and for the next hour, they will have to do as they're told, unless they quit. The project is called "A Machine to See With," and the artists call it "a film where you play the lead."

"It sounds like that movie *The Game*," one woman says. "Michael Douglas gets all these calls, he doesn't know from who, doesn't know who's really real and who's part of the game."

Nick, hushed and jittery, doesn't reply.

Two hours later, I'm outside the exhibit when I get a call. It's a slow, unsettling recorded message: "Call this number back to receive instructions."

I do, and am told to walk across the street to a firehouse. If I miss my instructions at any time over the last hour, the Voice says, I will fail. I walk across the street and press "one" to confirm my adherence to the rules, and the Voice tells me that there are cameras on me, one zooming on my cold fingers, clutched around my iPhone. I laugh but look around. There were some surveillance videos in the Blast Theory room ... could they really be taping me?

I am told what my mission is: to rob a bank in Park City. I smile. I was told by the Blast Theory guys that some people chicken out of the mission objective, but I am determined to do everything they tell me. After all, they wouldn't really have me rob a bank, right?

"Turn to your left and walk down the street," the Voice commands. "Don't look suspicious." Of course, it's hard to act normal as the Voice accurately narrates the things going on around me including the buildings I pass, or the ribbons in the window of a house I near. The Voice begins to test me, asking questions, asking me to look past the pretty parts of Park City, telling me to notice the boarded-up windows of abandoned homes. Sometimes, on his orders, I trespass. I get a rush from following his creepy orders, certain that his tests wouldn't place me in too much danger. At times, I feel like I'm on a subversive episode of *The Amazing Race*.

Eventually, the Voice instructs me to enter a hotel and head to a specific bathroom. "Lock yourself inside the stall. For the things you will have to do, you need to be unobserved. Once you are inside, call me back." The line goes dead.

A minute later, I enter the bathroom, which goes from pitch-black to brightly lit in two seconds as it senses my motion, causing me to jump. Is there someone here with me? As I lock myself inside the handicapped stall, the Voice calls me again, asks me personal questions, and orders me to take all the money out of my wallet. I gulp. Will I lose it? How susceptible am I to following orders? Is this still a game?

Fortunately, I'm only asked to hide it somewhere on my person where the cops will never find it. I stick the dollar bills in my sock. My heel itches and I get further instructions. As the game continues, I'm sent walking all over Park City, ordered not to look suspicious yet becoming more and more paranoid. Is that man on his phone part of the game? What about those two women smiling at me as I pass them? As the Voice gradually asks me to do things that are more and more questionable, are all the consequences part of the plan?

I am off to meet my accomplice, though I have to do something brazen to get her to acknowledge me. At one point, we find ourselves in a car I don't own, and neither does she. Once we're together, we have to plot out that bank robbery, and we can't smirk and half-ass it -- the Voice won't let us. We have to find it in

our heads to take the idea of our potential crime seriously, answering what we will do when it goes wrong and people have to get hurt, and now the rush of playing bank robber becomes unsettling.

Eventually, I find myself in that ATM vestibule, with two thoughts repeating in my head -- the terms of the bank robbery I've told the Voice that I will commit, and the Voice's early warning that if the police intercede, they're not responsible for what happens next.

As the bald guy punches keys into the ATM, the Voice calls me to change the plan. We're going *now*. And then, oblivious, the bald guy invades my space.

"Need a lift somewhere?" he asks. Come-on, innocent offer, or part of the game? I decline, since the Voice needs me inside that bank next door in ten seconds, and he's already counting them down through the phone pressed against my ear. "Nine ... eight..." Is this the part where I'm supposed to chicken out? "Seven ... six ... " Are people in the bank in on this? "Five .. four ... " I'm almost there, about to open the door. I'm not a bank robber, not even for play, right? Will my overseers laugh if I don't go in? Am I the author of my own story or is Blast Theory, and what will I do?

In the interest of not incriminating myself nor spoiling the ending of *A Machine to See With*, I won't reveal what happened next. All I will say is that later in the day, I found myself in the grocery store watching people, thinking of something the voice told me, that he wanted to see if I would "step through a door and become a different person." I wasn't playing the game anymore, and I was no longer the lead of my own movie, but I was attentive and aware, suspicious of others and conscious that they might find me suspicious, too.

I went up to the counter, determined to shake it off and buy a Milky Way. The clerk asked for my money. And then I felt that tingle in my angle: My cash was still rolled up in a wad in my sock.

As I lifted my leg to pull crumpled up cash out of my sock, the clerk instantly reevaluated me. I wasn't just some out-of-towner here from Sundance, I was a *total weirdo*. I was the kind of guy who, with the right kind of coaxing, might do something unusual. I let her think it, because it was true, and I walked out into the brisk winter air, wondering how many of my fellow festivalgoers might become like me over the course of Sundance: a mild-mannered journalist who, instead of turning into a superhero, became a temporarily enlightened crook.