



THEATER | Blast Theory's "A Machine to See With": Monkey see, monkey do



Photo courtesy Walker Art Center

By [Jay Gabler](#), [TC Daily Planet](#)

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"It seems like you're always going to interactive performance events," said one of my colleagues as I packed up to leave the Daily Planet office and participate in Blast Theory's *A Machine to See With*, being presented in Minneapolis through April 19 under the auspices of the Walker Art Center. It's true: while for some people it might seem very strange to sit under a signpost waiting for a robot to call and tell you where to go, this wasn't my first rodeo.

Maybe that means I'm jaded, but unless you're so inexperienced with off-the-beaten-path theater that you're completely fascinated by the mere premise of *A Machine to See With*, I'd advise you to save your ten bucks. I'm not often disappointed by productions presented by the Walker, but *A Machine to See With* is seriously disappointing. The piece blows every opportunity it has to be interesting, engaging, or thought-provoking, and ends with the avant-garde equivalent of blowing a raspberry on the back of your hand.

There's a cinematic frame around the piece—"You are the lead in a heist movie"—which is appropriate, because *A Machine to See With* feels like a watered-down, dumbed-down adaptation of [Rimini Protokoll's charming *Call Cutta in a Box*](#), which the Walker presented last year. Like *A Machine to See With*, Rimini Protokoll's piece began with a phone call; however, whereas that piece was filled with unexpected delights and ended with a genuinely touching moment of human connection, *A Machine to See With* is filled with unexpectedly flat anticlimaxes and ends with an annoyingly contrived moment of would-be connection *apropos* of nothing.

Film/Video

Without giving too much away—would that there were anything of substance to give away!—I'll say that the piece involves walking the environs of St. Anthony Main while taking instructions from a mysterious caller with a British accent (Blast Theory are based in East Sussex) who talks about landmarks like the St. AN-ta-ny La-BORE-a-tree. The idea is to wrap the participant up in an unfolding narrative, but the most interesting part of my experience with *A Machine to See With*, during a press preview day, was the way that I kept having strangely glancing encounters with fellow journalists, all with their phones pressed to their ears. There goes Jason Zabel from *The Onion*...and here comes Taylor Carik from *Secrets of the City*...Steve Marsh from *Mpls.St.Paul* seems like he's up to something important! I started to wonder whether the piece was going to end with all of them jumping me in an alley. *Et tu*, Gregory Scott?

After I published a negative review last year of a play that I said "missed opportunities," the playwright sent an angry e-mail. "That's a pretty egotistic stand to take," he wrote, "that a few quick thoughts you had while watching—the places where you wanted it to be 'pushed' (implying more artistic courage, of course!)—are the difference between it being a so-so at best piece of theater for the masses, and the awesome version you wrote, in a parallel universe—for smarter, cooler people like yourself."

Maybe it is egotistic of me to say that I wish *A Machine to See With* was more like the awesome version I wrote in a parallel universe for smarter, cooler people like me—but, well, I do. In that version, there would be multiple voices on the phone, to make the participant's experience richer and perhaps to unsettle us. In that version, the interactions among participants would have been more complex and ambitious. In that version, the cheesy directorial cues ("the camera picks you out against the concrete wall...cue the lights, cue the sound") would be dropped, or made a more dynamic part of the experience. In that version, a few simple technological tricks like those employed by Rimini Protokoll would potentially have a huge impact. And in that parallel universe for smarter, cooler people, the show would not end with a goddamn hug.