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## INTERVIEW

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# A conversation on engagement, authorship, interstitial spaces and documentary: Matt Adams, twenty years of Blast Theory<sup>1</sup>

*Q: Can you talk about the work Blast Theory does and how those experiences can extend to interactive documentary?*

Adams: I feel relatively fraudulent talking in a documentary context because we don't make documentaries and don't come from documentary backgrounds. A lot of the issues and pertinent questions documentary makers ask themselves are alien to me in some ways.

But Jew, Nick and I have been working together for a long time, Blast Theory is 20 years old this year. Our work has always had a really strong element of interest in the real world and boundary between the art work and the real world. And thinking about how that boundary is a really porous one and thinking about how that art work seeps out into the real world and how the world seeps into the art work.

1. NB: Edited in Studs Turkle style: rearranged order for continuity, leaves out filler words.

I'm reminded by a really lovely work of Martin Creed – a conceptual artist – who says something like – I'm paraphrasing – 'the art work plus the world equals the world'. That's a really nice element of honesty around what artists do.

Surveys and polls of one kind or another have always kind of cropped up in our work. So there are all these kinds of forms of practices that in some way intersect with documentary – the idea of measuring the world, monitoring the world, recording the world and feeding that back.

So that line between pretense and reality has always been really interesting to me and the sense in which in our real lives we are staging ourselves in some way. In staged environments we are really ourselves in some way and just to think about how those two things penetrate.

It's changing dramatically as a culture in the last ten to twelve years. How people can represent themselves culturally? How they communicate with other people? It's much more highly mediated than it was. There's a level of staging that's increasing increasing increasing.

*Q: How so? Do you mean the clothes we wear, do you mean how we ...*

Adams: There is all of that but what's changed is online culture.

Sherry Turkle is a real influence on my thinking on that in terms of how, you know particularly in the earlier days of the Internet you had room to manipulate your identity – there's loads of gender switching, identity switching, you have multiple names and identities on multiple different services. And they're now trying to drive that out of the Internet but it still exists in a more subtle way (<http://www.mit.edu/~sturkle/>).

Now a social network, how you use status updates and likes and photo tags. Those are key agents of social interactions. That's how a lot of people are building and entertaining relationships.

And mobile phones are just another layer on that: text messaging, instant messaging, any number of strata that you can separate out – all these different ways, their own affordances their own economies and business models, they all construct the way we talk in different ways. The fact that a text message is only 140 characters, semi-anonymous, phrase, it's live but time-delayed, that it costs you money for each message. All those things go, combined all have a dramatic impact on how you use it, who you talk to and what you say to them.

On some level what I'm saying is very banal and on another level it's deep seeded and has fundamental implications for how society is constructed and what the social and political sub-tools of a society are and are really transformed in some ways, in ways we don't fully understand.

*Q: Do you think it's important that we maintain that ability, especially as our identities are augmented online, that we maintain that ability to be anonymous, be another identity?*

Adams: I think having that freedom of choice is really important because I think – cities, one of the ways cities work is to give you anonymity. I grew up in a small, rural community and I couldn't wait to move to place where I didn't know my neighbours. It never bothered me the slightest bit, that I wouldn't know who would live next door to me. ...

I think online as well – that sense in which you can have some flexibility and malleability around your identity can be a very powerful and interesting thing.

I'm not someone who is overly concerned by the collapse of privacy that is currently taking place. I think privacy and surveillance – we're in a very fluid moment in those things. The traditional lens through which they are usually talked about is an encroaching state and an encroaching corporate sphere and privacy being eroded step-by-step and being bitterly resisted by the forth-right thinking people, I find that an unconvincing reading of what's going on. That's perhaps a tangential issue.

*Q: Perhaps not? Your work certainly plays with the notion of identity, especially asking the public to bend their identity or to extend it or – I don't know – how would you describe what you ask them to do, to participate in things like A Machine to See With or Complicit? And the way you observe their identities in that? Maybe there's something about surveillance in there? ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cD26y4ncDe4&feature=mfu\\_in\\_order&list=UL](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cD26y4ncDe4&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL))*

Adams: Absolutely. Absolutely. Ulrike and Eamon 'Compliant', it's different in different ways, in different projects (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLrsE6D4qTw&feature=related>)

In Ulrike and Eamon 'Compliant', we play with identity in a very particular way. Because you are invited to choose to become either Ulrike Meinhof or Eamon Collins and you're then talked to as if you are that person and over a 30-minute walk that's fed onto you more and more and more and you go through a number of things that extend that complicity with your identity (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJ5PFDkDkVA&feature=related>; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulrike\\_Meinhof](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulrike_Meinhof); [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eamon\\_Collins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eamon_Collins)).

There's a vibration that comes off that process whether you adopt it or resist it you are still navigating that supposition that you are now someone else. It does that in an entirely interior way. There's not really roll playing or pretending to be someone. You're never invited to do anything that would outwardly indicate that you're someone different. It's an entirely interior process, just an auditory process.

*Q: Do you consider your work to be co-creation or do you maintain authorship? This notion (authorship) that we are fascinated by in interactive documentary.*

Adams: I've only got only contradictory things to say about this subject.

I think that Jew and Nick and I have always sought to problematize the idea of the artist as a kind of unique and special individual in society that does things that other people don't do and brings things back for other people to engage with. Which is, relatively bogus thing [...].

I would endorse Brian Eno's definition of interactive work as unfinished. Meaning that only when the public come, does the work complete. And I believe that very strongly. And I would say a work like Rider-Spoke is a way that shares authorship with the public so that the public are both performers, authors and audience members at the same time ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brian\\_eno](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brian_eno)).

Having said all of that, I think there isn't any doubt whatsoever that the work we make doesn't have a strong sense of authorship and a very particular – and we talked already about – a very particular tone of voice.

There are certain things that are very Blast Theory in style and you can see them across a twenty year history of work. And I think that contradiction is really great.

*Q: Before, you said you think very little of what you do is documentary, and yet there's a whole literature within the documentary field that dispels the notion that it could be unbiased in anyway. Every little bit of documentary is edited and orchestrated to get a response from the audience and yet you 'don't do' documentary?*

Adams: I would hope it's teasing and pulling at questions of reality and how we understand the world and how our intersects with the world all of the time ....

We're always looking to pose those questions. In some way, that's just classical artistic digital art theatrical practice.

One of the thread that I see running through our work is that as a member of the public, as a participant, or an audience member or a spectator, as a witness, or as a bystander, I think we've got something across all those different things that the real event is present in some way and so a real event is then casting light on the manipulation and fabrication that sits around it.

*Q: Why is it important to poke at those interstitial spaces between reality and our perception?*

Adams: I think it's a more fluid place than it's ever been. We're in a kind of miasma between reality and unreality all of the time.

That's the kinds of lives we lead, where we witness things before we see them. All of those kinds of bizarre things. I think it's important because we're so much within that.

In 2000 when we started making work for mobile devices and mobile phones, the idea that they were cultural spaces was quite a particular notion, quite arguable, quite a debatable idea because at that stage phones were still seen as tools that delivered a set of functionality to you.

As soon as we realized that 3G was coming and therefore your phone would be on the Internet and therefore your phone would be a node on the network, to me anyway, that was a real moment of 'I remember precisely where I was when' that suddenly arrived. I was like 'Oh my God, that changes everything!' about how you communicate and what your relationship is to the Internet and how the Internet is now with you wherever you go and you yourself are networked, it's not like to go to a thing that is networked, it becomes part of you. Phones are very personal and intimate devices.

Using the city and technology and thinking about the city and the technology – how each reconfigure each other and how each are cultural spaces. It's really important.

*Q: You tend to deal with 'big, fundamental questions about life' – why?*

Adams: I don't know. It's probably a personality flaw. (Laughs)

I was talking about it just recently because I read a review of Murakami's new book *1Q84* and I cut out (fusses with wallet) a quote because I thought it was such a nice description and it says (reading), 'some critics are unsure what to make of Murakami ...'.

(reads what follows from *The Guardian*)

Some critics are unsure what to make of him, the prejudice being that a writer who is so popular, particularly among young people, cannot really be that good, even if he is now quoted at short odds each year to win the Nobel prize for literature. But Murakami's success speaks to a hunger for

what he is doing that is unusual. Most characters in the modern commercial genre called 'literary fiction' take for granted a certain unexamined metaphysics and worry exclusively about the higher-level complexities of circumstance and relationships. Throughout Murakami's oeuvre, on the other hand, his characters never cease to express their bafflement about the nature of time, or change, or consciousness, or moral choice, or the simple fact of finding themselves alive, in this world or another. In this sense, Murakami's heroes and heroines are all philosophers. It is natural, then, that his work should enchant younger readers, to whom the problems of being are still fresh, as well as others who never grew out of such puzzlements – that his books should seem an outstretched hand of sympathy to anyone who feels that they too have been tossed, without their permission, into a labyrinth. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/18/haruki-murakami-1q84-review>)

And I just thought that that sense of the stories that have a comforting, are an outstretched hand. One of the reasons it resonated with me particularly is that having just made *Ulrike and Eamon: Compliant* and *A Machine to See With*, they're both quite political works and there's a certain level of anger running through both of them in certain ways and that's not uniformly true over works we've made.

We have made works like *Rider Spoke* and we made an interactive work for buses called *Route 1236* that are about mediating conversations between strangers that definitely have a different register ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkAQX8cz9hc&feature=mfu\\_in\\_order&list=UL](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkAQX8cz9hc&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL)).

But at this particular moment, I'm thinking that I would like to make work that acknowledges a sensitivity, a possibility of warmth because both of those works that I just talked about are quite uncompromising.

It's partly, I think, 'to be an artist is an outrageous arrogance', in the first place. And then to be able to exist and have a career as an artist is an outrageous privilege. And if you combine those two things together, I feel like you have an obligation then to take the profession very seriously and try and make sure you are adding to the diversity of the world – that you are doing something that is distinctive and unique. And part of that is trying to find a tone of voice, a kind of register that is true, that can engage with people.

We often joke about the fact that our work has no jokes in it whatsoever. I don't feel like we are like that as people. There is just something about the way we collaborate that has a certain tone of voice that recurs. Maybe we are trapped by that. Or maybe we need to get out a bit more, I don't know.

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