

CHAPTER 8

How to Kidnap your Audiences

An Interview with Matt Adams from Blast Theory

Maria Chatzichristodoulou (aka Maria X)

Portslade, August 2007. I am here to interview Matt Adams, spokesperson for the internationally renowned British group Blast Theory. Led by Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj, Blast Theory create projects that merge different technologies and dramaturgical structures, converging disciplines such as live performance, media arts and games. Their work explores the relationship between real, virtual and fictional with a focus on the socio-political aspects of technology and how these affect social dynamics. Whereas Blast Theory's projects successfully target wide and diverse audiences by operating on a usually simple, accessible and playful first layer, they often consist of multiple layers one can 'peel off' to engage with increasingly deep, more nuanced and subtler aspects of the work. In these performances, audiences are placed 'centre-stage': they are being kidnapped and surveyed (*Kidnap*, 1998); chased around real and virtual cities (*Can You See Me Now?*, 2001–); put in black cabs, side streets, hotel rooms, empty offices (*Desert Rain*, 2000; *Uncle Roy All Around You*, 2003); asked to locate mysterious protagonists or create their own characters (*Uncle Roy All Around You*, *Day of the Figurines*, 2006); even asked to commit to emotionally supporting a stranger for a year (*Uncle Roy All Around You*). In this kind of work, active involvement with the piece is a prerequisite.

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Maria X: Do you perceive a shift in your work over the years? It seems to me that your early practice, though rooted in the club scene, was closer to the traditions of live art and/or theatre compared to your current work, which seems very strongly related to media arts and gaming.

Matt Adams: I see strong continuities in the work that we have made. Our early work, especially projects like *Gunmen Kill Three* (1991), *Chemical Wedding* (1992) and *Stampede* (1994), is already incredibly divergent from traditional theatre practice. We did not perceive ourselves as working within a live art tradition either – in fact, the term live art barely existed at the time. In terms of how our work has progressed, I still see a very strong performative element in our current projects, although that is sometimes less prominent. *Day of the Figurines*, for example, is very different from live performance. Even so, I see it as an improvisational theatrical process where people are invited to create characters, represent those characters and act out with other people interactive improvisational narratives. Other projects are more performative: *Rider Spoke* (2007) invites people to record things at a particular time, in a particular place, and then gives them the opportunity to cycle around to find other people's recordings. We are still incredibly engaged with the idea of performance, the idea of a performer and an audience member having a live exchange or interaction in a particular moment in time and place – this is the animating principle behind much of the work that we want to make.

[Insert Figure 8.1 here - landscape]

MX: How did you start using technology in your work?

MA: Right from the beginning, we were very interested in how we might create a fully immersive performance environment in which several things can compete simultaneously for the audience's attention. We were interested in how this might enable audiences to construct an experience, how they might deal with a sense of overload in order to develop their understanding of what is happening. All our early works were promenades, so they were putting the audience's body in a situation where one had to decide where to turn to look, how to position oneself. This is how an audience member is constructing an experience by filtering his/her understanding of what is going on.

MX: As you said, from the very outset of your practice audiences are encouraged to create their own experiences. After some point though they become a really integral *active* element of the work. How did this develop?

MA: There was always an interest in the relationship between audience and performer, and how we can dismantle that. One of the reasons we were so fascinated by clubs was the sense that this was a completely fluid environment in which the centre of attention was constantly shifting and entirely subjective. We were interested in how we can have a complex, subtle, nuanced exchange with our audience: they come, they sit in the dark, they watch and we present ... But what else can happen, which other methods might we use? This is partly to do with an interest in communication systems and in how these can potentially be socially and politically transformative. So we are looking at what role technology might play in opening up new terrains in theatre practice. The critical

moment in that lineage is perhaps *Kidnap*, because we wanted to make a piece about giving up control. The questions were: in what ways do audience members give up control to the performers on stage? Why do they do that and how can we expose this? How can we play with this boundary? The idea we came up with was to allow audience members themselves to be at the very centre of the piece, to actually be the protagonists. We suddenly thought that the ultimate destination of that process of enquiry would be to ask our audiences to be kidnapped by us, allow us to take complete control of their existence over a period of two days.

[Insert Figure 8.2 here - landscape]

MX: In the video documentation of *Kidnap*¹ you mention that your audiences (participants, ‘victims’) are 50 per cent of your artwork. This is also the case in all your works that I have experienced: audiences are always asked to engage with your projects as active participants, whereas the projects are structured in such a way that they cannot materialize without the audience’s involvement. Nevertheless I wonder how much you really are prepared to push the boundaries between artists/performers and audiences/participants? What I mean is that, though audiences are clearly central in your work, they are also given strict guidelines in terms of how they can engage with it. To an extent, they are asked to ‘perform’ specific roles in pre-written scenarios, which they have limited agency to affect or change.

MA: This varies from work to work ... This is a key question though. Clearly there have

¹ Accessible through the Live Art Development Agency’s archive, visit <<http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/>> (accessed 9/09/2008).

been some experiments, John Cage's *4.33*² perhaps being the most extreme example, where the artist is being completely removed and all that s/he does is set a start and an end time while everything else is to do with the audience's listening. There are a lot of other such experiments from Fluxus onwards.³

MX: Yes. I was wondering whether a lot of this work could possibly be considered more risky in terms of its outcomes compared to yours, which seems to be quite closely observed and controlled. You are extremely careful in how you frame your work.

MA: Our work is certainly tremendously controlled and we are very careful, I think that is absolutely true. The question is, given the fact that those experiments have already happened and have taken things to extreme limits, where do we now want to situate ourselves? Our projects are not hollow intellectual and aesthetic experiments, they are pieces of work that are looking to engage with, and ask particular questions about, the culture in which we exist. If you take *Kidnap* as an example, the question we set ourselves was: why do so many of us give up control so readily to others and what is the pleasure in that? Clearly there is something about giving up control that we actually

² John Cage's piece *4.33* (1952) was a three-act composition, which lasted for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, during which the performer (David Tudor) sat in front of a piano without playing a single note. He only marked the beginning and end of each movement by closing and opening the keyboard lid. In this way, Cage shifted the focus from the performer (and the sound he was expected to produce) to the sounds of the environments and the listeners themselves.

³ Other such examples are Yoko Ono's instruction pieces, which are short, zen-like sets of instructions for actions that the audiences were invited to imagine and/or perform. See Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit* (London, 1970).

like, that we are drawn to, and this is counter to our Westernized notion of the agency of the individual. What is the appeal in taking drugs, getting drunk or extremely angry and being completely out of control? Or in handing control over to politicians, religious leaders or others? Why do we leech so much agency away from ourselves? As artists we are trying to set very particular parameters in place, so that the nature of both the freedom and the rules that you as an audience have been given when interacting with a piece are articulate and invite you to think in certain ways. *Can You See Me Now?* is a good example of that: it is essentially a playground game and you interact, but how much can you do? It is actually a quite narrow field of interaction. But the parameters that you are able to play with are precisely evocative within the context of the work. Those parameters are the building components on which that work generates meaning and emotional impact.

[Insert Figure 8.3 here- landscape]

MX: Thinking again of *Kidnap*, it is interesting to compare it to a piece like Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974), where there were various objects on the table the audience could use on her. Amongst these, there were a gun and a bullet. At some point, an audience member loaded the gun and pointed it at her. While Abramović abandoned herself completely into the hands of her audiences, in *Kidnap* you ask for exactly the opposite, that is, for your audiences to abandon themselves completely into the hands of the artists. Why do you think it is that, whereas both practices situate audiences in the centre of the piece, their approach to audience involvement is so radically different?

MA: The difference is, I think, that Abramović and the traditions she springs from are

primarily interested in the language of performativity itself. I perceive those practices as reflective about the relationship between artists and audiences. Whereas the people who experienced *Kidnap* were not invited to reflect on the relationship between the artist and the audience in the first instance. This is a piece about kidnapping, an incredibly powerful political and pop-cultural social force. During the 1970s, some of the most important political discussions in Western urban culture were happening via the medium of kidnapping, if you look at the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany, for example. We always attempt to put those formal enquiries at a subservience to the terrain of ideas that we are looking to explore and reflect upon. That is why Abramović's work takes place in a gallery and is very heavily documented as a historical moment in performance history, whereas *Kidnap* took place on the streets of London and was observed in a completely different way.

MX: It seems to me that your relationship with your audiences often becomes very intimate. In the video documentation of *Kidnap*, for example, I watched you feeding the blind-folded 'victim', taking him to the toilet, waiting outside, taking him to wash his hands ... All this seemed to build an extremely intimate interaction. Another example is *Can You See Me Now?*: although the piece encourages the development of very different types of relationship, certain audience members have discussed how they got emotionally involved and felt really close to the runners while they were playing.⁴ Is this affective relationship with your audiences intentional?

[Insert Figure 8.4 here - landscape]

⁴ See 'Can You See Me Now?' at <http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_cysmn.html> (accessed 9/09/2008).

MA: I think it is partly intentional and partly out of our control. It is only in the last couple of years that it has become obvious to us that our interest in locative media and work with mobile devices as in *Can You See Me Now?* is partly about how we can negotiate our relationship with strangers in the city. How you exist in an urban space, how you find the strength or the mechanism that enables you to have relationships with other people or with strangers, and what the political ramifications of this might be. And I think that they are very strong. Over time we came to an understanding of how politics is actually within everything, it is infused in our behaviour. How we relate to someone who asks us directions is a political act. This is how we create a body politic, through that type of inter-relationship. At an intellectual level that is really important to us whereas at an emotional, almost subconscious, level, I think that Ju, Nick and I are looking for ways in which you can have those moments of epiphany with a stranger. It is rare that you have an interesting engagement with strangers, but when it happens it is a thrilling moment! How you define a political moment is very subjective and I do not object to people who describe our work as apolitical. Nevertheless, our projects are about the social organization of the world being conjured up out of personal relationships and one-on-one interactions. To me, that's politics.

MX: In an interview⁵ you discuss that one of the reasons you are working with games is that, as a cultural phenomenon, they are more accessible than other types of art, and

⁵ See Sabine Breitsameter, 'The Urban Environment as Computer Game. Matt Adams in Conversation with Sabine Breitsameter', *Audiohyperspace* (June 2004). Available at <http://www.swr.de/swr2/audiohyperspace/engl_version/interview/adams.html> (accessed 9/09/2008).

easier for audiences to understand and participate in. Are you actively trying to address wider audiences?

MA: For me this is essential. I believe that certain art practices are inward-looking, self-reflexive, over-intellectualized and framed with far too much meaning. We want to make work that fifteen-year-olds find exciting. Of course it is a naïve emotional impulse to say that we want to make work that always has this possibility. It is a completely flimsy structure on which to build, but this is not to say that the opposite is true. We have been criticized for being superficial because we are happy to collaborate with the corporate world and we don't have a critical – that is oppositional – relationship to capitalism. But my belief is that a lot of new media art work, being self-consciously political, is impenetrable and that to me is the antithesis of political engagement. I do not attempt to be dismissive of a whole section of practice; I am just trying to explain, through emphasizing the differences, where I see us as quite divergent from some other media art practices.

MX: On your website you describe how you are trying to incorporate social dynamics into live events, such as *Day of the Figurines*,⁶ as a method of scripting these events. In another interview you mention that one of the reasons you work with games is that they

⁶ *Day of the Figurines* is set in a fictional city, which is dark, littered and in decay. The game unfolds over a total of twenty-four days, each day representing an hour in the life of the city. A series of both mundane and catastrophic events is taking place during this period of time. How the players respond to these events and to each other creates an urban community with its own social dynamics. See <http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_day_of_figurines.html> (accessed 9/09/2008).

are ‘part of social and political dialogues’.⁷ What exactly do you mean by that?

[Insert Figure 8.5 here - landscape]

MA: One of the starting points for us, and a real interest in our work, is a belief that popular culture is an enormously significant political form, which is less readily acknowledged than we realize. On the other hand, we live in an age when technology is considered a democratizing force which allows people to engage with each other in different ways, access information, email their MPs ... And the question that we come back to so often is: *who* is able to speak and *what* are they allowed to say? That is very much a refrain in the work that we are currently making, particularly during the last four or five years. The question is: if these technologies are enabling us to speak to different people and to strangers, or discover new relationships with new communities, what are the limits of these new spaces that are being created? What are these new relationships? What do we mean when we say community? To what extent do these technologies function as consumerist, solipsistic toys? Do they generate social transformations where it really *is* possible for people to blog from Iraq and make us more aware of what it is like to be inside the war zone, for example? These issues are being very heavily contested right now. But that is not to say that we make political work, because the thing that we learned from the first years of making work is that any piece is inherently boring if you know what the artist thinks. This is where activism and art become terribly confused for me: this is not what artistic enterprise is about. It is about accepting the full

⁷ See Aleks Krotoski, ‘Alternative Reality Gaming: Interview with Blast Theory’, *The Guardian Games Blog* (April 2005). Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2005/apr/19/alternativerrea> (accessed 11/09/2008).

complexity and confusion of our existence, and trying to represent these enormously ineffable issues. And always hover outside of our understanding, always be ungraspable in some ways, because it is so important to be able to find forms that enable us to represent this complexity. It is such a difficult process ...

MX: You say that, through your work, you want to find new interfaces to connect the digital with the physical, the real with the virtual. From my personal experience, the boundaries between the real and the fictional or virtual are always vague, confused and difficult to trace in your projects. For example, *Kidnap* participants said, after the event, that they were upset about what was happening at the time as they did not know where the limits were, where this experience would stop or how far it would go. Why is your work always situated within this edge?

MA: This is the root of drama: it is about people getting up and pretending to do something with enough conviction that you believe them.

MX: Well, in your case you make audiences actually *do it themselves*.

MA: Ha ha! Yes, but this is a natural extension ... A man puts a round piece of cardboard on his head and says, this is a crown and I'm a prince. And theatre is you sitting there, being prepared to believe that he is the Prince of Denmark. So the question is, where does this leave us now, within our super-personalized, individualized, super-mediatized age, when we can all create personas all of the time so that we have multiple fractions of ourselves spilling out in different directions? Through social networking

sites, for example, we all represent different slices of our personality. How can we make sense of the world when we are overwhelmed with different sources of information, when there is such a fluid boundary between fact and fiction? Slavoj Žižek discusses this in *The Desert of the Real*.⁸ It is the matrix, this completely blank *tabula rasa* into which reality is created. We have always sought to create work that represents that.

MX: On the other hand, I think that your work differentiates itself considerably from the Baudrillardian discourse on the simulacrum,⁹ exactly because it tends to point to the real. In a lot of social networking sites and virtual communities the discussions are concerned with whether the actions and commitments that take place or are being formed there are being carried out into the real world or whether they remain virtual, and what this entails. In your work it seems that the actions and commitments which occur during the game world *are* carried out in the everyday life, in the realm of the real, whether this is the commitment you make at the end of *Uncle Roy* to support a stranger for a year, or whether this is being sent text messages every day for a month in *Day of the Figurines* ... I find this kind of reversal really interesting.

[Insert Figure 8.6 here - landscape]

⁸ See Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London, 2002).

⁹ In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard claims that, in modern society, reality has been replaced by cultural and media symbols and signs, which he calls simulacra. He argues that simulacra do not conceal the truth but have become the truth, whereas our experience of reality has become the experience of the simulation of a reality, which no longer exists. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S.F. Glaser (Michigan, 1996).

MA: Yes, it is a reversal. That is where my very simple, pragmatic approach comes in which says ‘yes, the Gulf War did take place’, it is quite straightforward. And the question is: if we accept that we live in the society of the spectacle, that the simulacrum is everywhere, how can we exist? What do we do when we get up in the morning? How do we relate to things and to each other? I think that is why this sense about the real world re-imposing itself into such conceits is such a current and on-going thread in our work.

MX: Gabriella Giannachi describes your work as virtual theatre.¹⁰ I was wondering, since you come from a theatrical background, how do you envisage the theatre of the future?

MA: Well, you know, we are trying to make it! Ha ha!

Response

Gabriella Giannachi

Blast Theory’s work has consistently challenged its audiences by redefining the boundaries within which they are implicated. Such boundaries include dramaturgy, so that, for instance, audiences are often torn between different modes of spectatorship and participation; liveness, in that audiences, who experience a mixed reality, are actually made to encounter each other, as well as other performers, or even bystanders, and commit an act of trust that outlives the performance itself; collaboration, because

¹⁰ See Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres: An Introduction* (London and New York, 2004).

audiences can often only navigate or advance in their experience by cooperating with and to some extent controlling each other; and mediation, so that not only are the fictional spaces and times set up in their work the result of complex processes of remediation but they also generate an entirely new perspective, that of a mixed reality, through which to experience both the artwork, and the everyday life context within which this is set.

In his interview with Maria X, Matt Adams, mentions that Blast Theory are interested in setting up performative environments ‘in which several things can compete simultaneously for the audience’s attention’. This creation of an excess of signs, but also of an uncomfortable context within which these, whether physical or digital, have become somewhat blurred into one another, is certainly the case of games such as *Uncle Roy All Round You* where participants reported mistaking passers-by for Blast Theory members. On the other hand, a more pervasive context is at the heart of *Rider Spoke* and *Day of the Figurines*, where participants had to negotiate their role and participation in the game, which in the case of the latter lasted over twenty-four days, from within the context of their everyday life.

In *The Politics of New Media Theatre*¹¹ I present Blast Theory’s work as political. This is not only because the company create spaces which are aesthetically and socially transformative, but also because they problematize the very ways by which we use technology as a lens and language to experience everyday life. Here, technology does impact directly on whom we choose to be, in our relationships with others and in our engagement with locality as materiality, and in the ways these inform each other. So, as Adams suggests, *Kidnap* is about ‘giving up control’, but also being controlled. It is

¹¹ See Gabriella Giannachi, *The Politics of New Media Theatre* (Oxon and New York, 2007).

about looking and being looked at. It is about trust and endurance. *Can You See Me*
Now is about controlling distant runners whose experience of the cityscape in which the
work takes place ends up constituting the only *live* context for our own experience of it.
There is a Joycean, powerful epiphanic mechanism that propels most of this company's
locative media work to do with *Verfremdung* and the very politics of technology, the
language of art.