Paysage technologique, théories et pratiques autour du GPS
Andrea Urlberger | 2005 — 2007 |

Technologie			Théorie			Art		
Texte	Entretiens	Documents	Texte	Entretiens	Bibliographie	Texte	**Entretiens**	Œuvres

Art — Entretiens | Blast Theory | Masaki Fujithata | Esther Polak | *GPS Movies* | Hendrik Sturm

Ju Row Farr (Blast Theory) : Entretien avec Andrea Urlberger

12 février 2007, Brighton

Blast Theory
Fondé en 1991, le groupe Blast Theory est dirigé par Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr et Nick Tandavanit. Actuellement basé à Brighton, Blast Theory s'intéresse essentiellement aux relations entre l'espace réel et l'espace virtuel en explorant l'usage des médias localisés et les réseaux numériques en espace urbain.

Blast Theory
Le site de Blast Theory
Le site de *Can You See Me Now*, 2001

Ju Row Farr — *Can you see me now* is a game that you play online and on the street from anywhere in the world. We map a specific geographic area that we can physically merge to running and we use GPS and some very crude walkie talky technology to trace people who are online, and we receive the information onto a handheld computer that we carry around with us, so we can see where you are as if you were in front of us, even though you're not there. You can chat to each other online and we see all of your information come through to us as the runners on the street try to catch you. We can speak to each other as well, you can also hear us online so you'll know it's coming after you. I suppose it's a very crude description of the game but it's a chase game that you play online or in the street. It's about people that aren't there or that you haven't seen or that you just can't see. "True called" is a video installation work that we made, and it's a combination of footage from Köln in Germany and London. We set a video camera to look at certain areas in time and in cities; it's to do with the sense of people that were there or could be there or spaces that could or couldn't be occupied. Some movement go though but it's quiet since it is set at night.

The game is a very simple idea. The thrill of feeling someone recording your name or chasing you even though you're not there is one of the strongest element of the work. I think that the sense that you're involved is important. For some people it's funny for others it's more serious, some play over and over again and even drop in online to be chased in different virtual cities, so they obviously like being chased even though they're not there.

When we catch people, we take a photograph of them. When people log in to play, we ask them about somebody they haven't seen for a long time and give them their photograph we uploaded within half an hour. It's a sort of research. When we thought about the project, we thought of people we lost contact with, those who

disappeared or died or that we miss, friends that live far away that we'd like to see… in people's mind there's a place that they lost for these people, the lost memories held in a certain place. By taking photographs we wanted to put geography, a new place slightly more in the present where people could be remembered somewhere else; it might be in a street corner in Vienna (the last time I saw my dad was 20 years ago in a car going down the street, but if I play the game and I said to myself it was my dad, I'll have a geographic image of him being more present in another city, it's a bit like a ghost.) Trying to capture something that isn't there and believing it's true, like memories are (real but invisible)

Andrea Urlberger — You're always talking about the connection between physical and virtual spaces. Is that what you're creating with your game? Do you think you're creating a new fragment of space, a new density with more things into it?

Ju Row Farr — It's a deeply profound question in a way about how you work, whether you think as an artist or as a make-up of something. Are you revealing something or re-shaping something that already exists somehow? I'm not sure…I don't feel, as an artist, like a magician making something magically pop-up that isn't there… I don't feel that we have special powers to necessarily see what other people don't see, but I think our job is to draw connections, slow things down, and pull focus into detail. It's making a space where people can take an opportunity to see things that may be already there, it's creating a context to visualise what is there. We don't see more clearly but we hope it's interesting for people. Our job is to pull threads and make a frame.

Andrea Urlberger — Do you think that locative media and GPS can do something special about this
overlaying ?

Ju Row Farr — Yes, I guess that there is a lot of overlay between real, fictional dream, imagination, and documentary. Virtual is a very technological term, it's only one aspect of it, and it's also to do with dream, memory. I just see this is sort of range of possible layers.

Andrea Urlberger — Do you think that locative media and GPS can do something special about this overlaying […]?

Ju Row Farr — I hope so but I think that any technology is sometimes designed or evolves for certain reasons and the GPS is a good example. You can see its function for example in a car and why it's a very good system, the same way as a mobile phone is really functional to talk to people because they can carry it around with them and it fits really nicely to their ear. As a communication tool they work very well, and they can be creative too. That's what our job is, we try to see what else they can be used for. They don't remain static.
We're developing a project at the moment and we're trying to decide whether we'll use a GPS or a wifi hotspot. One of the delightful things about the GPS is that even if you don't drive or own a car, there is a certain use or understanding from the public of this technology. For someone creating an artwork, it is very useful to have a tool that anyone can understand and have access to. So, thanks to this familiarity with the tool, people can help in the artwork even if it can go wrong. For me, it's a tool that isn't exploited enough creatively and potentially powerful to do amazing things. What you do with GPS can be great if you attach content to the location and direction or navigation. Potentially you can add all sorts of contents or locations with directions, so it can be anybody that is walking, on a bus or in a car.

Andrea Urlberger — When you began *Can you see me now?* people didn't know much about it back in 2001, did they?

Ju Row Farr — Technology is something very rapid in the Western world within certain economic groups and people are very interested in it, it's relatively affordable and it changes very quickly and so are people. They are very technologically literate.

Andrea Urlberger — In 2001 could they understand the tool?

Ju Row Farr — There are people who didn't understand it and still don't but our job is to use the tool to get to the work. It doesn't really matter if they understand it

or not. If people are worried that their phone loses signal, then we haven't done our job well.

Andrea Urlberger — Would you want people to learn?

Ju Row Farr — We don't have a view on that but I think that we're trying to slightly suggest to people that if they acted differently with a tool or with people online, there would be a lot more potential experience or communication between them. We're quite interested in communication between strangers and also people in their environment. We're not hugely interested in people being competitive, our work is quite collaborative and we don't necessarily want to make games that encourage people to fight against each other. We can do many things with these tools; they make you act differently or believe that a stranger could be a lover or someone in your future. It's about how the landscape or the environment helps it or pulls it away from you.
People don't have to be incredibly confident to have meaningful interaction or value. It's a very fundamental thing when people that come to our work never played games. We're not interested in making games for gamers or artwork for an art audience. We're very opened to the fact that certain groups of people come along to our work sometimes, it could be a group of thirteen year old boys coming to us because their mother brought them along for a birthday treat or a bunch of people in their thirties who are academic and who are enjoying the game because of the content. For us, it has to be openly read. I think that artwork that can only be read in one way is a bit odd.

Andrea Urlberger — You're fascinated by the relation between technology tools such as GPS and poor users (rural users, teenagers) people who are usually excluded.

Ju Row Farr — With teenagers the access to equipment is easy, there is a lot of excitement. A lot of play and performance and many new things happen among those groups of people. There's less fear and respect for these tools. It's a challenge for us because the way they see it is different and new and even useful.

Most of people that come to our work are ten to fifteen years younger than us, which is a very interesting and learning experience for us as well.
The Internet is the best for this and people distribute work historically to very specific groups of people, those who are appealed by it, who are inspired by it in some way. We actually want to broader our audience; there are people who are able to use the Internet or other kind of dispersed technologies.

We're not completely obsessed by technology. *Can you see me now* is the second piece of work where we use the Internet and I think we have a real love/hate relationship with it. Lots of technologies are born or suggested for certain reasons and I think that a lot of the communication or interaction online goes through chat rooms, and this is where many people went to find communication with others who were broadly dispersed.

We aren't interested in chat rooms anymore, in one way it's a great space to meet people in another it's a great place to meet strangers. It felt shapeless to us, as a space where you can just dump questions. However, it can offer much more, the structure of it is appealing since it provides a different environment or architecture to make a work or experience and it also enables people to communicate differently.
In the one hand we thought that chat rooms were just dumping grounds, quite crude spaces, but in the other hand we felt that there was a potential to build a very crude virtual world. The idea is that the experience within that space is chasing and that it's very uncivilized so why no trying to shape something specifically rather than just put all the ingredients in a big bowl.

Andrea Urlberger — Connection between virtual and reality, presence and absence

is a big part of your work.

Ju Row Farr — It's true, we're always trying to find a new place where things can happen and where there is potential and it's also possibly a deep sense of not wanting things or people to disappear. It's much more about controlling things, where we can have a handle over a short period of time among a small group of people. We're not trying to create a puppet show, it's quite naïve. For example, the person that walked past you in the street is a stranger but could be the person that you spent a big part of your life with, one with which you have a lot in common. In the game we are much more mobile and economically able to do different things in different places. You can know about Sheffield without having gone to Sheffield or Tokyo.

Andrea Urlberger — Can you explain the place of GPS in *Can You See Me Now* ?

Ju Row Farr — In a very positive way, *Can you see me now* is a very successful piece of work and it feels like it's a very neat combination of form and function because people can use it easily.
We are wrestling with GPS again to see what else we can do with it in a car or how we can use it differently. We are waiting for an opportunity (a commission or a funding action) but what we already have is the interest of people in real and virtual space and the connection between what is present and what is not. People care about the space inside cars, they have this incredible imaginative sort of space that's just a piece of metal around them and they're travelling through space. We

like to know how much content they would recognise or attach to a certain location. We would like to work on that specific moment, when they don't receive that piece of information because the signal is bad or they are moving too fast, we trying to work out a new form for those tools.

Andrea Urlberger — You have your own way of using the GPS, because most of artists record movements. You're more interested in real time and localisation than into recording.

Ju Row Farr — Maybe it's a sort of posterity. One of us has a theatrical background. It's about a sense of living now, in the moment, I'm not quite sure apart from commercially what the value of recording is. If that's valuable for the person experiencing the work, then we would do it but in our work it doesn't feel like drawing a line is meaningful.
Every time you go to the theatre or to a club to have a live experience, it's always different. But with our work, we're often in the background recording this information, so we can play it back for our research and not for the members of public. Sometimes the positions on the map are being recorded but it's strictly for us to learn, and we don't offer it to the members because seeing the trail doesn't suit the piece of work even though it could be fascinating. It's just a choice we made, so we chose the features of the tool that we were going to use. In traditional art for example when painting a sculpture, it is live but when you walk away you are left with an impression from that moment we are not going to take away how you walked around it.

Andrea Urlberger — From an interview I understood that you don't try to tell stories or get a narrative context. Do you think that *Can you see me now* doesn't tell stories?

Ju Row Farr — Maybe on a bigger level they do for us, but within the work I think it's possible to see a kind of structure but I don't think that in a conventional way we're trying to tell stories.
There are three of us collaborating on it so it's important to agree on themes and areas that are important to us, but we don't believe that our stories are interesting. We just think that we can structure experiences and work where people can have

their own stories or fictions or they can see fictions in the themes that we remind them in reality or virtually. We're better at structuring the opportunity for people to create their own mini fictions or stories; our own personal stories wouldn't be so interesting.

Andrea Urlberger — You create a structure in which people can create their own story?

Ju Row Farr — In *Can you see me now* the story wouldn't be very big or complicated, it's just about going online, getting chased and getting caught. It's quite a crude story but our intention isn't for people to create a story, it's to have that moment from A to B, for some people it can be more fictional, actually it really depends on the work.
Recently we did a big jump board game called *Day Of The Figurines* set in a town that has a whole story that happens over 24 hours in 24 days in real time and the

town has sets of stories that can happen at any time, and depending on where you are on the big board game and on which part of story you're in, if you talk to someone through SMS you might miss the story because you're having your own internal dialogue or interaction. In The Figurines we very much play directly with narrative, there are all sorts of fictions that we wrote that are within a town but players don't have to experience all of them or even one of them, they can just choose to talk to someone or go to another place and go to shops or stand by the canal. But I guess that's a story. Right now we play with conventional narrative much more than we've ever been playing with it and we love stories but we do like real people talking about real things, we like documentary.
I think that people are visually very literate, but the emphasis is placed on the audience. People can structure a live event through visual material; I would never say that stories are important, what I am interested in is people's experience.

Andrea Urlberger — GPS is an instrument from American department of defence ? What do you about these military aspect ?

Ju Row Farr — I'm glad I didn't put any funding to develop it. It is strange but I don't think it's easy to use anything that is clean. We don't live in that sort of pure process. I think that the responsibility of individuals and artists is very important and it's absolutely true that in "Can you see me now", we are not making any political point about where the nature of GPS comes from and its development, which we could do and a lot of artists may well do. I'm no trying to defend any use of material for our own game but we're not using it politically.

Andrea Urlberger — The control is important to you?

Ju Row Farr — It is but I don't think it is associated with the military. Many people said in the past that we're very controlling or registering things as if it was surveillance but our intentions are to create interaction and any kind of methods used are aimed at making the work better. We don't have a desire to observe our users or use the material in an exploitative way. It's about supporting people that are using the work. If we could hold somebody's hand and take them through the work we would, because we don't want to turn people off from the work. We have a desire for people to totally understand it and if it doesn't work we want them to be able to find the number so they can get help on how to make it work. Our whole intention with technology is to enable people to use it and not to feel stupid, any kind of control or watching is not our aim.

Andrea Urlberger — Usually artists don't use it as an instrument of control. Do you think that locative media, phone and GPS can change people's behaviour in urban and public spaces?

Ju Row Farr — I think technology generally changes the way people form with the

Ju Row Farr — I think technology generally changes the way people form with the technology and the way they share it socially, it makes people move through space. According to a study, the thumb is now more mobile than the forefinger so even physically we're changing because of the technology that we use. There are no doubts that there are tools that are changing our understanding of how we behave with each other and how we behave in the spaces that are around us.

I'm not sure how it will change the architectural environment and I don't know

how change evolves so much in architecture. I don't know how technology that people use domestically drives the change in architecture. I can see how spaces around people can affect them and how they behave with their tools but I don't think I'd be able to guess how it will change inside a house. I can imagine these things happen but I don't have this kind of knowledge. I'd like to know what the development of technology has done to architecture in the last hundred years. I know about performance of architecture and interactive architecture but it's a very specialised and small part of architecture.

Andrea Urlberger — How Blast Theory consider the commercial and the artistic use from GPS?

Ju Row Farr — I can feel that we are in this strange place. Where are we in the interface between the commercial use of technology and the artistic use? We're between commercial and creative use of a tool as well and how it influences and change the way that things are done commercially. There are spaces where architecture or commercial tools are pushing the way people are living together or perform.

Andrea Urlberger — You are working with Nottingham University, and how do you handle this collaboration?

Ju Row Farr — We've been working with them since 1997 but only on our big projects. What I appreciate in this collaboration is that they are constantly looking to explore new things even though they have very specific research goals, so there is a lot of flexibility. We can manage to fulfil two completely different agendas. The ability to make a project evolve is different for them, it has to be in the museum of contemporary art in Chicago whereas we can bring it back and change it. Those are the slight differences. They want to make it better and they have research goals. It worked amazingly well even though we had to travel a lot. The personality of people involved is important too like Steve Benford who was one of the main persons that enabled us to collaborate.

Andrea Urlberger — What about the collaboration with Industry?

Ju Row Farr — Two years ago, agents in Los Angeles approached us, they were part of the games division of a big agency. They took us all to find commercial applications of our work and we now have a project on a reality TV show in New York. People in telecom have approached us for years and they probably saw the potential of our work. We would like our work to be seen by more people even if we are very cautious, because we don't have a desire to earn a lot of money.

Andrea Urlberger — Do you think that the emotions of people involved in your work are important?

Ju Row Farr — There is emotion in our work because of people's reactions but we didn't plan to make an emotional piece of work. We always interview people because they feel like we're interested in them, the gesture over to people feels quite manipulative in a sincere way. People like to be interviewed because they feel that we are interested in them. But when people use technologies they forget that there is human resources that are essential to make it beyond a nerdy tech experience, I think that they forget that there is a person at the end of it.