Authored collaboration, choreographed reality

Hugh Davies

Monash University, Australian Network for Art and Technology

There is something perversely appealing about a *Truman Show,* like fiction engineered around you: a false, but plausible reality in which the inconsequence of your actions invites you to attempt daring play. But in order to maintain such a world, you must remain trapped in it, suffer under its direction and pretend to believe it is real.

In this paper I will discuss three examples of participative works that are related in their dictatorial control and perceived captivity of their participants as well as by their blurring of traditional distinctions of art, reality and fiction. Tracing the emergence of this strain of participative works' from conceptual art, performative practices and relational aesthetics from the last century, as well as their relation to *noir* cinema from the late 1990's, I will tackle the ethics of these antagonistic experiences that deliberately blur distinctions of reality in public places. Central to this paper is my contention that these works do not generate adverse or enduring ontological confusion in participants, but instead, they encourage individuals to exercise critical judgment towards all mediated information. But first I will introduce the artists and works.

As part of their performance work *Kidnap*, in 1998, Blast Theory invited submissions from participants willing to be kidnapped from their daily lives. Months later, when many had forgotten their initial application, they were abducted and their incarceration broadcast online.

Tim Etchells' 2001 mobile phone based work *Surrender Control* involved participants receiving a series of escalating dares to their mobile phones. Beginning with flirtatiousness, temptations such as 'touch two people at once' and building over days to more perverse instructions such as, 'Steal something', recipients were challenged to consider what they would allow themselves to be dictated to do before taking back control.

In 2002 Robin Hely initiated *Neurocam* which has now purportedly grown splinter cells internationally. Enlisting online, participants are emailed a series of assignments; tasks and challenges to be undertaken in daily life, each assignment requiring further submission of personal autonomy towards the ultimate realisation of the experience.

Both tantalising and despotic, each of these controlling experiences is in fact collaboratively constructed by both the artists and the participants involved. Although their confrontational nature appears radically original, these works pick up concerns and values first raised by the Dadaists, ideas which can be found flowing and evolving through Conceptual Art, Fluxus, Situationaists, and which were reinvigorated by new technologies in the Relational Aesthetics of the 1990's. These are ideas that champion indeterminacy, challenge conventions of recognised artistic styles, blur distinctions between artist and audience, reality and art, and often achieve these ends by means of direct engagement between people and place. Contemporary works in this area have perhaps been best described by Daniel Palmer (Palmer 2008: 366) as being positioned between media arts, post-Duchampian irony and borrowing from a Marxist theorization of everyday life. Although continuing these ideas, the works I discuss here are not imbued with the optimistic values of Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* or McLuhan's 'global village' as their forebears. Instead, they take on an antagonistic and sometimes cultish atmosphere of social revolt. In fact, if *Relational Aesthetics* can be distinguished as creating microtopias, (Bishop 2004: 54) these new works could equally be marked for their microdystopian atmosphere, inspired from the cinema of the late 1990's such as the *Matrix, The Truman Show, Fight Club* and *The Game*, all films in which apparent realities are uncertain.

The protagonists of David Fincher's films *The Game* (1998) and *Fight Club* (1999) are both trapped in imposed realities, first as minor cogs in banal consumer lives, then later, as central figures in alternate world conspiracies spinning wildly beyond their control. Although neither film was a box office hit, both triumphed commercially in DVD rentals. Their cult positions were wholly secured when cited as inspiration for the nascent field of pervasive games, interactive narrative's that employ technology but use the real world as a platform; *Fight Club* spawning flash numerous mob events such as the obvious *Pillow Fight Club*, and *The Game* being the often cited inspiration for the entire genre of Alternate Reality Games - experiences that blur the distinctions between game and life.

Within Alternate Reality Games, there are no avatars and no real distinction between the game world and the 'real' world as the games are delivered across a range of formats; mobile phones messages, letters, posters, with the Internet as the central binding medium. There is no realm of distance as players interact directly with characters in the game in the physical world, and as the protagonist in *The Game* discovers, it often becomes impossible to discern between events as reality or game. The immersive engagement of *Kidnap, Surrender Control* and *Neurocam* are all closely related to Pervasive and Alternate Reality Games in that the authenticity of the experience is heightened by both their setting in urban spaces, and by the presence of the participants' body in the work. This phenomenological device as a tool for immersion in these domineering experiences can have compelling and life affecting results. Consider Blast Theory's *Kidnap.*

In a paradoxical inversion of *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* in which the protagonists reject their simulated lives over a much harsher, yet actual reality, participants of *Kidnap* rebuff actual reality opting for a harsher albeit more authentic illusion. 'A kidnap is a deeply traumatic experience', Matt Adams of Blast Theory explains, 'but it does give you time to reassess your life, and it can fundamentally alter your sense of self. Everyone comes out of a kidnap changed.' *Kidnap* highlighted a desire for total immersion and submission, evidenced by the 300 individual applications received, each applicant paying 10 pounds to be abducted. Like *Fight Clubs'* 'Homework assignments' whereby members are instructed to stage public interventions against corporate culture, *Surrender Control* suggested enticing yet subversive acts to be carried out in public places, thereby challenging the social and commercial norms of these spaces, a socialist quality consistent with all of these works. While Etchells' messages provided hints, not demands, the sinister cunning of *Surrender Control* lay in the inherent intimacy of the mobile, a location reserved (at the time of the work's presentation) for close acquaintances, and the messages had the delicate clout of passed love letters or whispers in the ear.

Conversely, *Neurocam* demands action for continued participation. It also demands secrecy. Its clandestine nature and guerilla tactics tie the works closely to *Fight Club* and the Pervasive and Alternate Reality Games the film has inspired. However *Neurocam's* website denies comparison to Alternate Reality Games. It is difficult to discern if in doing so, it is reinforcing the TINAG (*This Is Not A Game*) principle inherent in Alternate Reality Games, a kind of ludic reverse psychology by which games deny their gameness in order to increase immersion in players minds. It is

revealing, therefore, that *Neurocam* also denies being a cult or religious experience thereby implicitly linking itself with each, and the immersive total worldview they present.

Concerns have been raised about the ethics of creative works that challenge the norms of shared social reality, equating them with everything from terrorism to the decadence of Reality TV (McGonigal 2003: 2). Indeed, some parallels and influences cannot be denied, as these forces are ever present in contemporary society and should not be ignored. There have also been recurring fears of such works triggering a cognitive dissonance in participants whereby they lose sight of real and unreal. But we must question the degree to which any genuine terror or ontological confusion occurs in the mind of participants. For such traumas to occur, participants must be legitimately, and in an extended way, deceived by the mimesis of the work as reality. I argue that even without the context of artistic work, mainstream understanding of reality is sophisticated enough to recognise these experiences as fictive play, but that in recognizing the play, people become more willing to engage. This is verified by Jane McGonigal's introduction of the concept of 'Performance of Belief'. (McGonigal 2003: 3) McGonigal purports that participants of Alternate Reality Games wilfully feign belief in the game's fiction in order to contribute to the fiction's construction, thus increasing their own immersion in it. This notion of Performance of Belief is similar to cinema's suspension of disbelief yet it is active, whereas the former is passive. However, both are wholly dependent on the participant's fundamental knowledge that the experience itself is fictional.

It is sound to suggest that Performance of Belief is at play in each of the works discussed here: while the artists offer an imposed structure of involvement, participants themselves generate their individual experience and the depth of their immersion, in full knowledge of the work's fiction. While each of these works may contain a degree of verisimilitude, they are meticulously fabricated constructs in which choice of participation and conventions of engagement are largely predetermined and agreed to. Therefore the appeal of *Kidnap* lies in the ability to be engrossed in the shock of abduction, the boredom of captivity and the romance of Stockholm Syndrome, all within the safe awareness of its fiction. Indeed each *Kidnap* participant was secured a prearranged safe word which, once spoken, would immediately cease the experience if they desired.

Aspects of performance and play are also apparent in the open-endedness of these works. Consider for example, the possibilities for interpretation of *Neurocam's* and *Surrender Control's* instructions, notwithstanding, the ability of participants to ignore the instructions altogether. This inherent optionality mark these works as fictions for, as Thomas de Zengotita asserts, the opposite of reality is not fictions or illusions, but options (Zengotita 2005: 52). The recognised truth of a real kidnap or dictatorship is that it is neither customised for, nor chosen by, you.

So what is the purpose of these works? Do they merely satisfy fetishes? And at what ethical cost? If we are to weight the ethics of presenting these works in public spaces, would that not require us to question all experiences and messages found in these locations from media journalism, political and religious statements and perhaps most importantly, omnipresent advertising? Should these messages also be scrutinized for any potential or actual ontological confusion they inspire? Like the Dadaist's rejection of logic as that which had led to the world war, these works reject the values that have favoured capital growth over social development. The nature of these works is that they seek to challenge conventional ethics and modes of interaction; their antagonistic delivery underscores a desire for us to submit to greater powers that have seen these forces of capital flourish.

Everyday reality is constructed and mediated, changing but constant. The artists behind these works can momentarily peel back the corners of our shared and assembled real, allowing us to question the motives of those who create it. These works invite audiences to critically engage with *all* reality, but neither the works nor artists themselves can topple the real. In fearing that they could, we misjudge both their agency and the aims.

One question remains unanswered; what is the effect of these works on non-participants, on those who witness a kidnap or are touched by strangers? Without the ability to participate or the knowledge of play, will bypassers take such actions and events for real? I will tackle this question of non-participant roles in the course of the next twelve months.

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