

From The Times

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Your life, his art

Fancy losing your identity in the name of art? Mathieu Briand needs volunteers at Tate Modern



John Lewis

You may be familiar with the term flashmob. It's when huge groups of people, prearranged by random e-mails or text messages, are instructed to go to a certain venue at a certain time to behave oddly. En masse, they will suddenly start fighting with pillows, or jousting with glowsticks, or forming rugby scrums outside shops, or dancing to the music on their iPods. "The moment the clock at Victoria Station strikes 6.53pm," says one recent e-mail from the flashmob Mobile Clubbing, "dance like you've never danced before!"

The phenomenon has its roots in the art-school pranks of the "situationists" in the late 1960s, and has recently started finding its way back into the art galleries, where curators have renamed them "interventions". Tate Modern is staging a particularly intriguing "intervention" next [[weekend, when the French conceptual artist Mathieu Briand will issue 100 willing visitors to the gallery with a rather sinister Mathieu Briand rubber mask and tell them to mingle with the regular punters. His partner – the Australian choreographer Prue Lang – will "choreograph" the event from a computer, sending each participant a series of text messages on their mobile phones, instructing them to scream, or lie down, or to kiss a member of the public.

"It's a bit like a flashmob," says Briand, an entertainingly manic 35-year-old artist from Marseilles, "but it's more like computer hacking. Instead of a computer, I'm hacking into a social structure. And I've no idea what will happen."

The event is called *Did You ever Want to be Someone Else?* and the masks, he says, have resonances with the film *Being John Malkovich* and also with Chris Cunningham's face-morphing promo video for the Aphex Twin's *Windowlicker*. "It's all about exploring ideas of identity," he says. "I call it controlled schizophrenia." As Briand starts to explain the theory behind his work – invoking Philip K. Dick, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Martin Heidegger – his six-year-old daughter sits next to him in the Tate Modern's canteen, pulling faces and giggling at his attempts to speak English. Amazingly, he seems to welcome her intervention. "No, no," he says. "It's important to me that she understands what I'm doing."

Indeed, Briand's interactive exhibits possess a certain childlike appeal. Gallery visitors have been invited to drive vehicles that they can't see, or to jump up and down on trampolines while they watch desynchronised images of themselves relayed on TV screens ("It makes you feel very confused," he says), or to go inside giant eggs and hear the sound outside the egg amplified. One exhibit invited punters to put on cyberhelmets with cameras installed in front of the eyes, enabling them – at the push of a button – to see through the eyes of other people.

"It's a similar feeling that people will get when they put on a mask with my face on it," he says. "It is very disorientating and disturbing. Your own identity is challenged."

Briand comes to Tate Modern on May 25 as part of the Long Weekend, four days of disparate events that celebrate the complete rehang of the Tate's exhibits. The event's centrepiece is Briand's *The Spiral*, a sculptural sound

installation that takes over the Turbine Hall at the Tate. A number of flight-cases are arranged in a large coil, and at the centre is Briand's experimental sound recording studio, featuring five turntables, two mixing desks and a vinyl-cutting machine for pressing dubplates of records in realtime. "People are used to doing all this on computers nowadays," he says. "But when I do it with archaic, lo-fi technology like vinyl records it suddenly becomes magical!"

On the opening Friday guests from local schools will be invited to bring in old vinyl records to make new musical pieces, while on the Saturday DJ artists such as Charlie Dark, si-cut.db and Xentos "Fray" Bentos will be using the installation to make their own music. But will the music and sound that emanates from theSpiral actually be any good?

"I'm more interested in the process than the result," he laughs. "It's like what Marcel Duchamp says – when things are *good*, they are often boring. I'm not sure that any of this will be *good*, in terms of the music, but it certainly won't be boring. Hopefully people will get immersed in the process, in what is happening and enjoy that as much as the resulting sounds."

Briand has taken *The Spiral* around the world – China, Japan, Mexico, Los Angeles, New York, Barcelona, Paris, Lille – but is especially keen to come to the UK. "People use it differently everywhere you go. It shows how each culture relates to music," he says. Not only is the Turbine Hall the biggest space it has been displayed, but it also brings him closer to his musical inspiration, the crusty, nomadic rave collective Spiral Tribe. They organised outdoor raves around the country in the early 1990s, coming to a head in a massive confrontation with the police at Castlemorton, Worcestershire, in 1992.

"Spiral Tribe opened up a musical and social revolution for my generation, as teenagers," says Briand. "When they organised free outdoor raves in France, it was a revelation. You had black kids, white kids, Arabic kids, all dancing together, outdoors. The boundaries were down. And you had electronic music – that had always been quite arcane and experimental – becoming a mass phenomenon. I like that about English culture. It's much more mixed up than in France, where people are much more snobby about art and music. We in France live in the past, where the English live in the present. That's why I love the Tate."

Mathieu Briand: The Spiral, Tate Modern, Bankside, London SE1 (www.tate.org.uk/thelongweekend2007 020-7887 8008), May 25 & 26, 10am-6pm

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