The Owl
Project

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*Simon Blackmore*

Hello. I can't believe I'm stood here in front of a log after such amazing talks. I've not been to a conference with quite so many extraordinary works and ideas. My name is Simon and I'm from the Owl Project and there are three of us, Steve, Antony and myself. We all come from slightly different backgrounds: mine is quite similar to Steve's, I graduated from a fine art degree back 1999, and then I did a computing MA. Antony who is not here today, took a similar route.

I'm going to just start with the Logık which is quite a few years old now. I had just done an MA in Creative Technology and had studied lots of different interactive software. I had got really excited about learning computing and then I came out of the MA and I just kind of... I don't know, I have a really funny relationship with technology where sometimes I love it and then I just look at it all think, "oh God if I see another thing just interacting with something else, it will drive me mad". No disrespect to anyone's work because that's what I do, it's just what is this technology that we're dealing with and why do we need it? So the Owl Project exists in this kind of strange zone where we make technology that's desirable, but then there's not very much

of it because it's really hard to make and no-one can really buy it.

The Logık in particular came out around 2001 when there were a lot of laptop performers and you would always see them standing, ironically in front of a laptop just like mine, just doing their stuff. We had a love for the music and excitement about it, but also a strange repulsion of thinking I'm going to have to buy an Apple computer to be creative. There is a culture of technology being sold as something that will make you somehow imbued with creativity and so from that point we started making these limited systems that we tried to be expressive with. I'm going to show you a video of the first Logık performance. This was back in 2001. You will notice that we are nodding our heads out of time, this is because we had two laptops, or two log laptops and we didn't managed to get them synchronised so they were playing cross rhythms.

A key feature? Well ironically we managed to sort it out through more technology later with stepper motors and I think that the Logık music went a bit downhill after that. Many of the sounds generated by the Logık were from the hum of the lights that lit up the display.

IMAGE: Crispin Jones Watches / 'The Accurate' promotional image

Actually 240 volt lights that put this huge hum through the PA. Actually when we made these we didn't know anything about electronics. We would do things like connect the jack to a switch with just a battery and when it's switched, it sent a voltage straight to the PA. At one point we did a performance in a working man's club and managed to set the speakers on fire. I don't know what we did, but I think the logs kind of moved the speakers too much.

"I guess we've really worked on the margins because obviously this music is not going to get us into the charts"

Basically we had this kind of perverse musical direction, while everyone else seemed to be learning how to use Max MSP to create generative music software, we were trying to make the music they were making just on our logs. The inside of one of our logs looks like a Max patch or something. I guess we have really worked on the margins because obviously this music is not going to get us into the charts, but interestingly we also work on the margins of woodworking as well. I think I might stop it here and move on to Steve. If you imagine this as a kind of "out there" electronic music, Steve is going to talk about working in the "out there" regions of woodworking.

*Steve Symons*
I joined the Owl Project four years ago. I started with the Sound Lathe Project, which is an exploration of the way craft changes and the way industrial processes have changed. The Sound Lathe is a traditional pole lathe. Originally people used pole lathes to produce wooden bowls and they were always happy with their wooden bowls, and wooden bowls would be made close to the village that they were used, so there was a very decentralised industry of people



IMAGE: Crispin Jones Watches / 'The Accurate' promotional image

up and down the country, using a lathe to make wooden bowls, trading them and using them locally.

At the same time you could buy porcelain pottery, but it was very expensive, because at the time the kiln furniture was simple, well to make some porcelain you had to fire your plates on the floor and you couldn't stack them up, so there was no mass production. Then someone had the clever idea of putting little bits of wood in between the plates, so they could stack up lots of plates, whereas before they could just make one set of plates from each firing, they could suddenly make hundreds and the price of porcelain just collapsed and everyone could buy this product which people had wanted for a long time, but hadn't been able to afford. So the wooden-bowl-making industry, which had been employing people for centuries, just over a few years, completely disappeared... so what happened to the bowl turners, they become Northern European spindle turners or handle makers for axes and knives, or spindles for the backs of chairs.

Here is our Sound Lathe, it is a traditional pole lathe which is a lathe which is driven by an up and down cord and the foot treadle. We collaborated with Mike Abbott, one of the UK leading pole lathers actually, who has written a couple of books and is responsible for re-emergence of pole lathing in the country.

*Simon*
Mike is probably like the Brian Eno of the pole lathe.

*Steve*
So first of all you have to get your wood ready before you can turn it. This is Mike Abbott's workshop where you can do wood working courses in poling. We worked with Mike at Edale in the Peak District not last summer, the summer before.

*Simon*
No it was last summer.

*Steve*
It rained, we camped in Edale for a week and it rained on us for the whole time. We had a gazebo, with four or five thousand pounds worth of computer equipment in it and this equipment was focused on the lathe and on Mike Abbott. Throughout this period we gathered sounds, recordings and data.

In the Sound Lathe we have taken the traditional lathe and we have augmented it with three linked systems. The first one is based on the treadle, the energy that is put in by the person carving gives rhythm to the whole of our performance, which is turned into a MIDI beat, which goes into the live sequencer Simon has written in Super Collider. The second system works on where the carver is lathing, where they are putting that chisel on the chisel bed. Essentially we have got the chisel bed and the chisels wired up, so we know which chisel has been chosen and we know where they're working.

The last system actually takes the shape that's being carved and passes that to MAX/MSP where it is sonified in different ways. Whereas the other two systems used live samples from the whole process of splitting the wood, chopping it, getting it ready, this last system is a deliberately, I don't want to use the word pure, but it's very electronified. We can scan across the carving at different speeds and modulate different frequencies to build up layers of sound.

The whole performance starts off with a log and it finishes with a nicely carved spindle. At the beginning the sounds start off as rough and then get more and more processed as the process develops. To sense the development of the spindle we originally used a series of potentiometers to capture the wave shape

but then we moved to a camera-based system which is a lot more accurate but makes it a lot smoother.

*Simon*
Also there is another sensor system so that if you move the chisel around you move through different parts of an audio sample. We have shown this piece in different ways, as a performance in an installation, recently in Italy we made an installation where we turned the end of the gallery into a workshop where we were making spindles and we gave the spindles away at the end, so it became a mixture of demonstration and discussion of what a workshop should be.

*Steve*
About this question, what do we see ourselves? To me this project shows the way we have had to invent ourselves as artists and how we've taken technology, we augment old technology and we are like traditional craftworkers we are making our own tools all the time. We prefer to use open software and hardware if we can, the tools that we do make, we give away to the public where it is possible. This mirrors the early lathing and traditions of making your own tools and making your own lathe and is quite a cross-person ethos. We find that when we meet with people who are working like this in software or hardware or working with other hand tools, we feel an immediate affinity for the way they're talking and the relationship they have with their tools and the relationship that has with their product.

*Simon*
Whilst we were showing at the Share Festival in Turin, on the penultimate day this man, Marco, appeared and he's not the usual person you see in a digital art exhibition and after much translating and gesticulation and clapping each other on the shoulder, it turns out that he is one of the last pole lathers in Northern Italy and he had heard about the project and he had come

over to see what the young "whipper snappers" were doing with this tradition, this centuries-old tradition and of course we had to get him on the lathe, actually we had to slow him down, he was itching to have a go and make some noise. It was a very nice way to finish a week of hard work, meeting Marco there.

*Steve*
Now we are going to talk about the iLogs. We are interested in mobile phones. They are desirable, the way you interact with them in particular, but it's soulless in some ways, so we like this idea of housing our stuff in wood. We have built sound systems which make different sounds, for example a "rustle" sound.

*Simon*
The iLog is our competitor to the iPod. The iLog stores twenty seconds of audio, you can take the power away and plug it back in and it's still there. The buttons... well we've improved them a bit now, as no-one could really tell the difference between the one you turn and one you push, so they get pulled off occasionally so now only turning ones are wood. The functions it has are better than the iPod, we think, for live performances you can grab a sample really quickly and then you can slow it down. The "rustle" has a really nice feature where you can go back into the recording and get old samples out, by taking the voltage away from the recorder.

*Steve*
Another option of the iLog is the desk top version... the stump, that is based on the idea of sawing, so you create the power which allows you to make noise. The final iLog that we will talk about today is the one that turns light into sound, it picks up on frequencies. This is reproduced in real time with a small PIC. The symposium environment here today with the talks from designers is a bit strange, we are usually working towards some form of performance.

We all make instruments in our own particular way, generally there is a sound we are aiming for and in Antony's case, a process that he is interested in. I'm more interested in the actual act of interaction and the action you're doing and what that means sonically so hence the sawing. We also have another series which is a thing called an mLog which is a USB version which you can plug into audio-making software.

## Q&A

Q    Two questions, if you have a period in terms of furniture or performance what would create your favourite sounds, so would it be rock or would it be in terms of the wave forms and secondly, what's your favourite wood to use?

Simon    The carving of the shapes is quite an interesting one. When we worked with Mike Abbott, we were really excited to work with a guy who can do loads of really nice curves and stuff but he says that he doesn't really do curves.

Steve    Got to be straight like this.

Simon    Yes he's like coming across saying "I'm not really into that decoration type of thing".

Steve    A real battle to get him to build up and then do the full dimple. But in terms of our own carving skills we just do interesting shapes and as for wood, laburnum, apart from the fact that we have to be masked up to work with it as its poisonous, or cherry.

Q    When's your first album coming out?

Steve    We're still working on the way to etch it into the wood. Bit problematic at the moment.

Q    Have you got an Edinburgh printing shield?

Steve    No I'm afraid not no, but perhaps we should.

Q    I would probably buy one of your iLogs if you got it up to maybe forty seconds just twenty seconds isn't enough.

Steve    We do have an iLog Pro under production.

Simon    I want to know what you would do with the extra twenty seconds?

Steve    Or you could just slow down half, there's your forty seconds…

Simon    Any other questions?

Q    How often when you're producing an instrument and you've obviously got a process in mind at the start of that, how often do you get to the end of that process and go, oh I don't like how that sounds, I'm going to do it differently?

Simon    Our design approach has an evolution, I think the concept of making music with a lathe is almost flawed from the beginning. We had this idea that it could be amazing and it always is a bit, just weird, and I think that is interesting, so it's exciting. You have the liveness of the beat and it's like, oh well this is really good and then you listen back to it and the beats are all over the place.

Steve    It's improvised anyway, but yes, it is a cyclic process. First you make your instrument and then you have got to learn to play it, then you perform with it, and then you develop it. For example this is a log I can feed audio into and audio comes out and acts as resonance chamber, it's got some contact microphones inside. This was an idea about trying to make something more organic. I drop things on here and actually cutting and sawing this as well and it will eventually get cut in half. It's an ongoing sound instrument and that dialogue is just an ongoing process.

Q    I noticed in the fist clip you showed you were wearing balaclavas – is that significant in anyway?

Simon    That goes back to art school. The whole Owl Project thing came out of when we were at college in Cardiff and we used to go out and light fires all the time, as you do. Not in public spaces but in Cardiff you could go out into hills quite easily, which I have to say I'm a bit more nervous about doing in Manchester somehow. One night we were just by a fire and we had a little sampler with us and we sat recording the sound of owls and then we got surrounded by them, just amazing just playing the twit twoo sound back to them and one of them just flew over us. I don't know, the balaclavas, that's an interesting one: I think it was because of poaching, we were kind of into the idea of guys poaching owls, I don't know.

Steve    We stopped wearing the balaclavas but the costume debate does go on occasionally.

Simon    We've got very nice t-shirts with OP on the back.

Steve    Yes but we should probably get back to balaclavas.