

(Tree) House Music

CHRISTOPHER STEENSON INTERVIEWS ROBIN PRICE ABOUT HIS ENVIRONMENTALLY-THEMED PUBLIC ART INSTALLATION, *AUTOMATED BIRD RAVE GENERATOR*.



Robin Price, *Automated Bird Rave Generator*, 2017

Christopher Steenson: What exactly is an *Automated Bird Rave Generator* and how does it work?

Robin Price: The *Automated Bird Rave Generator* is a solar-powered, outdoor cuckoo clock, but this particular cuckoo clock wakes up on the hour, every hour, to play 'bird techno' (but only during business hours, so it doesn't upset the neighbours). The 'bird techno' in question consists of local birdsong that was recorded by the children from the Bloomsfield Community Group and myself. The recordings were manipulated into rhythmic loops in my music studio and then made into songs by the children.

This particular *Automated Bird Rave Generator* is intended to highlight the effects of pollution on the environment. The bird techno played by the birdhouse responds to the environment via sensors that detect changes in temperature and pollution levels of the river beside where the piece is installed. The river's temperature controls the speed – and therefore the pitch – of the music. When the water is cold during the winter, the music slows down and is lower in pitch. In the summer months, the music speeds up and is higher in pitch. The birdhouse also detects the electrical conductivity of the water, which varies with tide and pollution levels. The total dissolved salts in the water controls a glitch effect that is applied to the music. As pollution levels rise, the amount of glitch effect is increased.

CS: You worked with Wheelworks Youth Arts, the Ulster Wildlife Trust and the children from the Bloomsfield Community Group in east Belfast. How were both of these groups involved in the formation of the work?

RP: I went to the Wheelworks Youth Arts open day when they unveiled their new ArtCart project bus. The ArtCart is a mobile project space inside a bus that Wheelworks use for running digital art workshops with kids around Northern Ireland. I told them about a project I was putting in for funding to make an outdoor sound installation that responded to environmental sensor data and that funding never came through for it. A few months later

Wheelworks rang me and asked if I would like to do something similar with them.

The Ulster Wildlife Trust were involved along with the Bloomsfield Community Group as they run two youth groups respectively which teamed together for the project. Jess from the Ulster Wildlife Trust was really fun to work with and gave me copious notes on which birds were likely to be found in the park as well as a bird spotting tour of the park.

For the first week of the project, the children and I played about with a digital light painter and made long exposure photographs of bird drawings the children made to introduce the avian techno(logy) theme. The following week I ran a sound recording workshop where we walked around the park at dusk and recorded as many bird sounds as we could find. I turned those sounds into strange loops in my studio and gave them back to the children to arrange in GarageBand, completing the 'bird techno' phase. I had to leave for a residency after that, but the children spent an extra week drawing designs for the birdhouse enclosure with another artist, Sinéad Owens. I then laser-cut these designs in acrylic to decorate the final piece. Wheelworks are really good to work with, because they always budget for backup artists to help facilitate a project.

CS: How did you approach developing workshops for children on this theme?

RP: It was really hard. I hadn't worked with such young children or such large groups before this project. I learned that kids can smell fear, so you need a plan B, C, D and E when working with eight year olds. There's a tendency to treat activities like a race if they're not sufficiently engaged, so you have to keep things in reserve if they finish an activity early. When workshops went well, I left with a massive buzz, but if the kids got bored (listening back to sound recordings kind of sucked), then I felt deflated.

The biggest problem was that the project was quite experimental and fiddly to make. It was something of an abstract concept for the kids to understand until it was finally placed in front of them. Community art can be like a Venn diagram, with the community group's interests in one circle, your funder's aims in another and your own in a third. It's sort of left up to you to move your circle about until you find the overlap. It's not something I'm expert in, but I think it's a worthwhile process.

CS: This piece combines aspects of sound installation, music and environmental information (such as ambient temperature and pollution levels). Why are you interested in combining such elements in this way to make art?

RP: All my work has involved translating sensor data into some kind of audiovisual response. For example, a few years ago, I made a full-size, light-up, musical ping-pong table. It was really popular, but I felt like it was just spectacle with no real concept – which is cool, but I wanted my work to draw from ideas outside itself. I decided to shift the focus of the sensors away from people to their effect on the environment as a way of engaging with the Anthropocene as a subject matter.

CS: Can you discuss any other environmentally-themed projects you've been involved in?

RP: I have an ongoing project that visualises air pollution levels using long exposure photography at various locations around the world including Ireland, Wales, India, Mexico and Kenya. The more pollution particles detected, the more points of light are drawn onto the final photograph. The idea was to try and visualise these hazardous invisible particles as if they'd been illuminated and blown up under a microscope.

The project involved a series of collaborations with different environmental scientists following my residency at Birmingham Open Media (BOM) lab, which specialises in art-science technology crossovers. I initially partnered with an environmental scientist at Birmingham University, Dr Francis Pope, who shared

my love of ambient music and early drum and bass. We worked together on another project that took real-time data from the university's forestry research experiments and translated it into ambient music and visuals in BOM's basement gallery.

CS: Do you have plans to further develop the ideas and technology of the *Automated Bird Rave Generator*? Are there other projects in the pipeline?

RP: I'm currently developing projects for PS² gallery and the Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI) to advance my research on building solar-powered sound art generators for public spaces. The artwork for PS² will sit on top of their pixelated shipping crate in Peas Park in North Belfast. PS² curator and director Peter Mutschler wants the artwork to measure and respond to "the joy in the air", which I think is a beautiful concept, but hard to translate into reality. I'm playing with geo-located twitter metrics to try and assess the public mood in Belfast using crude word counts. There are companies doing similar kinds of sentiment analysis professionally, but I'm just mucking about with Python code and feeding the results into Pure Data (which is a graphical programming environment often used for interactive sound design).

The project for ACNI is a collaboration with Millennium Court Arts Centre and Oxford Island nature reserve. It will make music in response to weather data and the ever-fluctuating bird populations in the area.

CS: Have you considered how other birds around Belfast might react to hearing the 'bird techno' generated by your installations? Other artists have previously used sound to affect birds' natural habitats – I'm thinking of American composer David Dunn, who played electronic tones to mockingbirds to see if they would mimic them.¹

RP: This is something I'm sort of worried about. A lot of bird-song that we perceive as being really beautiful is birds telling each other to fuck off and staking out their territory. This is especially true for robins – they're very aggressive. The music made by the *Bird Rave Generator* only plays for a few minutes every hour, so I don't think they'll be too affected by it. The Ulster Wildlife Trust didn't seem too concerned and I defer to their greater wisdom on these matters. Also, the birdsong I use is often slowed down or re-pitched, so the birds might not recognise themselves in the music when they hear it. I tested the installation in my backyard for two months and the local pigeons basically ignored it.

CS: As a final question: if birds really do listen to techno, what do you think their favourite 'sky filler' is?

RP: I like to think that the starlings that murmur around the Albert Bridge in the evening are tumbling in tune with James Holden's *A Break in the Clouds*.

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Robin Price is a digital artist and electronic musician.
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Note
¹David Dunn, *Mimus Polygottos*, 1976.