

CIRCLES AND PROPS - MAKING UNKNOWN TECHNOLOGY

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The OWL project is an evolving interrogation of how we might imagine technologies that do not yet exist. The paper describes the theoretical background and structure of a series of workshops aimed at allowing participants to create their own personal technological fantasies. We explain the background for each conceptual shift in the process and attempt to outline how and why they may work.



Fig 1. Owl circle workshop, Sydney 2010, photographic media, © Kristina Andersen & Danielle Wilde



Fig 2. Owl circle workshop, The Mastification Amplifier, Sydney 2010, photographic media, © Kristina Andersen & Danielle Wilde

How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?

Meno, from Plato's dialogue (in Solnit, 2005) [1]

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles from the Future* [2]

The Unknown

It is almost impossible to imagine what lies ahead. What will the future bring? How could life be different? The OWL project is an evolving interrogation of how we might imagine technologies that do not yet exist. How can we support the emergence of radical future technologies that reflect and respond to our personal desires? Asking someone to imagine yet-to-be-imagined technologies puts a large strain on our ability to bring ideas into being. What do you really want, if you could have anything? It is an awful question to ask and when you do, you will mostly get simple, modest answers. In the quote above Meno asks how we will go about finding that thing “the nature of which is unknown to us.” [1] The OWL Circles were created as an attempt to find a way to blot out the most immediate answers, so that we might access more instinctual, and perhaps less plausible responses.

The Circles are purposely designed as a way to sneak up on ourselves, to be caught unaware and unself-conscious for a moment so that we dare to begin. Our aim is to elicit nuanced, imaginative and implausible responses that challenge and stretch what we consider to be possible. We begin with the body and use ideas of enchantment, ambiguity and play, as vehicles through which to contemplate Meno's question, and thereby support the conception of “sufficiently advanced technology.” [2] The Circle workshop experience takes the participant through a rapid series of formalised conceptual shifts, that each draw on large areas of work in theatre and performance theory, game-play and motivational psychology. This paper is an attempt to account for these shifts and the body of work that lies behind them.

The OWL Circle Workshops

The purpose of the OWL Circles is to allow participants to create their personal technological fantasy. They are hosted in a neutral, utilitarian space, containing a large shared worktable with various tools and lights, and another table, off to the side, containing various neatly organized recycled materials. Neutral colors predominate. The materials are chosen to afford a large range of structural possibilities and aesthetics. A small area is also set up for video interviews, with a video camera on a tripod in front of a black wall. Ideally, the circles are conducted with twelve participants and two workshop facilitators. The format has evolved until it was reduced to the following, strict sequence of conceptual shifts:

- Introduction: Welcome and brief introduction, including the reading out loud of the quotes from Arthur C. Clarke and Meno. [1] [2]
- The Desires: A list of common desires are read aloud and placed on the table in the form of index cards. [3] Participants are asked to choose one.
- Transfer to Body: Participants are asked to identify in which body part their chosen desire resides.
- The Material Switch: Participants choose materials they find appealing.
- Thinking with Your Hands: Without knowing what to do in advance, participants begin making.

- Being 'Done': When they recognize that they are 'done,' each participant is led to the video interview corner.
- Description: While being fitted with a microphone participants are instructed to tell us: their name, their desire, what their object is called and what it does. The answers are filmed in one take.
- Debrief: A short debrief is performed to complete the process

What is Happening?

In the following we explain the background for each conceptual shift in the workshop process and attempt to outline how and why they may work. The main component is a series of estrangement switches that shift the mindset of the group away from the predictable and towards a temporary moment of otherness.

THE INTRODUCTION:

The introduction functions as the drawing of a circle or the beginning of a game and as such it serves a number of functions. In a theatrical sense, it declares that a game is beginning. Caillois specifies a number of characteristics for games: they are engaged in by choice; they are separate from the routine of life, and occupy their own time and space; games are uncertain: the results cannot be predetermined, the players' initiative is therefore required; games are unproductive: they create no wealth and end as they begin; games are governed by strict rules that suspend ordinary laws and behaviors; and, finally, they involve make-believe that confirms in players the existence of imagined realities that may be set against 'real life.' [4] By framing the circle as a game, Caillois's characteristics automatically come into play. This liberates qualities of attention and engagement that are useful when trying to find "that thing the nature of which is unknown," [1] while Clarke's assertion that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" [2] further emphasizes the game-like quality of what we are trying to do; at the same time as it focuses our quest into the realm of technology.

THE DESIRES:

The list of desires that we use is borrowed from Steven Reiss's research on motivational psychology. [3] Reiss's desires are usefully provocative: they reduce a complex emotional field down to someone else's shorthand definition of the world. They also introduce language before we know what we might be describing, and thereby provide an uncommon point of departure for an embodied discovery process. Choosing to approach a difficult subject in a complex or convoluted manner is a common strategy of fine art. The underlying assumption is that to 'free up' the creative and expressive body to respond to the unanswerable, we must first 'busy' the reasoning part of the brain so that it will not interfere. [5] The sparse, yet strict instructions that we provide act as a structure that engages the reasoning part of the brain; freeing participants to be spontaneous, to follow their intuition, aesthetic scents and creative whims. [6] It allows them to trust and follow their instincts. The list of desires acts as the first estrangement switch, and is followed very closely by the next conceptual shift: the transfer to the body. Importantly, the facilitators remain neutral throughout, accepting all choices as equally valid.

The list of desires is:

- Acceptance, the need for approval

- Curiosity, the need to learn
- Eating, the need for food
- Family, the need to raise children
- Honor, the need to be loyal to the traditional values of one's clan/ethnic group
- Idealism, the need for social justice
- Independence, the need for individuality
- Order, the need for organized, stable, predictable environments
- Physical activity, the need for exercise
- Power, the need for influence of will
- Romance, the need for sex
- Saving, the need to collect
- Social contact, the need for friends (peer relationships)
- Status, the need for social standing/importance
- Tranquility, the need to be safe
- Vengeance, the need to strike back/to win

THE TRANSFER TO BODY:

“Where in your body does your chosen desire reside?” This question acts as a second estrangement switch, transferring from, and connecting, desire to body. It is a nonsensical question that draws heavily on surrealist art strategies, liberating in their absurdity. [7] “If you were a color what colour would you be?” Children know this game and have answers for these types of inquiries. The switch between an abstract desire, defined very strictly by someone else and the feeling that this word does indeed reside within your body, allows the participants to begin to work. The question is no longer abstract: it has been made concrete and physical. This clear concept now becomes the participants’ guide in the work.

THE MATERIAL SWITCH:

“Find the material that works for you.” This instruction acts as the third estrangement switch and allows the physical making to begin as participants find physical form and texture for the body-feeling that has been identified. Again, the decisions made here are not reasonable, rather participants continue their line of absurdist questioning by asking, “if this feeling had a texture and a shape what would it be?” This process exposes unexpected and poetic possibilities that can be explored from the specific sensory potential of a material to body behaviors as they rise from desires, feelings, and anxieties. Dr. Montessori of course famously used blindfolds in reviewing materials, stating that the eye can interfere with what the hand knows. [8] We could add that language can interfere with what the hand knows. Once the participants have chosen materials, they can begin to build and support their burgeoning concept.

THINKING WITH YOUR HANDS:

Through the making process the work is one step further removed from reasoning and habitual thinking. The participants have up to this point made three very large leaps of faith: choosing a desire, connecting this desire to their body, and their as yet unnamed feeling to a material texture and expanse. These three switches have occurred in less than fifteen minutes, allowing no time to re-consider or back out

into careful reasoning. In a sense, participants are not completely committed at this point, simply because they do not know what it is that they are making. The work that follows is instinctual and effective. The conversation around the table is practical: "Can I have the scissors?" "How do I make this stick out to the side?" [9] Kelly claims that the divorce of the hands from the head puts a strain on the human psyche. [10] This suggests that bringing them back together again through embodied processes releases strain. Having viewed numerous circle participants engage in this process, we suggest that the state that it engenders is tranquil: focused, efficient, relaxed and also gently energetic. Thinking as an emergent bodily process allows us to access knowledge, expertise or connoisseurship that otherwise eludes articulation. [11] The OWL processes leans heavily on this idea.

BEING 'DONE':

Knowing when a device is 'done' is an instinctual knowing. The circle structure removes verbal reasoning from the imagining and creating process, and frees the participant to trust their ability to recognize what it is they are doing as it emerges, including when it is 'done.' This knowing 'when' is something we all have experienced, Henri Cartier Bresson called it "the decisive moment," the moment when the trigger on the camera is pushed. This moment relies on the photographer's ability to see and record an event literally taking form in the immediate future. [12] Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment was tied to a particular approach to photography, nonetheless it is useful to provide ways of thinking around the notion of making a device which is yet to be imagined, and knowing when that device is 'done.' In musical improvisation, the knowing where to go next becomes a series of small decisions made in a hyper aware state of flow in which the musician 'knows' both the minds and desires of his or her fellow musicians, and also holds the experience of the audience as an almost physical thing which can be examined, turned, changed, and at some point is 'done.' [13]

DESCRIPTION:

The interview is filmed in one take. Participants are required to think on their feet, to not let their inner dialogue drown out their ideas. We began with language, with the desires and now we return to language again. The process between is embodied, non-lingual or mute. As language floods in, it takes over, surprising the participants. Excluding language from the central part of our structure allows a very intuitive and productive process to emerge and only at the end is reasoning allowed back into the experience. In order to allow this process to appear "on camera" we ask the participant to speak in one-take with minimal intervention from the camera operator. This achieves two things: first it allows the process to remain personal and introverted, the camera operator is just that, an operator facilitating the participant to self-record their piece; and secondly, the switch between an intuitive and wordless making process to a reasoned presentation happens 'on camera,' with many participants only realizing what they have built as they name it. To make this final switch more distinct we ask strict, product-like questions. Instead of, "how did you feel?" we are asking, "what does it do?" The strictness of this line of enquiry allows the sometimes hazy decision making process that has come before to crystallize out. The 'product' is described and the participants are thereby brought back into the everyday world. The circle is broken and the game is over.

DEBRIEF:

As a postscript to the overall workshop experience, each participant is debriefed before leaving the workshop space. This allows us to close any conceptual holes, attend to any concerns the participant might have and is an important part of us taking responsibility for the emotions and questions that may arise in an intense experience. It is also where we can explain a little bit more about the background and reasons for the project.

The workshop takes two hours, including the recording of all twelve participants' work. In that time we have opened a bubble in time in which we were allowed to physically build what did not previously exist, and in turn meditate over our desires, and how they might be met or mitigated.

Nine circles have been conducted to date: three in Tokyo and six in Sydney. Five of the Sydney workshops were targeted towards specific social or community groups: artists with disabilities and their carers; design academics; young children; performing artists; librarians. The outcomes were exhibited as part of the 2010 Participatory Design Conference in Sydney. [14] The breadth of participants and contexts afforded deep reflection, and the development of the strict structure described above. The whole process shifted the way that people thought about and imagined their bodies in relation to technology. The results were not only enchanting, but were deeply felt. [15]

Some Conclusions

Susan Stewart, in her book *On Longing* proposes that souvenirs are objects of desires that assist in the formation of continuous personal narratives that connect the present with the past. [16] OWL objects and devices connect participants through their imaginations and desires, as well as through the objects themselves, from the present to the future. They give form to, and assist in the formation of continuous, or ongoing personal narratives that support this connection. [17]

The workshops themselves are live, volatile processes, understood in the sense of Dewey's 'experience.' [18] We work with ideas not just in the form of description, where only language can become knowledge and meaning, but rather as a 'process of becoming' that, without turning to either romanticism or mysticism, can allow what may appear as chaos to create order and pattern through embodied experiences. Judith Butler states that we are required to, "risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human." [19] The workshops are purposely built to facilitate this kind of risk taking, to provide a temporary space in which we can 'become.'

In Viktor Shklovsky's view, art resists and overturns the deadening effects of habituation. As our "perception becomes habitual," he argues, "all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic" and as a result "we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions." [20] Art promises to recover the sense of immediacy and wonder that habit slowly erodes: "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known." [20]

The OWL project confronts desires, bodies and dreams about technology. It affects a displacement of desires, by naming them and giving them form, but it also affords giving account from the place Butler speaks of, the place where we become and remain human. The objects that are made are a kind of souvenirs from the future, but where souvenirs remind us 'what happened then' the OWL objects carry stories about 'what happens next.'

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