

eaman

**Second
chance**
Meet comic
Stewart Lee

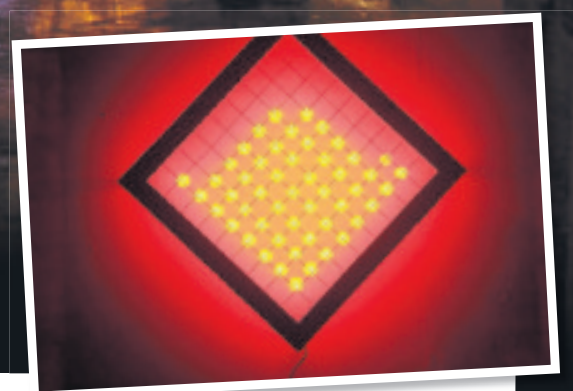
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EXHIBITION: Curiosity
Collective - Dark Show
Photos: JEN O'NEILL



The curious case of art and technology



Curiosity may well have killed the cat, but it has also given a group of people a focus for new ideas, as **WAYNE SAVAGE** discovered

IT'S been nearly five years and we still don't quite know how to answer the 'is it art?' question, laughs Curiosity Collective co-founder David Chatting.

He is one of a dozen or so people who meet every other Tuesday at McGinty's pub in Ipswich to share ideas and methods of retooling technology in whatever way they imagine.

"We've always been kind of happy to say this is a curiosity, in a kind of Victorian sense of the word. Personally, I think there's an artistic element to some of the things we've done most recently, but that's not the ethos of the group," says the 32-year-old computer scientist and electronics buff.

They are a collective in the truest sense of the word.

"We have several musicians, lots of people who have more of a

design background, who maybe come from a website kind of design space; a biologist and there's also a performance artist who does dance - we haven't gone that direction yet, but it'd be really interesting to.

"Curiosity is the keyword; if you are curious about things, want to try stuff out or you want to share your ideas or skills then the idea is come along and talk about it - that's our ethos," David enthuses. "The common thread is that you're excited enough to want to communicate with other people about what you do."

Having lived and attended school in Ipswich since he was four, David recently left BT - where he built prototypes of interactive systems, different devices and software - after 16 years to pursue his own projects.

The Curiosity Collective, though, started nearly five years

ago when he and Cefn Hoile, a fellow BT research and development colleague, went to America on a three-month secondment.

Based at MIT - Massachusetts Institute of Technology - in Boston, they found a large group of people fusing technology and art. It was a trip to a cyber arts festival while out there that really inspired them.

David remembers "Everywhere we looked, in shop windows and loads of galleries, there were just people doing really interesting stuff with technology; nothing sort of practical, more the artsy side of it."

"There were little robots scuttling around in window spaces; it was just fun and we thought we want to do something like that."

As soon as the duo returned to the UK they fired off e-mails to

REFLECTIVE: Trickle Down by Jonathan Clift - An animation of LEDs light trickling down the wall, reflecting on economic theory

friends, saying they'd found this interesting and different way of looking at their skills.

"I was spending my days building things for serious reasons; when actually you can use these skills for something a bit different, a bit more whimsical."

David was surprised by how quickly that idea sparked imaginations.

"That was about July 2005 I suppose and it grew quite rapidly. By the following year we had our first exhibition at St Mary's. To start with it was people we knew; now it's really interesting because people come out of the woodwork

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and say 'actually, I've been doing this thing in my spare room for the last five years and it's really cool,' he added.

That first show, back in July 2006, was – as David describes it – an anything you want to build we'll find a space for it affair.

"It was almost sort of a fair of anything we could possibly want to put in the space, which made it really interesting and dynamic. It was like 'there's this thing over here that's not related to this at all but it's interesting and does something kind of slightly crazy, perhaps'."

Crazy is the right word. Wandering around one of their exhibitions is like wandering around Caractacus Potts' workshop. If anybody could bring Chitty Chitty Bang Bang to life, it's these guys.

However, this approach had its downside.

"One of the things we were having problems with is how do you tell people what this is. It was just 'come along to this dark church space on Ipswich docks and you're going to see some stuff'," he recalls.

Then came the breakthrough idea of doing theme-based shows; this led to the Proverbs Show at Electric

“One of the things we were having problems with is how to tell people what this is”
David Chatting

House, Graham and Oldham Artists Gallery, in 2009.

A particular favourite was Cefn Hoile's the grass is always greener on the other side exhibit.

"It was zero technology," says David. "It was just Astroturf and two fake bunnies rotating in front of you. As it rotates you see this contrast. What he did was paint one side of the grass a brighter colour than the other so you get this kind of simple, beautiful optical illusion. We had a whole set of things like that."

Then there were exhibits like the watched pot never boils which was achieved, David says, with "an extraordinary amount of technology and massive amounts of over-engineering".

It consisted of a kettle and a background with three cameras pointing out at the audience and a PC hidden below. Every aspect of the kettle was simulated.

There was a little bit of water, a garden mister that you might find in a pond making the cold steam, and a fan to blow it out, with the simulated sound of bubbling.

"Using the kind of face detection technology you might find in a camera, you can say if you can see people's faces pointing towards the kettle, it means they're looking at it."

"So we had a little bit of software that did that and said okay, we'll start the bubbling – but if anybody's watching we'll never quite reach the point of boiling. Soon as they look away it starts to steam and a simulated whistle blows. That was a lot of fun," he smiles.

Interactivity is another keyword for the collective – be it inflatable pronged sculptures that rise, fall and reach out for passers-by at a recent show or an interactive video mirror made of 64 Magners Cider bottles at McGinty's last Christmas.

CREATIVE: Drawing in Light - David Chatting & Tom Juby. Drawing with light pens in the air, computer vision simulating a long exposure photograph,



OTHER DARK SHOW EXHIBITS

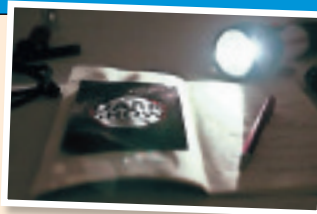
■ **Bubble Machine – David Chatting, Craig McCahill and Robert Lenne:** This was a child's toy modified to be triggered when a torch illuminates it in the dark to create a flow of bubbles;

■ **Keepie Uppie in the Dark – Matthew C Applegate:** LED lights were suspended in the air inside helium balloons, encouraging visitors to look up to St Mary's magnificent roof;

■ **Inflatable Sculpture – Tom Juby:** Exploring the use of light and air to alter form, the inflation and deflation of the sculpture creates the illusion of life;

■ **Drawing in Light – David Chatting:** This allowed the visitor to draw in mid-air with light, simulating a long exposure photograph;

■ **(de)construction – Tom Juby:** A projection of the past and possible



future of the main archway. This used a re-projection of a photograph from 1942 back on to the arch and the physical simulation of falling blocks on to it;

■ **Cock Robin – Angela McLellan and John Bowers:** The common garden robin is an feisty character and is surprisingly busy in the dark! Visitors could hear just how talented our town and country companion really is, with a little curious tweaking of course!

The latter filled a window at the Ipswich pub. Each bottle contained an LED and passing your hand over a camera outside the window created a lightshow inside each one.

The focus, stresses David, is on fun not usefulness.

"Have you ever seen the movie they took from the front of a train from London to Birmingham," he asks me while pointing out pictures of bizarre mechanical menageries on his laptop.

"This idea originally was that

you'd have like a handcart thing that you would pummel to move, but it got reduced because it was quite difficult to build. So you ended up having to wear a hat and there was a distance sensor at the top and you kind of bounced up and down to make the onscreen train move forward."

He then moves on to a text entry system for a mobile phone using semaphore.

"This is one of the things that sums-up the kind of thing we do," he laughs. "You have a webcam and by moving



coloured flags you're spelling out the letters in your text message and once you're finished it sends it off, on the face of it not very useful, but quite fun."

Whatever they're doing it's going down well with those who come to their shows. The last exhibition at St Mary's, the Dark Show, attracted more than 160 people over one weekend.

"We are communicating with people, getting though and the comments are really nice. It's not always massively easy to get these things to respond how people might expect them to," he admits.

Members' joy at sharing their ideas and skills is palpable.

Mike Challis said: "For me it is the fun, expertise and the quirkiness of the diverse members of the group. As a sound artist the exhibitions mounted by the

collective give me an opportunity to try new ideas and be creative without waiting for a commission to come along. The results are beginning to feed into my paid work and vice versa."

Lunula, his piece for the Dark Show and believed to be a world first, is a prime example.

"Two years ago I was part of a team that made Standing Wave, an installation at Snape Maltings that vibrated a shallow tray of water and shone coloured lights on to the surface. The reflections were cast onto a 'wave' of white that sweep out over the water," says Mike.

"Lunula took that principle to a new dimension. Instead of reflecting light off the surface of water vibrated with sound, this time the light source is luminescent algae in the water giving off the light."

Mike has been fascinated by the

ON THE B-SIDE

Jonathan Barnes



Why Ipswich Town just aren't very rock n' roll

MUSIC and football have been slugging it out for years in my world.

I love them both dearly and hopelessly but there have been times when one has enjoyed far more of my time and attention; had the other on the ropes.

To continue the tortuous boxing analogy, fighting for football out of the blue corner is Ipswich Town, that most brilliantly infuriating of teams to support; rock n'roll and all its might sits menacingly across the ring (though I guess it might fail the drug test).

If anyone's keeping score, music is a clear winner at the moment. There are many reasons for that, including the cost and time involved in watching a team perennially draw 1-1 and the excitement of discovering great new (or old) music compared with the shrug of the shoulders that greets another journeyman on loan from Sunderland.

But, come come, it doesn't have to be a war, and you can only imagine my excitement when the worlds of rock and ITFC do occasionally collide.

I've always been more fascinated than I really should be about rock n' rollers who might follow the Town. The only trouble is, there aren't many. And those who do pledge allegiance to the Blues flag I get suspicious of. I wonder if they really could hold their own in a discussion about Johnny Wark's penalty record or whether Graham Harbey was our worst ever player. I want to know if they've ever met a mate at Sir Alf.

That would be nirvana (small case n - Kurt Cobain wasn't a North Stander, to my knowledge), but it's still music to these ears to hear any pop star or public figure name Ipswich Town as their favourite team.

And I've been relentless in my search to dig out fellow Tractor Boys in my years reporting at the EADT and I can't help but throw in The Football Question whenever I interview any rocker or popster with local links.

So who have we got? Well, 80s pop icon Nik Kershaw once told me he used to stand with "all the hooligans" in the North Stand but then ruined it by saying he was really a Chelsea fan. He did go on to say "the world is a better place when Ipswich are winning" but he'd lost me by then.

I was very interested when Charlie Simpson, the Busted poster boy turned alternative rocker, bought into the club in the post-administration share issue. He spoke enthusiastically about Wembley 2000 and big games he'd seen against

Arsenal and Manchester United. But when I'd spoken to him a few weeks earlier he had crumbled under my interrogation, and admitted he was more of a rugby man. He didn't know his Dalian Atkinson from his Chris Kiwomya.

The Darkness? No, they were lapsed Norwich fans, although Dan Hawkins had an amusing rant about Delia Smith.

It's general knowledge that Tom Chaplin, the lead singer of Keane, is an Ipswich fan but I've heard his allegiance was initially just to spite his father and brother who are Norwich fans. I'm not sure if that counts.

I have tried to pin Mr Chaplin down on this, but in the process of trying to get the interview I think I have puzzled the PR folk. "You want to speak to him about what? Ipswich Town?" One day, I'll get to the bottom of it.

For genuine fans, we've got Sheila Ravenscroft, widow of the late, great John Peel, who once wrote an article for this newspaper about her support of the club. Peel often came to matches too, and on the last time I spoke to him, I remember him saying how he felt closer to Ipswich than his beloved Liverpool "because Liverpool had become a brand, and you could never accuse Ipswich of that". He gave wonderfully simple analysis of Town's performances, like "you can see on their faces how hard they're trying - but they just can't that ball where they want it to go".

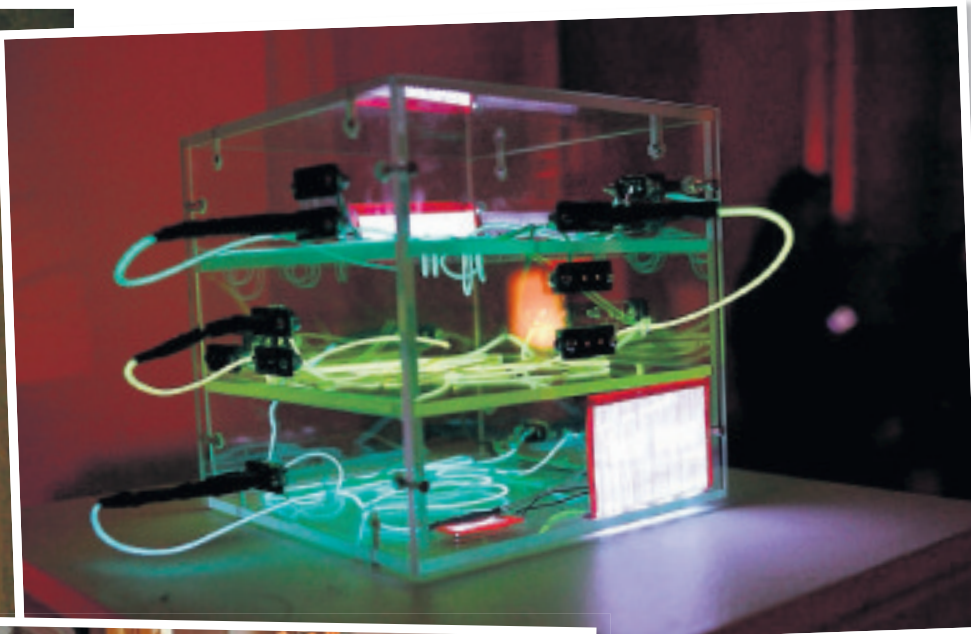
Who else? Well, Ed Lay from Editors is definitely a fan. I've read about him publicly backing Keane (the manager that is, not the band) and he even appeared on Mark Clemmit's Football League programme. But his touring schedules mean he's a one-game-a-season man, at best.

So I'll have to make do with getting my kicks when I can, such as the picture which has emerged of R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe wearing the blue on stage at Portman Road. I wrote and blogged about that 2005 concert a couple of weeks back and the fact that I'd never seen a picture of the legendary frontman in the Town colours.

Sure enough, someone soon pointed me in the direction of a shot of Stipe in Blue. I can't reproduce here it for copyright reasons, but if you want to see it for yourself, try visiting <http://tinyurl.com/yag9d26>.

I think it was *Imitation of Life* that R.E.M. played while Stipe was an honorary

Tractor Boy, during the encore. It definitely wasn't *Shiny Happy People*. They left that out altogether. It wouldn't have sounded right. Not at Portman Road.



ILLUMINATING: The Cube by Chris Reason – Make a path through the EL wire maze

"Later I discovered this group of people who were thinking and acting even more widely about the interaction between technology and art (the curiosity collective). Nobody would ever pay for that. But it is fun to be involved with such a group."

Members mostly show in Ipswich, but they are looking forward to travelling back to the Maker Faire in Newcastle on 13th March – but nothing's ever that simple with the Curiosity Collective.

"Preparing for the faire last year in the pub we consulted Google Maps on the iPhone to determine the route to drive from Ipswich to Newcastle. Google told us to go via Harwich and the Netherlands with two ferries making up the route - it had defaulted to a walking route but presented us with an adventure," remembers David.

"We decided we make that trip this year and take as many of our portable makes with us as we can - especially those which give our curious take on way-finding, navigation, geographical information, mobile social networking and the like.

"At least some of our walk will be aided by a homemade sextant, an Arduino-powered pedometer, a device for calculating latitude from how a webcam registers the hours of daylight, an iPhone-based geographical misinformation system and so forth," he laughs.

"We intend to document the walk as it happens through social networking sites like Twitter and conduct some impromptu performances and presentations of our work on ferries and in Dutch coastal villages.

"When we get to Newcastle we'll share our journey through the images, music and data we have created along the way. We will encourage people to try out our low-tech location devices, so they can prove they really are in Newcastle!"

■ For more details on the Curiosity Collective visit www.curiositycollective.org

■ For more photos of their activities visit www.flickr.com/groups/curiositycollective/pool/

■ For videos visit www.youtube.com and search for Curiosity Collective

wayne.savage@eadt.co.uk



luminescence you get from the sea at night all his life and found walking the Suffolk coast and sailing the seas all around the British Isles that the dark often revealed a glittering light source in the water.

"For Lunula I took culture of *Pyrocystis Lunula* obtained from the Scottish Association for Marine Science and grew them into sufficient quantities to fill a shallow tray suspended over large speakers. The resulting three-minute show, in the pitch black, revealed the glittering marvels of sound and glowing organisms as the algae reacted to the soundwaves vibrating the water tray.

"Now talks are under way for Lunula to visit Snape in August as part of a celebration of Aldeburgh Music's series of LAB projects over the last three years."

Angela McLellan is one of the collective's few active female members, joining 'accidentally' after leaving her contact details at a show two years back.

"David contacted me and said if I liked the show that much I should come along to a meeting. I have been a member ever since and been involved in the last three shows.

"I was told that I bring emotion and home baking to the collective as I am studying to be a counsellor and made shortbread for the proverbs show," she laughs.

"I am not technologically minded yet I was welcomed because I was enthusiastic and interested. It is an exciting group which allows space for expression, creativity and learning

new skills like how to use a soldering iron."

Along with fellow member John Bowers, Angela created *Darknoise* for the last show, a continuously changing composition tuned into St Mary's on small radio receivers. The aim being to explore a variety of sounds produced, heard and understood in the dark.

The collective isn't just about exhibiting. The help on offer from other members is what attracted Angela Wright to the group.

"As a disabled fine art student creating an art installation for the Salthouse Harbour Hotel, Curiosity Collective was recommended to me by Town Hall Galleries so I could find out ways to explore using audio in the art piece. I found them to be most welcoming, supportive, helpful and interesting suggestions. It is so easy to keep in touch with them and I'm proud of CC being in Ipswich!"

Fellow member Alex Healing said being a technologist in industry is tough because you are constantly worrying about the utility of what you're producing.

"Joining the Curiosity Collective allowed me to broaden my skills while being driven purely by the technology and my own intrigue to create and learn things to share with the rest of the group for, above all, enjoyment," he added.

Paul Marrow, meanwhile, said he came to Ipswich because people paid him to work on technology inspired by nature.