

The Moirai Mask

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Fig. 1. Moirai Mask Still from Video.

1. PROGRAM NOTES

The *Moirai Mask* is an ornate mask that operates as a NIME. The mask has an integrated MIDI controller that allows the performer to play music by touching the brass and bamboo panels. In performance, the artist uses audio-montage to collage sounds of the Australian wilderness with electronics and sampled fragments of an acoustic string instrument. The mask is handmade from predominantly recycled materials; hand cut brass panels and hand painted bamboo elements adorn the front of the mask, which are sewn into the cotton paneling that covers the hand soldered electrical components.

The *Moirai Mask* is a sonic play on the Covid-19 PPE mask. The PPE mask, like an exo-skeleton, provides an extra, augmented layer of protection from our bodies, the ‘outside world’, the virus, the Other. The Covid-19 pandemic forced us to accept our bodily limitations and embrace this prosaic form of human augmentation, the PPE mask. Furthermore, as the Covid-19 virus enters our bodies and is transmitted through our breath, we must acknowledge that we are not separate from the non-human world that we inhabit but are in fact bodily constituted through it [1]. As Deborah Lupton et al. point out ‘the COVID crisis

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DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/0000000.0000000>
Music Proceedings of the International Conference on New Interfaces for Musical Expression
NIME'23, May 31–June 2, 2023, Mexico City, Mexico

[has] heightened awareness of our collective vulnerability to each other's more-than-human bodies' [ibid.].

Drawing on the concept of a NIME, here the PPE mask is appropriated as a symbolic and subversive art object, paying sonic homage to the non-human world while the artist's voice is subtly silenced.



Fig. 2. Moirai Mask.

2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The *Moirai Mask* project centers on the concepts of reframing, recycling and reusing. The mask was assembled from leftover materials in the middle of the pandemic lockdowns of 2021. Mirroring this process, the sonic component of the project brings together leftover slices and samples of field recordings, electronics and recordings of acoustic instruments in a musical collage.

As a MIDI controller the mask is quite simple, operating as a series of momentary switches that trigger MIDI notes or data. As a symbolic art-object, the mask is more complex. Human beings have been humbled by the pandemic. It has highlighted our vulnerability, but also the damaging effects of humanist notions of human exceptionalism, at the expense of other species and our shared environment. The PPE mask is a symbol of this humbling. A potent and ubiquitous reminder of the fact that human beings are not transcendent nor are they proof against even the most minute organisms with whom we share our environment. With this should come 'the recognition of transspecies solidarity on the basis of our being environmentally based, that is to say embodied, embedded and in symbiosis with other species' [2].

In performance the *Moirai Mask* draws on these ideas. The artist's voice replaced by the sounds of bats (a creature that was demonized throughout the pandemic), birds, the Australian bush and electronic and acoustic instruments. In this work there is the suggestion that the PPE mask may just be a pivotal object that signals to us an opportunity to halt and think transversally, outside of our constraints, into our shared futures [3].

3. TECHNICAL DESCRIPTION

The mask is a highly ornamented object with shapes that were laser cut from bamboo sheets, hand painted and riveted onto an array of hand cut brass triangles. Below the first ornamental layer of the mask is a secondary layer that houses eight buttons. The buttons are soldered onto individual insulated cables that combine into a single cord that then protrudes from the edge of the mask. All the necessary connections to actualize the mask as a controller are then carried by this cord to a small metal box, which they connect to over a VGA or DE15 connector. The box houses a Teensy board, which is soldered to the connector via some breadboard. A USB B connector is the final output from the box required to make connection and communicate with a computer running any MIDI enabled DAW. The VGA cable between the mask and the box was chosen not only because it has the required number of pins in one connector but also because they are currently readily available having been rendered largely obsolete. That is to say, their primary purpose for (analogue) display technology has been superseded by digital technologies (HDMI, DisplayPort) but they can, of course, be repurposed. In future different iterations of the mask could be developed with the same connector. That would mean only the coding on the Teensy board would need to change. Finally, there is a switch on the box that changes the device to send out either MIDI CC# values or MIDI note values.

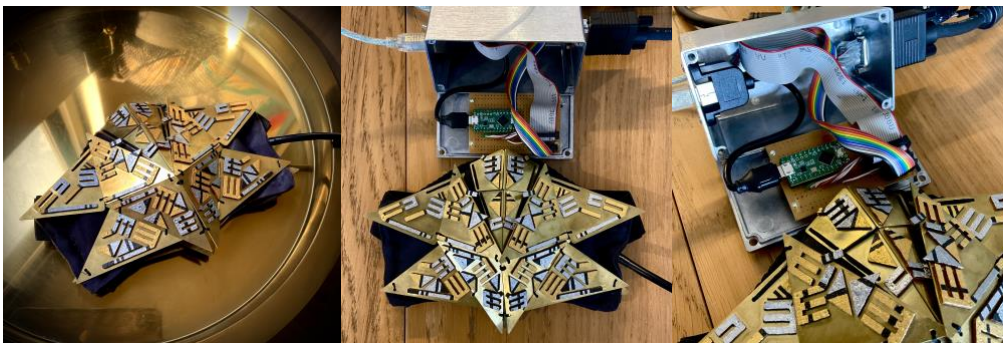


Fig. 3. Moirai Mask Detail.

4. PERFORMANCE NOTES

The performance will be 15 minutes in duration and would be best suited to a dark or dimly lit space. The technical requires are two XLRs cables and a table for the performer's small mixer and laptop.

5. MEDIA LINK(S)

- Video: <https://vimeo.com/790642487>
- Audio: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1INfAfNSi15L60x4XeWUi1NxBE1vOJtUv/view?usp=sharing>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Cat Hope and Iran Sanadzadeh for their ongoing support.

This work was supported by Monash University.

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