CHAPTER FIVE

Disco Dissent Collective: A Performative Nexus OF THE Political, Subcultural AND Creative

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ANTICIPATION: AUTONOMOUS COLLECTIVE PRAXIS

The marketization of the 'creative industries' (of which education is a significant commodity) has assigned increasingly reductive roles to design students, delimiting their power and critical agency. Positioned in a liminal or interstitial space for learning (Gale, 2017) the Disco Dissent Collective (DDC) acts as a catalyst for subverting the passive tendencies of conventional (graphic design) education in the neoliberal university. The power of collective action is inscribed into the DDC as an antidote to the isolating pressures of academic achievement and aggressive competition. *Permission* to risk and embrace freedom is associated with safety and *trust*. Therefore, as the elective's leader, and in a dialogic discourse with the collective, I help to instil confidence in alternative approaches to design. Disco Dissent draws on my professional experience of experimental design practice in the Friends of Gagarin (with Zoe and Adrian Philpott) at the Notting Hill Arts Club (London), working across performance, DJing, immersive theatre and interactive film. Underpinned by critical and playful design methodologies the members' skills, experiences and ambitions are activated in a disobedient pedagogy:

> Real learning in the sense of experimentation has no prescriptive force, it is restless,
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> disobedient and awaits subjects-yet-to-arrive … [it] is a deterritorialisation, a disobedient
>
> force opening up potentials for new or modified ways of doing, making, seeing, thinking,
>
> feeling. (Atkinson, 2018: 60)

As an optional elective for 10–15 participants from the second-year graphic design degree at Kingston School of Art (London), the DDC anticipates a more engaged critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011; hooks, 1994), conceived as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). At weekly meetings, the year-long programme of co-created events, gigs and talks is characterised by a socio-cultural convergence of dance music, rebellious night-time subcultures, social media and visual identity. The DDC forms a performative nexus of radical pedagogy, play and dissent by exploiting graphic design's symbiotic relationship with music and pop culture, and its ubiquitous presence in contemporary life. The social construction of knowledge (Giroux, 2011) is unpicked and reconfigured for a transformational process in which the emancipatory potential of studying (graphic) design is reclaimed. Learners become social performers here, in a collective endeavour, defined by social theorist Alberto Melucci (1996) as 'a process continuously activated by social actors …. Providing an account of the plurality and tensions constituting a collective actor, collective identity, is a cognitive tool for this learning process' (1996: 62–63). In this way students make learning happen (Biggs, 1996), inspiring change in themselves and each other in a reciprocal synthesis of style, invention and attitude.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

Disco* is employed as an umbrella term, linking the socio-political undercurrents of New York's 1970s nightclubs, Adrian Piper's (1972) ground-breaking *Funk Lessons,* and the radical nightclub architects of 1960s Italy (Gruppo 9999, Superstudio, UFO) with the global phenomenon of disco. At a time when sub/urban nightclubs are under continual threat of closure (across the UK), the DDC challenges students to embed the affordances of these nocturnal cathedrals of socio-creative emancipation into their learning. Whilst the studio-classroom situates learning in a community of practice for design students, patterns of behaviour (participation, studio hierarchy) can become entrenched in these contexts, inhibiting transformative shifts in knowledge and action (Illich, 1970). The design studio is, thus, relocated (conceptually and physically) to neutral or external non-institutional spaces, unconstrained by the social inequalities of the hidden curriculum (hooks, 1994). The studio-nightclub heterotopia (Foucault, 1984) permits taboo and marginal positions to be explored, provoking new praxis through a performative framing of research and making. Safety is established and sustained by the lead tutor, who acts as project manager, transferring to facilitator, then withdrawing to the role of critical friend as student members take over. In this re-drawn territory for learning, more performative pedagogies (Biggs, 1996) can be enacted in an embrace of the *unexpected*: students are *actors* in a space that permits transgressive creativity manifested through convivial collaboration.

*the first rule of Disco Dissent is … you don't need to use disco.

ACTION

Performative design pedagogies include workshops, students as critical agents, the collective as human library and space as a transformative tool. Broken up into thematic sections, the staging and construction of the collective is formulated within a matrix of socio-cultural, temporal and institutional considerations. A new conceptual map can be drawn for each DDC

within the graphic design programme, reconfigured to suit the participants' critical and creative trajectories. Each underlying aim is described first, followed by a suggested action, in the form of an instruction. The guidelines start with establishing the 'who' of the collective, then the 'where' of thinking and making, and finally 'how' the actions described here are adaptable to each new community of performative practice.

Actors

Aim: All action and aims are co-created and drawn from what is already known. In a collective social structure, each participant in the DDC adopts a role/responsibility as a critical 'actor', which compliments rather than competes with the other members.

Action: Seated in a circle, each actor will identify their skills, experience and ambitions. This may be best achieved (at the *first* meeting) in anonymous written form on sheets of paper, folded and placed in a 'hat'. The tutor will discuss how to translate these components into relational actions, as in a Venn diagram; each member takes on at least one task or role, permanently or on a rota for an agreed time; the role of secretary must be performed by every member at least once; students gradually take over leadership.

Collective Identity: Structuring Critical Action

Aim: The process of all learning is contextualised by the framework of generational family experience and cultural agency (hooks, 1994). Therefore, this immersive educational experience seeks to address gender, class or ethnic bias through critical debate and democratic action.

Action: At the first meeting, co-create a set of principles to coalesce the group's collective identity; devise a *timetable* for action at weekly meetings; what are the group's aims and ambitions? Test these within the academy and in the public domain; the tutor will coach

students on how to open a meeting, decide on and manage actions, how to reflect, and look/plan ahead to the next stage.

Collective Visual Identity: Word and Image

Aim: Exploit and subvert the overlooked attributes of popular culture. In a dialogic approach, the politics of individual/personal and collective/community identities are unpicked and interrogated as a critical experiment with design's tools and processes.

Action: Devise a name that represents the group's conceptual core and identity or use a title that captures the spirit of an event. Test conventional design tools and techniques in new ways to develop a suitable visual identity: use limitations (colour, typeface) to apply a memorable visual language across a series of events; extend the identity through badges, zines and social media to build a sense of collective belonging (internally within the group and externally with a local audience).

Resources: Building a Performative Toolkit

Aim: Design media and methods are no longer static, fixed (printed book, poster and billboard) or even desk-based: in the post-digital landscape, they are open to reconfiguration as a set of processes, synergies, and exchanges, pro-actively engaging new audiences.

Action: In the form of a human library, experience, knowledge and expertise are sought within the student membership: this is essential to understanding the limitations and possibilities of each collective. Identify pragmatic, conceptual, inter-personal and transferrable skills as key resources. Build in peer-to-peer learning (DJ/mixing; software) to empower all members equally. Students set up and manage social media sites to build a socio-cultural network of knowledge.

Transformative Sites: Temporal Space and Place

Aim: The space (time and place) of learning is critical to the open-ended methodology of the DDC. Find a location that can be *transformed* by participants into an autonomous zone, a heterotopia within which rules of behaviour are defined by the actors therein. This is a transitional space: a playful zone in which to exercise creative and intellectual freedom (Freire, 1970).

Action: Reconfigure a studio (student bar or club) by removing all furniture; set up decks (turntables) and a sound system to construct an atmosphere; deploy projections to set the scene of the action; make the name and theme clear/memorable; create a world (heterotopia) defined by you/us; embody this world through design tools and nominate (sober) members to document the event.

Performative Praxis: Theory in Practice

Aim: A (decolonial) critical pedagogy seeks to reposition marginal knowledge more centrally in design, to transfer the dominant mainstream hegemony to the margins (hooks, 1994). Ideas of power and pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011) are enacted through the collective's dialogic culture: themes and autonomous actions are framed as potential dissertation subjects. Practice and theory converge as legitimate subjects of study.

Action: Embed cultural-historical references in the making process: identify examples of radical creativity then workshop the transfer of performative practice to the page (Schön, 1983) in a reflective report-in-action.

ANALYSIS

By democratically co-creating a performative design collective, embracing and integrating each group's inherent knowledge and competences—DJing, imagining a club heterotopia, constructing visual identities, social media and event management—the DDC has transformed students' preconceptions of graphic design as a persuasive but passive discipline. By devising a collective brand identity, peer-to-peer training, and raising their own funds (designer entrepreneur), the group have embedded critical action and belonging into their own formulation of design practice. In a performative mode of learning, the tutor's role is framed as catalyst and project manager, gradually withdrawing as the collective gains momentum and takes over leadership. Once the DDC is autonomous and self-directed, empowered by trust and freedom, embracing the unexpected and disobedient, it has fulfilled its purpose.

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