

Dyspraxic Collaboration: Inattentivity and Retrorelevation in Daniel Oliver and Luke Ferris' collaborative performance art practice

VIDEO HERE

Daniel Oliver and Luke Ferris

We are Luke Ferris and Daniel Oliver. Luke works at a Secondary School SEN (Special Educational Needs) unit in London, teaching children with Moderate Learning Difficulties (Autism, Downs Syndrome and Global Developmental Delay). Daniel is a teaching fellow and researcher in the Drama Department at Queen Mary University of London. He wrote his PhD on awkwardness and audience participation. We are both performance artists with an interest in audience participation.

We have been making work together for fifteen years, since meeting on the BA Contemporary Arts degree at Nottingham Trent University. We have had lots of names over the years, including AuntyNazi, Daniel Oliver and Mr Ferris, and Daniel Oliver (Introducing Harvey Harris). Our performance work is participatory, raucous, funny, overcomplicated, thrown together, over-thought, risky, wordy, and highly physical. We have occasionally got a little bit hurt. On very rare occasions so have the audience. Our practice comes in the form of two-to-one performances, talks, consultations, videos, and, most commonly, 20-40 minute shows.

As should be clear, we are both dyspraxic. We have discovered that this makes it difficult for us to describe our practice. People say everyone finds it difficult to describe their practice. We say we find it more difficult. Our way of dealing with this

is twofold. Firstly, we write as if you already know who we are, or that you should do – as if we are part of the performance art canon. After fifteen years we feel we are owed this. Secondly, we suggest that it is possible that none of this stuff actually happened. That we are just two dyspraxic smart guys going on about a long-term performance practice that has never actually existed and that it is hard to understand what we actually do/did because we don't/didn't actually do anything. Maybe it's even a light poke at such practices and the discussions that surround them. Dyspraxia makes organising thoughts difficult and sometimes we have found that it is easier if we do not have to worry about organising them around the truth.

We feel the best way to engage with this contribution to CTR Interventions is to watch the above video now with this limited amount of information. If you find yourself asking 'but what is this dyspraxic practice that they are referring to' you can imagine us answering 'this is'. If you cannot imagine that, just think about what it might be like. You can then read through the script and the glossary of terms below and that might help, or it might ruin things. Then you can watch it again. We are aware this is asking a lot, but it is important to note that your attentiveness is not necessarily required. In fact we discourage it.

Script(s)

On the 1st April 2017 we met to have a big chat about the role of dyspraxia in our collaborative performance practice. We were particular interested in the way it affected our ability to be attentive to each other and to the tasks we set ourselves when making our performances. We recorded our conversation with the aim of using it as source material for two scripts for our video. The first script, which appears as

subtitles in the video, exemplifies an *attempt* to be attentive to each other and to stay on task. The second, which we speak, exemplifies an embracing of inattentivity and digression.

Conversation 1: With attempted attentivity

Luke Ferris: Having just had that massive conversation... the big chat... the primary source resource... about dyspraxia and inattentiveness and why it's good in our collaborative performance art practice, let's have it again, but shorter for the video.

Daniel Oliver: Yes. For clarity, which is something they ask us to do, what is this connection between dyspraxia and inattentiveness and can we talk about it, you know, as dyspraxics?

LF: I don't know how clear it will be. Although clarity is a subjective term anyway. To me, inattentiveness and inattentivity in dyspraxia is rooted in having limited capacity to prioritise. Does that make sense? This is a good way of doing it. This makes total sense.

DO: In various bits of writing and presentations that I've been doing around dyspraxia and performance art – and audience participation – I keep using this bit from a guide to dyspraxia by educational psychologist Sharon Drew.¹

Conversation 2: Embracing inattentivity

Luke Ferris: Having just had that massive conversation... the big chat... the primary source resource... about dyspraxia and inattentiveness and why it's good in our collaborative performance art practice, let's have it again, but shorter for the video.

Daniel Oliver: Yes. For clarity, which is something they ask us to do, what is this connection between dyspraxia and inattentiveness and can we talk about it, you know, as dyspraxics?

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Comment [EL1]: Who is 'they'? Do you mean the editors of Interventions?

Daniel Oliver and Luke Ferris May 12, 2017

Sort of. 'They' refers to two things. The first is usually it refers to a person or a collective or a group of people that are involved in the context in which the work is being placed. It might be the producers of a festival, it might be the artists that run the artist-led space that we are working in, or it might be the editors of a journal. We've always had a productively brattish relationship with 'them' where performances are built around the idea of a rebellion or resistance against things that 'they' might have put in place. Or that some elements of our performance are there to expose power structures and so on – like institutional critique. But hopefully the ridiculousness of the work points to the fact that this institutional critique is critiquing stuff that we might have just made up. That's putting it in a very concrete way and it never quite works like that; it's always more muddled.

The other 'they' connects to the idea that there is a rarely mentioned third member of our collaboration who actually runs things – a kind of idiot despot who enjoys putting us and our participants in awkward, risky, or troubling situations. We have yet to decide if this third member is dyspraxic.

There is also the idea, implied throughout this contribution to *CTR Interventions*, that there is a 'they' that do proper collaboration in which everyone is very attentive to each other and to their task. We are open to the idea that this 'they' is also potentially fictional.

¹ Sharon Drew, 'Dyspraxia', in *Neurodiversity in Higher Education: Positive Responses to Specific Learning Differences* ed. by David Pollak (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), pp. 91-123.

It's one of those lists of things to be aware of when teaching and doing interactive, active learning, group work, and one of the things she describes is difficulties 'participating in discussions' which lead 'to an apparent unwillingness to join in, or making contributions that do not seem relevant'.²

LF: Maybe it's like you cannot prioritise which bit of what is being talked about is important – or even if what is being talked about should be prioritised above how it is being said. Like you suddenly start going on about everyone's hand gestures.

DO: In terms of our collaborative practice I think it's about learning to embrace the risk of irrelevancy that arises from not being able to be very attentive and then getting good at making it retroactively relevant once we've made it.

LF: It was said about Bob Dylan that what he was best at was making mistakes and then working out why it had been the right thing to do.

I think we can call that retrorelevation, which comes from the verb retroreleventiate – which means to think back and recontextualise an accidental act as deliberate. Or is "purposeful" better.

LF: Are they good drawings? But what if we say that we never made any work, that the practice is just documentation.

DO: We're not make-up artists.

LF: And the videos might not work. I'm losing focus. Maybe it's like you cannot prioritise which bit of what is being talked about is important – or even if what is being talked about should be prioritised above how it is being said. Like you suddenly start going on about everyone's hand gestures.

DO: Yeah or I turn up to make stuff up with you but you haven't thought of anything.

LF: But there's a bucket in the room and you just starting messing with...?

DO: No, I can't, that's the point – that's pre-retroreleventiating – i.e. the bucket is invisible and I can't even see it because you haven't come over-prepared.

LF: What is an invisibility bucket? – just as a question...

DO: It makes water transparent or invisible or see through or invisible from the outside looking in. Express the desire to claim to have done a water-performance to redirect the stream of thought.

² Drew, p. 109.

DO: I wonder if that is what Slavoj Žižek means when he talks about the shift from 'contingency to necessity'.³

LF: I wonder if that is what I meant in the big chat source material when I expressed the desire to have done a water-performance that redirects the stream of thought.

LF: Can we think of a performance that we've done that we could make retroactively relevant to this point about retrorelevation?

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DO: Yes – so rather than picking a bit that does work – we should pick any bit and then retroactively make it work – to back up what we are saying with evidence, bearing in mind the Freud – Davinci – DiCaprio – Capri Sun the drink version – Radcliffe narrative we worked through in the big chat... the primary source... So looking at this bit here...

DO: *LUPA: Time Language* was a collaborative remake-cum-sequel of a solo performance of mine that you then performed without me. That could be worth mentioning.

LF: You couldn't be there if I recall. That was why I ended up doing it.

Actually, looking at this bit, it's worth saying we don't want to come across as if we feel this dyspraxic approach, this inattentive is only our game... that it's unique to us or our conditions as they say – though I do think its heightened or foregrounded, as they say. But it's basic Wooster Group approaches with dyspraxic Third Eye leanings – you know everything in the room can end up in the performance – except the bits you wanted to end up in the performance because I didn't pay attention to them because of my dyspraxia.

DO: Exactly, although I wasn't absent due to inattentivity.

LF: And I don't think my inattentiveness was such that I just didn't notice your contribution. No.

DO: The premise for my absence was that I was trapped stranded in a looped future.

LF: But it was a planned absence, so we pre-recorded all your parts to compensate for that and the volunteer participant in the performance had to listen to you and repeat your lines.

LF: But that's not offensive or rude because I utilise your inattentiveness as an editorial filter – made necessary, due to the fact I find it hard to prioritise when compiling my own ideas. I mean, I can only speak for myself.

DO: I was trapped due to a chain of events set in motion by the volunteer participant working out how time-travel during the course of the performance based on my pre-recorded lines. So, we were attempting to help them learn time-travel wrong.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *Event* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 129.

LF: But they had to listen very carefully in case they accidentally got it right.

DO: Yeah... You too... And me.

DO: My presence and our revisionist approach to the present depended on the inattentiveness of the volunteer participant.

LF: But they failed to be sufficiently inattentive, thus you were not able to be physically present in the performance due to their triggering the tragic chain of events.

DO: It's fine. I've seen the video, I know you tried...

LF: I'm not trying to be a hero.

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You don't get many dyspraxic heroes because of the decision-making processes involved in that lifestyle. I come back to the incapacity to prioritise. These guys aren't trying to be heroes either. They just made some erroneous lifestyle decisions, but that could be anyone, it does not have to mean that they are dyspraxic.

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DO: Let's clarify or summarise... in conclusion.

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I'm thinking about Freud's analysis of da Vinci – you know, and the kite.

LF: Yes. We are talking about inattentiveness in relation to dialoguing ideas.

LF: ...So the whole Leonardo da Vinci – Sigmund Freud – Leonardo DiCaprio – Capri Sun – Daniel Radcliffe – Horse narrative. Which essentially is about unpicking the idea that Freud stole his kite design from da Vinci and when challenged on that attempted to tarnish da Vinci by declaring him to be a repressed gender deviant, because the kite design was essentially the mother as a vessel with a flaccid penis with a little bow-tie. And everything after that is just a retelling of that story, hence Daniel Radcliffe and the horse-cock

play, the re-reading of *R&J* in which Romeo is a half-blood-Montague and the third family in the play are attempting to vilify him with the same series of references that Freud later applied to da Vinci. And da Vinci had difficulty prioritising when it came to creative practice, not because he was dyspraxic, but because, according to Sigmund, he just had an insurmountable amount of sexual energy generated by homoerotic fantasies of his mother as an Egyptian vulture.

Is that right?

DO: Or just coming up with them.

DO: Sure. And then I'll just stick the proper version in as a footnote.⁴ The one I explained to you in the big chat – the source material. This is good. We are exemplifying.

LF: What do we do?

LF: It's a good example of misinterpretation can be used to redirect trajectory in a narrative, either through a kind of contrived ignorance or, in our case, an unspoken agreement that inattentivity can serve as a positive collaborative pin-board.

DO: Here's an example. Not a real one. Just a bad one for clarity. You arrive in the studio with a full note book. I arrive with an empty one ready to fill. You start telling me about your research around Minotaurs... and something about Laser Quest. I notice a bucket – maybe it's for cleaning, maybe a previous collaboration forgot it, maybe because they are dyspraxic. As you elaborate on the role of labyrinths in both topics (Minotaur and Laser Quest), I start working out how to trip convincingly

DO: The da Vinci-vulture narrative doesn't belong to anyone. It has to be open to evolve.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XI (1910): Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Leonardo da Vinci, and Other Works*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 57-138.

Comment [DO2]: Early in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, Freud suggests that da Vinci's excessive commitment to his work is exemplary of the 'special disposition' in which the libido evades the fate of repression by being 'sublimated from the very beginning into curiosity and by becoming attached to the powerful instinct for research as a reinforcement'.¹ In working to pinpoint the sublimated libidinal aim Freud focuses on a childhood recollection that da Vinci inserted into one of his scientific notebooks. The story recalls one of da Vinci's earliest memories (presumed to be a fictional account, due to its content) in which, whilst in his cradle, a vulture came down, opened da Vinci's mouth with his tail, and struck him 'many times with its tail' against his lips.¹ For Freud, the repressed desire revealed in this fictional story is da Vinci's 'inclination to take a man's organ in his mouth and suck on it'.¹ Freud arrives at this reading through firstly noting that a tail is 'one of the most familiar symbols and substitutive expressions for the male organ'.¹ Further to this, he links the vulture to da Vinci's experiences of his relationship with his mother, by pointing out that in Egyptian hieroglyphs, the vulture represents the mother.¹ Thus Freud goes on to connect the desire to fellate with an infant's desire to suckle on his or her mother's nipple.¹

Da Vinci's penchant for Vultures is, for Freud, further evidenced through an observation by Oskar Pfister of da Vinci's painting *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (circa 1508), in which he sees the outline of a vulture in Mary's 'curiously arranged and rather confusing drapery'.¹ This psychoanalytic reading of the story and the details in the painting, coupled with some historical research that, for Freud, indicated da Vinci's homosexuality, leads to the following proposition:

When we remember the historical probability of Leonardo having behaved in his life as one who was emotionally homosexual, the question is forced upon us whether this phantasy does not indicate the existence of a causal connection between Leonardo's relation with his mother and his later manifest, if ideal [sublimated], homosexuality.¹

As Storr points out, unfortunately this interpretation is 'based on a mistranslation': the 'bird was not a vulture, but a kite. Whereas vultures can be shown to have mythological connections with the mother, kites cannot'.¹

over the bucket – I explain to you why this is relevant to the myths I say – accidentally dripping over the bucket. You can talk about nothing other than mistaking a drip for a trip and we end up with bucket dripping green food colouring onto the audience's heads. I tell this creation story to the audience as they are dripped upon, convinced they need it. You...

LF: Sure, let me interject. For many, I imagine the most important part here is not the bucket but rather the ideas behind the bucket that I had and compiled as an extensive volume of notes which I brought to present to you at the studio. If I had not had so many fantastic thoughts, you would never have noticed that bucket.

DO: Sure, no, let me finish. I'm telling them how it came together – the bucket and why they are dripped upon by it. I find that important information. I say methodology a few times. But you practice your tripping-up pro-wrestler style behind me where I cannot see you like we have not discussed ever and that's where the audience focus their attention.

Is that what you mean?

LF: I was told that one of Agatha Christie's rules was to decide at the start who the murderer was, then half-way through writing the book randomly pick another character to be the murderer, and then for the rest of the book work out how they could have been the murderer. I don't refer to this to divert attention away from the point, but rather to hone in on it. Being in a dyspraxic collaboration revolves around the openness to digression, diversion and

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DO: What bucket?

Is that what you mean?

Or did you say book?

LF: Yes. Book.

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and unforeseeable development. Thus guaranteeing intrigue for all parties – artist and audience in the same way.

DO: It's about murdering ideas but it's not murder, you just change the ideas.

LF: Or even if we don't, even if the ideas are not murdered, they are just executed.

And that's why is that good.

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Glossary of Key Terms

Dyspraxia

We are both dyspraxic. Dyspraxia is also known as 'Developmental co-ordination disorder' (DCD) and was formally known as 'clumsy child syndrome'. Primarily it is a developmental disorder that affects coordination and can lead to difficulties with socialising, working and learning (especially in neurotypical environments - see section on neurodiversity below). Psychologist David Grant offers a useful description of dyspraxia, referring to a layering of a 'small visible part' and a 'very considerable hidden portion':⁵

The visible part in the case of dyspraxia is the element of clumsiness and associated difficulties with motor coordination. The hidden aspect is the underlying difficulties with attention, memory and some tasks requiring perceptual skills.⁶

⁵ David Grant, 'What is dyspraxia?' in *That's the Way I think: Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and ADHD Explained* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 50-64 (p. 50).

⁶ Grant, p. 50.

For more information see: <http://dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk/about-dyspraxia/>

Dyspraxic Collaboration

This contribution to *CTR Interventions* connects the 'hidden' and 'visible' aspects of our dyspraxia to aspects of our collaborative performance practice. Our performances themselves are clumsy and dis-coordinated – particularly in terms of structure, aesthetic and physicality. However, our focus here is more on the 'hidden aspects', and how they contribute to our collaborative performance making methodologies. Our 'difficulties' with attention, memory and perception are reframed as essential attributes when working together to devise our performances. As Luke says in the video:

Being in a dyspraxic collaboration revolves around openness to digression, diversion and unforeseeable development. Thus guaranteeing intrigue for all parties – artist and audience in the same way.

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to the idea that all minds are different. The neurodiversity movement celebrates this. It is rooted in the idea that neurodivergencies (autism, ADHD, dyspraxia, dyslexia and other learning difficulties and neurological/cognitive conditions) contribute to a healthy and productive society – neurodiversity is as important as biodiversity. This contribution to *CTR interventions* aligns itself with this movement because we focus on the positive attributes of our neurodivergencies. We do this in spite of the fact that these attributes may be deemed dysfunctional in comparison to neurotypical approaches. 'Neurotypical approaches' are those that appear 'normal' or obviously functional within socially normative situations.

For example, a neurotypical approach to collaboration might involve a highly attentive relationship with your collaborator and their contributions during the devising process. Due to our neurodivergencies (i.e. our dyspraxia) such high levels of attentiveness are difficult for us. Rather than aiming to overcome this we embrace our inattentiveness as an essential component of our process. This reframing of an apparent 'dysfunction' as a positive, productive attribute connects our work to the neurodiversity movement.

For more information see: <http://neurocosmopolitanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definitions/>

Inattentivity

Inattentivity in our collaborative performance making practice means not always focussing on the thing the other persons wants us to be focussing on, or not being attentive to the task we have set ourselves or that others have set for us. It might mean getting excited about the way an idea is being expressed rather than about what the idea is. It might mean focussing in on a tiny detail of an idea and allowing that to trigger excessive digressions and never returning to the original idea itself. It might mean being distracted by an incidental object in the space we are working in and thinking obsessively about how to incorporate that object, rather than thinking about the idea being expressed by collaborators.

Inattentivity is our special way of saying inattentiveness. Word retrieval can be difficult for dyspraxics. Saying inattentiveness 'wrong' in our title and our script(s)

suggests that saying a word incorrectly is ok. Insisting that words are said correctly risks excluding neurodivergent individuals from conversations, especially when they are moving at speed.

Retrorelevationation

Retrorelevationation is a clunky neologism. In our experience dyspraxics are experts in coming up with clunky neologisms. In our experience dyspraxics also have to become experts at retrorelevationating. In her guide to dyspraxia, educational psychologist Sharon Drew offers lists of things to be aware of when teaching dyspraxic students.⁷ One of the things she describes is difficulties 'participating in discussions' which lead 'to an apparent unwillingness to join in, or making contributions that do not seem relevant'.⁸ Thus our dyspraxia encourages us to develop methods for convincing people that, despite their perception, what we did or said in a given situation was, in fact, totally relevant.

For example, in after-show gatherings audience members occasionally ask "was that part of it?" in response to their experiences of negative affects – boredom, frustration, confusion, irritation, or to apparent mishaps or technical issues. Retrorelevationating means saying 'yes, that was part of it'; and by saying that, it makes it part of it. If you find yourself feeling negative in response to anything in this contribution to *CTR Interventions*, or you question the relevancy of something, or you are unsure if something is a mistake, we invite you to decide that it must be part of it and by doing so you will make it part of it. To clarify: the 'it' that it is part of is a

⁷ [Drew.](#)

⁸ Drew, p. 109.

contribution to *CTR Interventions* that both discusses *and exemplifies* a dyspraxic approach to collaborative performance making.

