Title

A Teacher's Presence

Author

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Norman Potter (1923–1995) was an English designer, writer and teacher. In 1964, he established a new department for 'construction' at the West of England College of Art in Bristol. This opportunity came out of a traumatic episode for art and design education in the UK. In 1961, a National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design (NCDAD) had been established to introduce a new qualification, the DipAD. It was meant to institute a more rigorous, academic culture in the art schools. But, after two years of preparatory assessments, the NCDAD declared many of the provincial schools unfit to deliver it. At Bristol, and across the country, departments were hurriedly reformed and restaffed under threat of closure.

> 'The school is concerned with putting things together in ways that make sense.'[1]

1
West of England College of Art School of Design prospectus, 1964, 3.

The first sentence of the Construction department's prospectus tells something of Potter's intent. The word 'construction' was meant to signal a disregard for existing institutional distinctions between furniture design, interior design and architecture. The integration of graphic design was also attempted – Potter considered that 'all designers, including architects, are practising graphics for the larger part of their working lives'.[2]

This should not sound radical in 2020, although one could hardly claim that Potter's assumptions about what 'makes sense' have prevailed. Not only in the UK do art and design schools continue to encounter existential difficulty configuring themselves around the everyday, messy relations between design practices, however these practices might have changed in the past five decades. The fact that a book such as Alex Coles' *The Transdisciplinary Studio* could have been published as recently as 2012 amply demonstrates how this conversation around specialisation perpetuates inertia. I don't suppose Potter would have considered the union of any combination of design practices in one studio to be 'transdisciplinary' – making sense should not require a transgressive effort. In any case, I think what defined him as a teacher was something more elementary.

2
Potter's approach to education was elaborated in his book, *What is a designer*, which was written on-the-job in Bristol. See Norman Potter, *What is a designer: things, places, messages* (London: Hyphen Press, 2002), 116.

By 1968, the DipAD was already in crisis. Students' frustration at its perceived impingement on their artistic freedoms was stoked by news of social movements happening internationally, and expressed in high-profile protests. The sit-in at London's Hornsey College of Art has become the iconic example. Lisa Tickner's *Hornsey 1968, The Art School Revolution* describes the protest there as itself a highly-organised, constructive educational project:

> 'It led to six weeks of intense debate, the production of more than seventy documents, a short-lived Movement for Rethinking Art and Design Education (MORADE), a three-day conference at the Roundhouse in Camden Town, an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, prolonged confrontation with the local authority, and extensive representations to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Student Relations.'[3]

3
Lisa Tickner, *Hornsey 1968: The Art School Revolution* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008), 13–14.





Former site of Norman Potter's 'Construction department', now the University of the West of England at Bower Ashton, Bristol. Photographs by Stuart Whipps, 2018.

Potter was present at Hornsey, and it made a profound impression on him:

> 'I cannot describe to you how my whole heart reached out to the potential of this situation. […] There are some experiences to which, to know them, their truth or falsity, you must expose all of your faculties. I shall not forget driving past the building the night the lights went out and the physical hurt I felt, the sense of outrage. I despise the behaviour of men without the wit, the guts, or the imagination to recognise life when they see it.'[4]

Following his involvement with another student sit-in at Senate House in Bristol, Potter received a letter from the university's lawyers threatening legal action against him. He seemed to relish the invitation to formulate this response:

> 'I personally attended four such discussions, together with many members of staff from the Bristol Colleges (including the University). I did so for the obvious reason that my students were there; students whose judgement I have cause to respect, and for whose education I have a continuing responsibility under all circumstances. It is difficult, indeed absurd, to interpret this action as 'trespass' in any good sense at all. […] It is regrettable that those who deplored the students' conduct failed, as it seems, to exercise their own educational responsibility; first, by failing to conceive an imaginative and realistic educational structure in which such happenings would be unnecessary, and

4
Norman Potter, *box and fox: a personal comment on design and teaching*, unpublished notes for a lecture given at the Royal College of Art, London, 27 November 1968.

> second, by failing, in the event of the sit-in, to argue coherently their case against it. To my mind, a teacher opts out of education if he fails to join with his students at crucial times in their academic life, whether or not he decides to support, or reasonably to oppose their conduct, by persuasion of its wrongfulness. I am not aware of a more basic principle on which to structure the pursuit of further education.'[5]

5
Norman Potter, unpublished copy of correspondence, January 1969.

This 'basic principle' – teachers and students being in each other's presence – is so stark that it disorients me every time I read it. In 2020, the point takes on a new urgency. At stake is the relational bandwidth of our educational exchanges; their being responsive, situated and, as Potter puts it, 'realistic'.

The events of 1968 changed the course of Potter's career. He left Bristol in 1969 and returned briefly in 1975. If the first phase of his work there was characterised by the unifying space of the Construction department, the second phase cast the students in more critically contested spatial scenarios, modelled after the Roman arena and the Greek labyrinth. Potter's ultimate conviction as an educator became the removal of the pretences of education: to expose the students to the realities of institutions and their deadening instruments of management and bureaucracy.

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For more on these subjects, see James' essay 'Norman Potter's teaching spaces' in *One and Many Mirrors: Perspectives on Graphic Design Education* (Occasional Papers, forthcoming).