

Improv & Weaving: Recombinant Methods of Co-production in Design

“Thank God we’ve still got musicians and thinkers whose obsession with excellence and whose hunger for greatness remind us that we should all be unsatisfied with mimicking the popular, rather than mining the fertile veins of creativity that God placed deep inside each of us.”

**—Michael Eric Dyson, in “I Stand Alone” by
Robert Glasper Experiment**

If organizational systems such as the Swiss Grid are byproducts of Enlightenment-era rationalism and Modernist obsessions with efficiency and universality, international corporate brands are also—in part—a consequence of the homogenizing power of the Swiss Grid. In contemporary social settings choreographed by social media, even personal identities and behaviors can fall susceptible to predictable grids, feeds, and streams, resulting in a din of similar voices neatly packaged into well-proportioned boxes. The Swiss Grid, taken to its natural conclusion, has made it easier for most aesthetic production to be performed anonymously.

This exercise takes inspiration from the Black American traditions of jazz and quilting—both predicated on grids

of one form or another—to question the anonymity of grid-inspired schemes. How can we create new underlying systems and layered outputs when we eschew grid systems as a default? What implications can individual voices have on these new systems? Is there a need for a Swiss Grid when we invite intuitive gestures and encourage co-authorship within design processes?

In jazz and quilting, there are underlying systems—chord progressions or quilt grids—which help to program individual contribution. However, these two traditions are constantly in pursuit of a result that is more unique than the last—the end result tends to be more of an acknowledgement of the grid than it is a conformance to it. Moreover, jazz and quilting invite “found” objects, material, and ideas to build a tapestry of collective output—through this lens, they seem to have opposite goals than that of the Swiss Grid.

Rather than working “anonymously” and independently to develop a visual idea—typical of traditional Euro-American approaches which celebrate individual “genius”—this exercise prioritizes negotiation, trust, co-authorship, and comfort in unknown results.

CO-IDEATION: Decide on a central goal.

1. As a group, research and decide on a musical artist to create an album cover for. It can be any album for any artist of any genre of any era—gospel, hard bop, trap, house, etc. (To make this more of a learning moment, try to choose an artist/album that you haven't heard before.)
2. Research the historical and cultural context of this artist and album. What sociocultural forces might have contributed to this body of work? How do people move, dance, or otherwise interact with each other when listening to it? How might this album differ from others in the same genre?

CO-CONTRIBUTION: Invite individual efforts and ideas.

3. Incorporating the research from the previous step, each group member will contribute 1–3 images that remind you of the music, or its sociocultural context, of that album. These images can be paintings, stills from films or music videos, memes, photographs, etc.
4. Draw lines and shaded areas across your image(s) that denote underlying geometries, hierarchies, emphases, or other relationships. These lines may be straight, curved, wavy, dashed, etc. Shaded areas may be solid, patterned, etc.

CO-PLANNING: Superimpose each other's schemes to create a collective, underlying framework.

5. Using different layers in digital illustration software (or with translucent tracing paper if performing manually), stack the diagrams on top of each other.
6. As a group, develop a new, collective “supergrid” which incorporates lines and shaded areas of the stacked diagrams. Are there areas that line up? How can you can reconcile or embrace areas that don't correspond so neatly? The resultant diagram will likely be a complex, patchwork of “non-grids”. This will serve as the organizing scheme for the next step.

CO-PRODUCTION: Deconstruct and borrow from each other's ideas to create a co-authored, improvised composition.

7. Pool your imagery from Step 2.
8. As a group, take turns cutting up each other's imagery and positioning the pieces to create a collage which responds to the “supergrid” from Step 6. If working digitally (Miro, Adobe Illustrator, etc.), feel free to scale, skew, or manipulate the colors of the images to introduce new textures, proportions, and patterns. (Pro tip: listen to the music during this step, and work intuitively as the music moves you.)

9. The resultant collage will serve as the background of the album cover. Arrange the composition on a 12" × 12" square (the same size as a vinyl record cover).
10. Almost done! Listen to the music you designed for—does your collage feel inspired by it? Feel free to make additional adjustments as necessary. Lastly, Add an album title and/or artist name to contextualize the piece.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS:

1. Were there any steps in this process that made you uncomfortable or feel awkward? Were those moments during the individual or collaborative portions of this exercise?
2. What did you learn about the artist or genre, and how did those findings inspire your contribution(s) to the overall work?
3. What did you learn from your fellow groupmates' contributions? Was there anything in particular that inspired your contribution(s) to the overall work?
4. How might this style of working be incorporated into other projects of yours—especially those that are intended for diverse, public audiences?

