

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Kingston University		
Unit of Assessment: 32 – Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
Title of case study: Designing Night Life: Informing New Curatorial Activity in International Design Museums on the Design History of Club Culture		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013 – 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name: Catharine Rossi	Role: Associate Professor in Design History	Period employed by submitting HEI: Jan 2013 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Dr Catharine Rossi's research into nightclubs as important sites of design experimentation has led to a series of exhibitions beginning in 2014, culminating in the international touring show Night-Fever: Designing Club Culture 1960-today, co-curated by Rossi for Vitra Design Museum (VDM), Germany. Rossi's research has resulted in significant impacts upon the curatorial and collecting practices of museums in Germany, Belgium, Denmark, and the UK, including the generation of new exhibition subjects, and increased public, cultural and media awareness of the importance of nightclub design and heritage. In doing so her research has brought this overlooked subject to international attention, securing new and wider audiences for museums and galleries of art and design.

2. Underpinning research

Rossi first developed her argument that nightclubs are important but overlooked sites of design innovation in two text outputs: 'Crafting a Design Counterculture' [R1] and 'The Italian Avant-Garde, 1968 – 1976' [R2]. Both include a focus on Space Electronic nightclub (Florence, 1969), designed by Italian Radical Design collective Gruppo 9999. Previous understanding was that Radical designers largely rejected designing physical or commercial architecture. Rossi's research challenged this interpretation, presenting Space Electronic as an innovative spatial typology composed of audio-visual technologies, which incubated multidisciplinary experimentation. This understanding has underpinned all of Rossi's research into the design of nightclubs.

Exhibition-making has been key to the development of Rossi's research and pathways to impact. In 2013 Rossi was invited to curate an installation for the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale: Space Electronic: Then and Now (7 June – 23 November 2014) [R3]. Rossi furthered her research into Space Electronic, collaborating with Kingston Professor Ben Kelly on installation design and filmmaker Gilly Booth on a film about the nightclub for the installation. The installation emphasised the contrast between Space Electronic's physical continuation and its earlier, ephemeral, history of experimentation, which has little material trace today. In addition to curating the installation, Rossi contributed to the Biennale catalogue, participated in events, and created a website and leaflet to disseminate the research. Further contextual and theoretical research into Space Electronic was published in a research output for AA Files in 2014 [R4].

Rossi expanded her research to a broader study of Italian nightclubs and Radical Design, following an invitation from the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) to co-curate an exhibition, the first of its kind in the UK. Rossi's research included conducting interviews and reconstructing the design history of nightclubs through historical periodicals, photographs and films. Radical Disco: Architecture and Nightlife in Italy: 1965 – 1975 (8th December 2015 – 10th January 2016)

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[R5] featured 7 nightclubs, including Superstudio's Mach 2 and Gruppo UFO's Bamba Issa. Rossi co-commissioned an exhibition soundtrack from Bamba Issa's DJ, and collaborated with Studio Julia on the exhibition design, inspired by Mach 2's black and pink interior.

In 2016 Vitra Design Museum (VDM) invited Rossi to co-curate the international touring exhibition Night Fever: Designing Club Culture 1960-Today (7th March – 9th September 2018) [R6] with Jochen Eisenbrand, VDM Chief Curator. This third phase of her nightclub research shifted focus to the international design history of club culture from the 1960s to 2000s. Rossi conducted research into China, Hong Kong and South Africa, as well as leading the development of the exhibition's UK and Italian content. Research included interviews as well as site, museum, and archive visits to identify exhibition content and objects. Working with the curatorial team, including Nina Serulus, curator at ADAM Design Museum, Brussels, the exhibition's partner institution, who joined the curatorial team in April 2017, and exhibition designers Konstantin Grcic and Daniel Streat, Rossi developed the exhibition design and text. She also co-commissioned an audio-visual installation to communicate nightclubs' experiential design and co-edited the accompanying catalogue (including a co-authored introduction and sole authored essay) [R7].

Night Fever and Rossi's previous, linked research projects considered nightclubs as a new type of design space which emerged after the second world war, as distinct from other kinds of leisure environment such as dancehalls and jazz clubs. By situating them as incubators of design activity as well as vital parts of the social-cultural fabric, Rossi's research has drawn museum and public attention to the importance of collecting, preserving, and interpreting their material heritage, and to documenting the contribution of architects and designers to their development.

3. References to the research

All underpinning research has been subject to both committee and editorial oversight, and/or peer review.

R1 – Rossi, C. (2013) 'Crafting a Design Counterculture: The Pastoral and the Primitive in Italian Radical Design, 1972 – 1976' in Made in Italy: New Perspectives on Italian Design, ed. Lees-Maffei and Fallan (London: Bloomsbury) DOI: [10.5040/9781474294133.ch-007](https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474294133.ch-007)

R2 – Coles, A. and Rossi, C., eds (2013) The Italian Radical Avant-Garde, 1968 – 1976 (Berlin: Sternberg) DOI: [10.1093/jdh/ept049](https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/ept049)

R3 – Rossi, C. (2014) Space Electronic: Then and Now 2014 (Venice Architecture Biennale) exhibition. REF2ID: 32-97-0000

R4 – Rossi, C. (2014) 'Architecture Goes Disco', AA Files, (69), 138-145. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43202558>

R5 – Rossi, C., and Upham, S. (2016-17) Radical Disco: Architecture and Night Life in Italy, 1965 – 1975 (Institute of Contemporary Arts, London) REF2ID: 32-97-0000

R6 – Eisenbrand, J., Rossi, C. and Serulus, N. Night Fever: Designing Club Culture 1960 - Today (Vitra Design Museum, Germany, 2018). Touring Exhibition. REF2ID: 32-118-1665

R7 – Eisenbrand, J., Kreis, M and Rossi, C. (eds) (2018) Night Fever: Designing Club Culture, 1960-Today. Weil am Rhein; Vitra Design Museum. Exhibition catalogue: ISBN 9783945852248. REF2ID: 32-118-1665

4. Details of the impact

Starting in 2015, Rossi's research has had continuing impact on the exhibition subjects, programmes and collection practices of internationally significant museums and galleries in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and the UK. It has informed the development of new types of exhibitions on nightlife, as well as the collection and preservation of the material heritage of nightclubs. This has led to increased public and media engagement with the subject, generating new audiences for venues and increasing the range of venues engaging with VDM

design exhibitions. For instance, awareness of her work led to an invitation to be a Trustee for the London-based Youth Club Archive in 2017, where Rossi is contributing to its future plans for a UK Museum of Youth Culture.

1. Curatorial Activity: New Exhibitions and Exhibition Content, 2015 – 2020 ongoing

The primary impact of Rossi's research and curatorial practice-research has been on the programming, collection and curatorial practices of design museums internationally. Her work has been critical in establishing club design and culture as a new area of activity in major cultural institutions, with the potential to elicit positive media and audience response. In 2015, Radical Disco was exhibited at the ICA, London. This was the first major stand-alone exhibition of club culture and design in the UK. In a letter to the university, the ICA's Associate Curator underlines the importance of Rossi's research and practice to the ICA's decision to develop this exhibit; noting that '*Radical Disco was born out of Rossi's pre-existing research into post-war Italian design and architecture*'. Importantly, the letter highlights that it was Rossi's curatorial work on Space Electronic that '*brought my attention to this little-known period of experimentation*'. In addition, the letter identifies '*Architecture Goes Disco*' and '*The Italian Avant-Garde*' as '*foundational in the development of the (ICA) exhibition*' [S1].

Rossi's research for Radical Disco also came to the attention of other European venues, developing content on club culture design history. The Villa Noialles in Hyères, in France, staged a 2017 exhibition entitled La Boîte du Nuit (19th February – 19th March 2017), directly referencing Rossi's research, particularly her work on Radical Disco, as '*one of the most relevant and interesting work(s) we've based our research on*' [S2]. The exhibition leaflet states that '*the selection here relies notably upon research*' undertaken by Rossi [S2]. As a result of Rossi's curatorial research, she was invited to participate in the exhibition's events programme.

Between 2016 and 2018 Rossi developed the touring exhibition Night Fever with VDM in Weil-am-Rhein, Germany; the organisation's first exhibition on club culture. VDM's Chief Curator Jochen Eisenbrand has identified Rossi's '*pioneering research and outstanding expertise in this field, in particular her exhibitions Space Electronic and Radical Disco, [as] a major inspiration to stage Night Fever*'. VDM's Director had seen Space Electronic in 2014, leading to an invitation to Rossi to co-curate Night Fever in 2016. The relationship of Rossi's research is further foregrounded in the VDM exhibition, which opens with a section on Radical Design nightclubs [S3]. As Eisenbrand has noted, Rossi '*was one of the first scholars to put the topic of the interconnectedness of nightclubs with the field of design in Italy on the map*' [S3]. Furthermore, the curatorial approach developed by Eisenbrand, Rossi and Serulus, has informed its presentation in the touring venues (listed below).

Following the successful development of Night Fever for its initial venue, Rossi's research has informed the development of new exhibition content and programming in other cultural institutions across Europe. VDM secured 5 touring venues for Night Fever: ADAM Design Museum (Brussels, 21 November 2018 – 5 May 2019), Centro Pecci (Prato, June – October 2019), Designmuseum Danmark (Copenhagen, 2020); V&A Dundee (2021 forthcoming) and HOTA (Queensland, 2023 forthcoming). At each venue, the narrative and content of Night Fever has been enhanced to pay attention to its new location and audiences. This has generated new research, the identification of additional exhibits, and the development of supporting programme content, thus bringing the material heritage of nightlife to wider attention. For example, Designmuseum Danmark commissioned designer Johannes Torpe to create a 1:1 replica of a section of former Copenhagen NASA nightclub, which he had designed in 1997, for the final section of their exhibition. In support of the exhibition at ADAM Design Museum, Brussels, the tourist organisation Visit Brussels financed a freely distributed 'Brussels Club Map'. This was in collaboration with ADAM, and designed by the exhibition's graphic designer, to coincide with the exhibition's opening at the Brussels venue.

In advance of the exhibition opening at the V&A Dundee (delayed due to Covid-19), new curatorial content is already being developed. As the Director of Programme at V&A Dundee points out, '*Our decision to programme Night Fever at V&A Dundee was informed by the strong*

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curatorial narrative developed by Rossi, Eisenbrand and Serulus...*This is the first time the Museum has hosted an exhibition on design and club culture*'. She continues to state that '*Rossi's research for Night Fever and our subsequent discussions and email exchanges have informed our curatorial activity at the museum and has led to our identification of new artifacts and sections for the exhibition's installation here*' [S4].

In addition, Night Fever's co-curator Nina Serulus followed the successful staging of the exhibition at ADAM Design Museum, Brussels, with another club culture exhibition focussed on Belgian graphic design. Designing the Night: Graphic Design of Belgian Club Culture (1st March 2019 – 29th September 2019), was an extension of the approach taken for the VDM exhibition, which '*originated in Night Fever: I would have never delved into the subject without the former exhibition*'. Serulus emphasises how she '*utilized the intellectual framework developed in Night Fever to make this smaller, additional, Belgian focused graphic design exhibition*' [S5].

2. Publicity and Media Coverage for Institutions

Rossi's research has generated significant publicity and media awareness for 3 of the exhibiting institutions so far. Radical Disco featured in over 25 print and digital media platforms including newspapers, fashion and music sites, and radio programmes. Night Fever has received over 200 radio, television, print and online appearances, in mainstream and architecture, design and music specialist outlets, in over 12 countries. According to Jochen Eisenbrand, VDM's Chief Curator, '*In terms of press coverage...this exhibition was the most successful I ever dealt with*' [S2]. Night Fever has also increased the profile of a new museum and an ADAM co-curator posits Rossi's work as fundamental to its success, noting that Night Fever '*put the subject on the agenda of both museums, but also foreign media to write about it*' [S5].

3. New Audiences

The exhibitions cited have generated healthy visitor figures in all their venues, with an increase in new and younger visitors, as well as positive feedback. For example, the ICA's Executive Director has praised Radical Disco's '*fantastic response*' with over 30,000 visitors, over 10,000 web page visits, and '*positive feedback*' [S6]. Night Fever received over 103,000 visitors at the first 3 venues. VDM's Chief Curator Eisenbrand comments echo those above, noting that '*Night Fever brought us many new visitors, especially among a younger generation: our 2018 visitor survey... indicated a substantial number of first-time visitors to the Vitra Campus. 11% of all visitors in 2018 visited the Campus due to Night Fever*' [S3]. Whilst not all visitor figures for venues have been made available due to Covid-19 delays, the trajectory of evidence signals the critical importance of Rossi's nightclub research on the audience profile for international venues.

VDM tours its exhibitions extensively all over the world. However, Night Fever was the first VDM exhibition to be staged at Italian, Danish and Australian venues, and therefore has contributed to VDM's expansion of its touring partnerships and engagement with wider international audiences. Sales of the accompanying VDM catalogue, co-authored and co-edited by Rossi, have also been successful: by December 2020, the English edition of 4500 sold out (including the pre-orders for V&A Dundee and HOTA Australia) and the German addition has sold 1200 copies [S7].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1 – Letter from Associate Curator, ICA, 1 December 2015

S2 – Letter from Curator of La Boîte du Nuit & La Boîte du Nuit exhibition leaflet

S3 – Letter from Chief Curator, VDM

S4 – Letter from Director of Programme, V&A Dundee, 11 August 2020

S5 – Letter from Curator, ADAM Design Museum

S6 – Letter from Executive Director, ICA, 14 January 2016

S7 – Email from Chief Curator, VDM, concerning book sales, 18 January 2021