

Matthew Lyons: The Discoteca Flaming Star Experience (This is the Remix)
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In his book *Rock My Religion*, Dan Graham described the popular music group Devo as having deftly mixed the seemingly opposed genres of punk and disco in order “to place both attitudes in tension.” In a similar way, Discoteca Flaming Star (DFS) combine disparate sound sources, cultural and historical references, and performance modes to subvert the expected trajectory and hierarchies of a staged event. At times a loose performance collective and a garage band at others, DFS call their activities “hardcore karaoke,” implying that they are some mutant form of a cover band. But Discoteca Flaming Star is more broadly a platform, an approach that can take many shapes.

In its varied formations over the years, Discoteca Flaming Star has included professionals, amateurs, metal rockers, an accordionist, belly dancers, folk musicians, contemporary dancers, and those performing ‘just this once’ among others. Their renditions of the pop rock of Shakira or Prince, the melancholic ballads of Jacques Brel, and the disco of Donna Summer to name just a few are extended, spliced together, or transplanted on top of one another, all the while using the classic avant-garde strategy of holding skill and polish at bay. (One DFS classic is ABBA’s “Thank You for the Music” superimposed on top of AC/DC’s “Big Balls.”) Often these songs have been brought together for the political, social, or emotional situations they obliquely reference or evoke. Yet beyond the songs used as sonic material, other clues establish a complementary lineage of artistic heroes, a matrix of inspiration that extends from the cabaret culture of Berlin of the interwar period to Jack Smith and his cohorts in New York during the 1960s and beyond. Improvising and faking their way through their unique tributes, DFS continually employ more than one mode of performance and address at a time. The end result is often what they describe as a “noiserockpiece with pop lyrics.” Whether playing a set in a dive bar in midtown Manhattan; at an outdoor, evening performance in a village square in the remote region of Extremadura, Spain; or in the context of an arts space, museum, or gallery; DFS react to and interrupt the traditional relation between the site, the performers, and the audience in each context. The combination of skilled and unskilled music-making, under-rehearsed moments, ad hoc arrangements, and happy mistakes produces an experience which is both jarring and liberating for the audience.

The foundation of DFS’s emancipatory potential is built upon the dedication of core members Cristina Gomez Barrio and Wolfgang Mayer to bring into play wildly diverse elements and to continually shift gears. Furthermore, their lack of “cool” detachment as well as the spirit of generosity towards and trust in their numerous collaborators is strikingly transmitted to the audience. Accordingly, Wolfgang Mayer’s stage persona is neither a nostalgic rehearsal of glam rock nor a full-on delivery of camp. Referring to this aspect of his performance as “make-up,” his matter-of-fact execution of it meanders around within the glam-drag spectrum. Overall, in DFS’s carefully considered performance practice, potential antagonisms between popular music genres, historical eras, and the conventions of “performance art” versus “rock concert” become neutralized or rather coexist on the inclusive platform created by Discoteca Flaming Star.

The banners, photo-works, and videos which come out of their performances also utilize this kind of combinatory interruption, or interruption through combination. One banner shuffles that odd pairing of the disco group ABBA and the rock band AC/DC into the interruptive sequence AACB/BDAC. Another banner uses the opposite and therefore related approach of continuity with the statement “I hope everything you loved dies in your arms” written in one unbroken line of spray-painted, cursive script. In the photo-works, many snapshots from performances are spliced together to make one compound work – both singular and multiple, comprehensive yet incomplete, and further interrupted by text stenciled over the collaged images. Likewise, in video pieces, adhesive letters are applied directly onto the screen of the monitor thereby disrupting the seductive nature of the video image.

In all their works, this simultaneously combinatory and interruptive approach serves to prevent a kind of passive absorption on the part of the viewer/audience. By extending to the viewer/audience this DIY energy and liberatory agency, DFS underline the basic platform fostered throughout their practice for positive and active engagement. Resisting the temptation to hypnotize the viewer/audience, Discoteca Flaming Star bravely accept their vulnerability as sincere, trustful performers and acknowledge their position as hardcore fans themselves. Being so earnest and affirmative without the protection afforded by layers of irony may prove to be one of their most hardcore aspects.