

Nightlife as a Site of Inclusive Cultural Production

INTRODUCTION

“The Loft just opened my brain. We all used to go there every Saturday. It was religious. It was our church. The whole party atmosphere was incredible. It wasn’t a club. It was a family thing... There were no outcasts. The crowd was very mixed... It was about music.” – David Morales (*Love Saves the Day*)

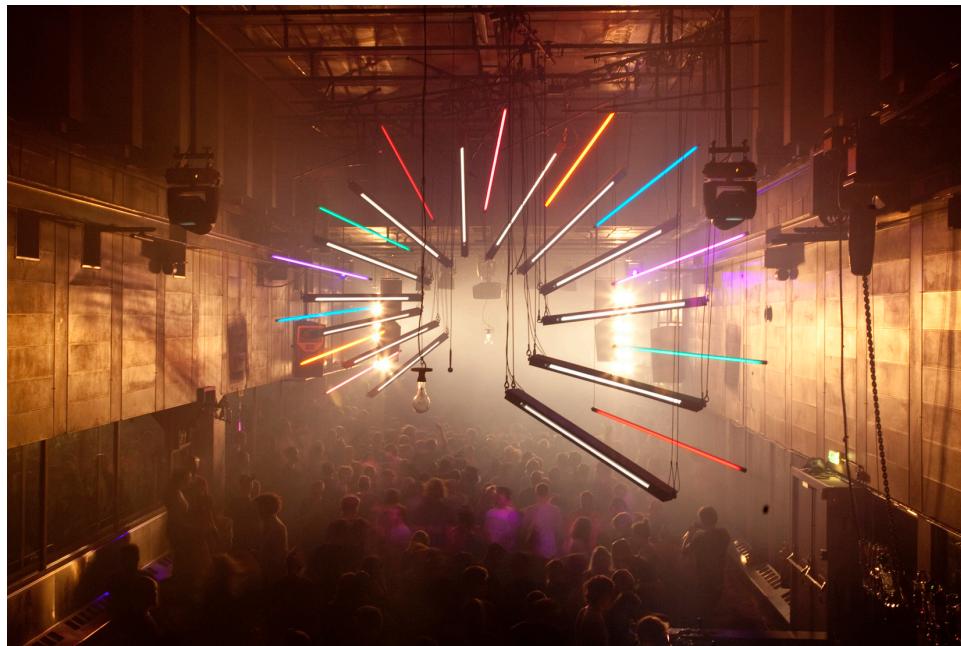
I caught the dance music bug in the winter of 2017-2018, coincidentally right around the time when my favorite nightclub, Nowadays, opened up its indoors space. In 2019, I started to go to that club more frequently, usually every weekend. Sometimes I *do* have what feel like spiritual experiences on the dance floor. And although I am not particularly interested in using loaded terminology around religion here, I think the quote above helps to illustrate and frame the significance of a well-designed club culture can for a community of people. Over the past two years, as my club-going activities turned into ritualized behavior, I have developed opinions about the best nightlife institutions and started wondering if I could build one myself. For my thesis, I am interested in investigating nightlife as a site of cultural production.

RESEARCH

My research has been interested in: the history of modern dance music culture; the role of the DJ in music culture; the role of the dance floor as a space for entertainment, creative expression, and performance; inclusivity of underground music scenes; and technical interventions in nightlife. When I started, I did not have a narrowly focused thesis idea; I admit there are additional research topics I will need to explore in order to properly execute the project I am proposing (more on that below).

In Tim Lawrence’s *Love Saves the Day* I found a thorough history of the 1970s dance music scene centered around New York, including accounts of the most influential and popular clubs of the time. It provided accounts of clubbing experiences which help steer away from some popular clichés, for example, this one of The Loft: “‘Dance was not a means to sex but drove the space.’ Revelers refigured the dance floor as a site not of foreplay but of spiritual communion where, thanks to the unique combination of decor, space, music, drugs, lighting, and dance, as well as Mancuso’s guiding party ethos, sensation wasn’t confined to the genitals but was *everywhere*—in every new touch, sound, sight, and smell” (Lawrence, 25). Much of The Loft’s design as an institution appeals to me, from the mixed crowd it attracted to Mancuso’s purist, idealistic dedication to music and his sound system technical innovations.

One common theme amongst many of the nightclubs detailed in *Love Saves the Day* seemed to be exclusivity; invite-only membership systems and tight door lists prevailed at the best parties. I believe that modern NYC dance music culture has progressed in this regard, but admit that the allure of some invite-only parties still takes up some space in my mind.



Trouw, Amsterdam

The development of a new dance music culture brought with it dual performance spaces; not only were DJs performing records behind the booth, but dancers were allowed “to assert their own identities — through their dress, through their partners, and through the steps they execute” in a form of “dance-floor democracy” (Lawrence, 177). This function of the dance floor is another reason why I am attracted to it, and other scholars would seem to agree: “nightclubs work simultaneously as spaces of entertainment, where we go to have fun and to distract ourselves from the pressures of contemporary capitalism; spaces of performance, where we go to experiment with identity and put on what Grazian has called a ‘nocturnal self,’ or that special body we become at nighttime; and spaces of creativity, which foster the incubation of brand-new developments across the media and visual arts” (Moore, 50). Ultimately, it is “freedom, anonymity, and darkness [which] make nightlife a creative space to test out new ideas or personas” (Moore, 56). Although a relatively short article, *Nightlife as Form* presented many of the ideas which are now central to my thesis concept proposal. Moore’s description of Trouw, a defunct nightclub in Amsterdam (the proprietors now run De School) might apply to a successful version of my own project: a “red-hot nightclub [which] doubled as an arts institution” (58).

In researching technical interventions on the dance floor, I found that these sometimes try to solve non-problems (see *DJs' Perspectives on Interaction and Awareness in Nightclubs*) and other times are simply ineffective. I believe that live streaming platforms like Boiler Room fall into the latter category; although they enjoy some popular success online, they ultimately face “technical challenges of transmitting festive energies across media” (Heuguet, 78). Still, their goal of greater inclusion in underground music culture of people who are seeking its “kinesthetic and aesthetic effects” by elimination of “logistical obstacles that served as a veritable initiatory quest” (door policies) is a noble one. Ultimately, my personal experience suggests that the best parties are marked by a lack of technology, through policies like bans on cell phone use. For old school analog purists, this even means DJing with vinyl records despite their technically inferior performance and logistical baggage compared to digital files.



Mister Sunday party dance floor at Nowadays
(no phones allowed in between the speakers)

New technology may not be the most welcome thing on the dance floor, but that doesn't mean that the role and output of the DJ is not shaped by digital culture. Most will agree that we rely on DJs to help combat musical information overload in today's “digital mediascape of content surplus” (McCutcheon, 114) when there is more music being produced than ever before, at a dizzying rate. I would go further and assert the DJ's role as cultural critic: “given the abundance of content made available for creative appropriation by contemporary information and communication technologies (ICTs)—and given the intensification of corporate campaigns to control, contain, and confiscate such abundance—it is time to recognize more fully the DJ's role as a critic and to theorize the cultural functions of DJ work (which is play: the work of improvisational, inventive, and innovative playback) as criticism” (94). Completion of this work supports a more “positive valuation of copying and sharing and... a more expansive, robust conception of fair dealing” (98). The performance of a DJ mix (both in a club or a radio

context) draws a conceptual line from “the historical roots of the music [to] where it should head in the future” (104). Of course, not all DJ activities are critical or political; we must remind ourselves not to forget our physical and social bodies and “never to forget the party, to mix ‘music with people’ turns the culture club DJ into an artist” (Pfadenhauer, 14).

DJing is an appropriation-based art form where listeners sometimes have trouble putting a finger on why a particular DJ is good; I found at least one definition in my research which helps explain it: “*kairos*: a term from classical rhetoric that might be summarized as contextually contingent knowledge of the opportune moment, ‘a sense of the present and timely action’” (McCutcheon, 109). Gauging live crowd sentiment is often an important part of the job, but I would like to suggest another interpretation of *kairos*. Here, I think we should pay attention to the impact of modern networking technologies once again, for they add more color to the “present and timely action” in the definition above. I appreciate DJ Rupture’s take on this in a chapter called *How Music Travels*: “The speed with which digital audio zips from one place to another has shrunk the world, short circuiting business models and scrambling lines of influence. The overwhelming availability of music that results from this proliferation and portability is altering our conception of it in ways we’re only beginning to understand” (Clayton, 58). A song produced in one corner of the world can be remixed and played to a completely different audience the next day. Breaking news in the morning can trigger a DJ to alter and politicize her dance floor performance later that night through the incorporation of specific musical histories or spoken word acapellas layered into the mix. And the system feeds back into itself when recordings from the club or radio are uploaded to Soundcloud or Mixcloud, thereby broadcasting a filtered version of the “festive energies” into a global music culture.



Promo image for one of my radio programs on Half Moon BK

Outside of this thesis research course, I have been going to many nightclubs & festivals (conducting fieldwork, in a sense) over the past year. Most notable are: Nowadays, Sustain-Release, Sublimate, Shaker Mountain, Planetarium, Unter, Groovy Groovy, Club Night Club, Bossa Nova Civic Club, Mood Ring, Public Records, Berghain, and Griessmuehle. I have also been engaging with Brooklyn electronic music culture institutions & collectives. Hone Social, a free DJ workshop run by two friends of mine, has been developing a warm, inviting community which has been an inspiration for my thesis. Pick Up the Flow is a grassroots online social network for resource & skill sharing in the Brooklyn dance music community, and another source of inspiration for me.

Much of the current community-building work in this scene is intersectional, dealing with issues of race and gender representation. Half Moon BK is an online radio station which has made a huge impact in promoting local music culture produced by black, brown, and non-male artists, the effects of which are apparent over the course of their short history. A few years ago, the scene was very white and male dominated, but that is no longer the status quo thanks to organizations like Half Moon and Discwoman.



999-PIES party on November 23, 2019

Of course, this wouldn't be an ITP project without practical application of my knowledge of club culture. To that end, I have been steadily developing the relevant experience I need for this project over the past year. I learned how to DJ and now I play in some of the local clubs. Going to all these parties has informed my opinions on the audiovisual design of club spaces. Recently, I organized the first installment of a new

party series called 999-PIES, where I curated the music, selected & designed the warehouse-like space, and created a custom LED lighting installation.

THESIS STATEMENT

How can I design inclusive club culture which is authentic to the art being presented and which lives beyond the time & space boundaries of the party? How can I foster and challenge people's comfort zones in these spaces with experimental audiovisual art? To answer these questions, I plan to organize a series of parties demonstrating holistic audiovisual experience design and create an inclusive, socially-engaged project for resource/skill-sharing in Brooklyn's underground dance music community.

I believe my project will be different from those referenced in my research by its close linking of nighttime parties to daytime creative activities which engage the same audience. It will be socially-engaged in the sense that I will use community input to direct these activities, so I am not bringing prescriptive about them from the outset.

PLAN FOR NEXT SEMESTER

I plan to continue engaging with the Brooklyn dance music community as a DJ, promoter, and club-goer. Through these channels, I will gain access to experts who have founded and/or run some of the institutions I listed above, and more. I also plan to keep reading relevant articles and books; some research areas I have not yet explored much are ritualized behaviors in nightlife and spatial design of clubs (see bibliography items by Goulding and O'Grady).

I hope to utilize my ITP studies in abstract video art for live performance, spatial audio, avant-garde music composition, and light sculpture towards the goal of producing great parties. I plan to run them in various suitable spaces I can find in Brooklyn & Ridgewood. I will curate (if not create) the music and visuals for these events. As an appreciator of a diverse set of musical styles and the equally diverse social situations connected to them, I also want to explore social gatherings with varying degrees of party "intensity". This may include deep listening sessions which are not overly prescriptive (allowing for some socializing and talking about the music) and daytime or early evening parties which don't require clubbers to use drugs to stay up all night.

As for the other half of this project – the socially-engaged institution for skill- and resource-sharing—I have some experience conducting DJ workshops for beginners, but I hope to expand on this. This part of the project is less well-defined at this point, but my hope is to create space and time for the creative individuals who attend my parties to collaborate outside the club and explore whatever form of cultural production interests them. I will use what I learned in *Socially-Engaged Art and Digital Practice* (through studying the work of scholars like Pablo Helguera and Gregory Sholette) to establish frameworks for collaboration, ethical behavior, and appropriate documentation.

I plan to conduct all these activities in an iterative fashion during January-March. I'm sure I will discover things which cause me to change course, or to focus on certain aspects of club culture. I plan to collaborate with artists, musicians, and other creatives in the Brooklyn music community to put on these events, but I haven't figured out what roles they will have exactly. At this point I am interested in holistically designing much of the nightclub experience, but I will need to draw on local talent in order to attract public crowds for larger events.

It's unclear just how inclusive this project can really be from a musical and socioeconomic perspective. I may have to focus on limited genres to bring enough people together around shared music culture interests. Also, there are obvious barriers to entry for potential audiences who may not have the free time and money to invest in co-creating club culture through this project.

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