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Diaspora Disco:

Curatorial Activism and the Social Practice of Nightlife

NICHOLAS TEE

To apply utopianism to clubbing in an active way would be to acknowledge this utopic feeling, and ask, “Why can it not be like this all the time”? This question opens up the clubbing experience to larger questions about identity, community and boundaries we create between self and other.

Angel Rose

As I write this article towards the end of 2020—against the backdrop of a global pandemic, the rise of far-right nationalism and unprecedented civil unrest brought about by an increasingly fractured socio-political landscape—the above quote by artist Angel Rose hints at a feature of nightlife that could potentially offer some relief in these impossible times. While many have theorised (and romanticised) about how nightlife functions as a cathartic outlet for debauched excesses, socially-engaged nightlife has the heterotopic ability to indulge in utopian fantasy while simultaneously functioning as a site for activist mobilisation, socio-political critique and identity formation.

Nightlife enacts what Jill Dolan refers to as the *utopian performative*—“small but profound moments in which performance [...] lifts everyone slightly

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above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.” For minoritized communities, nightclubs have often functioned as spaces of refuge, offering the freedom to participate in activities that were disapproved of—or even criminalised—on the outside. Ball culture in New York City during the 70s and 80s allowed queer Black and Latino communities to gather under the cloak of darkness to critique heteronormativity and social class through fashion, dance and music long before homosexuality was decriminalised in America. Similarly, daytime raves in the late 80s and 90s allowed young British Asians the freedom to take over clubs and dance to bhangra before returning home to their conservative Asian parents for dinner by six. Inside the club, they carved out space to imagine—and perform—a progressive future that was not yet permitted on the outside. Yet, nightlife itself is not immune to the same structures of oppression that exist beyond the club and run the risk of reproducing those inequities if it is not critically self-reflexive. As much as nightlife as a form is romanticised for its permissiveness, the industry itself is plagued by issues of access and representation such as racial, sexual and gender discrimination. Thus, if nightlife aspires to create free spaces to craft blueprints for the future, it must first do so by confronting the complex socio-economic realities that exist in the present.

Socially-engaged nightlife recognises this tension and uses clubbing to initiate and incubate social change. From community-focused club nights that focus on addressing the specific needs of a minoritised group to safe(r) space policies and after-party chaperones who ensure everyone gets home safely, club collectives employ a variety of activist strategies to build community, resist dominant power structures and create a safe environment for everyone to party. For example, MISERY in London is a “sober club night centering healing and joy for queer, transgender, non-binary & intersex Black people and people of colour”. By recognising that alcohol consumption and drug use can be a barrier to entry for those who are sober or in recovery, MISERY directly addresses this issue of access by creating a non-judgemental and inclusive space for like-minded individuals to party together, and in doing so, builds a space for mutual healing that will hopefully last long after the night is over. Sometimes what begins in the dark rooms of a nightclub can even extend into the streets, such as when thousands of young people gathered on the steps of the Georgian parliament for a “Rave-o-lution” in response to the attempted government crackdown on suspected drug use in Tbilisi’s club culture in 2018. This set the stage for a cultural shift that would see clubbers uniting with larger activist movements in calling for drug policy

reform. Activists have likewise recognised the political potency of the rave format, revealing the ability of nightlife to operate at the intersections of artistic innovation, socio-political critique and advocacy.

Nightlife acts not as a venue, but as a functioning network of complex social relationships and theatricalized constructs that work together in the formation of an environment. Therein, nightlife communities create alternative progressive contexts and possibilities.

Jake Yuzna

Between 2018 and 2019, I ran five editions of a club night in London called Diaspora Disco. It was an experiment that envisioned the nightclub as a curatorial site to platform artists from the East and Southeast Asian diaspora. Unlike the relatively formal context of an art gallery or theatre, the liminality of the nightclub embraced the collision of multiple forms at once. In the essay *Nightlife as Form*, Madison Moore writes about how nightlife sits as a staged experience at the intersection of multiple aesthetics, such as performance, fashion, music and design, giving us the permission to experiment with identities and imagine alternate social contexts. For artists from East and Southeast Asia and its diaspora, nightlife is an empowering site because it offers a space to hold the messiness that comes with performing “Asian” identity without the pressure of pinning it down for interpretive clarity. As a curatorial site, the multi-perspectival nature of nightlife meant that works by artists from different parts of the diaspora could be put simultaneously in tandem, contrast and layered on top of each other. For example, music from the DJ in the main room would bleed into the smoking area where another live performance would be happening, or video art projected onto the ceiling of the club would be played on loop while someone else posed for live drawing in the room below. Thus, Diaspora Disco took its cue from other activist forms of nightlife that had come before it by creating an alternate context to encounter the works of East and Southeast Asian artists through participation, community building and sensorial engagement, and in doing so, resisted a cultural landscape where the visibility of Asian artists were often dictated by white Euro-American art institutions. Furthermore, for anyone who has been asked “... but what kind of Asian are you?”, Diaspora Disco was an emancipatory space to get tangled up in the tensions, complexities and nuances that define contemporary “Asian” identity, whatever that meant.

In 2019, Diaspora Disco collaborated with Eastern Margins and Phantom Limb—two other Asian nightlife collectives—to organise a Lunar New Year



FIGURE 1: Lucky Ping Pong Dragon Karaoke at *Diaspora Disco x Eastern Margins x Phantom Limb: Lunar New Year Party*. Image credit: Diaspora Disco.

party which featured a “reunion dinner” prepared by artist and chef Julez Noh in addition to the club night. The reunion dinner, often considered the most important get-together meal for many Asian communities, was an appropriate reminder of the modes of collaboration and kinship that nightlife depends on to function, as well as the interpersonal bonds that hold Asian communities together. As Professor Nora Taylor details in “Have Performance, Will Travel: Contemporary Artistic Networks in Southeast Asia”, collaboration is key to regional artistic exchanges in Southeast Asia, which are “created through person-to-person contact, rather than the circulation of objects”. Similarly, collaboration within nightlife parallels the frequent cross-border exchanges and informal artistic networks that form the backbone of artistic production in East and Southeast Asia.

As clubs remain closed due to the outbreak of Covid-19, nightlife has inevitably been transplanted into the virtual—transcending the physical confines of the club and beaming directly into the socially-distanced comfort of one’s own home. From Animal Crossing and Minecraft raves to Zoom parties, pandemic nightlife has made visible the extent to which nightlife operates as a geographically dispersed network of social relationships which



FIGURE 2: Eunjung Kim at *Diaspora Disco × Eastern Margins × Phantom Limb: Lunar New Year Party*. Image credit: Diaspora Disco.

threads through diverse communities and cultures. In September 2020, club collectives Eastern Margins, CHINABOT, SUPER DOMMUNE and AVYSS GAZE connected between London, Seoul, Tokyo and Shanghai in an online event that took place on Mozilla Hubs, an experimental VR platform that allowed attendees to navigate a 3D re-creation of the Shibuya Parco Building in Japan as an avatar. On each of the virtual floors, one could visit an exhibition of artworks by artists curated by each of the collectives and watch live-streamed performances. Similarly, Singaporean rave experiment Endless Return hosted a party on Zoom, “subverting the form of a corporate communications technology (usually part of a capitalist toolkit) into an engine of protest and creative expression” and connected artists between Singapore, New York City and Taipei. Thus, the shift to the virtual has enabled East and Southeast Asian nightlife communities to collaborate and connect trans-locally through nightlife on a scale that would have otherwise been physically unfeasible before. Furthermore, the use of technology has enabled the production of a culturally richer and more diverse nightlife experience that is able to reach a wider audience. Although virtual nightlife can never fully replace the physical experience of dancing in a room full of strangers, it

certainly demonstrates how technology could possibly augment the future of nightlife as well as the interdependencies that East and Southeast Asian nightlife communities are built upon.

As an artist and curator from Southeast Asia, the allure of nightlife has always lain in its ability to offer a liminal space to navigate the complexities of contemporary “Asian” identity through artistic experimentation. It is a malleable form that constantly evades definition and a potent space for grassroots activism that is rooted in community. Ultimately, nightlife at its best does not merely indulge passively in *imagining* better worlds. Instead, socially-engaged nightlife actively *initiates* alternative progressive contexts through socio-political critique, activist mobilisation, artistic innovation, identity formation and interdependent collaboration. Rather than asking *why* the utopic feeling of clubbing cannot be like this all the time, nightlife actively says: “Here is what we can do to make it last a lifetime.”

BIOGRAPHY

Nicholas Tee is a live artist currently working in Singapore who collages action, image, sound and material through body-based performance, pain and endurance; their work is often politically charged, angry and messy. Nicholas’ work has been presented internationally, notably at Haus der Kunst (DE), Manchester Art Gallery (UK) and Point Centre for Contemporary Art (CY). Most recently, their work was featured in the *British Art Studies* journal published by the Paul Mellon Centre.

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