

DANCING AGAIN

by Danni McGrath

I've been thinking about dancing since last Camp Doogs when I took too many dexies and didn't stop dancing until about six the following morning. At the time I was working as, amongst other things, a waitress in a cocktail bar (yes, really) while attempting to write my final Honours thesis, so my main memory of this six hour dancing marathon was the foreign experience of having apparently limitless energy, in contrast to the constant state of fatigue with which I was familiar. I kept dancing, expecting to run out of energy but then the sun rose and we were still there. I'm very aware of just how ridiculous this scene would've appeared to the onlooker: six-odd straggly dancers flailing in the dust while DJs played chicken as to who would be the last standing. Something about dancing like no-one is watching, but rather, I was aware of everything; everyone who could see me, everyone I could see, my lungs and legs and hair and fingers.

So I guess I've been thinking of dancing as an activity that is equally self-aware and freeing. Sometimes it is private, but more often it exists beyond the bedroom or lounge room and becomes an act of self definition, and of projecting that identity.

I studied art with Liam Colgan and we shared a love of Grace Jones' confident, unapologetic existence. She exists somewhere between male and female: sterner than a woman is allowed to be, more polished than a man can normally get away with. A confident ambiguity that we both admire. We danced to Slave To The Rhythm while our peers watched and filmed, pretending we were that confident, and maybe even believing it for a while.

Liam was selected to show his work Caught In Reflection in Hatched 15 National Graduate Exhibition at PICA. The 48 minute video shows him dancing in his bedroom to Kate Bush's Wuthering Heights, stopping only to restart the song. A framed portrait of Grace Jones sits under a lamp on a bedside table, next to a digital alarm clock and bottle of deodorant. Dancing alone in one's bedroom is nothing new, but turning it into a test of endurance and then screening it to an audience brings in a new set of considerations. Although Liam was physically alone as he danced, the camera's presence foreshadows the future audience, framing this dance as a performance from the beginning. Thus the dance becomes political, albeit in a playful way. In a hetero- and cisgender-normative society, a young man dancing unashamedly to Kate Bush is decidedly subversive. The confidence with which Liam Colgan performs the feminine aspects of his own identity announce it as a legitimate way to exist in modern society. Dancing when you know someone is watching can be incredibly powerful.

A friend mentioned that people 'go out dancing' now. Again, this is nothing new, but I've noticed that events organised in the last few years by M.O.V.E., The Monarchy, Day Woo, Good Company and others have focussed specifically on the good vibes, the danceability, the 'oof' factor. The fact that the word 'boogie' has entered my vocabulary feels significant. I was

working at Connections Nightclub when Theo Parrish played le Club in February, and highly enjoyed joining the couple hundred others having one hell of a boogie on my break. On le Club the DJs play on the stage as instead of upstairs in the DJ booth, and I think this has a big effect on how people connect with the music. It feels more tactile; you can see where the music is coming from and how it's being constructed - not just in terms of records being manipulated on decks, but also the DJ's movements, their rhythm, their dance. Theo Parrish is a great dancer too. Being in a crowd that tunes into this dance, regardless of the music style, whether it's live or a DJ set, feels like joining a club with its own identity, even if it only lasts as long as the set. I've danced in crowds at festivals in foreign countries where I've known no-one, been able only to say the words beer, please and thank you, and still felt safe, connected and welcome.

Obviously, this dance utopia is not something that happens all the time. Rather, there are many music-based spaces where people feel actively unwelcome and unsafe, for a whole range of reasons. (For discussions on this topic, focussing specifically on gender and equality in music spaces I'd recommend looking at listenlistenlisten.org) One group that actively attempts to address the accessibility of dancing in a public space is No Lights No Lycra (NLNL), a series of free form dance classes held regularly around the world. NLNL events are often held in community halls, rather than typical spaces of dancing such as clubs or bars. Lights are dimmed so you can dance without being self conscious of your appearance, while still experiencing the community feeling of dancing with others. NLNL playlists are compiled by participants, and made available online, so the class also becomes a way of building a community around shared music. (Pro tip: Liam Colgan is programming NLNLxPICA on ~~Friday~~ June 6, at the PICA Performance Space. If you're into Grace Jones, Janelle Monae, Zebra Katz, Mykki Blanco and Peaches, this might be your thing.) NLNL classes are attended by dancers, musicians, physiotherapists, artists, retail workers, people with disabilities, lawyers, unemployed people, parents, students, all with different motivations, be they exercise, self expression, socialising. Despite this diversity, a worldwide NLNL community has emerged.

Reclaiming dancing from memories of self conscious and embarrassing primary school discos has been refreshing. 10/10, would recommend.