

DANCEFLOOR, FIELD RECORDING

Where this motion goes

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by Fred Small

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In *Raving*, scholar McKenzie Wark expounds a theory of raving as practice. The slim volume from Duke University, published earlier this year, is a return to theory for Wark — post-COVID, post-transition, returning to the rave after a twenty-year cool-down period. In it, Wark takes the reader on a night out; in and out of warren-like venues, Ubers, and bathroom lines. The book works doubly as a theory-minded auto-ethnography and an insider's guide to a specifically queer/trans, NYC-based, underground rave scene. Wark generously cites (samples?) the work of other writers, DJs, and ravers, bringing together a syllabus of raving as a collective, potentially liberatory practice.

Raving is best up front, near the speakers, where we revel in the time-bending melee of bodies, motion, and sounds. The DJ is playing techno. The crowd is going off. Moreover, the DJ is playing because the crowd is going off, and vice versa. The dance floor becomes the territory of rudimentary movement. Here, sound is an animating force. Bodies ripple, uninhibited, pounding, sweating, restless and engulfed by sound. Sound invokes movement and life. And so too, it relies on, and is given meaning by the collective listener. Sound and experience, in dialectic synthesis, animate one another. "I want to animate and be animated on the floor," writes Wark, "a node in a rippling field of fleshy instances that tipple around the pulsing air"

For Fred Small, sound is the material of life itself. On the dance floor, in the next room, on the radio, on the street. Working doubly as artist and musician, sound is both the medium and the subject of Small's practice. His experimental and pulsing tracks are both sound-tracks and sound-works, ambient but never background music, expanding and contracting in those mutable boundaries between 'sound' and 'music.' *Where this motion goes* pulls in the careful listener, inviting us to disentangle the ever-looping tracks of projection, colours, light and sound.

On the stairs up to the gallery the faint thump of bass reverberates down. A re-worked track by raptAGOG (a pseudonym of the artist) plays over speakers and in headphones. A dogged four-on-the-floor rhythm which moves horizontally, durational. Over that, a melee of synths which move in and out of focus, speaking in turn and then on top of each other. Uncanny mimetic touches, like exhalations, like human speech, peek out from between the beats. To listen with the gallery headphones provides a sort of doubled soundtrack, in sync with the same amplified song. It's a neat trick - signalling both immediacy and distance in its overlap. These trajectories so often co-

exist; when one hears traces of music from the bathroom stall or the smoker's area. The intense introspection that tends to arrive as the dancefloor is most crowded. "For clubbers," reads a social geography text from 1999, "dancing is about simultaneously losing yet also gaining control over one's body: dancing is about becoming part of and submitting to the dancing crowd."¹

On the far wall of *Where this motion goes* plays a looping projection. A spectrogram pulses, a graphic depiction of sound which here visualises frequencies as colour, and brightness as volume. The coloured bars, brightly hued verticals, then horizontals, thrum in sync with a distant rave. Each repetition of the audio track and the projection finds them further out of step, offering only fortuitous moments where they appear to align. Here, sound animates image, and the other way around. Neither operate in lockstep, each chasing the other in an obsequious loop, till they are shut off to start again the next day. The projected bars rise and fall in an abstraction of sound, signalling volume and frequency, but without a corresponding noise, match only themselves, pulsing ad infinitum. This dogged strobe-like projection acts as a kind of stop-motion, animating the music, and dividing its momentum beat by beat into flashes of light of colour. Like two faulty clocks, sound and motion chase one another, a slow syncopated wrestling. The beat bears on.

"The beats invoke me" writes McKenzie Wark, "to this time, inside the machine that we're all in, that goes on regardless, but within which here, in this lovingly crafted situation, art of many hands, we shall burn with animal fury, until it stops." In *Raving*, the territory of the rave extends not only to the dancefloor, but the surrounding infrastructure, the "gap between magic and property," within which the raving scene survives. (In that gap too, exists the artist-run initiative.) In *Where this motion goes*, the gallery becomes an oneiric mirror of the gig, mimicking its gestures and affects in a dream-like mode. In this dream-rave-logic, the music seems to breathe and pant in and out of time with the projection, a canny sonic hoax. In his compositions, Small gestures to the surreal, creating almost-human noises and frequencies which replicate breathing, moaning, and whispering. These touches heighten the sense of dream logic, the uncanniness of a barely remembered night. The strobing light blurs with the streetlights from the Uber home. Waveforms and jumping levels, graphics animated by metrics of volume, frequency, and bass, are cast onto the wall. In the dream/rave, the gig takes place inside the sequencer. The driving music slurs and speeds, treading and re-treading the topographies of auditory life, in and out of the gallery and the venue.

¹ Ben Malbon, *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy, Vitality*, 1999.

The crux of Wark's book is the idea that raving offers a potential, if temporary, liberation. For Wark herself, it offers a respite from the hyper-visibility and discomforts of newly inhabited trans womanhood. In a broader sense, raving is a dissociative practice that allows one to be in and out of one's body; in and out of durational time. It tracks then, that Wark and a cadre of trans friends gravitate to the rave as a respite from the dysphoric body and the brunt of the straight world. Just as gay bars and clubs offer a space for community and cruising which necessitates a site away from straight life, the rave exists in parallel — though oriented to different styles of music and affect, preferring different substances. However, while gay bars shuttered through the U.S. pandemic, the rave survived, hosting illegal parties through networks of unstructured labour. If the gay bar is dying, the rave lives on, both a harbinger and an unkillable cockroach of gentrification.

The ear, unlike the eye, cannot be easily shut to stimulation. At the other end of the gallery hangs a smaller piece, a second still spectrogram which maps the sound playing in the room. In this graph like composition, time is measured by the horizontal axis; frequency along the vertical. Effervescent bars of colour track the song's data — it is the one piece in the show which does not loop continuously. The work is a starkly analogue depiction of a fleeting experience, isolating a sonic experience from its reception. The printing of these metrics onto the metal plate merges the ephemeral and enduring.

For Small, the act of listening is energised by a sense of community. The duration of that act (that horizontal axis) is secondary to the dynamic between sound and the listener, the continuous animation of one to the other. The notion of time-keeping continually re-asserts itself in the work as gestures of looping, strobing, flashing, and measuring. However, Small's restrained use of these indicate an ambiguous, itinerant, and fortuitous sense of time, rather than a stringently quantified chronological one. The listener is not depicted but always implied; not keeping time but finding it anew between the beats. Wark writes: "time becomes stringently horizontal. Neither rising nor falling, just sideways swelling and slimming. The body slots in, to time, finding itself stranded through itself, through losing the form of its being in time." We compare notes on the ride home. We feel a phantom thumping bass pass through us. We find each other on dancefloors, over and over. Wark, again, writes, "a rave is just a pocket in time in which there's more time. But the pocket closes and spills us out, and then that was all there was."

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