

Carolyn F. Strauss reads *When Walls Speak*, edited by MYCKET, issue 13 of *Girls Like Us* (2021).

When I was five years old, growing up in Oakland, California, my class went on a field trip to visit a fortune cookie factory. We watched as thin layers of liquid-y dough were squirted out of a machine, forming uniform discs of a strange yellow-orangish hue. As they disappeared along a conveyor belt into the ovens, another line of slightly plumper, aromatic discs emerged from the other end where they were quickly snatched up by expert hands that pleated and pinched them to perfection. My excitement about being there at the factory was less about the marvel of the dough's transformation – or even the promise of the cookies we'd be given at the end of our visit – than it was about the fortunes they contained within their folds ... small slips of paper, each with a special message, one of them just for me. A message with a mysterious force that could change my luck, seed new desires or foretell my future.

In *When Walls Speak*, the queer art and architecture collective MYCKET describe the pistachio fortune cookies they lovingly made and filled with such messages for their guests at the club Sappho Islands (Theater Unga Klara, Stockholm, 2012) as 'a tiny but concrete model of how writing, materiality, form and content can be integrated.' The fortune cookies are but one of a dazzling, sometimes dizzying array of treasures found in MYCKET's takeover of the thirteenth issue of the magazine *Girls Like Us*, which draws from their six-year artistic research project *The Club Scene*. That project, like the magazine, interrogated the architecture of the nightclub through enactments of historical queer and feminist spaces, both documenting and mythologizing an archive of pleasure, potential, resistance, and resilience – an archive that MYCKET's three protagonists, Thérèse, Mariana and Katarina, celebrate as being 'found not in the library, but in our bodies and in the crowd.'

Cracking open *When Walls Speak* is itself a little bit like breaking through the hard shell of a fortune cookie: the standard print format giving way to an explosion of life-affirming energy, provocative ideas and colourful spreads. Like the spatial interventions it recalls and imagines, the magazine itself interrupts dominant norms and histories, animated by the playful impulses of its editors and with margin notes that point to legacies of critical thought and creative process, including from MYCKET's own academic and practical research. The reader is led through ten 'rooms' of their fictionalized club, detailing each one's distinct spatial and relational qualities and introducing us to the eclectic cast of characters who frequent them. The place they narrate is dynamic and generative, shaped not by a normative gaze but by a rich spectrum of queer subjectivities – whose spaces and dimensions of

experience are inspired by the nightclubs that, in the words of the three editors, have so filled them up over the years that they will ‘linger in the body forever.’

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Making my way through MYCKET’s sequence of spaces and stories evoked vivid and sometimes visceral memories of my own immersions in the club scene that began roughly ten years after that visit to the fortune cookie factory. First as a young teenager in the punk and new wave scenes in San Francisco, wearing heavy eyeliner and clip-on diamante earrings, for the first time discovering music and community that was *mine* rather than passed down by my elder siblings. And later among the ‘club kids’ of 80’s New York, navigating narrow stairways in stiletto heels, finding family among other misfits who had been drawn to the city, simmering together in a thick, luscious stew of deep house beats.

Mariana, Katarina, and Thérèse recall Stockholm’s iconic LGBTQI+ club spaces like Bangcock, Bitch Girl Club and Bitter Pills. My regular haunts in New York were Nell’s, the Pyramid Club, Save the Robots, and the World ... Those places and the communities they held were life-affirming for me, and to this day, their spatial configurations remain branded in my mind and body. Indeed, the rooms I remember best are the same as those that MYCKET identify in *When Walls Speak*: the street, the threshold, the coat check, the bar, the dance floor... And I would add to that list some of the other spaces and paces of the city that bookended the club experience: the dank subway stations and trains rumbling deep underground; the bodies of junkies I stepped over when entering and leaving a friend’s building on the Lower East Side; the empty blocks that sounded my footfall as I headed home in the wee hours of the morning, keys clutched defensively between my fingers.¹

I was easily enamored by the reproductions in *When Walls Speak* of club flyers and advertisements from the 80’s through the aughts – tangible, material remnants like lingering love letters to those spaces and the communities they held. They remind me of the flyers I sometimes made back then: poring over magazines for pictures and type, cutting, arranging, pasting, writing in the extra details, xeroxing off dozens of copies, trimming them down, spreading them around ... How lucky we were not to have had so-called ‘smart’ phones and social media back then. My friends were the people I met regularly at the bar or on the dance floor and those I got to know even better were the ones

¹ Just a handful of years later, some of those same spaces were systematically scoured and sanitized under the crackdowns of NYC’s monster mayor Rudy Giuliani: sex workers forced out of Times Square to make way for tourists, gentrification slowly but surely beginning to take hold on the LES – both by now already long a *faite-accomplie*.

whose (landline) numbers I could memorize even after a few drinks.² Long before texting, we had ways to let each other know where the next party was. Today, little to no documentation of our adventures exists – there were hardly any cameras at the scene, besides the occasional paparazzi when Madonna showed up – but there remains a vivid slideshow in my head and indelible memories held in the body, readily conjured back up by an image or a smell, a knowing glance from a stranger of a certain age, and above all by the music we shared.

The clubs I experienced, like the ones the reader encounters in this magazine, were vibrant nodes of difference, belonging, solidarity, and joy. There was space for everyone and every imaginable age and color and orientation was there (beyond the velvet rope, that is) to indulge in thrilling DJ sets and live shows that both affirmed and soothed the struggles of the community. Yet even as those were places where I found myself liberated in ways I had not felt previously in my life – the magical interior of the fortune cookie – as a white, cis woman my life experience was a world apart from the people beside me who relied on those same spaces to feel safe and even to survive in the face of discrimination, dehumanization, and sometimes racist and transphobic violence. To be sure, parts of the New York I navigated then were rough and dangerous, not designed with women's bodies or their safety in mind. But still, I was one of the lucky ones. I always had a home, a secure base beyond the streets. And while I had good reason to be trained in self-defense, I did not need to fear the police. Even as the clubs were for me an essential, life-giving force that forever shaped who I was becoming, I also understood that for others they were (and still are) nothing less than a lifeline. In MYCKET's rendering of the queer club scene in *When Walls Speak*, the sometimes troubled interweavings of such spaces are on full display.

Review interrupted – Saturday afternoon, 11 September 2021

I am at home in Amsterdam, putting the finishing touches to this site-writing, when my concentration is broken by a chorus of shouting and loud music passing nearby. A quick scan of the local news reveals it to be part of a nationwide demonstration organized by members of the Dutch nightclub and festival industry. More than 100,000 people have taken to the streets in ten cities to protest that, despite government promises to the contrary and even as other large-scale events have been given the go-ahead, their industry is still shuttered due to the pandemic. They call their movement UNMUTE US.

² One of my best friends' phone number was (no joke) 777-7771.

I head downstairs to see, and possibly to document, what is happening. Thousands of people, tightly packed together, fill the main road as far as the eye can see. They are advancing jubilantly alongside hefty vehicles outfitted with sound systems and blasting dance music. In defiance of the government – albeit with proper permits and heavily monitored by police – the clubs have brought their party to the streets.

The official statement put out by the organizers of UNMUTE US speaks of the economic precarity of the more than 100,000 people working in the events industry, of the young people whose mental health has deteriorated during the lockdowns, of the would-be clubgoers who long to escape from the structures of daily life, to feel like themselves again. The overriding message is one of desire – for movement, for community, for freedom – and a few of the signs I see people carrying directly echo the language shared by MYCKET in *When Walls Speak*:

‘QUEER FESTIVALS ARE NECESSARY’

‘DANCE IS THERAPY WITHOUT WORDS’

‘WE NEED OUR SAFE SPACES’

It’s not lost on me that this demonstration is taking place on the 20th anniversary of 9/11 – an event that occurred before many of the people marching were even born. When it happened in 2001, I still lived in New York and the towers were less than a mile from the apartment I shared with my then-two-year-old son. It was a crystal-clear, blue sky morning in Manhattan and remained so into the afternoon while the smoke from the blaze blew to the south over the water. By that evening, however, our neighborhood had filled up with toxic smoke, and in the interest of my own and my son’s health I decided to leave the city. Fortunate again, I could activate the escape-hatch of my privilege and get to safer ground, while for many that was not an option.

Witnessing the march in Amsterdam against the backdrop of 9/11 – an event that justified a 20-year unwinnable war, a chilling loss of civil liberties for many of us in the West, let alone the deaths of so many – I can’t help but think about the collective traumas many share these days: the tragedy of the pandemic, the deep despair of climate catastrophe, the stranglehold of surveillance capitalism, the myriad ravages of the neoliberal order ... They affect us all, but some much more so than others. So as I gaze at the crowd in the street in Amsterdam, I feel conflicted: thinking about the vast gulfs between, and degrees of, privilege and suffering. I wonder how the ‘need’ to return to the clubs expressed by this throng of people today compares with the needs of communities like the ones that

MYCKET describe for whom the club is a site of bodily safety, a tool for survival. The tall, blonde Dutch man carrying a sign that says, *Ik geef mijn leven om weer te kunnen raven* ('I would give my life to be able to party/rave again') does so relying on the fact that he is a legal citizen of the Netherlands, and health-insurance bearing, among other protections afforded by his white privilege. What his message seems to neglect are those with whom he shares the city (and the planet) who don't have such things: those whose lives truly are at stake – not only in the face of Covid-19 but also due to the effects of systemic racism, and from other structurally-embedded social and economic disparities – and/or those whose voices are silent because they lack documents.

In *When Walls Speak*, one of the architectural typologies of the club that MYCKET highlight is the broom closet, where the tools needed for cleaning, repairing, and maintaining the space are stored out of view. For MYCKET it serves as both a reminder and a metaphor for the 'invisible' black and brown bodies tasked with cleaning the places that more privileged white bodies occupy.³ It reminds me too of the work of LGBTQ health activist and educator Michael Roberson, who, when I first met him, explained how the 'progress' that has benefitted white gay culture has failed to protect or ameliorate the lives of Black and Latino LGBTQ bodies. Michael's primary area of interest and advocacy is the house/ball community (HBC), whose narratives he insists on situating not merely in terms of public health – HBCs continue to be among the worst affected by the AIDS epidemic – but more importantly in terms of the history of black radical consciousness. He explains:

Marginalized communities, such as the HBC, have created both resistant and subversive strategies to confront oppression and deploy the social imagination as the necessary precursor to long-term liberation work and justice-making. HBC has something to teach the world about what it means philosophically to be human, what it means politically to struggle for freedom, and what it means theologically to do so in the face of catastrophe and even death.⁴

I turn on my camera and film people dancing to a remix of 'Renegade Master,' originally released in 1995 by the black British house/electronic musician and producer Wildchild (Roger McKenzie) who died shortly thereafter at the age of 24. (McKenzie apparently had a heart condition that had gone undetected. Healthcare inequalities for people of color are well documented.) The song had reached

³ MYCKET reference the writings of feminist political scientist Françoise Vergès on this topic. More recently, Vergès has extended that critique to include the bodies of 'essential' workers during the Covid-19 pandemic: those who clean and sanitize the spaces of the privileged, who deliver their food and Amazon packages, who cannot afford the luxury of 'sheltering in place' – perhaps even for whom shelter is a precarious concept.

⁴ <https://www.artseverywhere.ca/ballroom/>

#11 on the UK charts, a position that was later surpassed by a 1998 remix by the producer FatBoy Slim (Norman Quentin Cook). The most recent remix, by the DJ 'Friend Within' (Lee Mortimer), currently has more than 18 million listens on Spotify.

When walls speak, I hear ...

desire

curiosity

courage

generous support

wandering through time and space

troubling existing histories and structures

finding a home in ourselves

voices intermingling

moving in and out of visibility

'desire paths'

magical forces

freedom

repair

unraveling feelings

unlearning what has been imprinted on us

mitigating risk

building community

tangling

transforming power relations

taking the future's hand

welcoming

hosting

flirting

gazing slantingly

making up for blind spots

switching codes without having to translate

generative forces

D-I-G

dissolving contours
creating fissures and leakages
being turned on by architecture
caring for our shared needs

Within 24 hours of the UNMUTE US demonstration, two other protests unfolded in other parts of the city: one about the housing crisis, demanding affordable rents and decrying predatory landlords; the other an LGBT+ 'dignity march' to reclaim the streets in the wake of a trans hate crime.

And the beat goes on ...