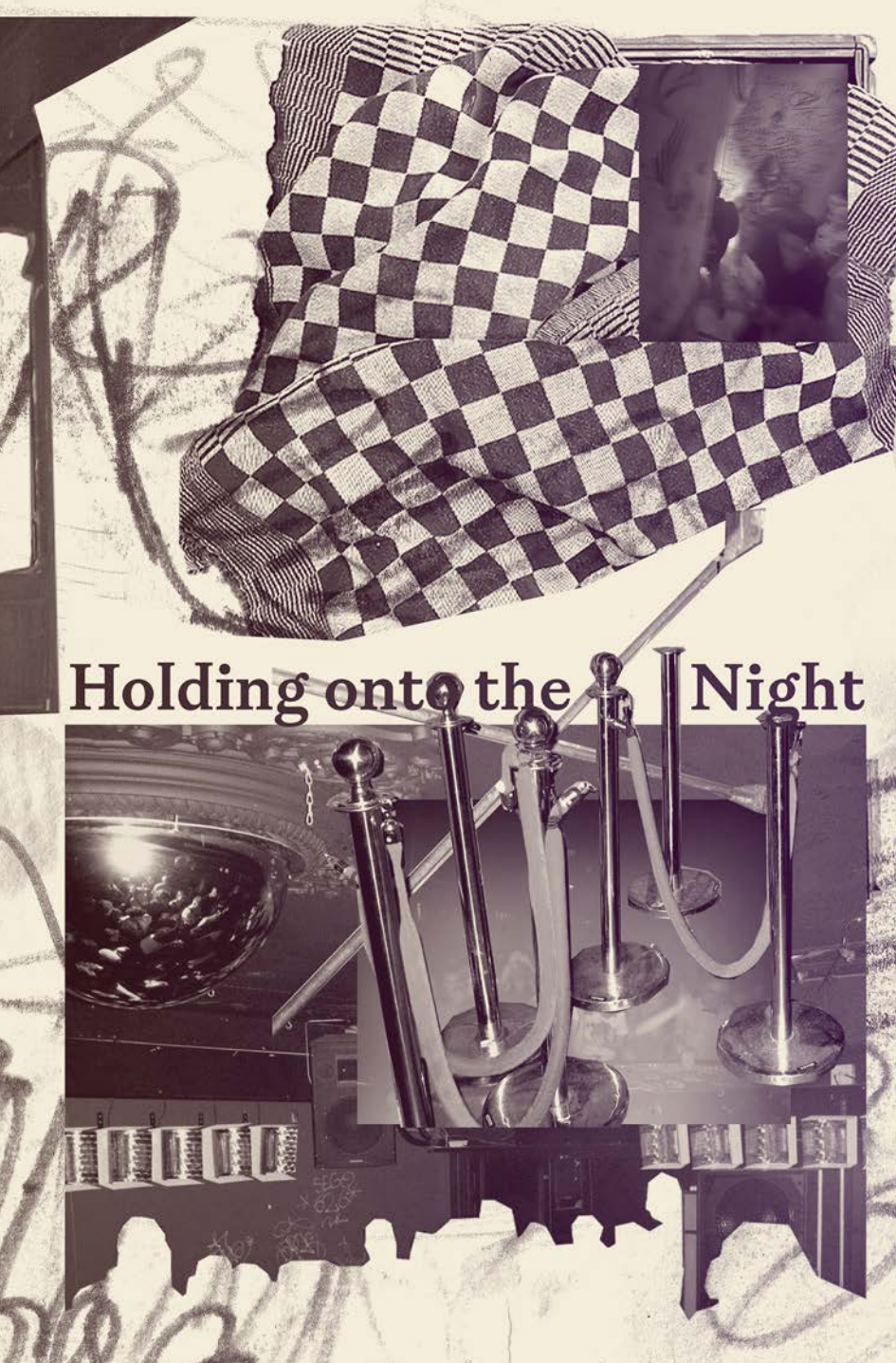

# Holding onto the Night

# Holding onto the Night

Capturing Amsterdam's Nightlife Culture

**Miguel Domingues**
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# INTRODUCTION

As I walk in carrying an empty beer cup, I stumble down the stairs and step onto the main dance floor. Around me people slowly fade into a haze as the smoke thickens. Peeking up to see who was on the sofas on the mezzanine, my eyes are drawn instead to the over-the-top glowing **"FUCK"** light sign.
My friend dances next to me. The thick smoke flows through my nostrils as I breathe in. My mind blurs. Glancing at the smudge that was left of my friend, I shout ***"I think I feel more at home here than in my actual home."***. Her face reappears next to me, draws closer to my ear and shouts ***"What?!"***. ***"Never mind!"*** I reply loudly. We keep dancing embraced by the cloud of light and smoke that unifies the dance floor.

This was maybe the fifth time I was in the nightclub **Garage Noord**. The club which was my introduction to Amsterdam's nightlife, 3 years ago.

## INTRODUCTION

Through my experiences within Amsterdam club culture and incorporating a collection of voices that take part in this culture, this thesis explores the space that nighttime leaves for care and creativity, as well as the possibility of its documentation. This exploration is framed by Amsterdam's post-covid, queer(-friendly) spaces, such as **Garage Noord**, **De School**, **Club Raum**, **Kanaal40**, and other cultural venues. To deepen this topic, I compare the cultural possibilities that these night spaces activate to bright-day-places, such as museums, which are the standard for spreading and experiencing culture. The intrinsic cultural value of the nightclub poses the question of the necessity or urgency of documentation. Following this reflection, I shift from the perspective of a club-goer (taking in) to the perspective of a club worker (giving back). By working behind the bar in **Kanaal40**, I analyze how the venue nourished and adapted to the community while this community simultaneously shaped the place.

In the final section of the essay, the question of documentation becomes more prominent. How do we guarantee that this culture is preserved and honored, when its intrinsic opacity is the foundation for the transformative and intimate experiences that we are trying to document. Navigating through no-photo policies, designing and exhibiting flyers and a more personal attempt to encapsulate and document a nightclub, I question the urgency of this documentation and its place in enriching the archives.

TOILET


TAKING IN

# I CAN'T SLEEP

When the sun sets, the world around you dims and slows down. When your email inbox stops ringing and windows radiate soft warm tones, there is finally time to lay down and take a deep breath. The night becomes a time for care. Possibilities might now replace responsibilities and exhaustion can quickly turn into excitement. The unsettling time of the night can easily become reassuring.

From a young age I struggled to fall asleep. Laying in the dark, silent, by myself, my thoughts ran free, thoughts that I couldn't fully comprehend. The night was unyielding and the only option was to sleep. As time passed by, the brightness of the day evolved into a new daunting time. The night had slowly become independent, a new timeless place. As soon as everybody else was asleep, I could move and wonder freely and anything felt possible. Even if it meant replacing sleeping hours with a couple extra coffees the day after this nurturing time was something I longed for. A time to experience myself, independent from daily constraints. A time to rewind, to release.

**[ ] is animated by the dark, whose opacity serves as an invitation to practice queer sexualities.**
(Gamboa 2021, 91)

In ***Pedagogies of the Dark: Making Sense of Queer Nightlife***, scholar Eddie Gamboa leaves blank spaces throughout the essay. This absence engages the reader, while preserving the privacy and integrity of the inherently transient and intimate nightlife sites. The voyeuristic distance of reading is replaced by an active sensorial practice and the text becomes subjective by embodying this absence. The opacity of the blank spaces reflect however the threatening conversation and actions surrounding queer nightlife at the time the text was written(1). This opacity conferred protection and, in this particular scenario, guaranteed survival.

Even though the author provides certain prompts to fill in the blanks and mainly refers to a queer cruising nightclub, one can broaden the interpretation of these blanks to anun-identified place in time in which experimentation and personal discovery happen not only organically, but are also instigated and energized by a dark space. This space, or the darkness

**(1)** "The mass shooting at a queer Latin Night in Orlando in July 2016 sparked a public conversation about access to pleasure and selfhood within conditions of colonization, violence, and negation. [The book] **Queer Nightlife** joins this conversation by centering queer and trans people of color who apprehend the risky medium of the night to explore, know, and stage their bodies, genders, and sexualities in the face of systemic and social negation." (Gamboa 2021, backcover)

in general, is framed as an instigator of new sensorial experiences, as well as of new ways of connecting to one another.

> **On a practical level, being in the dark can be disorienting, disrupting the repetition that produces our compulsory movement as the body searches its repertoire to improvise new gestures that provide a sense of where, when, and who we are as light fades (Ahmed 2006, 158).** (Gamboa 2021, 92)

I moved to Amsterdam when the Covid pandemic was slowly washing off. Face masks were still mandatory and big gatherings often posed a threat. Coping with this climate of insecurity, I struggled to get over 4 hours of sleep a night. Particularly on the week that I went with my class to an exhibition in **Het Nieuwe Instituut** in Rotterdam.

We stood still in the museum's dark basement. Through various media, a melancholic club space was sketched. Voices echoed and the bass dragged the soothing flashing lights. People passed behind the screens, reminiscent of figures of what had been or, for me, a premonition of what could be. A blurry feeling of belonging to an entity that was still

**(2)**"In 2021, during the nationwide club closure in The Netherlands, photographer Amie Galbraith (UK), scenographer Karl Klomp (NL), artist and musician Gaika Tavares (UK) and artist Juha van 't Zelfde (NL) transformed Gallery -1 of Het Nieuwe Instituut into a club for a few months. In their installation in the basement, they used various media to sketch a collective 'portrait' of club culture and the feelings of being one with their surroundings and each other. After a forced period without nightlife, visitors could (re)experience the togetherness and collective joy of music and dance." (Every Body in the Place 2024)

unknown to me. Some of my classmates sat down on the floor next to me and, later, as we now laid on the floor, reverberating the echoes that invisibly connected us, I effortlessly fell asleep.

The artists, Amie Galbraith, Karl Klomp, Gaika Tavares and Juha van 't Zelfde, described the installation [2] as **"a collective 'portrait' of club culture and the feelings of being one with their surroundings and each other"**. The installation allowed the visitors, **"after a forced period without nightlife (...) to (re) experience the togetherness and collective joy of music and dance."**.

The way this piece comforted me suggested a new way to fill these blanks. The portrayal of the scattered remains collaged together became a shared freeing experience.

Sleeping or not sleeping, the night didn't have to be lonely. Now living in Amsterdam, the night enclosed new thrilling possibilities, concealing new connections I had yet to grasp.

# COLLECTIVE RESTLESSNESS

MATHEO [3]

**It's something fragile, it's something really really small, that specific nightlife part that we are part of. I feel like a lot of people also don't see that, which is okay but being able to experiment and to put your ideals and principles up front, that's something unique these days.**

**(3)** Hello my name is Matheo. I'm a music researcher, but also an audio researcher, DJ, writer, sound designer, talker. And then enthusiast that wants to tells stories. Amateur storyteller. I think better said, that's how I see myself now. I'm not an artist but I find artistic ways to tell stories, that wouldn't be heard otherwise, musically. I have done all these different ways of expressing, all these practices, and I do it under the name of Rozaly.
**Also artistically?**
That I'm still trying, I still don't know, I'm curious what you think. I did a few installations the last year and then I still put my artist name there but people are like 'No, you have to put Mathijs Reinen.'
**Do you want it to be connected?**
It's the same principle but a different pocket. So, I don't know yet. (Matheo 2024)

In 1987, the arrival of House music's **"electronic and robot-like sounds" (4)** inspired new ways of experiencing music and allowed such vulnerable moments to take place. The club became a vessel for self-expression, suggesting alternatives to the social distinctions of the day.

> CLEO **(5)**
>
> **Suddenly there were more people who were enjoying the music and it was not weird anymore, it was really like an explosion. You could just do whatever you want, so it felt. The rules, there weren't any rules anymore. Anything you want to wear was possible. Everything was possible.**

The blanks Gamboa had left in his essay were now shared and could easily be filled by these endless possibilities. I realized that this world I built for myself was a vibrant, alive and breathing entity that belonged to others as well. In the club, I didn't have to justify my actions to anyone. It was a place that

**(4)** "House music is characterized by its simplicity and accessibility. Unlike some other electronic music genres, it doesn't rely heavily on complex arrangements or intricate melodies. Instead, it harnesses the power of repetition and rhythm to create a hypnotic and immersive experience for the listener." (The Evolution of House Music: From Underground Beats to Mainstream Grooves, Influence and Sound 2024)

**(5)** I say I'm a photographer and an artist. Because I've been a photographer since 1988 and in 2017 I started DOGTime at the Rietveld. I think it's wonderful! So now because of this education, I make other kind of work, more conceptual. I still make photographs, but also installations. So that's my 'Beelde Kunst kant'. I've always been somebody who makes things. So photographer, artist,I guess that's it. (Cleo 2024)

organically appeared in my life and where I could move around freely and let my thoughts flow effortlessly. This time, inspired by the people around me. The lights, the smoke and the music constructed the space I knew I needed, but I didn't know existed.

Now a playful space that eased connection, the nightclub housed a variety of people that expressed themselves in different ways. Fashionable people that push the boundaries of what clothing can mean and others that dance in comfortable sweatpants. Confused young people that walk in anxiously and walk out confident and smily. People that stand still in the middle of the crowd, absorbing what is happening around them [(6)] and others that chat the night away in the smoking area. This diversity enables DJs that barely know how to use the decks to move crowds and allows performers with complex stories to tell to feel understood. Promoters arrive 6 hours earlier to set up big decors while bartenders work extra hours when the club is too full to close. The fluidity and adaptability of the space animates a shared vulnerable exposure, a boundless stage for self-expression, for expansion. The night becomes an inherently creative time.

**(6)** I feeI Iike piIIars of the night are those peopIe that don't taIk too much an just stand there on the dance fIoor, not per se in front. They're there to just embrace aII the energy and harmony that's there. To me those are the peopIe that I go on my knees for. You're important. I think those peopIe (…) are just there to capture what's taking pIace in the night space and I think those are the most important and maybe the purest form of what a night person is. (Matheo 2024)

> **An officially sanctioned after-hours club, [ ] greets a steady stream of all those not ready to go home, or who have yet to find a home to go to.** (Gamboa 2021, 95)

> MATHEO
> **In nightlife, there's room for the stories that aren't being told when the sun is up. I don't feel completely in my element during the day. (...) These specific nightlife environments gave me a lot of liberation, in the way that I thought, 'Oh it's possible the way I look at life'. The way that everything is possible and everything is welcome.**

Embraced by this increasingly welcoming big mesh of nights that intertwine together, the sun light started to feel less intimidating. The club began to play a big role in my life, not only as a place to come back to my senses at the end of the week, but also as a place where I would re-encounter the community that slowly grew around me. People that in one way or another also looked for their time for care. I gradually realized that this time turned into a collective responsibility of caring for each other. The dark was not lonely anymore.

# *'HET IS TE DONKER'*

**'Het is te donker'** an old lady said to me. **'Waarom zo donker?'**, **'Ik weet het niet'** I replied in my limited Dutch.

We were in **Centraal Museum** in Utrecht and the multidisciplinary collective **La Cassette** [(7)], had set up the rave flyer exhibition ***Rave Diggers: A Visual Dug Through Utrecht's Party Scene!***. The exhibition lasted 2 short hours and the entrance was free. The flyers were hung along removable walls and it was indeed quite dark. People had to use their phone flashlights to access the wardrobe and the posters and flyers themselves were not highlighted by the bright museum's spotlights. However, to properly reply to the lady, **ik wist waarom**, the lack of light was actually relaxing and welcoming.

**(7)** "What started as a smaII hip-hop party has grown into La Cassette, a muItidiscipIinary creative brand rooted in nightIife. We've expanded beyond the cIub, curating cuIturaI movie nights, mentorship programs, expositions, and fashion projects. Our motto, 'Far From Done', reflects our drive to keep growing, creating, and pushing cuIture forward." (La Cassette 2024)

It wouldn't feel right to completely remove these posters from their intended context and place them under a sharp beam of concealing white light. The flyers weren't treated as sacred pieces of art but as accessible moments from the History of the city. The audience quickly engaged and enlightened each other on what each event had meant to them. Through this conversational environment the exhibition quickly resembled the nightlife venues captioned in the posters.

Lieve Goedhart [8], who worked as a programmer for **Kanaal40** and is part of the collective that organized the exhibition, discussed with me the cultural value of these night spaces in comparison to institutionalized day spaces.

LIEVE

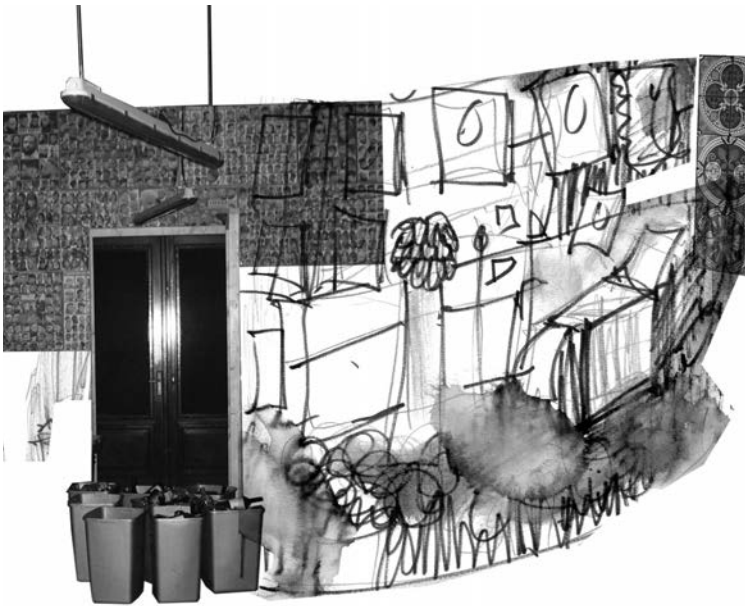
**The places in the scene that we're into are also the lowest or the most easy-going without-any-threshold places to go to, in terms of immersing yourself in culture, because the threshold to go to a museum, for example, is pretty high for young people. [The club] is the most accessible place to go to and experience some type of culture, but it doesn't necessarily feel like it when you're going.**

**(8)** I'm Lieve, I'm a programmer. I mostly make programs for club nights, but I've done some in the regular fields also. I used to program Kanaal40 for the last half year they were open. I now program the Melkweg, mostly club nights and a few electronic concerts. I have my own multidisciplinary collective. It's called La Cassette and there I kind of learned how to make lineups and what the value of club nights actually holds. Oh yeah, I programmed Into The Great Wide Open and done various different things. I was Ki/ki's personal assistant. I've done really weird jobs, but mostly all in nightlife, I think. (Lieve 2024)

In the museum, the white not only supports but it also swallows. An empty wall is white but one that needs to be filled, one that's not transparent, one that reflects all the light in the room making it a vicious mesh that traps you and makes you disappear. Contrastingly, the dark leaves space.

LIEVE

**When you go to the Stedelijk museum, it's a really static place. Everything is well thought out and it's been there for I don't know how many years. These clubs are kind of born out of some sort of necessity to get together and experience some type of culture that you can't during the day, with other rules that count than during the day.**



The white consumes, a blank page is not inspiring.
It feels like I'm in a simulation, stuck in a glossy blurring-bright psychoanalyst's reception, unsettling but disturbing. Liminal rooms after liminal rooms. Stuck in an endless glossy blurring-bright psychoanalyst's reception, unsettling but disturbing. Liminal rooms. I don't want to be noticed and disturb the liminal museum space. The bright lights and empty rooms make the artworks worth the ticket price.

LIEVE

**The club is the first place where you get inspired or maybe put some work up, put a tag, put a sticker in the toilet. This could be the first step to ever hang in the fucking Stedelijk. Although the cultural aspect of it is connected to institutionalized places like the Stedelijk, in the club it doesn't really matter who you are or where you exhibit. It's just, 'You're a nice person and you make nice things, here's a spot'.**

In a poorly-lit space where you can't see that well, you suddenly become more alert of who's around you, you actively make sense of the dark. In the beaming museum space, no one comments about how dark it is.

The creative environment of the nightclub is a suitable place to showcase other forms of artistic experimentation, such as performances or installations.

During **Het Einde**, the last party of the iconic club **De School**, a couple of installations sat with us in the café area, one of the parts of the building more prone to socializing. As my friend and I struggled to figure out what part AI took in the real-time scanning and printing of our hands and faces, two other people joined and shared their findings on the cryptic

all-in-one-AI-induced printer. Standing around a printer that stood still against the loud muffled bass, we discussed the artwork, talked about the club closing, the people we knew in common and what we did during the day.

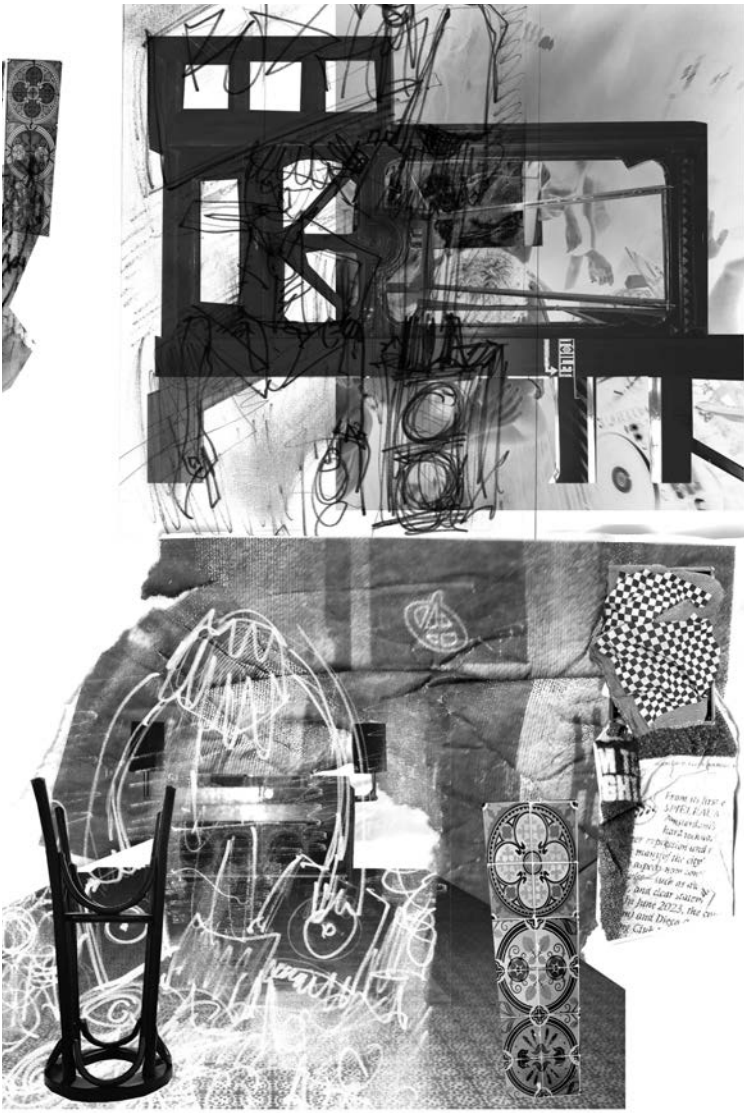
LIEVE

**In the club, you're out of your bubble, you meet people, you have conversations that you maybe don't have with your regular friends or the people around you. There are also just different rules in the night towards how easily you can start a conversation with a stranger.**

Lieve went further to mention the New York club **Electric Circus** that included a ***Think Tank*** room [(9)] with a bar all around, where **"you'd just go there to drill out ideas with each other and then you'd just go back dancing. 'Yo I'm really feeling this atmosphere right now, let's go and make up some really weird conceptual things!'"**

Why is this inspiring atmosphere not part of the static museum space? Could there be a way to reclaim the longevity of the museum and make these lively cultural night spaces less ephemeral?

**(9)** "The 1960s gave rise to a bohemian counterculture of improvised spaces and ephemeral happenings. And in 1967 the entire building was transformed into a psychedelically charged venue, featuring a 'sound and light ball-room', a bar and diner known as the Think Tank, and even a meditation room." (Gillen 2023, 17)



# DELVING INTO THE ARCHIVE

**“I think archiving club culture is lmportant bcause you can chart how this culture sprouts and spread into orher intstitutions and culural movements.”**
This sentence is what remained on my Notes app, after a long late-night conversation with Lieve in **Club Raum.**

During this year’s ***Amsterdam Dance Event***, I attended a panel talk, held in **Sexyland World**. The event was called ***Echoes of the Underground: Archiving Club Culture and Preserving Untold Legacies***. All the panelists commented on how delving into archival documentation inspires and supports their work as curators, DJs, performers and club goers. The crowd attending this lecture was not the usual people you greet in the club. The questions that followed the talk were posed therefore through very institutionalized and confrontational voices. The panelists focused their conversation in the urgency of looking back into archives, to honor and value who came before them and allowed the scene to be what it is today.

Matheo didn't take part in this panel talk but shared with me, on a more intimate setting, how crucial this **"looking back"** was for him. It first came from a personal search to find out his identity within a Caribbean context. Coming from Curaçao, Matheo explained that the focus of his education was more scientific and technical, while other fields such as cultural identity or spirituality were often overlooked.

MATHEO

**The past and the history of my island and environment describes who I am, it resonates, but I didn't know what the history and the discography was.**

**(...)**

**Six-seven years ago, I went to physically collect and document music for an individual liberation of who I am as a person. Through that process I accidentally did it, in the secondary phase, for others, which is being fruitful now today. Now that it's accessible through my search, second parties are also able to go through that process of identity.**

**(...)**

**I found out through that search that there were artists that also did non-conformist or "crooked" stuff. It gave me more pride as someone from there to be who I am and be even more empowered. How I felt is apparently how also other people of our island felt, but I didn't know those people yet, because they were never documented. I found archives and I traced them down and I went to visit these old people and had interviews about their life and ideals.**

Along with this search, Matheo performs and exhibits under the name **"Rozaly"**, with the purpose of shedding a contemporary light on "unseen spaces" of the discography and culture of the Caribbean islands. For him, DJing is a tool to share this research and express the relevance of this History.

MATHEO

**If you know what you do and know in name of whom you are playing music, because many communities and movements and generations were all part of the sound of today, because it's all connected to each other. If you know that that's the fact then you won't put yourself on the podium playing this kind of music making it all about you.**

Nonetheless, the title of the panel talk touched upon another realm of this problematic.

**How can we do this for future generations?**
**How can we help preserve this culture?**
**How can we make sure the people that started and contributed to the scene aren't forgotten?**

The same question was asked 3 times by 3 different people. The panelists were somehow caught off-guard these 3 times, partially because the urgency of this act was not discussed. On the other hand, the provocative tone underlining the questions didn't leave space for the panelists to carefully deliberate on their opinion. The answers defined the club space as an embodiment of this search, a part of the subjective process of identity exploration. One answer stated that the best way to take an active role in this archival process was to contribute to the community by being present and experiencing personally what happens during a club night.

> **Improvisational dance in the club is the constellation composed of past performances, gestures etched into the body that enable it to imagine forms of movement to this beat, to this room, to this crowd. (...) Dancing queers are radically present, building a world from the embodiment of the past to practice another world all together, one that will last the night. Or perhaps it will only last a moment, a moment that settles into the body, ready for the next opportunity, the next night.**
> (Gamboa 2021, 97-98)

While this position constitutes a valuable contribution to the development of night culture and emphasizes the active role of everybody that takes part in it (contrarily to what usually happens with day institutions), it's still focused on the cultural significance of the club. It doesn't answer the question on how to document contemporary club culture for future generations or how to share it with people that are not (yet) a part of this culture.

Framing the night as a shared time for care and creativity, this part of the essay considered the cultural value of these nightclub spaces as well as the cultural motivations that support them. To further preserve these values, I took what felt like the next natural step and decided to contribute to this culture from the other side of the bar.


GIVING
BACK

# DUCT-TAPED

The club **Garage Noord** was my introduction to Amsterdam's nightlife. I spoke to Lesley Macaya, one of the ex-owners of **Garage Noord** and **Kanaal40**, to understand how these places came to life.

After moving to the Netherlands, Lesley first started going out with friends and was often refused entry for various nonsensical reasons, such as not having **"good shoes"**, that were in fact based on inherently racist stereotypes. In reaction to these recurring incidents, the idea of owning a more welcoming space came to life.

LESLEY

**When we heard that we can get a place or rent a place, we weren't even thinking of starting a nightclub, but we just had a sort of creative hub. And in that whole thing, Garage Noord started. For me it was more like, if you don't want to let me in, I'm going to start**

**my own club. We thought we needed more space in Amsterdam for minorities**

**(...)**

**We went out with all our friends and then we went out in our own club with all our friends. That was the transition.**

**Garage Noord** was formed out of a necessity felt by a community at the time, it started organically. Roughly 5 years later, in 2022, the same owners opened **Kannal40**. A bar and nightclub that formed this time from the desire to give back, by providing a stage for marginalized voices and crowds in the center of the city, through a low-access threshold.

It was also in **Kanaal40** that I first met Matheo, who worked there as a club manager during the opening months.

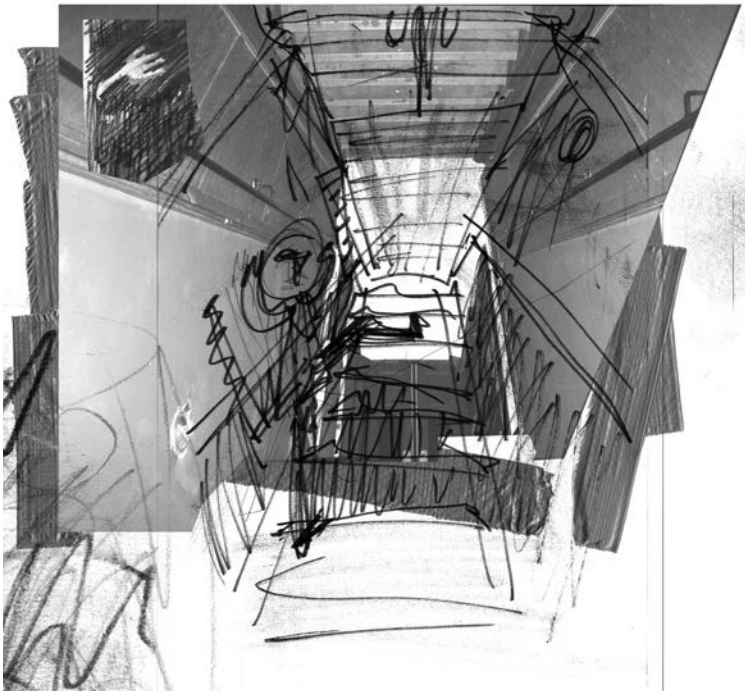
MATHEO

**I just wanted to be involved also. It's give and take, no? I wanted to know everything about it and I wanted to make sure that that few souls also get to have that experience I had.**

**(...)**

**It's so empowering and liberating if you're that one soul that doesn't know there are more souls like you and then you find out about it. You want to empower that and embrace that and that's something we need to cherish. That feeling I also got working in nightlife.**

After countless Fridays and Saturdays that merged into a new parallel universe, I applied to work in **Kanaal40**. I started working there right away, helping the restoration of the building before the opening. From a sports bar with an unrelated basement exhibition dedicated to a Dutch detective



writer, the plan was to build a cocktail bar with a club in the basement and a fine dining restaurant on the first floor. he venue would cater a platform for micropop culture [10] in the city center.

When I started helping, the first task I was given was to screw a cable tray to a wall. It took me a day and a half because some of the pieces were not ordered, which meant I had to carve them out of wood. It hung there for almost two years,

**(10)** "Micropop culture: culturally progressive expressions for a specific target group but with a universal infectiousness." (About40 - Kanaal40 2024)

which I'm really proud of. Some fridges also stood on only three feet out of four because there was a lack of screws. The construction site was not the most standardized but was nevertheless efficient at the end of the day.

Later on I realized that the most used tool to hang things up, or to fix equipment in the building and around it, was tape. Duct-tape, painter's tape, plastic tape, as long as it sticked. Often the tape that held the cables got lose and we had to hit the LED strip to light it up or paper tape was used to fix mirrors. Everything was fixed after a little push. Parallel to this exciting chaos, the polished Instagram account gradually built

up the hype and the tickets quickly sold out for the opening weekend. This particular contrast between what happens behind the scenes and what is publicly shared made me reflect on the lack of documentation on this sort of experiences. The organic emergence of these places often hinders the possibility to document them, however this lack of documentation naturally toughens the difficulties faced during this process.

While **Garage Noord** came to fill a blank within a community, **Kanaal40** appeared to expand this community and conceive, on a more generous level, a place where young people would not have to individually overcome the same problematic incidents. These new spaces appear from an organic desire to give back, to share the experience with other people, to gather and expand a community.

# FLEXIBLE SPACES

It was **Kanaal40**'s opening night. I walked in 15 minutes before the start of my shift and went up the stairs, careful not to trip on the pile of wood and cables that was being stashed in the back, amid the people that ran up and down to ensure the club space was ready at 9. The fine-dining restaurant on the 1st floor was already overcrowded while the club in the basement still had people sawing wood, while others, in a cloud of smoke and stress, hung up lights or tried out the smoke machine.

When I started my shift behind the bar, I could barely tap a beer. Naturally, after a couple of hours, I got switched to the position of a runner. Now instead of having people fighting for my attention from the other side of the bar, I was in the middle of the crowd and had to apologize every time I tried to pass through. Carrying piles of dirty glasses the whole night, I would take numerous bathroom breaks to take deep breaths. At the end of the night, as I aggressively washed the stepped-upon plastic cups stained with dirt and hair, all I could think was **'I'm gonna get fired.'**.

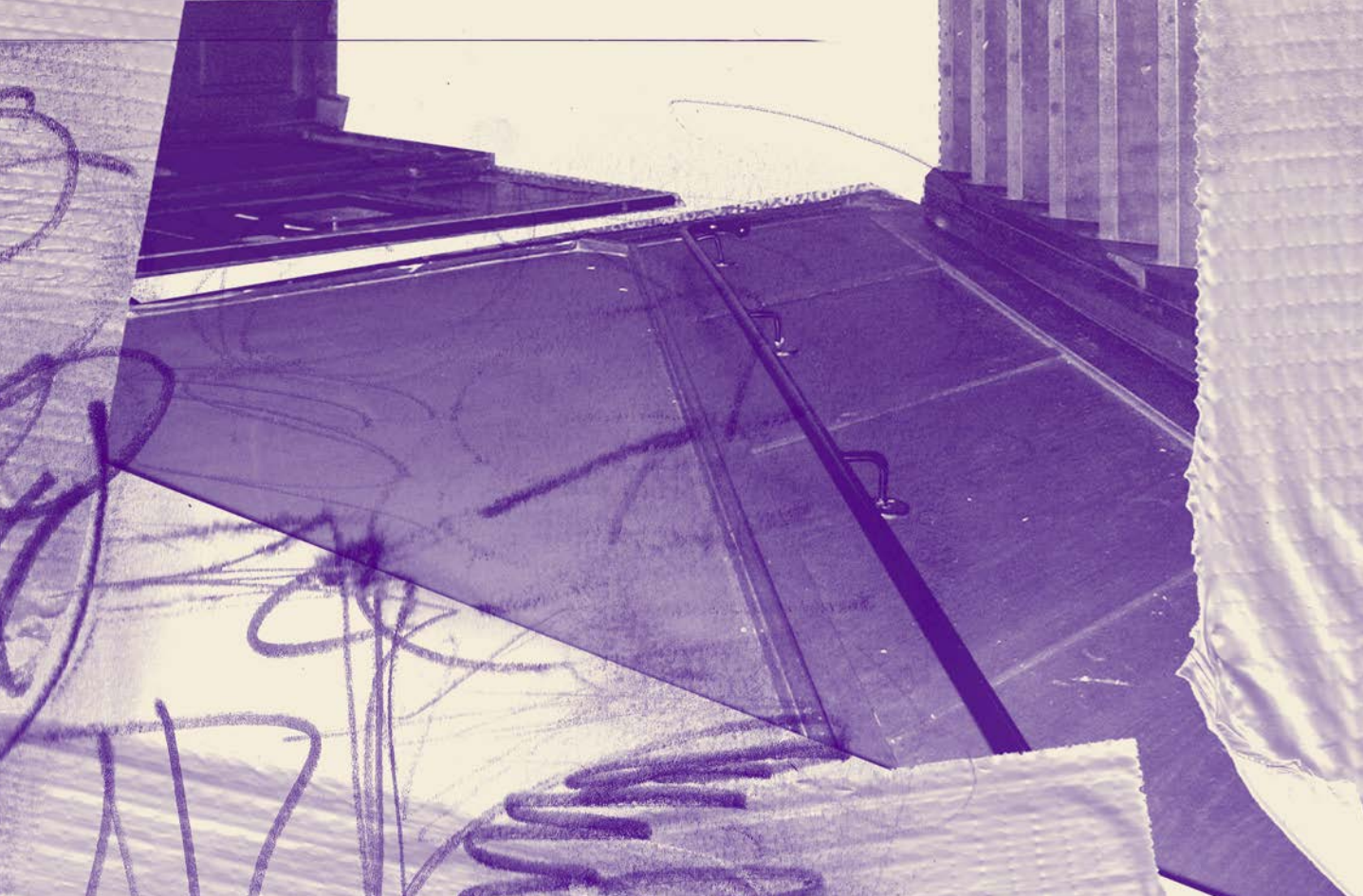
Night after night, I started to adapt to the rhythms of the dark. On a broader perspective, the acceptance and growth of these kind of places within a community depends of the flexibility of the space and of those involved to guarantee that the needs of the community are catered to.

When **Garage Noord** welcomed not only friends, but also friends of friends, other issues tested this required flexibility. The bubble that was blown to react to certain injustices had to be sometimes burst for similar reasons.

LESLEY

**I can remember the first day we opened in Garage Noord. It was an old garage. We were five, six guys starting a club and we had two posters on the wall with a naked woman, like a stereotypical garage calendar. I can remember there were two girls that went out to our place and ripped everything off. The next day we came together and we were like 'why are they doing this?' We were thinking, thinking, we were not mad. When we heard who did it, we asked these two girls to come to Garage so we could have a talk with them. We started a club, but we're busy with a much bigger plan than only a club. We also need to have a voice and we're also something that people look up to. We need to take on more responsibility. That was really the first lesson for us after the first day.**

These lessons, that were acknowledged and later internalized, besides reassuring the sustainability of the venues, contributed equally to the nourishment of the people involved. The constructive environment sustained by a healthy clash of



backgrounds and ideals was also noticed by Hana and Maria, two regulars that I had a chance to interview on a later stage.

HANA & MARIA

**My friends from the north, that's where they opened their mind to Amsterdam. Now they are like 'Oh yeah look at her outfit bro, yeah that's nice I like the color' *ahaha* we are converting people!**

**Yeah they now announce their pronouns sometimes, it's impressive!**

**Before Kanaal we used to go out and they wouldn't open their minds to a lot of things. We see them now interact in different ways with other people because we brought them here and they've seen a lot of different people now.**

**And we also kind of made them comfortable, as in, it's not dangerous territory.**

**Claro, but it's normal when you're not exposed to that, when you only see a lot of the same kind of people.**

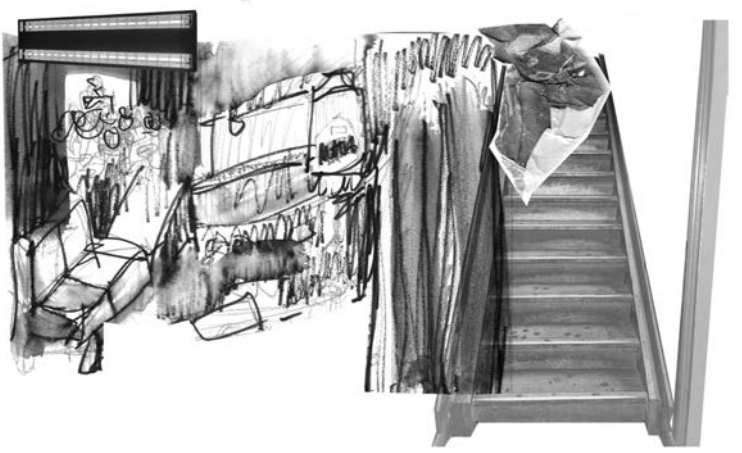
These values also echoed through the workers and artists involved. From having to mop the floor a couple of times before the bar opened when the cleaner didn't come, to artists changing their performances and programming depending on the reaction of the crowd. I talked with Michael Ekow and May, two artists that curated a monthly event focused on local live music. Referring to their own performances, the duo highlighted the imperative reciprocity when working within a community.

MICHAEL EKOW

**I think there's a lot of entitlement in art in general, which can be understandable because someone can**

> **work incredibly hard for something and then they'll feel a certain type of way about it, which is fine, but I think it's beautiful when you work hard at something and then you still make it so much about serving people as you realize your art as an act of service towards the community. Then being able to maintain and grow relationships with those people who actually connect you to your art, so that, for example, when you are performing they want to come and see you perform or if you are doing something they want to come and connect to that.**

This act of service expands also to welcoming younger members to the community, more prone to nightlife's possibly destructive downsides. Members who require guidance on how to navigate this overwhelming atmosphere. Lesley, who has **"en zwakte for young people that are in a hard time and want to make something of their lives"**, became a sortof mentor for

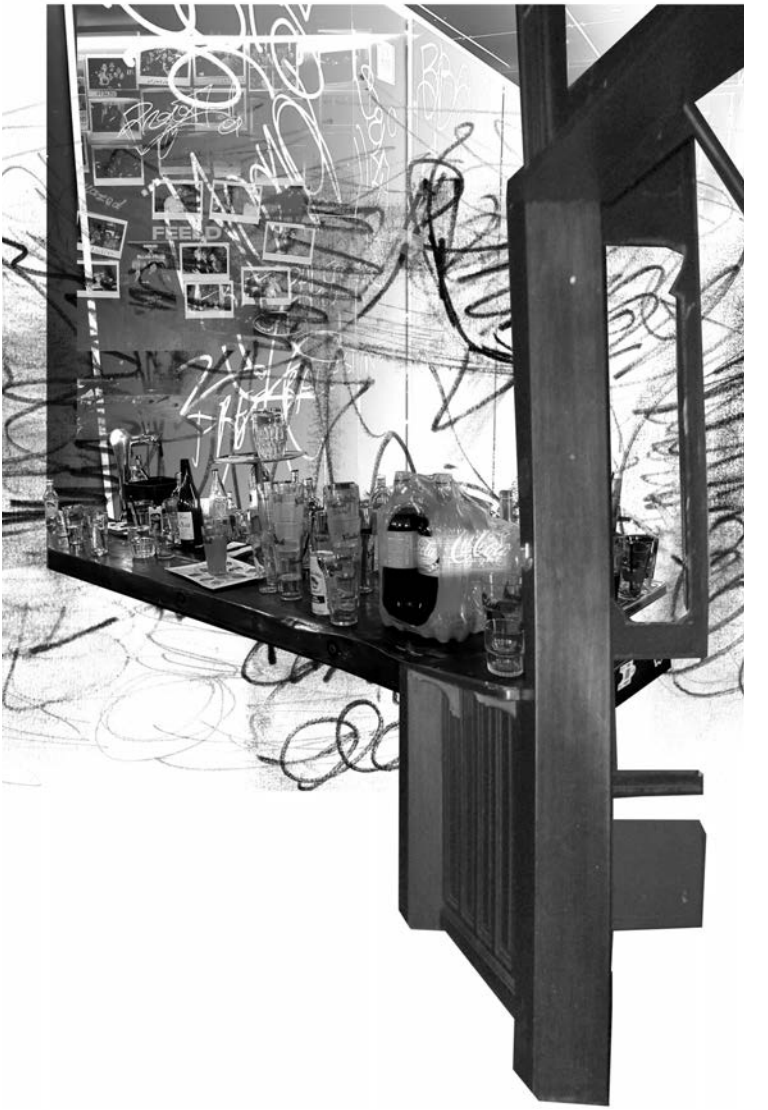


some of the young people that applied to work in **Kanaal40**. **"For me it was in sports, when I went to the sport hall or playing football, there was always someone a bit older than me that was helping me and these people really helped me also further in my life. They weren't there anymore but they gave me the energy of 'Okay, I can do something', and all the no's and no's that I get at school and the things that were doing bad, I didn't hear that with them."**

Despite being reluctant of the overall results, Lesley acknowledged that a lot of these boys became more comfortable in their own skin, while others required more attention than what was possible at the time.

In the end, **Kanaal40** and **Garage Noord** became flexible spaces shaped by the people inside and around them. This shift occurred on a personal level as well as in the overall space and reverberated through the community that regularly frequented the space. This overall flexibility and inherent changes are often overlooked or undervalued characteristics of the development of such a space.

As a reaction to this convention, I decided on a later stage to collect stories of the employees and of the people that regularly visited **Kanaal40**. Some fragments of these conversations are transcribed in the next chapter.



# *'IS THERE STRUCTURE IN A DUMPSTER FIRE?*

LESLEY

**One of the things that kept me so long in nightlife was working together with all different kinds of people, creating a team.**

**(...)**

**If you work in a place for five, six years, you work there and nobody can tell you anything. But if you are new and everyone is new, everyone can tell everyone something. It makes it a bit more difficult sometimes and more chaotic, but I think that's the most fun part of it, to have all the people together, not knowing each other and to figure out how you can use everyone's specialties or everyone's ability to play good in that team.**

NORA

**In the beginning it gave everyone, I think, a lot of energy, but then if you work that long and that much and those hours. We had to adapt to so many changes**

**that then I think it's difficult to keep the same energy, but I think there's a really good energy still with everyone. You feel like it's still really nice to come in here! But I can imagine it's more like work somehow. Before it was always new people, new places, new vibes and now you all know each other so you can also do things outside of work, but then you have to work.**

JADE

**It was also all more structured, now I feel they are changing things every week and we keep having to figure things out.**

NORA

**I think that also took a big toll on me here, I was trying so hard to organize and structure things and it's just not possible, it's just not the place for structure.**

JADE

**Is there structure in a dumpster fire?**

**No, every time you clean something there's a mouse in it.**

NORA

**I totally get that!**

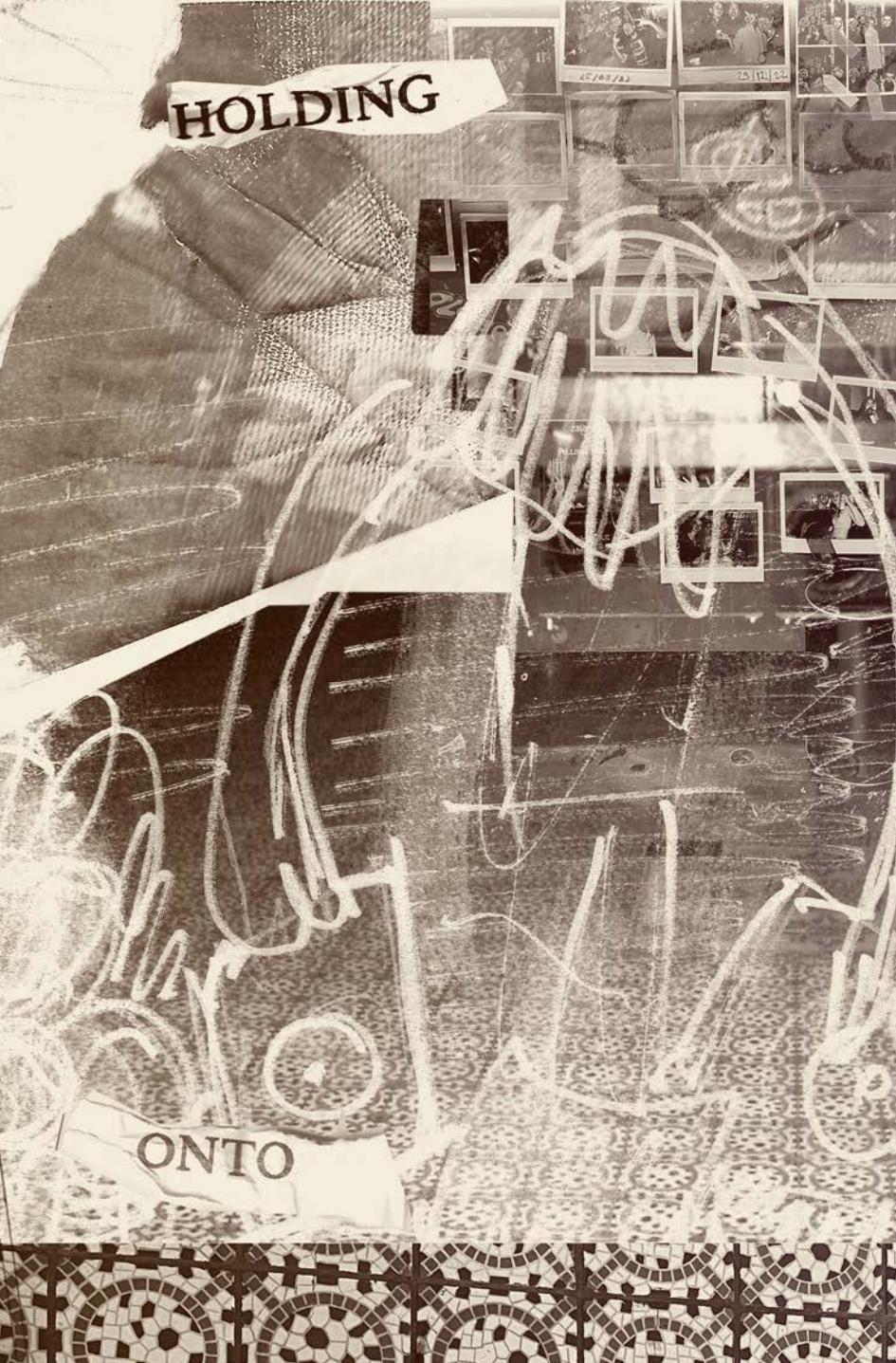
At the end of the day, **Kanaal40** was not really a club, in the true sense of the word, besides the sticky dance floor and the often loud and fast tracks. We slowly began to accept it as a community hub, a place where small DJs and collectives could easily try out their ideas, resulting in a very chaotic but exciting mess. Every night would be unexpected, also for the employees. The crowd would completely change from one evening to the

other. This is something that kept the space alive even when a lot of line-ups didn't attract so many people. Besides that, it also became a sort of living room for me and the rest of the staff. If we were not complaining that we had to work, we were there listening to the others complaining. As well as some regulars, we would always meet there and find each other.

As the last club nights approached, the workload got increasingly more intense and despite the recurring desire to change jobs, the chaotic duct-tape environment became a place where we learned, grew and took care of one another.

LESLEY

**I built a world around me and I'm really proud of it, what Garage is now, what Kanaal is or was. I don't miss nightlife or working in nightlife, I really miss the people. We don't do a lot of big things together but still it feels like we're all together in something that is special.**


HOLDING
ONTO

# NO PHOTOS

As you enter a club, a sticker is placed on your phone camera. This is due to a no-photo policy and signalizes that no photographs should be taken that evening. This policy is not always strictly applied and more often suggests a desired behavior. The placement of the sticker encourages more spontaneous forms of self-expression while appealing to the controlled environment ideally undeterred by daily norms and constraints. However, photography was not always regarded as undesired exposure.

The **Amsterdam's Stadsarchief** hosted an exhibition on club culture, named ***To Dance Is To Be Free***. The exhibition traced the history of Amsterdam nightlife since the 60-70s until recent days. The place was filled with TV's and projections and divided into smaller cozy rooms. One of the venues that most enriched the showcased archive was club **RoXY**. The legacy of this legendary club surpassed oral history and could be grasped through varied forms of documentation.

**“My photos didn’t get seen at all at that time or hardly.”** said Cleo Campert, a recurring name in the captions of **RoXY**’s photographs. When Cleo was employed at club **RoXY** the purpose of the photos was not really clear. She explained that a successful night at **RoXY** was when all the parts together contributed to an atmosphere that transcended the sum of all these parts. The lighting, the crowd, the music, the acts, the sound system and the decoration of the building, as well as a photographer moving around, would turn the place into a whole ***Gesamtkunstwerk*** **(11)**.

Previous to House music, the **RoXY** already functioned as a **“cultural salon”**, where different sorts of artists would get together and were given a stage.

> CLEO
> **You could dance in the middle of the stage. You could be whoever you want. And this added to the whole dream, the whole feeling, more than how you could possibly maybe feel in daytime.**

**RoXY** intended to give everybody a chance to be a star. Anyone from the audience could step on stage and feel like the whole club was watching them. The job of the photographer, back then a professional that had to carry a lot of equipment, was to support and materialize this idea.

**(11)** “The German term ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’, roughly translates as a “total work of art” and describes an artwork, design, or creative process where different art forms are combined to create a single cohesive whole. The idea was popularized by the composer Richard Wagner(…)” (Gesamtkunstwerk 2024)

By the mid 1990's, **RoXY** accommodated new musical genres, such as Jungle followed by Drum and Bass [12]. During these nights, Cleo noticed a sudden shift. **'No, I don't want to be in the photo.'**

> CLEO
> **I think that was the first time when there was a new audience also very aware of themselves and of media. It was before internet, before internet exploded. So I guess this had to do also with their political stance. They were these people who didn't do drugs, didn't drink, *Straight Edge* [13].**

Photography was now perceived as a mechanism for gazing exposure instead of selfless appreciation.

This shift was preceded by another similar transition depicted in the documentary film ***Paris is burning*** by Jennie Livingston (1990). The documentary portrays the ***Ballroom Culture*** of the 70s-90s in New York City. During this time the (mostly) black and latino gay and transgender community competed in "balls", as a form of self-expression and resistance. Eventually, the performances became less star-like and more inspired by reality.

**(12)** "Jungle music, often known as the don dadda of Drum & Bass, is a genre of electronic music that emerged in the UK in the early 1990s." (The Evolution of Jungle to Drum & Bass 2024)

**(13)** "(…) a counterculture within the punk counterculture: kids who believed true punk revolution lay in not using drugs, in not drinking oneself to death. (…)" (Sober Revolution: The Story of Straight Edge Hardcore in 10 Records 2024)

> **From Las Vegas showgirls to gorgeous movie stars to welcoming everyone to explore all sorts of identities, the ballroom scene changed. Everyone couldn't be a Las Vegas showgirl. Everyone couldn't put on a stack of feathers and a big headpiece. So they made the categories for everybody. (... ) Either you've got a nice body, or you are very fashionable, or you're very pretty or you're very real looking. But there's always something there for everyone. And that's what keeps them all coming.**
> (*Paris is burning* 1990)

Nowadays, the inclusivity of the club space comes partially from the lack of undesired documentation. While once the action of posing for a photo was a honoring position to be in, now, everybody has the possibility of taking their own photo. Social media profiles replaced the exposure of the stage in a more controlled and manipulated setting, and photography became more of an introspective medium that reflects a constructed self-image.

> CLEO
> **You feel even more that you have to protect yourself. So I guess that the people from the drum and bass era felt this already with me taking photos for magazines. (...)**
> **Of course, I always respect people who are like this. I always took into account that I don't want to photograph people how I would not have wanted to be photographed myself.**

In the exhibition ***To Dance Is To Be Free***, most of the imagery derived from the time when colors would only appear after

lubricated by liquids in a small self-sufficient dark room. Photos of compressed ecstatic bodies of movement, liberated by confinement, sliming within each other, melting into one melody of loud light steps. The process of re-giving light to the dark is now too immediate and redundant. The treatment the photography is given does not in any way resemble the moment when the picture was taken, it's too quick and self contained, there's no development, no deliberation.

The darkness creates a space where the colors don't overshine each other, the white cold sunrise can't destroy the world the night created. Would the clubs, bars and cultural spaces where I watched blurred piercing sunrises on Saturdays and Sundays be as suitable for such an official exhibition? Is it too easy to capture images nowadays? Too immediate? Would we want to be shown in such a frozen medium or is the club an end in itself?

Upon its release, ***Paris Is Burning*** was met with criticism. Although it raised awareness and, at a later stage, garnered worldwide attention, the director's gaze raised certain concerns about voyeurism and exploitation. The struggles of black lives that inspired ballroom culture were underdeveloped in the film, while focusing on the entertainment value of this culture for white audiences.

> **Jennie Livingston approaches her subject matter as an outsider looking in. Since her presence as white woman/lesbian filmmaker is "absent" from Paris is Burning, is easy for viewers to imagine that they are watching an ethnographic film documenting the life of black gay "natives" and not recognize that they are watching**

> **a work shaped and formed by a perspective and standpoint specific to Livingston.**
> (hooks 1992, 151)

From having a subjective personalized experience to reassuring that the experience is not translated to a different judgmental setting, not using your phone also allows you to enjoy the night without distractions. Nevertheless the freeing experience as well as the cultural and communal values found in the club space continue to constitute a gap in the archive. To this, Cleo suggests the return of the house photographer, this way you can still focus on your own experience while allowing the club to be documented by a trustworthy familiar face. Could this be a single sufficient solution?

> CLEO
> **I remember one of the people who worked there, who said 'You never take photos of me. I mean, you think I'm too uninteresting?' and I'm like, 'What are you talking about?' So there is always this tension when there's a photographer and you are not photographed. And what does that mean?**
> **Everybody has their own truth. This is just one of them, these photos.**

Considering that fully encapsulating a certain culture through the specific medium of photography might never be an attainable or desired goal, what could be the roll of documenting night culture? How can we document what happens in a club and honor the communities involved without affecting the experience?

# REMAINING EXPECTATIONS

At the start, anything is possible. An obfuscating clarity itches your rigid body, releasing shivering glimpses of what might become. At the start, I linger, no decisions are made, a world of possibilities expands on itself. Finally, this immersion translates into a fragile snapshot or a situated remain. Possibly a snapshot of a foreign world, which perhaps doesn't exist anymore.

In the performative intervention ***The Winner Takes It All: A Pleasant Evening of Nothing to Lose***, the artistic duo *Content y Contenido* **(14)** placed lottery tickets in the lockers in **Club Raum**. Upon arrival, the guests would be friendly introduced

**(14)** "Content y Contenido are Ingeborg Kraft Fermin and Lucía Vives as Swedish-Portugese artners in prime. They are based in Amsterdam - and the rest of the world via social media. By embracing these characters, they have been exploring pop-cultural concepts such as celebritization, the poetics of daily life, 12 second-attention span, gender politics, instant gratification, and - most importantly - fun." (Content y Contenido 2024)

to the performance and given a locker key. The key would open one of the lockers and give access to one scratch lottery ticket, metaphorically encapsulating the possibilities of what the night could bring. It was impossible to lose, you didn't have to buy the ticket, you couldn't buy any more tickets. Maybe you didn't even want the ticket in the first place. Most people kept the ticket unscratched for a few minutes, lingering on the unravelled potential and expectations of what the night could bring.

Possibilities become gradually more reassuring as you decide to start scratching the ticket, or giving colors to the blank page when designing a party flyer, or, as you enter the club, you try to grasp who's around you and what the night can offer. Slowly you start to adapt to reality. Expectations fade away as possibilities narrow.

When designing a flyer, you try to the encapsulate the possibilities of the unscratched ticket. However the only way to develop it is to start scratching, making guesses. Along this designing process, you slowly compose an identity that you want the party to be remembered by, the right people to relate to it.

Once all is scratched, expectations don't obfuscate anymore. Despite the narrowing process that excluded exciting possibilities along the way, a flyer was created, a scratched card remained. Does the scratched ticket give a faithful testimony on the performative intervention? If documenting an enjoyable dish, means documenting the recipe, what is the output of enjoying a night out? Do we also have to document what remains on the plate?

Can we fill in the blanks while keeping them opaque?


When the club **De School** closed, multiple forms of documentation were released. Simultaneously to ***Het Archief***, an online platform with recordings of DJ sets, the publication ***Het Altijd*** that gathered traces from the space was designed. Since the club had a very strict no-picture policy, the book collected all sorts of original representations, from transcriptions of what was written in the bathroom stalls to stills of thermal cameras that depicted the heat of the last events, mixed with glances of portraits (where faces were not visible), architectural drawings of the building and photos of the dance areas after a club night. Even though this publication is a very well executed design object that might trigger memories of what the place was for people who frequented it, it doesn't necessarily represent the space and what

happened there, resembling a souvenir instead. It consists of a deconstructed reinterpretation of the place without showcasing what was like going to this particular club.

If this type of book expands the space into a graspable format, while a successful flyer encapsulates the expectations, what could faithfully translate what actually happened?

> MATHEO
> **I think for nightlife, it's all everyone's approach that is a definition of what nightlife is. For instance, with RoXY, I think the best re-told story of Club Roxy is talking and sitting with the bouncer and hear all his stories and see his photos or drawings, talking with that person behind the bar, talking with the DJ, with the programmer, with the security. I think just having a recording doesn't do it. Just having a video doesn't do it. Just having a book doesn't do it. I think it's all these stories that do it. And it's a matter of documenting that.**

The printed publication ***No One Magazine***, edited in 2024, strives to document queer nightlife, by focusing on one city each issue. The first issue was about Amsterdam. The editors recognize that it's not possible to display all initiatives happening in the city, but hope to **"show a glimpse, spark curiosity and encourage readers to explore and connect - perhaps even more - with the underground queer scene of Amsterdam."**. The intent to connect was apparent during the magazine's release in **Club Raum**. The event included a talk that reflected the kind intention of the publication. People taking part in Amsterdam's nightlife shared their vulnerable

experiences in a familiar club setting that allowed for a way of safely exposing these stories.
This time, contrary to ***Het Altijd***, the publication encapsulates different voices that take part in this culture. Stories are told from a first person perspective and the experiences gather the motivations of a variety of queer parties. It states their principles, conveys their ideals and provides occasional photographic references, while building anticipation for a more personalized experience. The reader is consequently encouraged to actively participate in these gatherings, while simultaneously provided with a layered document that helps comprehend what the scene entails, even for people who are not connected to it.

The lingering expectations and possibilities that constitute the beginning of a creative process are comparable to the excitement before returning to a nightclub. As the night goes on, both processes have similar stages, however, a creative process usually ends with a graspable outcome.

What could be the outcome of a night out? Is it encapsulated through the motivations that started it, in the memories that remained or through physical remains of the space? Can this documenting process, as well as its archival, be damaging for the experience itself?

# THE URGENCY OF DOCUMENTING

**Kanaal40** closed its doors on the 10th of August 2024. After months of hard work and striving efforts in the face of various changes, I decided to collect stories of the place, incorporating different voices connected to it, as well as image material, and publish them in a book that would increase the longevity of the venue by materializing and documenting these efforts.

Inspired by the familiarity of ***No One Magazine*** and how touching and relevant it felt, I thought I could try to capture the inclusivity, openness and overall vibe of the place and the community through collecting memories. I contacted most regular DJs and performers and while a few suggested dates for a talk immediately, most expressed excitement but were not as willing to contribute. The staff that I worked directly with was the easiest to persuade and consequently made up the majority of the contributions. This experience and its implications made me question if archiving nightlife culture is indeed urgent.

In the background of the flyer exhibition in the **Centraal Museum** in Utrecht, a projected map of the amount of clubs that closed in the city framed the urgency of this exhibition. Even though Utrecht is not as lively as Amsterdam, in terms of nightlife, there was still a great number of venues that were overlooked by the government. The exhibition quickly sold out and people queued outside in the rain to get access to these two small rooms.

LIEVE

**I think it's nice that we can gather information and maybe if someone wants to write something about it, it's easier. But this really isn't the most important thing about it, I think it's mostly just so we can get permits more easily, can get funding more easily (...)**

**We know it's an important phenomenon, but there are lots of people that don't. And try to explain this to some fucking gemeente trotje... It's more because this culture is really threatened all the time.**

While this exhibition had very specific intentions, in conversation with Matheo, we considered a more radical approach to the question. Matheo highlighted that the lack of archival material motivated him to do his own research and its process was the most valuable part and questioned other people's motivations for the existing documentation.

MATHEO

**The research I'm doing back home, the fact that many things weren't documented gave me an urge to find it, like a drive to find it. Find the documents, find the**

> **pictures, because I knew they were there, but they were never... they were under the bed of an artist. To put all those findings together created a story for me, in which I see the links.**
> **(...)**
> **A lot of people try to make nightlife appear as a really sophisticated art form. To me it is, but I think to a lot of people it isn't. I think a lot of people do it for the sauce, for a trend, which is okay but I don't think you're the one then to decide whether it should be archived or not.**
> **(...)**
> **It's such an abstract get together and it's like a whole world on its own, that has so many different facets. How can you just, let's archive that. How can you archive that? It's so complex.**

Based on the success of club **RoXY**'s cherished documentation, Cleo found the question to be somewhat unreasonable. **"Well, I don't think you should never not document anything. I don't think it makes any difference if you don't document it. It's not going to get worse when you document it."**

> **If the dark is imagined as a site of refuge, then scholarship, even in good faith, shines a light that banishes the precarious cover already extended to these outlaw intimacies.**
> (Gamboa 2021, 92)

In his essay, Eddie Gamboa reaches a more balanced conclusion. Gamboa suggests that the experience of the dark is a very subjective one, which was even taken into account

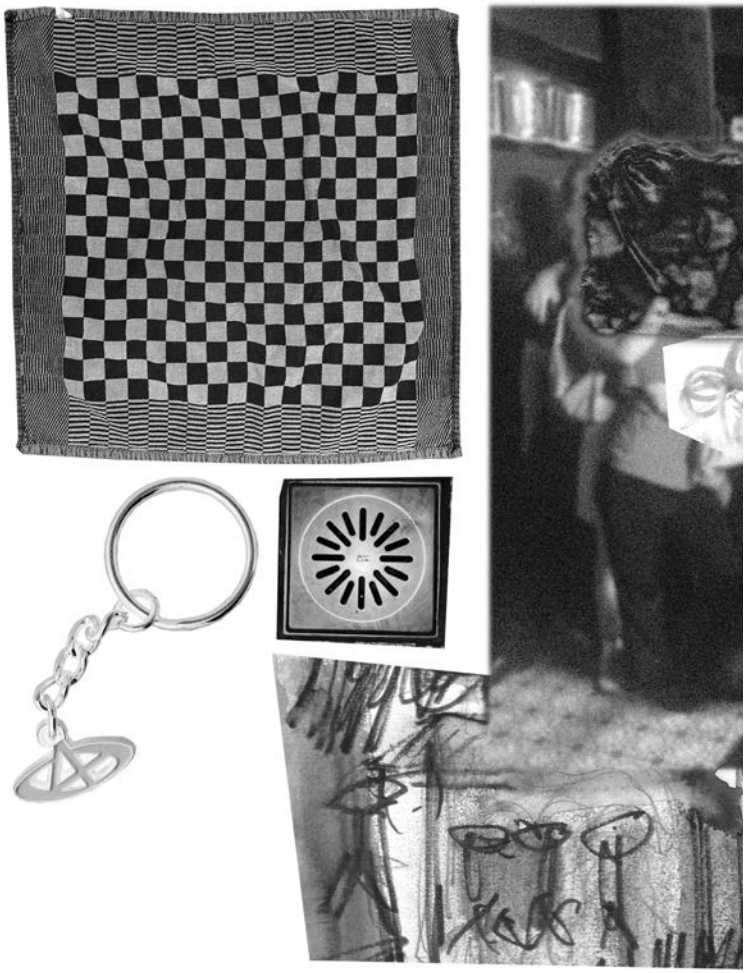
in the form of the essay itself. This influences the reader to have an own interpretation of the material and adapt to one's experiences, while keeping the opacity of certain contexts, in order to keep them safe. This "sense-based" method is on one hand seductive and, on the other hand, indoctrinates and engages and, through participation, allows for a queer sensorial reading practice. Although it was meant as a survival tactic, it allows the reader to develop their own sense of the dark.

> **[ ] as a site of queer nightlife so much as calibrate one to a style of queer nightlife. Which is to say that these moments serve as forms of ephemera that manifest in the dark, and thus rely on a preservation of the dark's opacity in order to get a *sense* of them (Muñoz 1996, 6).**
> (Gamboa 2021, 9)

After the first few months, **Kanaal40** was not as had been hoped for, which led to recurrent nights with few guests. However, in my perspective, there was still a communal feeling and an openness that subsisted and it was advantageous to frame the place within these characteristics. In the end, the publication was deeply cherished by the staff directly included in it. In the end it might have successfully reflected the essence of the place. The joy in connection, as well as the struggles we endured, were apparent throughout the book. On the other hand, the information that lacked worked as the opacity necessary to engage the reader in engaging subjectively with a nightlife community.

This drive to discover and connect with nightlife spaces allowed me to engage with a supportive community. After recognizing their cultural value, I became acquainted with their

foundations and decided to contribute to them more actively, by working as a bartender. The surprising growth that I experienced and witnessed throughout this journey highlighted the lack of documentation on this topic. Through the process of considering different voices on the urgency of documenting (and archiving) nightlife, as well as through my own attempt to do it, it became evident that sparking a conversation on this thematic is often enough of a result as it is an attempt.



# CONCLUSION

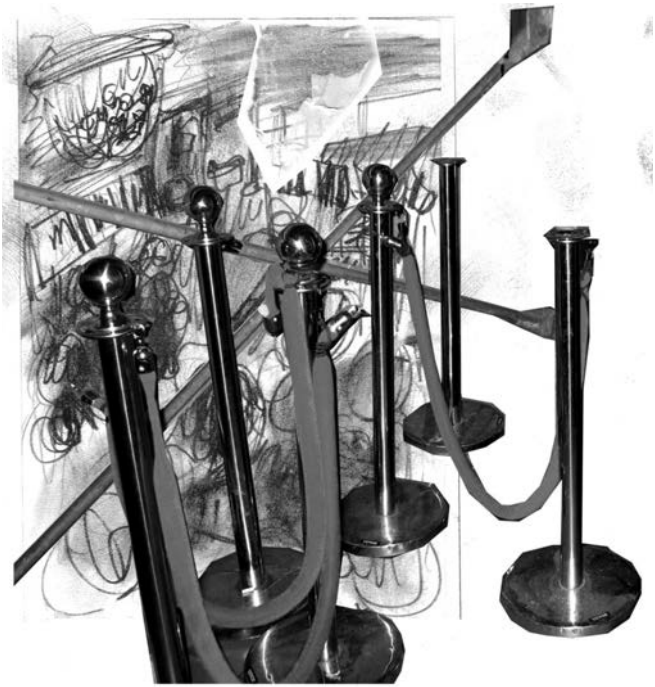
The night can be a reassuring time. While its intrinsic opacity challenges its accessibility, it equally nurtures self-exploration and creative expression. My journey through Amsterdam's nightlife revealed a fragile sense of belonging not only to the space but also to its surrounding community. This inherent fragility, despite reassuring a certain protection and accessibility, threatens the longevity of this culture.

To further comprehend the feeling that kept me waiting in line outside a club's doors every weekend, I decided to work behind the bar. Through this change, I played a more active role in this culture and at the same time was able to give back to the community that embraced me in the first place. Within the case study documented on the second chapter, I witnessed how these places emerge out of a direct necessity and grow

with the community that forms around them. It was this fragile aspect of connection and growth that moved me the most and became precisely what I sought to capture and preserve.

Navigating guidelines that aim to protect club culture, such as no-photo policies, I analyzed alternatives that could be less harmful for the communities involved. Possibilities that had a lower chance of being misinterpreted or wrongfully executed. Apart from flyers or other artistic forms that easily encapsulate the anticipation of a club night, I analyzed responses to what remained from this time. How can we tell the story of what actually happened instead of focusing on the anticipation of what could happen?

Writing this thesis and delving deeper into this topic, revealed in itself a successful method to generate this documentation. By recalling my own experiences and allowing others to share their stories and motivations, I was able to frame the night as a time for connection, creativity and care and proof my younger self that the night doesn't have to be a lonely time.



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**PLACES**

**Club RoXY** (closed)
Singel 465-467
1012 WP Amsterdam

**Garage Noord**
Gedempt Hamerkanaal 40
1021 KM Amsterdam

**Kanaal40** (closed - possibly reopening)
Beursstraat 1
1012 JT Amsterdam

**Sexyland World** (closed - looking for new location)
Noordwal 1
1021 PX Amsterdam

**De School** (closed)
Doctor Jan van Breemenstraat 3
1056 AB Amsterdam

**Stedelijk Museum**
Museumplein 10
1071 DJ Amsterdam

**Centraal Museum**
Agnietenstraat 1
3512 XA Utrecht

**Club Raum**
Humberweg 3
1043 AC Amsterdam

**Stadsarchief Amsterdam**
Vijzelstraat 32
1017 HL Amsterdam

**Het Nieuwe Instituut**
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## COLOPHON

**Holding onto the Night:**
Capturing Amsterdam's Nightlife

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