

# www DANCE: partying from IRL + URL

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29 June 2020

The mix of Covid, digital connectivity and our deep-felt human drive to dance together have reconfigured our dancing spaces

During the Covid-19 lockdown, many of us have missed the unique thrill of live dance performance on stages. But for me, it's another type of motion I have been longing for most: durational dance parties.

*So, you like to party?*

Yes. I enjoy DIY dance the most. Opportunities to express deep parts of me, in ways I cannot say or think. Access to the swirling unconscious. Mostly, this has been en masse. Rave culture. Club couture. Ecstatic experience. Adventures on and off-the-grid seeking places of durational dance delivery. Long swims beneath normal thresholds of sensorial immersion. Dissipation and unification. Spontaneity, joy and acceptance. These dancefloors are wild and sacred.

I first disappeared into a loud new world of lasers and power beats back in the early 00s. My bestie and I debuted at London's labyrinthine Fabric club. That summer we rapidly expanded our nocturnal landscape across the capital. Weekends were spread with the cream of the drum & bass scene. Super-fast drum kicks moved our frames, heavy bass lines led our hips in

gravelly swirls, topnotes of melody and groove kept us playful and light. MCs engaged the crowd with their patter. Sonic cycles were built and released all night. We were unequivocally there to move; five hours was a healthy minimum.

Since then, I discovered ecstatic dance too. Modern forms take their cues from 5Rhythms (<https://www.5rhythms.com>), developed by Gabrielle Roth in the late 1970s, a practice that sits in an arena encompassing the likes of Biodanza (<https://www.biodanza.org/en/biodanza/definicion-de-biodanza>) and sober rave. These experiences have enabled me to get into elated states on water, deep breaths and early nights. Zero judgement, and sooo much more space than your average dancefloor. The oceanic fluidity felt in these environs has vastly expanded my movement repertoire, and provided therapy from some of the short sharp shocks of daily city life.

In the last few years I've made the transition into DJing (<https://soundcloud.com/colourcarver>), trained as an ecstatic dance facilitator myself, and started making music, all organic progression for me as a deep lover of music and dance.

Then came coronavirus.

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**In these strange-indeed times, there has been an urgency to use tech not just for work meetings, but also to create, play and move**

## **Virtual skanking: the get down during lockdown**

As quarantine prevented human huddles and IRL dance parties, many of us tuned into URLs. Entering the endless cavern of online possibility, I've tried a few virtual varieties. The need has been high: to cut loose, shake off confinement sludge, power-up my working-from-home body with oxygen, and get MOVING in a world otherwise shrunken by phantom geographical cordons.

I've moved in ways I wouldn't have otherwise, with people across seas I wouldn't have danced with normally. I joined an Instagram Live with [Pia Love](https://www.instagram.com/pialovenow/) (<https://www.instagram.com/pialovenow/>), a dancer friend based in Puerto Rico, who led a fierce swishing and swirling class channeling the [orisha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba_religion#Orisha) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba\\_religion#Orisha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba_religion#Orisha)). Oya. I grooved through the chakras with a Canadian crew of my mate's Mum and her ladies in Vancouver, while she tuned in from Cape Town. Plus informal musical hangouts, live performances, a morning rave, party parties, and more live streams than I can remember.

This is what I've learnt so far.

### **Better than nothing**

First of all, it's better than nought, right? In these strange-indeed times, there has been an urgency to use tech not just for work meetings, but also to create, play and move. Online dance parties provide a musical moment to see familiar and new faces, dress up and feel fruity.

### **Move it move it therapy**

All intentional dance sessions represent a window of time you've created to move. I've enjoyed shaking it down, smiling widely in happy dazes. It still amazes me just how powerful dance is. An instant energy shaker and vibe changer. This feedback is exactly what I heard from mates after bouncing around our living rooms to my virtual Wild Women retreat playlist: *Haven't danced in ages. Exactly what I needed!* The power of dance as therapy and alchemy still belongs to us, no matter what.

## **Social bounce**

We are a social species. Dancing together can dramatically amplify the energy we feel and lead us into lands of collective experience. We can literally bounce off each other's smiles and moves, giddily playful in the moment. Online, these interactions are more limited – but still very much there.

## **We've been framed: selfie mode**

It's hard not to just end up watching yourself, isn't it? Our own image seems to hold endless captivation, especially so in a pouting selfie age. The equivalent of dancing in a mirror during an online sesh, can make us both extra-exhibitionist and self-conscious. More thoughts are trained on how we look on-screen. Whereas the only mirrors IRL are usually above washbasins.

## **Zoomlight: here's looking at YOU!**

Zoom features like Speaker or Gallery View, with the ability of organisers to spotlight people, firmly dishes out limelight. All eyes on YOU (*oh hello!*) is enough to instantly crack coy smiles and make you dance harder. More akin perhaps – in real-life – to high visibility spots like in front of the DJ or up on a podium of sorts.

## **Party POV: box vista**

The party horizon before us has drastically changed: from 360-degree, free-range wanderings, to being placed in uniform boxes looking at other boxes whilst we pace our own four walls.

## **Insta-Streamlandia**

URL mode is a transportation convenience yet an adventure sucker. Thanks to the World Wide Web, you're (instantly) already there! Averting early overtures of transit, queues and security, you are granted instant access to the domain which electronic music platform Resident Advisor (<https://www.residentadvisor.net>), dubbed 'Streamland'.

## **Short(er) circuits**

A 'proper dance' for me is at least five hours. Plus on-top time to take in the experience, chill, wonder and wander. Ecstatic dances tend to clock up 90–120 minutes, which is still decent. URL dance falls short. They tend to be energetic bursts rather than deep sensorial voyages. I miss those extra hours.

## Testing technicals

Normally, venues and promoters come with tech experts. People who know how to work the wires and tame the machines, lights and sound. Unseen and unbilled, these black-clothed (ungendered) knights of the night are easy to take for granted – but they are vital. Ask any exasperated live streamer turned DIY techie.

## Heard before seen: sonic systems

Quality of sound is paramount. You want to feel the music viscerally (*without* the unwanted bonus of tinnitus). But home-based dancing is reliant on the daisy chain of devices, gear and networks along the way, including (crucially) your sound system and The Connection. That's a lot of variables. Then there's your housemates and neighbours to be mindful of, as your hand hovers over the volume knob... In a native club environment, those are just not your issues.

## Cam couture in your imagination station

Zoom's virtual background and green screen options give the visually-minded a chance to swap scenes of domestic mishmash for more (aspirational) space-filling utopia. Novices can use Zoom's pre-set images to macro hone in on beaded blades of grass, traverse the expanse of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, or fly up to space to gaze back at the Earth's curvature. But the more adventurous take it up levels, often visual-jockeying with art and political statements.

## Dressing the set

It's not just the virtual background you can change. How about customising your home? Extra visual flourishes include lighting, projectors, props and pets. Who doesn't like a dose of remote fluffy pet therapy? As a colour freak myself, coloured lights and UV keep me happy after dusk. Some people, of course, don't have the kit or give a hoot about these extra visual flourishes, but for those who do, it's enjoyable to see the creative investment cash out in vibe dividends.

## Spatial strain: wild style or domestic miss

On IRL dancefloors, space is a moveable feast. Sometimes you can roam around in search of 'your spot', only to find it's suddenly become a traffic junction of drifting hoards. In short, clubs can get packed. Ecstatic floors tend to be more roomy. With domestic dance, the spatial

territory depends on your situ. Maybe it permits wild-style flailing and spinning. But what if your flatmate is working from home in the lounge when you want a big prance, and you end up confined to your so-called 'double' bedroom? Space-pressed city-dwellers will identify.

## **Me, en masse**

Raves and ecstatic dancing are all about individual expression and mass experience. The online environment of assembling en masse in individual windows is, for all its differences, a parallel structure. But other forms of social dancing – couples dancing, folk dances – have more rules and roles, which don't migrate so well from IRL to URL.

## **Limited feedback and deathly disconnect**

DJing is just not the same. Views of the crowd are less than satisfactory. [Playing at Riposte Virtual #2 \(https://soundcloud.com/riposte\\_uk/colour-carver\)](#), despite my flatmate doing a sterling job as a backup dancer, I felt super disconnected. Peeping a few bodies in blocks is far far from the felt bodily presence of those around you. The sensual shortcomings of URL dances are chasmic, and deeply felt. I miss dancing in real life. With real people.

URL DJing: Cath Carver at Riposte London

## **Dancing into the future...**

My whirl through digital dance has provided much-needed reprieve during quarantine, but connecting online through The Connection will never square up to the real thing. I wonder if tech-first presence can *ever* be enough for our highly social human species, no matter how many potential visions of the future are broadcast to our screens.

I've realised just how much space is a luxury, especially in crowded cities. Spatial quality and availability matters, for physical, social and mental health. Safe spaces to have formative dance experiences in are truly hallowed ground.

## **Fight for your right to party**

One thing is for sure: dance holds immense power. Let us not take its freedom and healing potential – on all levels – for granted.

Rave was built on principles of community, and contributed hugely to notions – and experiences – of both collective unity and personal expression. Ecstatic dance is a way of achieving freedom through the body, a moving statement of embodiment and enjoyment of

our physical bodies. In these entranced states we enter potentialities of deep energetic transformation on many levels. For many, dance is a prayer and movement medicine.

## Eternal flame

Dance is not restricted to the floors that are licensed and sanctioned for our consumption. Dance is wherever we are, an eternal flame of transformative power within reach.

That flame flickers online too – but what does the future hold? Early IRL parties are slowly bubbling back, often with dancefloors laid out in 2-metre socially distanced squares. Even off screen, it seems we may be dancing in boxes for a while longer yet.

And with many venues and promoters facing hard times after this deserted chapter, it will take baby steps, innovative thinking and solid backing to get us all up on our party feet.

But alongside the re-opening of 3D spaces, the online trend seems set to last, with both digital-first and hybrid organisers likely to continue interacting with their newly formed international communities. Plus the expected growth of XR (<https://www.wired.com/story/what-is-xr/>), as modes of reality gets mixed.

Me? I look forward to shocking out on the dancefloor again, and playing for real people soon. No doubt, we will all be appreciative – to a whole new degree – of those who hold and create space for our dance.

Power to Our Dance, in all its virtual and potential realities. ●



**Dance is  
wherever we are,  
an eternal flame  
of transformative  
power**

*Read on to find out about one organiser's real-life experience of a virtual dance party*

## From place to space: Riposte London / Riposte Virtual

*Eden Topall-Rabanes on moving his dance party online*

Eden Topall-Rabanes (front left) and Cath Carver (centre) at Riposte London

I began Riposte club in France about 12 years ago, as a cross between an art exhibition and a party. After I moved to London, it evolved into a kind of queer techno art rave. We usually have around four DJs and maybe 10 to 15 performers and 10 to 15 visual artists, and we're also involved in art and activism.

During quarantine, we hosted three virtual Riposte events, and I went to other online parties too. There were both positives and negatives to the experience. On the plus side, it was of course a way of keeping connected to our existing local community, but it was also really beautiful and heartwarming to reach other people globally – strangers, as well as people I knew, artists as well as clubbers. During the party when everyone is in front of their screens, it can be easier to chat with new people who you think are cool, or interesting, or cute. You can send private messages, and everyone has their Instagram up. All that was great.

I think the online space can be more accessible too. I've seen parties with sign language, and audio or visual descriptions, for example, and for people who are on the spectrum, it's easier for them to avoid sensory overload.

It's definitely cheaper for people! You don't pay for drinks at a bar, and most online parties don't have an entry fee. But that also means we make less money.

I've noticed that online there are a few big parties getting most of the attention, but overall there aren't so many parties. It's the same with DJs: a few get lots of work and others almost nothing. For performers, I notice a lot of drag queens but almost no other type of performers.

Privacy and safety are issues. You don't know who might be screen recording, so you never have the same freedom of going 'tits out' like you can in a club. Once, we got invaded by homophobes being abusive in the chat. We kicked them out super-quick, but it was scary.

After the party, you know, there's something so sad about just closing the computer, being drunk and alone, and just going to bed.

I'm really not sure we will continue the format when we can have live events again. But we are definitely looking at learning from the experience to integrate online and live action more, for example with camera feeds, and using more digital technology in the physical space.

*As told to Cath Carver*

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