Your love

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Pol Esteve

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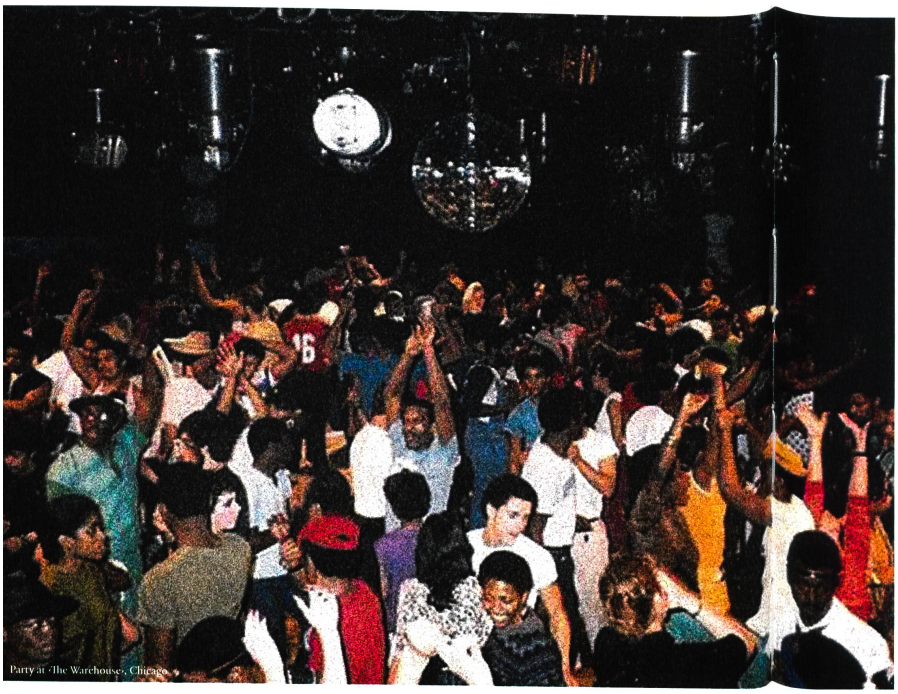


Party at ‹The Warehouse›, Chicago.

Soon it will be four years since Frankie Knuckles' demise. He was a famous American music DJ and producer born in New York. Trained as a DJ in Continental Baths, a pioneer dance club in a gay bathhouse in Broadway Avenue, he moved to Chicago in 1977, where a friend of his, Robert Williams, had just opened a dance club: ‹The Warehouse›. He asked Knuckles to be the resident DJ and ‹The Warehouse› and Knuckles would become widely known for creating a new musical genre: house music—called after the name of the club. Knuckles was an openly black homosexual; so were the dancers attending ‹The Warehouse›, a venue mainly attracting gay blacks and Latinos. The club was in a rather small building still existing today in 201 South Jefferson Street. Seen from the outside, nothing was exceptional; the narrow façade showed rectilinear features typical of early twentieth century industrial architecture. The only exterior indication for the club was a neutral blue and white back-lit sign saying ‹The Warehouse›. One could say the interior was as austere as the exterior. The walls were left bare and the whole room was painted in black. At first sight, no evident architectural additions or decorations seemed to have been added to the former industrial structure but, if scrutinized in detail, on the ceiling a series of newly introduced elements could be spotted, camouflaged in black. They were advanced technologies for lighting and sound. Dozens of spotlights, flashing lights, laser lights and other machinery for lighting effects were hanging from circular structures organized around a central mirror ball. In between them, a series of devices for sound reproduction were pointing down towards the dance floor. The whole structure provided full intensity sound and light to be projected directly on top of the dancing bodies; thus creating a sensual architecture that perfectly encompassed the music Knuckles would play.

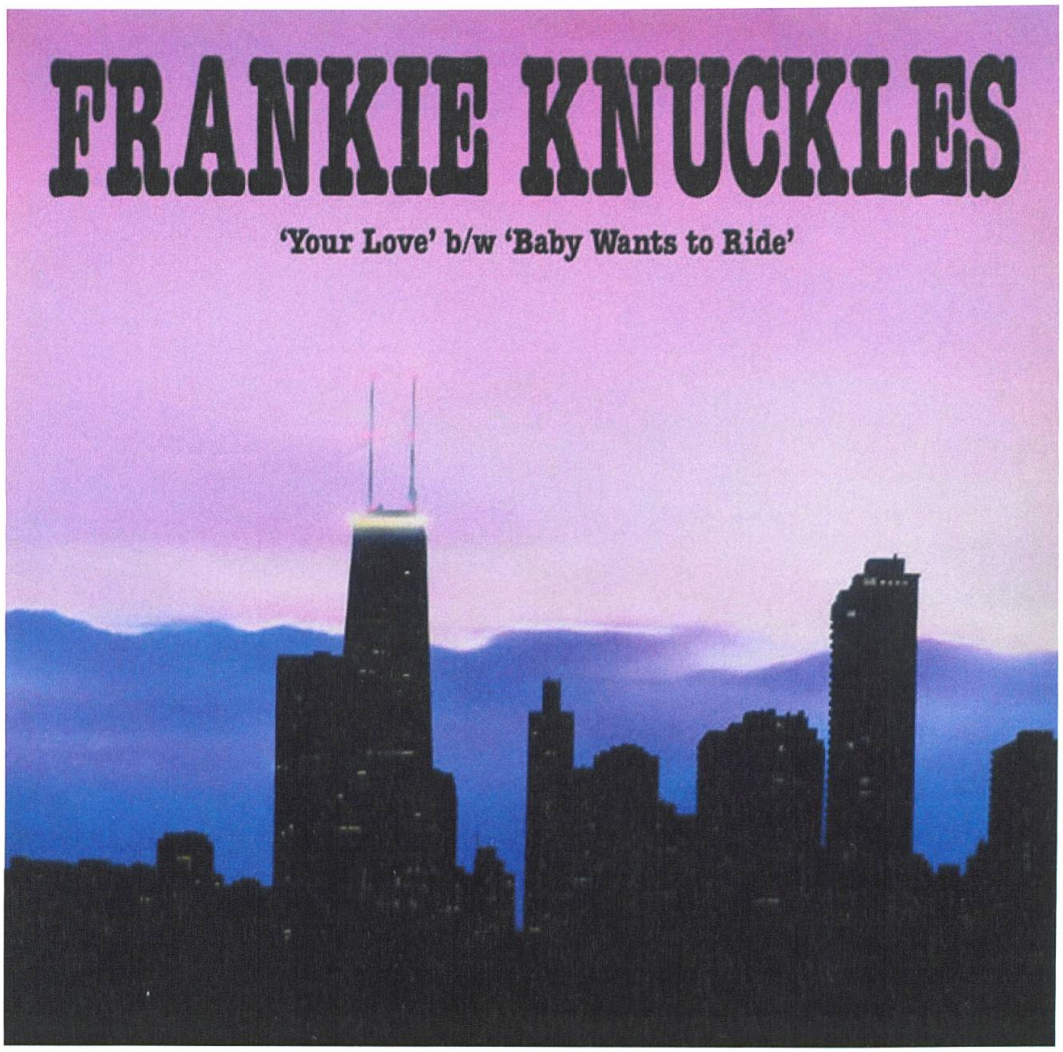
Along with Jamie Principle, Knuckles released *Your Love*[1], a house music track that became a classic of the genre and that can help to explain the kind of spatial experience these newly introduced spatial technologies provoked. *Your love*, was initially produced in the early 80s and, before seeing its commercial release in 1986, it only circulated through the DJ cabins of Chicago. The piece epitomized the musical genre that was born in ‹The Warehouse› and later played in similar spaces active in the city at the time—like ‹Music Box› or ‹Power Plant›. On top of a repeating synthesizer and a powerful bassline the lyrics praise «I need your love». The song seems to refer to two lovers, one asking the other «I need your touch, don't make me wait for your love», but within the context in which this song was produced and initially distributed, it can be interpreted in a different way: what is actually claimed is not the love of a single person but a collective love. It is commonly acknowledged that when you would go out for a night of proper dancing, sex was made

redundant[2]. The experience of dancing under the effects of light, sound and, often, drugs displaced erotic pleasure from the genitals to the rest of the body. The song sings to the lights, the speakers and the chemical substances that bring the dancer into a state of high sensory excitement. It was not a carnal encounter between two, or even a reduced group, but a collective experience shared with dozens of bodies affected by multisensory electronic and chemical technologies. Thus, Jamie Principle's voice singing «you know what to do, visions really blow my mind, fantasizing all the time» might well be talking of that moment and space where he experienced synthetic pleasure and techno-inflicted love. Then the dancer sings along «please don't tell me stop» when the frenzy of light and sound reaches a peak of intensity.

Almost a couple of decades after ‹The Warehouse› opened its doors, the American sociologist Richard Sennett wrote ‹Flesh and Stone›[3]. The book addresses the relationship between the body and the city—it analyses the political and social understanding of the body in different western cultures and in reciprocity with the built environment. The study aims to unveil the historical origins of sensory deprivation in the space of the contemporary city. Looking at New York's Greenwich Village, Sennett denounces the lack of citizens' mutual care in the late twentieth century multicultural metropolis, as a consequence of the reluctance to experience intense sensory stimulus and, particularly, to experience pain in public space. From his point of view, design has turned the city into a space of comfort, yet an aseptic space from a social point of view. In front of this lack of empathy, there is the need to transform isolation and indifference into care, he claims. Historically, the Greek rite of Adonia, the bathing in the Christian house and the nocturnal celebrations in the Venetian Ghetto, were all forms of social engagement that «created a more complex life for the bodies the dominant order sought to rule in its own image»[4]. However, this pagan and Christian rituals, formerly used to release the tensions caused by the sole fact of cohabitation, seem not to be the adequate instruments anymore. To his despair, they have no parallel in the multicultural city and new mechanisms to establish a civic order have to be sought: we need to change the understanding we have of our own bodies and acknowledge our bodily insufficiencies in order to induce civic compassion, because «without a disturbed sense of ourselves, what will prompt most of us [...] to turn outward toward each other, to experience the Other?»[5].

Looking back to Chicago in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when ‹The Warehouse› had opened its doors, we can easily see the similarities with the multicultural city Sennett was talking about: a mixed and diverse society in a modern and sterile landscape. Was Chicago, like New York, also lacking the rituals, mechanisms and places to experience the Other? If we read it from the point of view of Sennett, probably yes. Blacks and whites, homosexuals and straights, Polish and Italians, were mostly indifferent to each other. Nevertheless, a space like ‹The Warehouse› was binding people together. As many of the regulars like to remember and share online, there was a strong feeling of community between those attending the rite of compulsive dancing every week. Gay blacks and Latinos, with their «insufficient» bodies acknowledged each other as desiring subjects in an act of collective love.

The existence of a social space like ‹The Warehouse› might help to reformulate Sennett's question. How can one experience the Other if the Other is in oneself? In other words, how can you empathise with citizens of very different identities if you do not have an identity yourself?[6] As the 1977 Teddy Pendergrass's song—later remixed by Frankie Knuckles—«You can't hide from yourself»[7] puts it, «when you look at the mirror, do you see a foe or a friend?». The gay blacks and Latinos who regularly visited ‹The Warehouse› were doubly stigmatized. Their bodies carried clear ethnical and sexual differences from the master image of the perfect straight white male body. They were in a sense not that different from Sennett's amputated friend that he uses as an example of a body witnessing lived pain and, therefore, a body ready to experience the Other. In their case, it was not the hand but their masculinity, their genealogical origins that were missing. They did acknowledge and experience their body «insufficiencies», actually, they were reminded daily by the sole fact of living in a white heterosexual society. Their urgency was, as Pendergrass sang, to «make peace with



Your Love b/w Baby Wants to Ride, producer Frankie Knuckles, USA, Trax Records, 1987, [vinyl]

yourself before you can love another, understand who and what you are before you can go any further».

These «insufficient» bodies found in the architecture of ‹The Warehouse› a space for self-questioning. The technological display of lighting, sound and psychotropic technologies constituted a phenomenological spatial apparatus capable of inflicting pleasure to hundreds in one night. A kind of techno-bath, that instead of playing with water at different temperatures like in Roman times, bathed the body with light, sound and chemical waves producing unforeseen bodily sensations. A space where sensory deprivation was overcome by placing the «insufficient» body under the effects of the stroboscopic light, the subwoofer and drugs. Contrary to what Sennett seems to claim, was not the exposure to pain that constructed a civic body, but the caresses of the lower musical tones and the cognitive exaltation of the flashing light in combination with the LSD[8]. The re-erotization of the body in a synthetic act of love that allowed shared sensibilities to flourish beyond differences of class, gender or race. ‹The Warehouse› was the space in the city where for a period of time and on a weekly basis a rite of self-recognition built empathic links that made the crowd shout «when we love you turn me out»[9].

1 *Your Love*, producer Frankie Knuckles, USA, Trax Records, 1986, [vinyl].
2 An account of the experience of going dancing to gay clubs in the late 70s can be found in Douglas Crimp, ‹DISSS-CO (A FRAGMENT): From Before Pictures, a Memoir of 1970s New York›, Criticism, vol. 50, no.1, Special Issue: Disco (Winter 2008), pp. 1–17.
3 R. Sennett, ‹Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization›, New York, Norton, 1994.
4 Ibid, p. 374.
5 Ibid, p. 374.
6 An extended discussion on the political body and the relationship between blackness and otherness can be found in b. hooks «Postmodern Blackness» in Postmodern Culture, vol.I, num. 1, 1990.
7 *You can't hide from yourself*, Teddy Pendergrass, USA, Philadelphia International Records, 1977, [vinyl].
8 Oral histories account how in ‹The Warehouse› alcohol was not served but often the fruits offered in the buffet were impregnated of hallucinogen substances.
9 Exerpt of the lyrics of *Your Love*, producer Frankie Knuckles, USA, Trax Records, 1986, [vinyl].