

Bringing the Real Alive

By Larissa Belcic & Michelle Shofet of Nocturnal Medicine

Parties have the power to coax the buried to the surface.

In a party, social structures shift to create supportive scaffoldings around which a collective can reconstitute themselves. What has been cast aside, hidden, oppressed or repressed, can emerge as an organizing social principle. In a party, we shift and reposition ourselves into a world where we can become fully alive, fully present, felt, seen, heard, and witnessed together. What has actually been there all along, but buried beneath the surface, becomes manifest in our shared space.

We, Nocturnal Medicine, are a nonprofit design studio that throws parties in conversation with the cultural-environmental moment we find ourselves in today. This is a moment defined by the planetary health crisis and the existential threats it poses to all life on Earth. And yet, many living within the dominant US culture are left resourceless when it comes to tools for reckoning with this disaster.

At their core, our parties are centered around creating moments for collective pause and processing. The parties carve a space out of our everyday fabric and bring people together to confront the painful realities that beset the planet and environment in a manner that ignites the senses and invokes pleasure. Recent projects have explored: the dreaded seasonal shift into another pandemic winter circa December 2021 and the palpable anxiety associated with it; summers whose abundance and pleasures now also enfold fatal heat and drought; a different kind of spring where the blossoming of new life is met with false starts and stops, loops of frost and thaw—resulting in misalignment across age-old collaborators whose natural rhythms have been scrambled.

Each of the parties associated with these phenomena were designed to create a structure around them, to give voice to aspects of our collective reality. Within these structures, that which is unspoken, yet felt, is given the justice of becoming publicly recognized, tended to, and reformed around.



To be awake in the current moment is to be attuned to intense emotion in the form of grief, anxiety, anger, hopelessness, and fear. For many, reckoning with the emotional impact of all that is sick on our planet is a deeply disturbing task, a slippery slope that can send us hurtling into the arms of nihilism, doom, paralysis, and denial. But what does it do to us to feel all these things, to know all these things, and yet not experience a social fabric that reflects their reality? In our practice, we work to make places for feeling your feelings. The heaviness asks to be let in, to be understood.

There is a long human history of parties being used to connect with environmental rhythms and non-human entities—think harvest festivals or dances under the solstice moon. In a moment when so many of us deeply need a connecting path to the environment, we turn to the creation of new forms of parties, named and crafted in honor of the environmental beasts that fill our world today. But this creation is really just a remembering, a calling back to when we tied ourselves to the cues and timescales of Earth's many voices.









Parties always end but continually echo, felt through psychic reverberations, social imprints, and physical and emotional memories. Following a party we may soon remember how it felt to be in a social space structured around the realities of today. Invited to stretch into a new form, the social body has learned that this place is possible. Perhaps there is a form of individual and collective muscle memory that forms. Neurons, tendons, and limbs remembering the positions they were in, the way they moved in relation to other bodies, to materials, to sounds, to light, and to atmosphere. The body, individual and collective, experiences that it is possible to be together, feeling these feelings, knowing what we know about our world today, and that it can be a place of profound and entangled grief and sorrow, joy and pleasure.

Out of the party and again riding the pathways of daily life, what was brought to light may once more be subsumed by oppressive structures. But the taste of the party remains, ripe for integration into the body's systems. There is a case to be made here for repetition, for returning time and again to the party-space to give and receive release, to experience the reformation of the social body into something that recognizes, more deeply, who, what, and where we are as beings. With each journey made into and out of the party, its sacred pathways are affirmed and renewed once more.

Photos are from Nocturnal Medicine's winter 2022 party, "In the Valley Pools Our Sorrow," at Performance Space New York. The event was an experiment in nightlife and catharsis, featuring Akanbi on the decks and performance by Aarron Ricks and Ley.