FULHAM TOWN HALL

In a way, Fulham Town Hall is emblematic of London's wider story. Once a community space, it was often used by the GLF for dances. It's now been abandoned for ten years. It has recently closed for good and is about to be redeveloped into a luxury hotel.

> [MALE VOICE] *We had dances there to raise money to cover expenses for gay lib, they started off in different town halls, but Fulham was a rather popular one [...] they became weekly affairs because they were so popular, they were great fun I must say, and for very little money.*

Fulham Town Hall's is partly a story of gentrification and of the relationship between communities and places—it raises fundamental questions about public spaces. Who owns London's spaces? Who are they built for, and who is being left out?

Right before being redeveloped, and after ten years of being abandoned, Fulham Town Hall opened one last time for a short window to host an art exhibition of local artists. Through the pretext of the exhibition, I had the chance to visit the building and observe its great empty spaces. You can see the pictures I took on your phone or laptop. Everything that's left of these spaces is their imposing shell and what we remember of them, and these pictures. And as you stand outside and look at what will soon be or already is luxury hotel rooms, I want you to close your eyes and imagine you're inside, imagine you time travelled to 50 years ago.

Looking at the atmospheric setting of these pictures that remain, imagine choreographies of young queers being thrust into an exciting new life, swirling in the safe space they'd created, a space accessible to everyone, where they could freely express themselves to an audience of friends.

> [MALE VOICE] *They were just wonderful, it was a place to really come and show off your drag and people coming out for the first time in drag...*

I remember the utter shock and exhilaration of exploring queer spaces for the first time. I remember seeing men kiss in a club once, in Scotland, and I couldn't stop looking: something like that, I thought, would never be allowed at home...

> [MALE VOICE] *I knew Mario [...] I used to see him at the various public dances that GLF organised because effectively they couldn't stop you from hiring a town hall, so you know, [we used to go to] Fulham Town Hall...*

Perhaps Mario was already confident in his own sexuality and self-expression, at that point, but I like to think of Mario's experience at the GLF's dances a bit like my own tentative exploration. I like to think that he too perhaps would slowly stop censoring his own gestures, no longer afraid of giving himself away. Perhaps he too started to wear clothes that would make him think, "I could not wear this back at home". He too would be excited to wear something outrageous and let people turn their heads and look at him. On the pages of *FUORI!*, to his Italian comrades he talks about these dances as if they were sacred rituals.

> [MALE VOICE, ITALIAN ACCENT] *In the hired, ancient town halls of London, hundreds and hundreds of people of any sex gather to dance and have fun together, in a carousel of improvised costumes that reveal how stupendous the liberated gay fantasy and imagination are. Among transexuals in sequin dresses and vaporous purple wigs you can even find representatives of the most advanced extra-parliamentary left, stoned hippies with a bisexual air about them, David Hockney and the crème de la crème of King's Road, feminists resplendent with unfemininity and the enigmatic editors of "OZ". At the first dances, far and safe from the sight of the police, met the members of the Angry Brigades. Next to a Japanese in an Edwardian-style dress, like Silvana Mangano in Morte a Venezia, among anglosaxon guys and bearded South Americans in miniskirt, Italians competing with Fellini and Gherardi for originality of the costumes made in the blink of an eye with hospital gauze, ostrich feathers and Biba colours, the Angry Brigade conspirators plotted undisturbed the most sensational attacks that shocked London in the recent years, echoing to the English ear the Northern Irish terror, softened up to that point by the distance and the hypocritical discretion of a fanatic nationalism that hides its own problems from itself.*

In Mario's writing, the excitement of these extravagant characters dancing together in a place he belonged in, is paired with political consciousness and revolutionary action, as testified by the mention of the Angry Brigades. It speaks of the revolutionary alliances and politics of gay liberation, and the political potential of liberated self-expression. He writes of a sense of freedom I too have experienced, the excitement of being whoever you desire, and the frightening power that comes with that freedom and excitement.

As I walk in the great rooms of Fulham Town Hall I sense the unbearable feeling of the haunted space—under the roofs with flaking paint and in the dusty corners of these abandoned rooms dance the ghosts of queer history, the spectre of a revolutionary past that I want to access, that I want you to access before it is wiped out, and I want you to remember it. [START OF DANCE BEAT] I think of all the gay clubs I've been to and all the ones that have closed in recent years—I think of a desire for dancing, of the grooves and choreographies lost to the pandemic. Can you remember the utter freedom of dancing? I close my eyes and think of moving in the dark and dancing closer to a stranger, feeling their body against mine, I think of the sweat shining under the strobe lights... [END OF DANCE BEAT]

And as I think of all these things I am reminded of my sense of displacement in straight spaces and the elation of being together with others like myself, following the steps of those who danced before us. But their traces seem to be disappearing, as places like Fulham Town Hall are abandoned and closed—as people are left out from public spaces, and queer spaces and artists feel the blow of the pandemic. I keep asking myself—what does a queer place look like? Who is welcome in it? What boundaries are placed around it?