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Bodies at work: the relationship between the photographer and the photographed at raves and music festivals

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The crowd at Metro City that night packed the floor and filled the rafters of the multilevel club. I watched the scene unfold before me from the privileged position of the stage, hidden in the wings, out of the bright lights. I waited for the DJ to turn his back so I could take the stage and photograph the crowd. Finally the DJ turned to change the vinyl and I discreetly moved to the middle of the stage. The response to my appearance was far from discreet. The front rows of the crowd raised their arms and screamed like their favourite song had just begun, but that adulation was for me. They knew my name and some shouted it, they knew my brand and website and they wanted to be a part of the performance, to be immortalised on film...

(Barnes, 2018)

For as long as I can remember I have loved what music can do for the mind, body and soul; the way it can be heard through your ears but also the way it vibrates through your body and the way it can look. All these factors are what drew me into the late nineties rave scene with its heavy bass as well as the visual lighting spectacle that accompanied it. While initially I attended such events as a punter, in becoming a photographer, I ultimately became both spectator and performer. As Traub (2011, 13) suggests (in describing her own role in shooting at music-based festivals), 'I became a part of the spectacle performing the part of the photographer. The spider dance of the camera around the photographed contributed to the total tableau vivant'. My role in the late-nineties through to the early-noughties was not only to photograph the spectacle on stage but also to make the attendees themselves a part of the overall spectacle of the event. To be immortalized in film, as I suggest in the opening paragraph. This 'spider dance' as Traub so poetically suggests involved being accepted as a part of that culture if you were to get the most out of your participants, not just being a spectator.

More than an insider, I occupied the position of a performer in my own right, as I often had to perform to get my subjects to perform. I seek a reaction to my camera and my presence by engaging the subject(s) through my body language and verbal encouragement. As Carah (2014) suggests, making a photograph is a two-way process between the photographer and the photographed. ‘Nightlife photographers exploit their identities, the identities of their peers, the sociality of nightlife, and their communicative capacities in the course of their work. They capitalize on the attention, desire and intoxication of others, to do their work’ (262). With Carah’s statement in mind I will discuss a number of images that have in some way visually shown the relationship between the photographer and the photographed in the club.
and festival environment. Furthermore I will discuss how this relationship towards the camera and myself changed from the late-nineties through to the mid-noughties and suggest some reasons for those changes.

The image in Figure 1 is a reflection on how I felt about the rave/dance scene at the time it was taken. While you cannot see the golden and red hues in this image (colour was a big part of my images and this publication is greyscale) you can still get a sense of that energy and movement. I believe it shows a shared sense of excitement between the photographer and the photographed. Stylistically there is a sense of androgyny in the dress code that was commonplace within raves. Pini (1997, 61) suggests ‘Unisex’ clothes and the “dress-to-sweat” emphasis of the scene are important factors in the perceived erosion of sexual differences’. The presentation towards the camera is friendly but not sexual.

Figure 2 represents a similar feeling; one of almost a shy sense of abandonment but mixed with innocence. People were open to being photographed, but at the same time were often surprised to be asked. The look away from camera of the woman on the left suggests that coyness and uncertainty while the woman on the right, with her direct address to camera still feels somewhat uncertain. I remember having to coax the participants into allowing me to make this photograph and it required an amount of engagement and trust before I could.

Figure 3 for me represents the way I talk about music encompassing mind, body and soul. My involvement in essentially spruiking punters to be photographed is non-existent in this case. There is ambivalence not just to the camera (which they never noticed) but also to everyone else within the room. The moment was fleeting; soon after taking this photograph and they went back to dancing like everyone else around them. I believe it is one of the most romantic moments I have photographed in dance culture. I was overwhelmed by how much I enjoyed being a part of this scene and that really translated into the images that I was making around this time.

Figure 4 is more a reflection of how I was feeling about the scene almost a decade after I began shooting dance music. I was now in my late thirties and working late into the night was becoming more problematic as I just didn’t have that same level of energy one has in their twenties. The familiar faces of people I had got to know at events had moved on and I was becoming rather jaded about the whole scene. I started shooting images more for myself rather than just the promoters I worked for. I produced images that used the flash in a harsh way that ‘exposed’ the scene, rather than the fluid
movement of slow exposures mixed with flash that dominated much of my earlier work. It was also taken at a time when events that began at midnight and ended as the sun was rising were in decline, being replaced by the daytime music festivals. It is a cynical photograph; more than anything it says something about my own mood at the time rather than that of the attendees. It shows I was losing the relationship that I had with the crowd and attendees.

The move to the daytime festival brought with it a real change on how people presented to the camera. While academic discussions of ‘the body’ in rave culture have revolved around the erosion of sexual difference (Pini 1997), androgyny and asexuality (Anderson 2009), and less focus on sexual gratification (McRobbie 1993; Reynolds 1999, 2012a), the mid-noughties saw the return of highly provocative sexualized behaviour and shows of hyper-masculinity – common traits of club culture and rock-based music fans but largely absent in the early days of rave and dance culture. Figures 5 and 6 represent that change of how men presented both to the crowd and to the camera. While the rave and early dance scene had its fair share of shirtless men, it was more often due to the heat or for using the body as a canvas for the event in question as opposed to an overt parading of masculinity itself.

It was by no means limited to men. The presentation of women towards the camera (Figure 7) also changed with women actively posing and performing to the camera (and my masculine gaze). They convey an exaggerated expression referred to in fashion photography ‘as the “couture hunch” – elbows akimbo, shoulders pushed forward, stomach drawn in and back gracefully arched’ (Shinkle 2017, 205). Moreover, the performance of femininity is forthright and assertive. Compared to the late-nineties, I no longer had to even ask if people would be photographed, but instead people gestured towards the camera and at times even demanded to have their picture taken and would often get angry if I refused.
While I believe rave and early dance music represented a recognizable subcultural practice I feel this eroded as it transitioned into becoming known as electronic dance music and the festivals that went with it. Comparing Figure 8 with Figure 1 encapsulates my experience of that transition between rave, early dance culture and finally the modern day dance festival. From the point of style, what encoded one as a ‘raver’ has been replaced with regular high-street fashion, but this shift marked more than just a style trope; the inclusion of some women wearing high heels and dresses to events and
groups of men displaying highly masculine behaviour demonstrates a cultural shift. The address to camera in Figure 8 is of particular interest. In Erving Goffman’s (1979) seminal work on gendered advertising, he identifies a canting posture in women. In social media, the slightly arched back with the hand on the hip is a style of posing that has been labelled ‘the awkward lean’, in relation to women who echo a stylistic feminine pose seen in advertising. Here, women mimic model-styled poses of hands on their hips and a tilted body. There is also a pout rather than a smile and the clothing and makeup

Figure 7. Barnes, D. (2010). Summadayze, Supreme Court Gardens. Perth, Western Australia. [Digital photograph].

Figure 8. Barnes, D. (2012). Summadayze. Perth, Western Australia. [Digital photograph].
suggests the subjects are here to be seen rather than to dance. While this one image
cannot and does not represent all attendees of music festivals of this era, it is a marker of
change for both the scene and how people saw my role as a photographer. While being
photographed was once seen as a privilege and the role of photography was well-
respected, in contemporary times there is the expectation that the photographer should
do whatever the attendees asked for. The poses and presentation to camera have
become highly manufactured and have lost the sense of spontaneity and playfulness
of the images produced when I began photographing. The shift from what seemed
natural or comfortable presentations of the body has become a spectacle of exagger-
ated poses ‘as an extended and uncomfortable process of making oneself into a
gendered subject’ (Shinkle 2017, 213). In the late-nineties and early-noughties music
scene, I felt I was ‘spider dancing’ with my camera. In these contemporary times, I feel
my camera is more like a mirror for people to gaze upon their gendered selves.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Duncan Barnes is a lecturer in Photomedia in the School of Arts and Humanities at Edith Cowan
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The commodification of rave culture’.

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