FROM SUBCULTURE TO MASS CULTURE: THE IMPACT OF INTERNET PHOTOGRAPHY ON THE NEW YORK CLUB SCENE

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2008

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This study examines a contemporary New York City Club Culture whose history is rooted in the likes of Studio 54 and Andy Warhol’s Factory; it is valued by its members for providing a safe, inclusive space for alternative performance of self and style. Club Culture has always navigated between subculture and mass culture systems. With the introduction of Internet photography to the Scene, the Scene’s sustained future is threatened by capitalism and mass culture commodification. Within this study I contend that while past New York club scenes experienced cultural appropriation of their art and lifestyles through printed media and exclusive art showings, digital photography disseminated through Internet spaces has increased the depth and speed with which mass culture impacts the once exclusive spaces. During fieldwork in the current New York Club Kids’ Club Scene I performed participant observation, interviews with Club Kid girls, and later, archival research of Scene-focused media coverage. Subcultural research suggests that the internal process of meaning making is key to sustaining subcultures. Internet photography impedes this process through the popularization and commodification of the Club Scene (e.g. books, style trends, images) and through the facilitation of external meaning making. A new group of partiers are drawn to the clubs who are externally educated by popular media representations of the Scene. The entrance of the public into the private space of the physical clubs reinforces the mass media’s representation of the Scene with hypersexualized, heteronormative female roles. This process undermines and marginalizes the Club Kids within what was once their most private space.
For the girls and women, past and present, whose lives and works continually enable and inspire such inquiries as this one.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their time and commitment to furthering this examination I thank my committee, Dr. Radhika Gajjalla and Dr. Jeannie Ludlow. Additionally, I extend my deep gratitude to Dr. Peggy Giordano for her role in helping shape this study during its initial stages. To Dr. Don McQuarie, for providing consistent support of this work and process. My thanks to Dr. Louis Katzner, creator of the Katzner Fund which economically helped to enable the fieldwork portion of the research. To the HSRB staff at BGSU, thank you for your continuous support. To Jennifer Kavetsky for her wizardry in editing, and to everyone who contributed by conversing, dropping off potential resources, or critiquing pieces. I also offer my respect, awe, and gratitude to the girls who participated in this study. They shared their stories with candor and strength (and humor), for this I have no words.

To my family and to my sisters, your support is everything I could have asked for; I love you. To my girls, you give me constant strength, super strength; thank you, I love you. Finally, to Nick, you are truly an uncompromising, unwavering, patient, and loving reader and partner. If we ever doubt our fortitude we can look back at this moment and know certainly, we are capable of great triumphs. Gracias para siempre.
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PREFACE

My knowledge of subculture at the beginning of this study was one of peripheral personal interaction and academic interest. My seventeen year old sister, she is a skanker who spends every free moment, apart from marching band and the expected duties tied to high school, in Philadelphia clubs “skanking” (a skip/hop dance) to ska music. In addition to my familial relation to such a devoted skanker, my previous academic research involved my production of a photojournalism exhibit that included the stories and portraits of adolescent girls who were classified by social systems as “at risk.” The project revealed that it is not uncommon for girls’ most intense “truths” to be brushed off as “teenaged angst,” and often the stories of American girls are silenced not because they are un-important but rather because the spaces to tell their stories in are scarce.

Given the authority to speak, the stories and roles of girls proved vital, vibrant and chilling when made available for the community, their parents, and peers to witness. From my personal interaction with my sister, my work with the “at risk” girls, and my academic studies, I knew girls were active in subcultures and how underrepresented they are in sub-cultural studies. Further, it became extremely clear how consistently marginalized and undervalued their stories are within their own communities. My success working with this understudied population drives me to work with more girls and document their stories.

My Introduction to the Scene

I was introduced to the Lower Manhattan Club Scene in December 2005. During my first night visiting an old friend, she asked if I wanted to go to a huge party. Her invitation came with the warning that she was not sure if it was “my scene.” She told me that it might be a little wilder than what I was used to in Philadelphia and Ohio and I should be prepared for
nudity…”but really, it’s great!” I wanted to have a quiet evening out eating sushi and sipping wine with an old friend. It was clear to me that she really wanted to go and was very excited and impressed by her new party scene. Still not sure if I was up for the naked party she asked if I wanted to see pictures of it. Feeding both my curiosity and her enthusiasm I agreed to view what I thought would be pictures that she, an avid amateur photographer, had collected of her friends during nights of party-going. I was wrong. She did not show me a single photograph she had taken, but rather she opened a professional and well organized website devoted solely to the club scene she was inviting me to visit in person.

During that first virtual tour of the Scene, she pointed out the people who she had gotten to know during her year as a bartender at one of the most popular clubs. She explained that the Scene is accepting of everyone and everyone is “soooo sweet.” She pointed out the most popular drag queens, the transsexuals who have been in the Scene for years, and a close up of the ever-popular prosthetic breast that dispenses shots of alcohol while worn proudly by a man. She showed me men and women she called “Club Kids,” eighteen to twenty-somethings who frequent and define the vibe within the Scene. In spite of the profusion of color, smiles and intoxicating vibes from the computer screen, I did not go to the party with her that night. I did not feel ready, nor did I have anything to wear. Even if I did want to go, judging from the ironic, nostalgic, and “two steps ahead of any trend” ensembles I saw in the pictures I probably would not even be allowed within a mile of the club she was suggesting.

A few days later as I was on a train heading home, looking at pictures I took of friends and thinking back fondly on my visit. While reveling in the success of my journey the one thing nagging at me was the party I did not attend, and the website that I scanned for only a few moments but whose graphic images were cemented in my mind. I decided then to find out more
about the culture at work in the Scene. I wanted to know more about the Club Kids and their subculture. I wanted to meet the photographer who was running a website so charismatic that my friend was ready to drop out of graduate school at New York University to be part of the Scene.

Although there were also men and boys in the pictures, I decided to focus my research on an analysis on the experience of female Club Kids because women and girls are the primary subjects on the website and hold dominant positions within the clubs. As bartenders, go-go dancers, hosts, and fashionistas, the women stand out in both the real time and the virtual experience. I also wanted to focus on the stories of females because the stories of female subcultural youth are often marginalized but remain vital to subcultural production. Additionally, my background in photography allows me to notice the minute details in the photographer’s technique, interactions with subjects, and his technical and artistic vision over time, all of which risk going unnoticed without such a complete understanding of the medium.

Possible Sociological Approaches

My initial approach to this research proposed sociologically grounded field research with the upper middle class, majority white youth subculture of New York Club Kids. Using a deviance theory framework, I focused on the impact of labeling on both the subculture and the dominant culture. The Chicago School dominated subcultural research from the 1920s until the 1970’s with its work grounded in sociology and its focus on the role of delinquency and deviance within subcultures. The studies influenced by the Chicago School present subcultural identity as determined by circumstance and resulting in decisive life course outcomes. The Club Kids appeared to exist outside of the “typically” prescribed deviant subcultural space; my study
proposed examining how labeling works within an atypical and possibly unlabeled (as deviant) space.

Gangs are the most commonly addressed deviant youth subculture and a vital reference point for understanding what deviance is and how it is approached. The majority of research employs quantitative survey methods or ethnographic research with working class male youth subcultures (McRobbie and Garber 1975). With consideration to several different definitions of deviance, statistical deviance would define that those taking part in gangs as deviant because they are statistically marginalized by their act. An absolutist point of view would regard gang activity as deviant based on a black and white definition of good and bad. Normativists consider gang youth deviant under the condition that membership in the gang violates a social norm. Labeling would determine gang youth deviant based on surrounding community, criminal justice system and other cultural groups labeling it deviant. Being that the majority of the Club Kids appear to be white and upper middle class, the subculture does not correspond to a traditional deviant youth subculture in the cannon of socio-cultural analysis.

While the Club Kids may engage in as many, if not more acts of deviance than low socioeconomic status (SES) subcultural youth (based on media coverage), it appears that they are not approached by the greater community, criminal justice system or media in the same way that labeled groups are. The non-label potentially leads to a lack of research based on the perception that they are not “deviant” or a “subculture”. The non-label may have an effect that we have not yet seen because we have not examined it. Even though lower social economic status and marginality are often associated with subcultural involvement, the Club Kids are evidence that such markers are not required, for formation of a thriving subculture.
In what ways do class and privilege affect the gendered production and consumption that occurs in deviant subcultures? Locally criticized as nothing more than “a bunch of partying rich kids” or *Girls Gone Wild*, their ability to function within the approved boundaries and social spaces of clubs instead of street corners imparts social power on this otherwise non-normative and subversive subculture. The members are known to engage in acts that are typically considered marginal or deviant (e.g. drug use, public nudity/sex, internet pornography), yet within this subculture, they are apparently able to avoid being stigmatized and otherwise negatively labeled. Conversely, they enjoy growing popularity around New York, nationally, and internationally via the Internet and popular music or culture focused magazines.

Cultural and Gender Studies

After my initial field research and interaction with the Club Kids at clubs, in their apartments, and at cafés, my proposed sociological framework became an increasingly less effective way to synthesize what I was seeing, hearing, and experiencing. Using deviance theory in this case led to a numbing and erasure of individual identity and agency among the youth involved. Utilizing a multidisciplinary approach of women and gender studies, and cultural studies I am better able to examine the social structures and power relationships at work reinforcing or attempting to deconstruct dominant cultural ideologies.

By shifting my lens to a feminist perspective I am better able to contextualize and historicize the Scene. The lens shift allows for contextualizing the role of the social and the economic power structures at work between the Scene and mass culture and internally in the Scene itself. Additionally, this new approach allows me to reexamine deviance as non-normative and more accurately portray what I saw through ethnographic research techniques.
INTRODUCTION

Birth and Perpetuation: Scene History

The Club Kids today have trends, expectations, and traditions that they continue to cultivate inside the privacy of their chosen nightclubs. However, their lifestyle is not one accurately understood without placement in its rich and, at times, famous historical context. The Club Kids come from a long tradition of Manhattan party scene subcultures. Over the past fifty years, infamous club cultures including Studio 54, the followers of Andy Warhol, and the 1980s Michael Alig led Club Kids continuously made their marks on New York City. Each group used music, style, and exclusivity to make the scene their own; additionally, escape through performance, prolific drug use, and sexual experimentation characterized the previous scenes and continues to appeal to the current Club Kids.

In New York City there were separate straight clubs and gay clubs until disco successfully integrated the two in an environment defined by music and style. Lawyer Ian Schrager and restaurateur Steve Rubell’s partnership and investment in Studio 54 produced an environment of the most intense and extraordinary celebrity and eccentricity that club culture had ever seen. Schrager noticed,

not just the size and vigor of the gay culture he saw about him but the general mixing and melding of different groups of people, the breaking down of social barriers of race and class, and the sight of people willing to stand in line, often in rotten weather, for the privilege of spending their money awed him (Haden-Guest 1997a, 10).

In spite of Studio 54 opening in a CBS production studio in a day when the majority of the country was sure that disco was dead, it remains the most iconized American discotheque to this day.

Writer and nightlife reporter Anthony Haden-Guest attributes the disco look that Studio 54 made its own to several already established aesthetics; the nostalgic disco ball, burlesque
show gaudiness, and fashion photography strobe light effects (13). Rubell’s highly selective
door policy produced the perfect balance of celebrity and anonymous personalities within the
club. The result was a dynamic of extreme dictatorial exclusion and selectivity at the door but
instant democracy once you were admitted. Rubell knew that A-list celebrities’ presence kept
the club full. To keep the celebrities coming, he gave them plenty of perks such as cocaine,
poppers, and alcohol (218).

In the wake of Watergate and President Nixon’s resignation, journalists and
photographers were less likely to protect the privacy of personalities of interest than they were to
investigate them. With the growth of celebrity culture, Studio 54 was a primary source of gossip
and scandal. When Bianca Jagger made her entrance to Studio 54 on a white horse, it solidified
the club’s standing as A-list. As the photographs slowly circulated in the coming weeks, the
crowds grew—both famous and otherwise. Andy Warhol, Elizabeth Taylor, Donald Trump,
Elton John and more partied under the man on the moon image that came to life nightly on the
Studio wall. When Cher’s image graced the cover of The New York Post and The Daily News it
marked the first time a celebrity face trumped that of a fashion model in the media (47).

Discotheques changed the way paparazzi shot celebrities; now they were all in one place, the
chase was removed, and so was the classic ten feet of space between the camera and the subject.
(Haden-Guest 1997b, 45).

In 1978 a raid of Studio 54 revealed drugs and millions of dollars of unreported income.
In 1979 New York Magazine ran an unsympathetic article with a copy of a list found during the
raid that tracked celebrity names and the perks they received from Rubell (Studio 1979, 10).
After the sentencing of Rubell and Schrager, the sale of Studio 54, and The New York Magazine
debacle, celebrities were less likely to go to clubs. Those who still desired a space like Studio 54
found that perks were disappearing and a new paying generation was starting to line up.

The political climate in New York shifted as the law became increasingly intolerant of excessive public drug use and as New York faced the reality of AIDS (AIDS in New York 2006, 2). Increased awareness of AIDS decelerated the once heedless partying. In search of an escape, a new appreciation for voyeurism, porn, and fetishism erupted in nightlife, all of which Peter Gatien successfully exploited at his clubs (Owen 2003, 19). Gatien opened Limelight on November 9, 1983 in the cavernous gothic architecture of an Episcopal Church. The invitations read “Andy Warhol and Interview invite you to the grand opening of the Limelight” (55). Warhol’s approval brought celebrities and beautiful people to the new venue. The club functioned successfully with drink tickets for famous people and a highly selective door policy, until New York club owner Rudolph opened Palladium with Steve Rubell as a consultant in May 1985. Palladium advertised open bars and free weekend admission and Limelight, unable to compete, took an economic and social hit for several years.

The 1980s nightlife found success in a new trend in the city. Not drugs or sex, but art; intensely original art made by a group of young New York artists. Both Palladium and Area, a theme club that opened in 1983, turned the nightlife in their clubs into a tribute to the thriving art scene. In May 1985, Area premiered its art theme with contributions from Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, Basquiat, Kenny Scharf, and Julian Schnabel just before Palladium opened with its own goals of making a big deal of the new young art stars in New York (Haden-Guest 1997a, 267). At Palladium, Keith Haring painted a backdrop for the dance floor, Kenny Schark designed the bathrooms and telephones, and Eric Fischl, Laurie Anderson and David Salle made videos to play in loops (269).

In the March 14, 1988 New York Magazine reporter Amy Virshup dubbed a niche group
of partiers who frequented Palladium “The club kids” (12). Celebutante of the scene, James St. James remembers the impact the article had. “There were probably about fifty people involved in the Tunnel Kid scene in 1987, 1988,” After the New York magazine cover, the number swelled to several hundred” (Owen 2003, 353). Michael Alig, known as the king of the club kids, thrived on the mentality of an endless childhood and a unification of freaks everywhere. He was not adored by the reigning celebutante crowd but rather his methods appealed to enough people that the owner of Palladium, Rudolph, let him promote events until 1989. This continued until Rudolph told the Kids to move on due to their escalating drug use (333).

Limelight owner Peter Gatien saw in Michael Alig and the club kids the potential to rejuvenate his floundering nightclub. Gatien gave Alig full control and unlimited budget for promotions, and soon the club kids were part of the first scene since Studio 54 to exert the energy associated with pre-AIDS exhibitionism. “The club swarmed with sideshow oddities; a pandemonium of dope fiends, gender benders, and all purpose weirdoes dressed to excess” (3). By the end of 1990, Alig’s Disco 2000 parties, which he described as “the nightclub of the future and a place where adults could be children again” made Limelight the place to be again (59). The club kids had branded their drug intake into a party scene and Disco 2000 was infamous as a “pill and powder circus” (3). Similar to their Studio 54 predecessors, cocaine remained a drug of choice accompanied now by ecstasy and kedamine, an animal anesthetic known for producing powerful visions and antisocial highs.

Alig’s rejuvenation of New York nightlife did not go unnoticed. Haden-Guest explains that the media friendly club kids also filled a hole that the now unwilling celebrity world had left behind (Haden-Guest 1997a, 353). Paparazzi took advantage of the outrageously attired and newly named club kids who were willing participants as they never got tired of putting their
faces out there in a hope for fame. The club kids were covered by *People, Time, Newsweek, The New York Times*, and *New York Magazine*. They were televised by *The Geraldo Show* (Rivera 1994) and consequently Alig received letters from teenagers who wanted to move to Manhattan and join him. “Soon, every medium-sized city in America boasted a club-kid scene based directly on these lifestyle propaganda spots that aired nationally on afternoon TV” (Haden-Guest 1997a, 133).

The scene became well-known for the participants’ childlike and also increasingly heinous acts. Regular events at Limelight included a pee-drinker, an on-stage champagne enema, and The Hot Body Contest featuring wasted contestants stripping down for fifty dollars. Michael Alig even threw himself a thirtieth birthday party themed “Blood Feast” after a favorite slasher movie and enriched by a bloody scabbed bruised dress code. What was initially fun and fantastical nightlife was now marked by increasingly long-term, habitual drug use that turned the scene antisocial and grotesque.

During this time of escalated issues within the club itself, the city saw a change in leadership in January 1994 when Rudolph Giuliani was inducted as Mayor. He focused on cleaning up the city by policing for relatively minor offenses and holding a no tolerance drug policy.

Giuliani thought of nightclubs not as pop culture playgrounds that brought significant economic benefits to the city—not as important social safety valves where young people went to release the stress of urban living or as valuable incubators of musical movements (house, hip-hop-, punk) that swept the globe—but rather as wholly sinister venues that promoted rampant antisocial behavior (Owen 2003, 20).

Under the new administration, Peter Gatien and Limelight were soon to be scrutinized by law enforcement and the focus of a racketeering investigation. In the meantime Michael Alig was secretly using his dealer and sometimes roommate Angel Melendez’s drugs and money to
support a kedamine and cocaine binge. The binge ended on March 17, 1996 when Alig and fellow Club Kid Freeze (Robert Riggs) fought with and murdered Melendez. The body was dismembered and dumped resulting in a long gap between the murder and any investigation.

Many of the club kids looked down their powdered noses at Angel, not just because he made them pay for their drugs but also because he was a Latino. A pronounced streak of racism ran through the club-kid scene, which was made up largely of the pampered offspring of middle class whites (159).

On October 1, 1997 Riggs and Alig were indicted with one count of manslaughter each and sentenced to 10-20 years in jail.

In early 1998 the Gatien racketeering trial commenced but lacked proof that Gatien financed drugs at his clubs. In 1999 he paid a fine and served a short prison sentence for tax evasion. The persistent charges against Gatien and the loss of Alig contributed to waning public opinion towards Limelight. Looking back, Gatien described the climate surrounding the fall of the Limelight, saying that “there’s been a number of task forces set up that incorporated everything from Consumer Affairs to the Buildings Department to the Fire Department to Narcotics. To regulate underage drinking, whatever, you name it” (Haden-Guest 1997a, 372).

According to Gatien running a club in the ‘90s was much riskier than it was in the ‘80s when if you did not have violence you would not be bothered. Looking back at the scene from his jail cell, Alig comments:

Nihilistic, cynical, defeatist, yes; evil, no, I don’t recall anything intentionally malicious. Even the Blood Feast parties were more about camp than anything else. It was more about the absurdity than the nastiness. You have to remember the club kids were all about sensation and media and shock value. If any club kid said he was worshipping the devil, you can be sure it was for the publicity (306).

Gatien was deported, in 2001, back to his native Canada. The club kids dissipated without a leader or a space. The subject of a song, a documentary, a movie starring Macaulay Culkin, and
several books, Alig’s murder of Angel Melendez made him more famous than all the club kids’ promotion ever had.

Fast forward to today, to the new Scene, a Scene that has historical roots in Studio 54, Andy Warhol’s Factory, and Limelight. The modern-day Club Kids’ creative production of fashion, music and art reflects their history. Notably different is the dominant culture’s unfettered access to images of what goes on inside the clubs. Any pictures of Studio 54, the Factory, or Limelight were limited by controlled access to the highly exclusive spaces and the process of film photography. Many of the pictures that exist include people whose faces are iconic in American culture to this day. Studio 54 and the Factory were famous because of the celebrities who went there, and they epitomize New York nightlife due to their exclusive clientele. For many of the new Kids this is their college party, but they are not the quintessential sorority sister or fraternity brother. The Club Kid’s party habits are not necessarily atypical from those of other college-aged Americans today. For many students college is a right of passage into an unsupervised space that promises access to free alcohol, sex, and maybe a stray tattoo. College also promises a certain amount of privacy. Set largely on campus environments, what happens at a college party may become unwelcome fodder for campus gossip but no one expects to gain international fan bases with their late night stunts.

If what happens in college stays in college then something is different in Manhattan. The Club Kids are part of a subculture and Club Scene that historically and to this day values the internal meaning making that empowers them to maintain the diversity, tolerance, safety, and home elements. At the same time, the Club Kids are on the cutting edge of underground music and fashion trends. Professional photographers and journalists increasingly treat them like celebrities, trend watchers track them, and high school students know their faces.
I contend that while past New York club scenes experienced cultural appropriation of their art and lifestyles through printed media and exclusive art showings, digital photography disseminated through Internet spaces has increased the depth and speed with which mass culture impacts the once exclusive spaces.

Theoretical Framework

“Subcultures are not discrete entities; they are always in the process of acting upon, and being acted on in turn by, the world around them” (Gelder 1997, 8).

Privilege

The Scene possesses and engages with both economic and white privilege within the subculture and the surrounding community. Anti-racist activist Peggy McIntosh’s analysis of white privilege describes such privilege as the ability to exist as the norm with the expectation that “others” are working to reach the status you have. McIntosh explains that whites possess unacknowledged power in what she calls their “invisible knapsack,” “unearned power conferred privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate” (1988). According to McIntosh, racism is not necessarily outward manifestations of hatred but also “invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.” (1988).

Several possible advantaging systems in her analysis include race, social class, economic class, sex, sexual orientation, nationality, age, ethnicity, religion or physical ability. In today’s Club Scene, the sustainability of the Kid’s culture as “fashionable” rather than “non-normative deviance” is rooted in their privileged social position.

Sociologist Peter Willmott’s 1960’s study “concluded that the idea of a completely classless youth culture was premature and meaningless. He observed instead that the leisure styles available to youth were inflected through the contradictions and divisions intrinsic to a
class society” (Hebdige 1979, 77). Willmott’s study demoted “teenagers” as an all-encapsulating term to the dust pile and welcomed a detailed look at the segments that exist in youth culture and are as divisive and driven by McIntosh’s “invisible systems” as that of their parents.

Subcultures

Subcultures, according to sociologists Copes and Williams, are “culturally bounded (but not closed) networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects and practices through interaction”(2005, 82). The interactions of the members are primary to the meaning within the group. Through their practices they spread their subculture, or information about it, over time. Copes and Williams examined how this worked locally, based on a series of communication interlocks and use of the Internet. These interlocks included maintaining weak ties to multiple networks of people, being a member of several networks including the subculture, information spread through key role players, and use of mass media (Fine and Kleinman1979).

Subcultural activities usually take place during leisure time rather than work and are then labeled as non-productive or self-absorbed by the parent culture (Gelder 1997). Several studies of straightedge subculture found that subcultural youth are often perceived as contentious, rebellious, uninformed, and uncaring. Furthermore, they are “generally constructed as the cultural other, set apart from both children and adults in terms of values, beliefs and ethics” (Copes and Williams 2005, 68).

Hebdige argues that subcultures do produce work and subcultural noise: “interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media” (1979, 90). Through rule and norm breaking subcultures manifest a deep understanding of class and difference. Hebdige explains that this very public emergence is accompanied by a
wave of media coverage. The media begins with both fascination and condemnation followed by serious commentary and fashion page coverage. The final stage commodifies the culture into “just kids dressing up” and serves in many cases to remove the public fear. This recovery of subcultural disorder comes in two forms. In the first, economic conversion is the cooptation of subcultural signs and symbols by mass culture for economic gain. The second is the ideological conversion of the subcultural participant as complete other or complete spectacle (119). The Club Kids have access to private spaces, cultural and economic privilege that one would suspect sustains their deviance in very different ways than those of gangs. They are more likely to be appropriated by mass culture because they were accepted as a part of it in the first place.

Anthropologist John Irwin’s *Scenes* challenged much of the work of the Chicago School by positing that members of subcultures are always participating in some way with the mainstream and that they have contact with people who are not members of their subculture. He defined scenes as discrete social worlds in which membership is mercurial and fluid. There are also levels of attachment to scenes, such as even if you cannot be in the band there are other opportunities for participation on various levels (e.g. fans, tech support, managers) (Halberstam 2005, 316). The subcultures are social worlds that members move in and out of (they are not necessarily permanent) and they are not isolated from interaction with peripheral actors. Gelder says of Irwin’s work “it shifts away from the Chicago school’s early sense that subcultures are a reaction against social pressure to conform, or an evasion of forms of social regulation. Instead, subcultural identities are a symptom of democratic social pluralism; the result of lifestyle choices as much as anything else” (Gelder 1997, 8). From this point, it became more common to read subcultures as a means of forming temporary social identity. As Irwin wrote, “many of us plunged into them—we understood that we were not making an exclusive or lifetime
commitment” (1977, 17). Recently the motivation that drives youth to the subcultural group may be because of increasing difficulty to find meaning in their lives (Williams and Copes 2005).

Female Subcultural Voices

Subcultural studies, historically, consistently marginalizes the voices of female members. Often they are erased completely or they are mentioned as peripheral actors with no primary roles or impacts. Halberstam explains that queer subcultural theories “account for non-heterosexual, non-exclusively male, non-white and non-adolescent subcultural production in all its specificity” (Halberstam 2005, 158). She also suggests the need for subcultural studies to expand the definition of subculture beyond “youth in crisis.” Doing this allows us to consider the possibility of ‘deliberate deviance’ as opposed to the traditional inevitable acts.

Cultural theorist Angela McRobbie’s research on girls in subcultures and girl dominated subcultures shows girls and women as actively involved in the roles of subcultural entrepreneurs. Rather than subversive, she calls the acts of these women who buy and sell fashion in the London Ragmarkets ‘alternative’ (1989). She explains that while in the mainstream fashion is coded with female interest, in subculture the codes are specifically male.

The signs and codes subverted and reassembled in the ‘semiotic guerilla warfare’ conducted through style do not really speak to women at all. The attractions of a subculture, its fluidity, the shifts in the minutiae of its styles, the details of its combative bricolage are offset by an unchanging and exploitative view of women (1981, 32).

At the same time, resistance may exist in the space of the club. Katherine Frank writes of female strippers performing for each other at strip clubs while male patrons look on believing the attention is directed at them. Frank suggests these undercover acts “fuck with heteronormativity” as “thwarting the primacy of male desire in a heterosexual institution” (2002, 223). No matter how much subverting is done she acknowledges the power of any male observer to appropriate and redefine her performances. Frank suggests that self-conscious
performances of femininity can be personally empowering only within the context of race and class difference. In one study the women who could “pass” for possessing middle class femininity had more agency to perform resistance and still survive in the broader context of society (2002, 212).

According to Frank, race and class provide the framework in which the body is provided with different “relations to power” that determine the freedom with which certain bodies can perform variations of femininity without detriment. “A feminist politics of stripping, if one can exist, needs to be aware that the power of beauty remains deeply intertwined with class, age, and race hierarchies, and as a result, what is playful to one woman may be painful or impossible for another” (2002, 276). She supports Bourdieu’s theory that physical attractiveness can be a form of class privilege with examples from club and sex work expectations. Frank explains in her study that clubs use class markers like tattoos, piercings, weight, and excessive makeup in order to decide those who will or will not perform femininity in certain spaces (2002, 212).

MacRae’s fieldwork assessed how a person becomes a clubber and who pursues the venture. She noted the importance of exclusivity standards that exist within club scenes (ie. mainstream, hip) that set boundaries regarding who can join. Access to club scenes in this case was mediated by the youth’s social location. The study lends credence to symbolic interactionism within the context of youth experiencing the process of learning the group practices (these are primarily effective while interacting with other group members). MacRae finds that the stratification between the clubs is on a class basis; “status differentiation involved the use of material resources, cultural knowledge, and social networks to define the ‘other’” (2004, 69).
Theoretical Context

Engaging in dialogue with the already existing literature, I begin this analysis with the understanding that the Club Kids’ subculture is culturally constructed in a climate where racial and economic privilege divides non-normative youth into those labeled deviant and those who are “looking for thrills.” Those “looking for thrills” are more likely to have a stronger connection to mass and dominant culture through familial and social ties. Visually the Club Kids’ non-normative culture subscribes to some mainstream social expectations by working within larger societal frameworks, and as a result they are more likely to experience mass culture appropriation of their Scene in the form of trends. The Scene, which takes place in established for-profit clubs, is most affected by the framework of capitalism.

Applying the existing literature to the historical archives of New York club scenes illustrates how closely the media coverage and scholarship covering this period model, the trends in subcultural studies and also the original traits that the archives exhibit. Coverage of the clubs at the time, and in retrospect, focus on the men as actors and agents of change and on the women as objects of adornment or not at all. Male or Female, the names that appear in history are those of the richest, most famous attendees of the clubs, these include the movie stars, singers, artists, moguls, and then the club owners. The club owners garnered attention for the personalities they built for themselves and later for the more important aspect of their identities: the economy behind the club cultures they nourished. The economy always came to light, usually amidst scandal of drugs, extortion, or embezzling, and when it did it always trumped the culture inside the doors and became the headline news. The subculture of club culture went down again and again in economic flames that left the rest of the City its head and saying, “nothing good ever came out of wasting your days away partying.” The scandals and trials, inevitably, would drive
the Scene away for a while but never permanently, for eventually there would open a new wallet willing to start it all up again, in some form or another.

The media focus today on the scandal behind the economics of club culture results in a proliferation of detailed accounts of the rise and fall of the different chapters in its history from a business and legal perspective. This type of coverage dismisses what was happening within the subculture while these mass cultural frameworks were acting and reacting to it, but it also establishes the importance of mass cultural frameworks and their connections to those of subcultures. Both Karl Marx and philosopher Donna Haraway described a cultural shift where the private becomes the public.

Applying Marx’s critical analysis of commodification, labor and commodity fetishism to cyborg theory suggests a process through which autonomy, authority, and power in the Kids lives existed while mass culture capitalistic systems were present and active inside the space of their subculture. Donna Haraway uses the cyborg as a device and image throughout her manifesto. A cyborg is “a hybrid of machine and organism,” “a creature of social reality,” and a “creature of fiction” (1991, 424). She reframes the machine/organism relationship of mechanized organism and animated machine describing their obsolescence. The cyborg encompasses machine and organism into one boundary crossing entity. “For us, in imagination and in other practice, machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves. We don’t need organic holism to give impermeable wholeness, the total woman and her variants (mutants?)” (449). The ‘total woman’ is reliably imagined today as the cyborg – in Haraway’s terms great power comes with crossing boundaries. In this way, she contends that cyborg identities are a promising ideal. However, I propose in real context, the cyborg is likely to come
in contact with other structures of power that however manifested cannot be circumnavigated without some confrontational encounters.

Cyborg theory is an apt framework for this study as it provides a path to understand an organism whose identity is disparate in form but unified in purpose. For the Kids who create lives, networks, communities and art on the Internet their identities are such that, when unified, they create their entire self. Examined, their constant crossing of boundaries of all kinds is a fundamental part of their self, a self that while private is very much public and perhaps malleable. Haraway further explains that the dichotomies used to construct the ideology of private and public spaces as they characterize women’s lives would be better imagined as a network so to suggest “the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and in the body politic”(442). In practice, such a network means the conflation of public and private in what would have been the most public (city square) and the most private (bedroom) you can imagine. For the Kids, this means that what was once private, and still may be considered so, may not be.

The Kids time spent inside of the clubs is identity construction, community building, performance, leisure, networking, and, based on Marx, it is also labor. “In the use-value of each commodity there is contained useful labor, i.e., productive activity of a definite kind and exercised with a definite aim”(Marx 1983, 42). The labor that creates a product is hidden when that product enters the economic market as a commodity. The Club Kids are eventually both the workers and the product. They become the commodity. Their work is removed from their production and as their circumstances determine their consciousness, it is not possible for them to see their actions as work or as production for eventual consumption. Others are able to capitalize on their behavior and they get nothing or little from it, they are alienated from even
thinking about it as work. The commodification of the Scene is exposed to Marx’s fetishism of commodities; as ideology and social hegemony inform “needs” for something that is not possible to be or to have. This drives obsession with having the need met (72). In this way, circumstances determine consciousness. As cyborgs functioning across boundaries of experience and representation, they remain active producers and subversive identities. But as part of mass culture their agency may not be more than an illusion. However, the illusion of agency may be enough to keep the Kids enmeshed in a subculture that is increasingly involved with and affected by mass cultural systems of power.

Method

I began observing the Scene in March 2005 with a combined method of participant observation and critical ethnography. I went to clubs and conducted semi-structured interviews with the new Club Kids. I interacted with Club Kids in the context of the Club Scene and also talked to photographers and other mainstream attendees. It was evident from the beginning, being a young, thin, white, attractive woman, that I could easily enter the clubs, start conversations, and blend into the environment. For that reason, from the beginning I made conscious decisions about my presentation of self. I had more credibility with the Club Kids on first glance than most other researchers attempting the same methodology would have had after weeks spent in the same clubs. This ease of passing meant that I had to be especially conscious of how close I got to my subjects as an apparent peer and how much distance I kept as a researcher.

So much trust made me exponentially more focused on ethically representing the world that I was allowed into and the realities that the Club Kids I interviewed described to me. Although I could pass and I did dress up, every person who I spoke with one-on-one knew I was
doing research on the Scene. I encountered almost no skepticism about my objectives while I was in clubs as a participant observer. I tended to carry a drink throughout the night except while dancing, and although drug use was prevalent, I did not participate in any drug use. I sensed that the Club Kids were excited about my work but they were also increasingly used to having outsiders pay attention to them. Therefore, on some level I believe I was perceived as one more journalist providing them with publicity.

The process of participant observation is highly sensitive because of the need to remain constantly aware of how close I could get to the Scene without being too close and at the same time how too much distance would result in assumptions and essentializing on my part. I was privileged to be a part of this Scene in a way that most could not, but I remained aware of the boundaries that needed to be in place no matter how much a part of the Scene I appeared. In identifying my own positionality, I recognize that “critical ethnography is always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among the Other(s), one in which there is negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the Other’s world” (Soyini, 2005, 9). To achieve such substantive results, great value is placed on the experiences and meaning making done by the Club Kids. In this context, the study is interpretive and interactive in process.

The subjects are female self-identified Club Kids over the age of eighteen. I call them “Kids” or “Club Kids” throughout this study because that is how they self-identify. I also use the term “Scenesters” to refer to anyone who is a part of the nightlife subculture in this Scene. This label includes but also extends beyond Club Kids to other regulars in the Scene. The Kids claim to be between eighteen and twenty-two years old but often describe being under eighteen when they started partying. Initially, I contacted potential subjects on MySpace, an Internet
community where they are very active. Potential subjects were asked to participate in a one-hour semi-structured interview. Before consenting, I informed them that the interview would be recorded. The interviews were conducted outside of the party environment in a place of their choosing.

While I brought some questions to the table, the Club Kids were encouraged to talk about any part of the Club Scene or their current lives that they felt defined their identity or how they want to be seen. In addition, they answered questions regarding their perception of the group, motivations, process of joining, and future goals. The club experience is too visceral to theorize and deconstruct apart from the feelings of the Kids. Focusing on the meanings that the Kids attach to their own behaviors and their lived experiences is integral to understanding their accounts. To do such a thing is to apply my own notion of norms and expectations without consideration of the field.

I interviewed the Kids throughout 2006 and 2007 during four different visits and talking to those I could more than once. During my preliminary participant observation in early 2006, I had personal communications with some Kids in, and viewers of, the Scene, these are cited as “personal communications.” Some interviews were at their apartments and others were at coffee houses: the tape recorder was always clearly visible. Wherever we were they were greatly enthusiastic and apparently honest. I recognize that they were being interviewed about the place that they considered a kind of home or had for some period of time. In many ways the Club Scene is the place where they could go with any flaw, fashion quirk, sexuality, race, or fundamental difference with their parents; they could get lost and found amidst people who were trying to do the same. People, who instead of being seen for whatever non-normative marker
they wear like a scarlet letter during each nine to five day, are seen and subsequently Scene for their fabulous entrances as Club Kids and party people at night.

In addition to understanding the self-defined and perceived identities of the Club Kids, I also conduct content analysis of media representations of the Kids. Construction of identity by means of the Internet is increasingly popular as a professional and social networking tool. In addition to participant observation, I also documented the Scene through use of their personal online activity and the press’s online coverage through spaces like Myspace.com, Lastnightsparty.com and BlueStatesLose on Gawker.com. The first, MySpace, is a host for pages that are produced by the Club Kids themselves. They are personal representations of music, movie and book preferences as well as a place for the Kids to post pictures of themselves, share them with friends, and meet people interested in similar topics. Lastnightsparty is the first and most popular website that showcased the New York club nightlife of the Club Kids and their friends. Finally, Gawker is a New York City media and gossip weblog that hosts Bluestateslose, a weekly column whose critical and sometimes scathing commentary focuses on media images of the Club Scene.

The aforementioned mediums are those that the Club Kids had control over some portion of the content. I consider these in relation to present trends in the mass media construction of the Club Kid Scene using archival research of the last year of magazine and Internet coverage in the United States including Spin, Rolling Stone, Blender, NY Magazine, Paper and The Village Voice.

Structure

This thesis is comprised of a preface, introduction, three body chapters, and a conclusion. The structure of the following analysis aims to provide the reader with an image of the nightlife
of Club Kids who I interviewed as their Scene received increased media attention. The research includes interviews with Anna, Maddy, Abigail, Haley, and Leah. They are all regulars, women, and Kids in the Club Scene, but each has a very different story, role, identity and set of truths when relating to the Scene. To be clear, the following is not “the” Manhattan club scene. If I had talked to five different girls, five Club Kid boys, some men from New Jersey visiting for the weekend, promoters, owners, bartenders or dealers, the study would be different. Subsequently, this is the Club Scene as seen and experienced by these five girls at the time that I spoke with them. I also provide my own subjective interpretation of the Scene by interpreting my experience as a participant observer in the clubs and as an interviewer.

Chapter one introduces the reader to the Scene by using imagery to confront the reader with an illusion of nightlife’s multi-sensory experience. It seeks to allow the reader to experience the club without actually including a ticket to Manhattan in each thesis copy. I refer to chapter one as a composite vignette of Club Scene nightlife; the purpose is to immerse the reader as fully as possible into a night in Manhattan from beginning to end. Writing a composite vignette allows me to show each woman at her height of Club Kid identity set within the fluidity of one night.

The layout of the following chapter is a combination of performative writing based on my participant observation at Manhattan clubs and excerpts of the Kids’ interviews. The italic sections of the chapter indicate an excerpt from an interview; treat these sections as words only you can hear as you walk through the room. I did not conduct the interviews in the clubs during a party, nor is it likely that they would have said the same things to me if I had. Additionally, the five women at the forefront of this study do not individually know all of the others nor would it
be likely to find them all at the same party at the same time on the same night. From this point on our participants are, as they consider themselves, girls and Kids.

Chapter two contextualizes the role of the nightlife photographer in the Scene and on the Internet through textual and historical analysis of Merlin Bronques, founder of Lastnightsparty.com (LNP). Bronques’ charismatic personality, his artistic philosophy grounded in community collaboration, and his redefinition of beauty garnered what eventually became a cult of personality within the Scene. He started photographing the Club Kids and posting their pictures online, and in doing so created a demand for more photographers to be present in clubs. The presence of a photographer at these parties, what was once an oddity, is now a main staple and a measure of an evenings success. Using the Internet to disseminate his photographs as not only art pieces but also promotional tools for New York clubs, Bronques’ visual presentation of the Club Scene is interpreted and consumed by viewers as a literal reproduction rather than an interpretation of a subculture.

Fame looks easy to achieve when your face is on the Internet every day of the week, and for a little while that is what it looked like to the Club Kids. One could not open Spin, New York Magazine or Paper without seeing a Club Kid party on the fashion or party pages. Seeing the images on lastnightsparty and in print, a new generation of party kids started moving to New York wanting to be famous. The Club Kids mini-celebrity brought them notoriety but also brought the external world into their private space.

Chapter three presents what the girls focused on as the biggest and most affecting changes in their subculture since the popularization of Internet photography within the Scene. With a combination of their interviews and a case study of one of the most popular Scene parties, this chapter is an analysis of mass cultural commodification of Club Scene Style and its after-
effects. The case study is a media analysis of one of the most popular parties and personalities to originate in the Scene: the MisShapes party and deejay set of three 20-somethings; Leigh Lezark and Geordon Nicol, and Greg Krelenstein. Since its beginning, MisShapes has incorporated, traveled internationally, enjoyed endorsement deals, a book publication, magazine covers, ended the party and started looking forward to developing a fashion line and touring. A party that was once isolated within the Scene, grew to attract partiers from the New York tri-state area and tourists from anywhere with web-access. The MisShapes are the epitome of Internet generation subcultural youth. Focusing on the importance of style, the process of internal meaning making that sustains the Scene, and impact that it has in nightlife, the five Club Kid girls describe what Scene style is for them, the changes they have seen since the entrance of cameras, and how the changes have affected their lives.
CHAPTER I: A NIGHT IN THE SCENE

The sky never really gets dark in the city no matter the time, but if it did, we could all just follow the glitter and hum from the line along the sidewalk on the East Side in Manhattan to find the Club Kids. The parties’ P.R. firms do not find the glitter and hum a safe bet so their publicity is flawless, glossy, hot and highly graphic. Their postcards are your entrance fee (in conjunction with the cover); they will get you past the velvet rope or, if nothing else, they will alleviate your nostalgia for days when band posters were worth keeping. Perfection does not stop at P.R.; everyone present is here to show their look. If they do not have a look they are making an ironic statement. Whether toting a look or a statement, the goal of everyone appears to be a bit of applause while exuding nonchalance.

It is a Friday, so there are people from all over including those who have traveled from upstate New York and New Jersey. The Jersey kids stand holding their chalked IDs like trophies and then there are the regular Scenesters: DJs, Promoters, Go-Go Dancers, Drag Queens, Hipsters and Club Kids.

A lot of Club Kids and Scenesters don’t go out that much on Fridays actually, because everyone is like, “oh that’s when all the kids from Jersey come in and it’s way too crowded and everything.” So that’s when those kids go to the places that we go to on the weekdays because they hear that they’re cool. Like if we go to a place on a weekday and it’s on LNP then all these Jersey kids will go there on the weekend because I think they see it on LNP. They what to go there because “oh so and so will probably be there.” These places just get way too crowded so a lot of my friends don’t go out on Fridays, we won’t always go out on Fridays, only sometimes. (Haley 2007)

Ahead you see a stern man guarding the door with control of a velvet rope and a fairly arbitrary cover. Upon mentioning the names of the right people, promoters or DJs, some walk past this long line and float past the rope as though it does not exist. After waiting in line, some partiers get in for free because they have the right look while others pay the cover. And some, some are charged more: the fee for the ugly or inept. During our first of two interviews Anna explained,
Misshapes these days, weird, weird, weird, weird. The whole crowd is different and they are letting in these losers. I’m like, ‘Thomas [door guy] your not doing your job.’ He used to be selective, everyone used to be hot and now it’s like, this many people are this hot [indicates a tiny amount with hands]. It’s sad. (Anna 2006)

Although Anna may be sad that her sacred place is at times desecrated by losers when she is in the club she never shows it and she always gets in. Free. Tonight she is your host.

You made it past the velvet rope and are now inside where it is dimmer and all of the colors change to red, darkroom style, as though protecting this world from over exposure. Let your eyes adjust. The room is full; it is pulsing, more alive than you are. You get a drink since for several hours most nights it is open bar. If you are blessed with connections and drink tickets drinks are free all night. All eyes within range of the door are on the door, bodies turn, lips murmur, and Announce!,

“Anna!”

“Hi Anna!”

“Oh Anna you look amazing”

“I just loooove your MAKE UP, ooh.”

“AM”

“AZ”

“ING!!!!”

The ones I hang out with the most I know from this whole scene. You are always making new friends. It’s a really surreal world. I really don’t do much besides school, homework, and then I go out and I see all my friends and I have fun. (Anna 2006)

Now I know everybody, and it is more fun when you meet new people who spark you. Like when I met her [Abigail], or my friend James but I love all of my old friends so much. If I have something new that inspires me, like a whole new revamping of my look or something then I will go out more. (Anna 2007a)

“Annn Aaaah”
“An na!”

Two feet over the threshold and into the club, there she is real and in person: Anna Rexia. Her fiery red hair, standing on what looks like live wires, precedes her. Her face is a nightly work of art painstakingly decorated in what she calls a style of drag. Merlin Bronques put her face on the map and even more so, on the Internet and his MySpace Top 8. She remembers him calling her, “Poster Child 2006.”

_Honestly I could just party all the time and be happy. Like, get a job in this world and just like be fine I suppose. I’m in fashion design and I want to be famous. But I would love to continue to do fashion design in some way with this world and I would love to have my own party and host (Anna 2006)._

_I want to do more, I will still go out but I want to be famous for something else. I’ll go out and do the whole Madonna thing, go to a club and be ridiculous, but I don’t want to make my living off of this. I want to do something more with my life. It’s a very shallow scene and I really don’t want to be involved with it forever. It’s fine now because I’m 19 and you’re supposed to be doing this when you’re 17,18,19,20,21... til your like, you know into your 20s. And if you’re not doing something productive, I feel, with your life, I don’t feel like DJing at Annex every week is a future. Ideally if I was gonna work I would want to do something creative and have it be my income you know? I don’t know what I’m going to do with my life but it is going to be something amazing. (Anna 2007a)_

Anna is wearing a vintage lace dress that she afforded by trading in a pile of past outfits to Beacon’s Closet for credit. On her head is a cream pin box hat with a small net veil covering her face. Tonight’s makeup includes silver sequins, similar to her dress, glued down both sides of her face; long lashes caress each side of your face as she kisses you “hello!”

_I do whatever inspires me that moment. It could be a movie I just watched, or like a song I listened to and I’ll be like I want to do this I’m gonna do this. I’m not going to Misshapes and being like “oh this person wore this I’m gonna recreate it.” I don’t do that I don’t really follow magazines I just kind of follow what’s in my head. (Anna 2007a)_

She reinforces her right to the title, “The Living Doll” every time she makes an entrance like this. While many Club Kids have trademark looks, tattoos or roles within the Scene, Anna has a
trademark identity (as the girl with the makeup, as the girl who likes drag, and as the doll) and name that elevates her above the fray.

It’s face paint. I love makeup. My Club Kid name, whatever, ‘Anna Rexia’ oh so witty. When I was 15 I was like, ‘I want to be a drag queen. Oh, this is a funny name I can use.’ I was like, ‘Wow, I’m so witty.’ And then I put it as my MySpace name and that was it.

I was always doing makeup but the reason I kept doing it is, I like, met Andy Shah and he gave me a flyer outside of Misshapes. I didn’t really know who he was and then like I saw him again and I wasn’t always doing makeup then but he said he recognized me because of my makeup. And so I just said, ‘I guess I’ll just keep doing it so people start to recognize me’, and it worked (Anna 2006).

Even before the feeling of lashes fade from your cheeks, Anna is gone from sight, swallowed by the booth five feet away. For Anna, hosting means that her pockets get lined because everyone will feel those lashes on their cheeks, everyone is her best friend tonight.

for hosting, all I do that night is pretty much hang out with my friends, arrive at the party I'm hosting, say hello to acquaintances and partake in idle babbling. I also get bottle service (vodka + mixers, etc), which is really nicely done at some parties and really ghetto at others. I don't drink but all my friends do, and then I dance and see what I can do to pass the time!

I used to be really excited by hosting and partying because I felt like I was special, or famous or something, but in reality, I'm just another, although colorful, face in the crowd, host or not. Therefore I don't really get excited anymore. (Anna 2007b)

Scanning the room you find not fiery hair, but a bold print sign next to a blond girl in lace tights and black bra. The sign reads “Pant and Coat Check.” You can try to leave your coat on but may just sweat to death. Pants, however, are up to personal discretion. Some people are keep their pants tonight while others happily do away with them. A blond grabs her drink and tiptoes right past you, stopping briefly to scan the room.

I’m 19. I’m Leah aka Baby. I kind of basically hang out with everybody in the Scene. I’m pretty well known apparently. I know a lot of different facets of people. I know Kids like Anna, I know kids that hang out in more electro clash stuff, or more Misshapes kids, or industry people, or just hipster kids or kids from New Jersey who are like 16. I just kind of know everyone I guess.

The first party I went to I was with my boyfriend at the time, in 2005 I guess, and that was the promoter Garcia who was pretty infamous. And I went to a party with him. And then
I would also go to Misshapes, I would go to Misshapes about every Saturday. I just got to know a lot of people. I just started expanding on that. And that winter I started going out a lot. I went to a lot of different parties and I started going that winter. I dated a DJ. I guess I got into every one and every thing. (Leah 2007).

Leah does not stand still long; she intertwines her fingers with those of the girl beside her now and leads her into the mass of bodies, lights, and music.

Two long bottle-toting arms adeptly maneuver in between you and the thirty-something probable accountant who fails to budge from his wide stance. You see the long delicate bottles and glasses held high in their trip through the undulating crowd. The most seasoned bartender you have ever seen in fishnets supports them. Moved by the crowd she pushes against the Dockers and sweater vest that block her path, the body inside the conservative costume does not move; it is paralyzed and excruciatingly displaced. No Matter. Not a drop of juice spills as the bartender successfully delivers bottle service to the booth attached to that which swallowed Anna just moments ago. A demand yelled from the bar to the bartender turns her away from the booth. The smile of success wiped from her face as she moves at technologic speed to satisfy alcoholic desires.

With her dutiful disappearance, Keith is left in your line of vision sitting at the booth with his head above the crowd. Keith is a promoter, DJ, and the creator of High Voltage party. His six foot stature pairs fantastically with his girlfriend Haley who barely surpasses five feet. At every turn, this pair is the subject of glances, both of them knowing exactly how to work a crowd. Do not misunderstand; they make a great looking couple with their matching dark cropped hair, pale skin and obvious affections. There is no mistaking that Haley is popular with the hipsters and Club Kids; she is well known, photographed, and runs with a crowd that has connections. Simply walking into a dive bar at two in the afternoon she and Keith always make an entrance.
In my case I get some kind of joy out of going out and knowing everyone in a room. Like, it feels good when I’m walking in and everyone is like “Haley, Haley, hey what’s up.” It’s cool but in the end they’re not your friends and I’ve actually talked to a lot of people on the Scene about this and they feel the same way, they’re like “I have a lot of friends but no close ones.” And I think it’s how much people feel (Haley 2007).

Two girls lean into the booth to endow kisses on Haley. She smiles, kisses back and then gives a little shake of the head “no.” The girls nod and move towards the dance floor. Tonight the booth is “Reserved” for friends and fellow partiers whom Keith invited earlier that day.

If I go to a party at Lotus or if I go to Movida, I would know everyone there. Those are my quote friends even though that is such bullshit because you know they are not really your friends. I have hundreds of close friends through the Scene through knowing people and I call them friends, but then I always say that I have three actual friends. And like those three actual friends go out with me and know all of the same people, but you know we hang out we go out to dinner they’ll come over, they’ll spend the night we’ll go to the movies, we watch movies, we do things that a regular group of friends would do. (Haley 2007)

Leaning against each other, both Haley and Keith have drinks in hand and schmooze with several people on their respective sides. The star-like flashes from the dance floor lights reach Haley’s face; her pink drink shutters in its glass as someone from the table stands to go dance. Everyone shifts to refill the booth while Haley lays her left hand on Keith’s leg and continues to talk to her right.

I have lived in NY for two years and I moved out here kind of for a job and for new scene. Because I’m from San Diego, which is like a big city, and then I moved to Oregon and it was like really small and I just don’t do well in small cities. So I kind of became fascinated with the scene in NY when I was in Oregon. I would like look online, and I knew of Lastnightsparty and Missshapes prior to coming out to NY. I would just always look at it and stuff, I wasn’t obsessed with it but, I really wanted to be a part of that. So, I came. It’s not the only reason I came out here, I also came out here for a job opportunity. I work in public relations and this is kind of what I want to do, you know? Nightlife, P.R. and everything like that just really interests me. But I was really excited to like come out here, and initially I just wanted to be friends with these people and hang out with them. They just really interested me (Haley 2007).
Haley came here with a clean slate, a job, and a curiosity about the Manhattan Club Scene.

Within a week of being here she fell in love with the nightlife that embraced her and with Keith, her boyfriend to this day.

_We fell in love, and the way we hit it off was just perfect. It was really low key and we felt that there was really something there so then the next night we met up again and we were really excited to see each other and he was like “let me take you out tonight, I know a lot of people and you’re going to be whatever”’ and I’m like this naïve girl from San Diego who is, you know, thinking that she has to pay twenty dollars to get into a club and like pay for drinks and stuff. We went to Marquis … it’s like very fancy, upscale, Paris Hilton goes there all the time. It’s one of those where you need to know someone to get in and if you don’t you need to look really good and you still need to pay twenty dollars. And we’re walking up and me and Keith are having such a good time and there is a huge line and we just walk past the line and there’s a velvet rope and the door guy literally just opens it and Keith and I walk in. I didn’t say anything but I was just like, “what is going on right now?” I was just in shock, and I thought, this is really so cool, this is so cool (Haley 2007)._

The booth next to them fills quickly after a rumble passes over the hall. Everyone is turning and yelling hellos and various acknowledgements as a fabulous looking Queen enters the club. Towering seven feet tall, covered from head to toe in pink sequins and topped by a platinum blonde wig with a silver feather flowing from it, she owns the room the minute she enters. Heading to the dance floor, she passes a mop-topped, skinny-limbed guy who looks more like a boy than a man. His bandana denoting “in” status disappears as he turns to face Maddy. Her dark eyes and pale face match him as if they picked it all out just for that evening. A black elastic band around her head holds her straight dark brown hair scarcely out of her eyes while her slouchy black tee reveals the straps of the longer white tank and red bra underneath. She nudges her left sleeve from creeping down her arm as she bobs and dances in the crowded entrance.

_I don’t make my own outfits. I make my own outfits but I don’t do like crazy things. Anna does the face paint and has crazy outfits. I’ll make my own outfits but they’re not like crazy. And a lot of people are like drag queens and DJs. I’d like to DJ though. I’d like to throw my own party, I think that’s be really fun and DJ at it. (Maddy 2006)._
Maddy leans into Haley’s booth quickly to ask about the next night’s parties; there are several options. Everyone in the small circumference of earshot consults and come to a consensus.

*It gets tiring, it’s so tiring going out every night. Especially with school and work, I don’t go out as much as I used to but that means I still go out at least four nights a week. I’ll always go out on Wednesdays and Thursdays and Saturdays, sometimes Friday, sometimes not. And then sometimes Tuesday* (Haley 2007).

If Maddy looks familiar, it is probably because you have seen her before. Her penchant for dancing nightly and her famous tattooed shoulder has made her a regular icon on Ambrel.net, Indierotica.com and Lastnightsparty.com. The cameo that she designed for permanent display on her left shoulder could never have foreseen the fame it would know spanning 2005 and 2006.

*There was one picture that was taken at um, Luke and Leroy’s like six months ago. And it was me and a few of my friends in the bathroom, like three girls and like two boys. And we were all just making out in the bathroom. And he shoved us like in the corner. Merlin shoved us in the corner. And like some of the girls boobs were out and he was trying to pull mine, my shirt down and I was like ‘no, no I can’t, I don’t want my brother to see this.’ But he took that picture and my brother took that picture and like put it in an email and sent it to me and was like ‘what the fuck is this?’ (Maddy 2006)*

The party websites lead you to believe that every time she shrugs on the dance floor a camera is present to embody each moment of abandon for cyber communities far and wide. Sitting at home it would be easy to imagine her body inches from photographers all night long.

*I guess when pictures are taken it’s always like a point in the night that has to be talked about because they’ll always make you do something, like, risqué. Like last night um, me and Kelsey went to Lit and Jess, DJ Jess, who takes pictures for Indierotica, he’s one of our good friends. He’s like ‘you and Kelsey get in the bathroom, we need to take pictures.’ Everyone makes you do things. Everyone who takes pictures makes you do things. Except for.. Ambrel, he doesn’t, he doesn’t really make you do things. His pictures are really good.

You can’t say no to Merlin, you just...he just will pressure you to do whatever he wants you to do. He’s scary. I would be scared. He scared me so much that I wanted to cry when he made me kiss that boy. Because I wanted to kiss him so bad, and it’s embarrassing when you know he doesn’t want to kiss you and Merlin is making me kiss him.* (Maddy 2006)
No flashes are hitting Maddy now to implicate any truth hiding behind the cyber smokescreen.

You wonder if she notices. Does she feel emptier without the light coming from forty five degrees of a lens? Is she waiting for the flash or is the sweat dripping from the edge of her lip and into her mouth enough to deem her night a dancing success?

*It [the club scene] just sucks you in. It does. Especially when you’re...I was seventeen. I was seventeen and like you can get into twenty-one [age] places when you’re seventeen. I think that’s incredible. I didn’t look like I was twenty-one either; I looked like I was seventeen.* (Maddy 2006)

The bead of sweat is gone now, licked from her lips and replaced by a smile so wide it draws you onto the floor with its undertow. The dance floor starts right where the row of booths stop. The lone disco ball throws little beads of light onto every body within its reach. Here the music starts to set in and you hear songs that you know but would never expect to hear in one of the most hyped parties in the country. You also hear some of the best in electronic, indie and dance. “I don’t like to classify myself. I don’t like punk rock music because I am not a punk rock girl. But I like, like dancing music, club music, so I guess we’d be club kids” (Maddy 2005). Maddy thrives and comes alive with each beat, with each step, and each jump she takes. Twirling, twirling this girl with the beautiful lady on her shoulder is nourished with the dancing, dancing: she joins her dancing boy counterpart in syncopated hilarity.

*Almost every night I go out because all those people are my friends and I have fun. I’m not really like I want to be famous from this. It’d be cool if it happened but I don’t really plan on it happening...I go to school Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday and Saturday and I work on Fridays and Tuesdays from 6-11:30, I’m a waitress. It’s pretty slow and I don’t get paid that much but I don’t do it for the money. My parents pay for my apartment and stuff, So, I just do it because my parents want me to have a job and for a little bit of extra money, and I get to do my homework there... so it’s cool.* (Maddy 2006)

With each song every body keeps on dancing, writhing, rubbing, jumping. Sweat drips off the points of their impeccable, asymmetrical haircuts. Not one body hesitates; there is
touching, boys touch girls, girls touch boys, boys touch boys, girls touch girls and everybody is
all wide-eyed loose limbs and rhythmic.

Most of the guys are gay or like, drag queens. The three guys that I go out with all the
time who come out with my group of girls are gay like my three best friends are gay. It’s
NYC like every guy is gay. And if they’re not out, they’re probably gay anyway. I know a
few guys who go out who aren’t gay but I don’t know why they go out, it’s weird. I think
it’d be weird if a lot of straight guys went to parties like this because it seems like such a
gay thing to do. They are very gay environments because of so many drag queens and
like the kind of music that they play and like the dancing. I don’t see straight guys really
like dancing a lot like that. Straight guys that usually go to these places usually don’t
dance. (Maddy 2006).

The people around you only stop dancing because they cannot kiss and dance at the same time,
or need to find the bathroom. One bathroom is just around the corner while the other is
downstairs. They are extra dark and ultra red attempting to create an illusion of cleanliness or
romance. Helter-skelter lines of figurine personalities are forced out of their ecstatic dancing and
into a momentary stand still to wait in this narrow darkness for entrance into one of the two
bathrooms. There is always a line for the bathrooms: little spaces that are used for more than
simply relieving oneself. There are people both using and dealing; if you are looking for coke,
ecstasy or kedamine...you are in the right place. Maybe you aren’t up to having sex in the main
rooms but would prefer to commemorate the night with a photo shoot? Welcome to the
multipurpose latrines of nightlife!

You get them [drugs] for free you don’t have to buy them. Like, guys give them to you in
the bathroom they just hand it out. I have no idea why. I don’t do drugs so I don’t really
know but I’ve been offered drugs so many times. People that you’re friends with are just
like ‘come to the bathroom with me, come to the bathroom’. People pressured me, like
really pressured me to take drugs, like not even pay, like this kid Matt I knew once was
like ‘I’m gonna blow coke with you later’ and I was like, ‘no, I don’t do coke’ and he was
like, ‘you’re gonna’. I’ve met like really great people. I’ve also met really shitty people
but...um, just people that are into drugs and stuff that you think are your friends but fuck
you over big time. (Maddy 2006)
Each bathroom is designated by little white people on black backgrounds; one wears a skirt, the other pants, but no one heeds their “girls to the left, boys to the left” instructions. Such labeling is not welcome nor is it expected by anyone here except the white woman and man who remain as little pictures on the doors night after night to keeping up nothing but appearances.

*I there are people that say they are faghags and gay boys are very very accepted. But I don’t know, I’m dating a girl right now, I don’t label myself as anything so it’s kind of hard for me to see it in other people. There are a definite significant amount of gay boys, and girls do tend to latch on to boys and become so called fag hags. I actually find those kinds of girls very annoying and I try to avoid them...

I think there’s a good amount of straight boys actually, and good amount of straight boys who are wedded to bed with gay men as well. I think people are just very open about everything and that’s just how it goes really...People are much more likely to have a problem with the fact that you are wearing something from Abercrombie. (Leah 2007)*

You are finally at the front of the line. Three people exit the door to your left in a state of undress more pronounced than five minutes ago, but you do not attempt to discern the possibilities as to why. The knob is loose; one good yank and it would be on the ground in the puddle of beer and piss and water and? You sit on the toilet and see that the walls are tagged at eye-level with marker, and the mirror across from you with pink lipstick. There is no paper, not one square. A rolled dollar bill lies on the floor soaked through, but it is no use to you.

*Everyone’s wasted and everyone’s on coke. Everyone’s doing coke in the backroom all the time, it’s like a big coke party. But I don’t know, I’ve kind of grown immune to it” (Anna 2006).*

*I would say half of the people I know do coke, 25% of them are coke heads. But these people don’t consider what they have a problem. I guess if you are a DJ or a promoter it is your lifestyle to do it a lot, but it’s...it’s still a problem”(Leah 2007).*

Through the pink lipstick you check yourself, then turn, grab the knob carefully and step into the narrow hallway where all eyes stare at you, watching and wanting you to move out of the way just a little bit faster.

*Instead of returning to the booth, you make your way to the basement. The stairway is*
little wider than the average human body but people are walking up and down the short wooden steps. Many of them are bobbing to the beat in their heads, feeling the likely substance in their bodies and carrying another in their hands. You embark on your journey down with careful anticipation. There is an amplified sensory experience awaiting you in the basement. The shaking from feet pounding on floor radiate through your bones before you hit the last step as you venture down. The people down here, they are the ones who get in for free, who go out every night or who don’t have the patience for bottle service. “I can’t explain it but if you see one you will just know they’re a hipster” (Anna 2006). The spotlight spins in time with the base line and meets your eyes as you inhale dank cement floor, alcohol, sweat, and the over-cologned tee of the shaggy haired stranger who inadvertently dances against you for stability and lack of space.  

Not every kid can be out trying to cure cancer. It’s like their version of a keg stand. There are kids partying everywhere you know. They are no different than that. Everybody wastes time, your parents waste time getting drunk with their friends too. And it’s not really any different from that. (Leah 2007).

<<So come, come to the land where anything belongs/ No one else will let you know the truth>>¹ The lower ceiling makes the basement feel fuller or maybe the basement is fuller or maybe everyone here is just dancing a bit bigger, clenching their teeth a bit tighter than they are upstairs. The marvelous scene before you is the life that Anna, Haley and Maddy and so many Kids before them have worked to achieve, maintain and redefine over and over again.

There is definitely a miniclebrity thing that goes on, but if you act like you have that, you’ll just get made fun of. I know I make fun of people for acting that way. The only kids who really think of themselves as miniclebrities are the ones who aren’t miniclebrities. They aren’t really a celebrity unless they are at the point that they are like a Misshapes or something. (Leah 2007).

Over and over again every night of the week they come out to this Scene to be seen and

¹ Simian. “Never Be Alone” We Are Your Friends. Astralwerks. 2002. CD.
photographed assuring their positions as known. "You'll never be alone again."

It all seems so perfect, all lace and beauty, every moment worth capturing for all cyber culture to see. Right? Through the crowd, a girl with an unmatchable wingspan reaches toward the loose wires above her; grace and sensuality meld in front of you. The only passageway is up through the stairway and the only light comes in fluorescent colors. "Well come on /Well come on/Well come on/Well come on."

Her fingers extend softly and the lace tights you saw two hours ago move naturally down to dancing feet that have done this a thousand times before. Leah is under a spotlight none of us can see but everyone makes room for her, no one would want to be responsible for interrupting the go-go dancer from another dimension.

"I guess first and foremost I’m a go-go so I’m known for dancing around in my underwear. I’m that crazy blonde. I kind of push things to the limit sometimes. A lot of people think that I sleep around. I know that I’m known for that even though I don’t consider myself known for that and I don’t think I should be because I haven’t. But just having a very wild, vivacious personality, and just having fun and being the girl who wants to have fun and encouraging other people to. And just partying a lot, I’m a very open person." (Leah 2007)

A smile spreads across her face and she spins again with a thick gold chain following behind her. She sways from limb to lit up limb. Synthesized pulses determine every heartbeat, beat, beat, and you find yourself moving to her tune. You are not alone. Leah unites this sardine nightclub, wakes them up and wears them out with desires manifested. Hidden behind blonde bangs, her blue eyes are dark here and they crawl into the privacy of the crowd who knows her so well.

"As far as getting something out of it, I do feel as though if you are a DJ or someone who owns a bar or you’re partying professionally you will get something out of the Scene. But honestly for me, I’ve made connections, I’ve gotten work, I started modeling, go-going, some photo stuff here and there, but I wouldn’t say I’ve really gotten anything from the Scene. It’s much more of a social thing, what I got is social out of it, and my drug problem I got out of it. Not a really positive thing but I guess it’s something though. You could definitely say that came from there.

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
I don’t see myself as just someone who does more than DJs or promoters or go-gos a party here and there. Honestly the money is not enough for me to really care that much. It’s just where I go maybe to see my friends sometimes. Especially as someone who is cleaning up, as far as drugs go I need to cut back I can’t have a reoccurring... I can’t be a really big part of it anymore (Leah 2007).

You and everyone in eyeshot wants to dance with her, to come close to her magical energy, but we all know we cannot touch a go-go. Leah leans back and all of her little hairs depart from her as though she has been giving them each private dance lessens in her spare time. She does not care to dance with anyone tonight, no one but the bright lights and the base lines.

**Flash** Once mesmerized and bobbing heads turn and the room’s energy and bodies within move towards the stairs. **Flash** Merlin Bronques is here. As soon as he arrives people rush to him, pose, and contort in hopes of attracting his gaze.

I don’t consider myself a Club Kid and I never actively pursued this, and at this point it kind of weirds me out sometimes. Because I know kids grow up and there are kids in high school now especially, who look at party websites and see pictures of me and my friends. It’s all right I guess I mean it’s cool you get posted and people rag on you, or if you’re not getting ragged, people are kind of like lurking you, it’s a little creepy. I get really bothered, I’ve met people who have actually admitted to me that they came here and they went to this party because they hoped to get like, photographed. That is definitely something that weirds me out because I might not usually shy away from the cameras but, like it’s just...it’s just funny. You came to New York to get naked for Merlin Bronques? Really? Somebody has some very misguided aspirations (Leah 2007).

You see a commotion by the bathroom. You make your way over there and see three women covered by each other’s hands, thighs and flesh posing in the bathroom stall. Bronques, towering just outside of the doorway’s threshold, captures and directs their public embrace. He is surrounded by onlookers, mostly women, and a documentary film crew. Everyone is as attentive to his movements as they are to those of his subjects. Then, like a man taking a coat off a woman’s shoulders and folding it over his arm, he follows his camera baring hand into the bathroom and pulls the door shut in one almost unperceivable motion.
For one thing I get paid to get my picture taken for stuff like Burning Angel so I don’t want to really sit there and have mini photo shoots with people unless I really want to work with them… (Leah 2007)

As the door slams shut all that is left is the red glow coming from under the door and the burning anticipation emanating from the gawkers. A huddle of frenzied fiends and a horny couple slouch against the wall next to some earnestly full bladders surrounding the door waiting for Merlin to come out. Who will be next? The doorway is even more crowded than before.

The attention is really nice. To get your picture taken, even if you’re like topless or whatever, it’s just, it’s great. It’s really addicting. And Merlin, I think he’s got a weird charisma about him that like he just kind of draws you in. Even if he’s not like, ‘get naked and I’ll take a picture’ apparently girls will come up to him. Apparently at Motherfucker, at this last one he said it was just gratuitous girls were just coming up to him and lifting their shirts up (Anna 2006).

The door finally swings open, and out strides Bronques, camera first, hidden behind large wire rimmed sunglasses and an ultra glossy black wig, an impeccable black rendition of Andy Warhol’s coif. With his camera held at shoulder height there is no need for introduction; he is unmistakable. Behind him exit the women who were the focus of his lens for the past fifteen minutes; each of whom is wearing slightly less clothing and makeup than when they entered. They have smiles on, is that what satisfaction looks like? The ring of fans and potentially full bladders that formed around the bathroom door dissipates to let him out. He embarks to find his next subject and they are not far.

It is now two in the morning and it is evident that no one downstairs is planning on going home. The barely lit DJ sits in the far right corner past the bar keeping everyone going. <<Do it/ Now......... an/ Live it......today>>4 The lights travel, whirling throughout the room from time to time. More often you see the flash of cameras. Yes plural, and plenty. **click** It would take twenty minutes to get from the back of the basement to the stage, but with a camera only

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five. The music <<Prime time of your>>\textsuperscript{5} cuts out and the stage lights up. Joanna Angel struts up on stage arms above her head swinging her microphone like the lone lasso in NYC. You wonder for a moment what she is trying to catch. The crowd screams and Joanna is lit a thousand times by flashes. She stands center stage and teases the gaze of the ravenous audience “are you ready to meet my ‘Burning Angels’?” she calls. Every right index finger in the room is ready to click a picture of the upcoming burlesque showing. When you make it to the front you turn to the crowd and see that the front fifty people do not look like the Kids you have been dancing with all night long. All of the young twenty-somethings in self-made ensembles and the female faces are hidden from view from here. Looking back at you are men, late twenties and older primarily white who came specifically because they heard that burningangel.com was doing a show. Almost all of them have cameras; some look like they are from the media with professional setups but most hold garden-variety pocket digitals.

When there is a camera around people go crazy. Everyone loves to get their picture taken. New York is such an exhibitionist society. The club kids in New York are so exhibitionist. That’s part of the reason why I’m like oh I have to top my outfit each time so that I can get pictures taken of me and get more attention. (Anna 2006).

Abigail is standing on the edge of the stage in front of you. She watches Anna halfway across the room waiting for her to come over. No predilection for pretension, Abigail is physically small in stature and frame but her energy is huge. She has two long black wild pigtails, dark eye makeup, reddish lipstick, and long fake eyelashes, one of which is slightly off kilter. Her black dress, stockings and ankle boots are all consistent with the dark, sexy, but slightly childlike, undone look of her makeup.

I heard her name [Anna’s] everywhere and I was like is she normal? Some guy was here from Spain and asking her [halting deep voice] “are you Anna Rexia?”

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
Some guys came up to me and was like, “you know anorexic?” and I was like, “who” and he was like, “you know anorexic?” And I was like, “oh, yeah...” people like know about her. (Abigail 2007)

Anna is kissing a partier on her way through the room and yells over the noise into his ear, “How are you? You look fabulous sweetheart!” **kiss kiss** She moves on having spotted more friends and acquaintances in her path to Abigail, each of them is needing a hello from the host.

There are people who show up at the parties because they want to be popular, and we call them social climbers and we look down on them. They try to use our friends and they try to use us. [To get known (Anna 2007a).] Anyone can get naked on the Internet and anyone can get drunk (Abigail 2007).

Abigail sits herself down on the edge of the stage steps; placing her feet hip width apart on the step below. She allows her body to deflate for just a second, cocking her head to the side and taking in the spectacle. <<Callin’ me, all the time like blondie / Check out my chrissy behind/ It's fine all of the time /Like sex on the beaches>>

It’s the best escape. Nobody judges. That is how it is for me because being in my life I am not good at doing daily things, I am good at having a good time, that’s what I'm good at, that’s when I’m most happy. Being around all these people its like a dream because in a dream you can do something and it’s ok because it’s a party I can do what I want I can dress how I want I can make out with who I want and then the next day, people, they won’t give you shit for it. But if I was on the street and did things like that or if I went to visit my family and did things like that I’ll get shit for it. But there I’ve become good at it. (Abigail 2007)

The crowd hoots and hollers in response to several Burning Angel girls who just made their entrance onto the stage. **click click** The last to walk on, displaying a full chest of tattoos, stumbles on the first step in her big black boots. **click** Collecting her strut she enters center stage and fills the space right next to her fellow angel. A chorus of deep cheers rises in front of

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I’ve met a lot of the Burningangels and they are all like really nice together people, they have a drug problem or two and they’ve gotten over it, or are. They are really nice people and they are just free, and it’s totally empowering to see them be proud of their bodies and not feel bad about because I have such horrible self image I could never do that. I don’t think. Plus my mother is so against sexual liberation in an exhibitionist kind of way which is what makes me the happiest. Like if I was gonna, I would totally do that but my parents hate it. And in the past I have, and I did and I loved it and then my parents yelled at me when I was home and sick with mono, so I haven’t done it since. And it really like fucked with my psyche a lot and with my self-esteem and it really, really really, really brought me down and I really feel so unattractive all the time now, which is kind of horrible. And I really think that that was a big factor in it that it just like made me feel like an ugly person. And I know I’m not but it just. Yeah, so I admire them and I think it’s cool and I’m all for it. (Anna 2007a).

Their mini burlesque performance successfully fulfills the hopes of tonight’s straight male clientele. Unlike the tall, thin, blond, big breasted women who grace the pages of Playboy and the majority of Internet pornography, tonight’s show is comprised of four women of varying heights, sizes and colors. They model jewelry reminiscent of punk rock, they sport home dyed hair and are scantily clad in red boy shorts, white tanks and bathing suits. Burningangel.com is known for its hardcore self-proclaimed feminist pornography (Angel 2005) with several models often in attendance at parties as entertainment or guests. <<Fuck the pain away/ Fuck the pain away>>.

_With Burning Angel it’s just money, it’s just easy money basically. I don’t really believe in the whole feminist porn thing. The really only thing is that you’re choosing to do it I suppose, but you’re still probably not getting paid enough, if anything instead of being exploited by a man you’re being exploited by a woman. So I really don’t believe in that whole shit, but it depends. I have no qualms with the site. I just don’t believe in that standpoint anymore (Leah 2007)_.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
DJ Jess of Indierotica.com approaches to photograph Anna and her fledgling host Abigail in an embrace. This is their chance to commemorate their night. Anna pulls Abigail in close and the two girls soak up the frames the Jess allots for them. They confront the camera wide-eyed, mouths opened, and make-up showcased. They hold each other as though they are alone; they hide for no one that this is a highlight for them. They have drawn the attention of the camera right next to a stage full of half naked women: tonight is a success.

_I have to start working more hours because I did a lot of things in the adult industry too. I did role-playing, I have a photographer in Philly who takes sort of like fetish-focused photographs of me and I did some videos online of like, fetish things. Like I’ve stepped on grapes for people who have fetishes and I sell them on clips for sale. And I make a lot of money and I don’t think about who watches them. For a little bit I stopped when I started working with Anna but I need to again because I am completely financially responsible for myself now since I’m not in school. The minute I stopped going to school my parents were like that’s it. I have a lot of money saved that was for college but it’s going into rent now. When I start taking classes again they’ll help me but as of now that’s it (Abigail 2007)._

_No we’re not typical, a lot of people are trust fund kids. We know people who are older who have normal jobs. So, they are 25 and you know, they’re either drug dealers or they have a normal day job. [They work at American Apparel (Abigail 2007).] But the people our age are completely supported by their parents, completely (Anna 2007a)._

Immediately to their right are two girls, both are small, thin and fairly young. The pink tutu and fishnets catch your eye; there is a long tear along the left leg. The girls are sharing a stool and kissing by the bar. **click click** The tutued girl opens her heavily lined eye just enough to see where the flash is coming from all the time her lips never depart from her kiss. Little wrinkles form in the corner of her mouth. She smirks, arcs back against the bar and slides herself on to it. They only separate lips long enough for the dark haired girl to position herself on top. Laid out like there is no one in the room they come to a silent consensus about their next move.

_I think a lot of girls get naked for him [Merlin] because they think he’s gay. So they don’t feel threatened. But he’s not; at least I don’t think he is (Anna 2006)._
The girl on top runs her hands along the body below her down to the tear and then lowers her face into the pink billowing tutu. **click click click** She peeks out just enough for her audience to see her eyes.

*I’ve been photographed naked and been paid for it so [at parties] the only thing I won’t take off is my underwear. Cuz there are a lot of pictures of me doing weird shit in my underwear. There is one of me and my friend in the bathroom and I am wrapped around her like a scarf. I don’t care. And they are really good photographers and I want them for my Myspace, that is the only reason I do it (Abigail 2007).*

**click** **click** Is this intimacy? Is this publicity? Both? You wonder as you notice that there is bar dirt all over the thin white legs protruding from the damp pink fabric. The clicks raging beside you substantiate that this will make for good photographs. The bartender proceeds to serve drinks around the spectacle that is impinging on his workspace.

*I was naked on the Internet last year but it was cool then I suppose. I was tasteful, I was fabulous and that was when it was first starting out and then everyone was doing it and now it is like over and if you are naked on the Internet it’s like not that exciting anymore. Everyone is like “Oh, I’ve seen that already, been there, done that (Anna 2007a).*

It is four am now. It is no longer legal to serve alcohol in New York. To most the party is over if you paid to get in, if you paid for drinks, if you are not “scene” then you do not get to stay downstairs. "It was worthwhile living a laughable life / Just to set my eyes on the blistering sight / Of a vicar in a tutu / He's not strange / He just wants to live his life this way"9. If you are in, then you remain part of the mini sea that continues to roll and surge while New York City is none the wiser of the energy beneath it nightly. Keep on going, dancing, posing until someone offers you something more. It is all smiles and sweat. It is all lights and skin. This room is the only place in the whole world for right now; it is a black hole of red light soaked in by saucer sized pupils. Not everyone is intoxicated by substances, but regardless of choices to partake energy is bottomless.

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I used to be completely sober but I’ve tried a couple things. I’ve gone out high before because I just wanted a different perspective on the Scene because it was getting really boring and not fun so … I definitely don’t do it every time but I have to say that now I can see why people go out and get fucked up. It’s hard to deal with people all the time when you are sober and you just want to let go…I guess that’s not necessarily true but it’s just fun it just adds an extra, something (Anna 2007a).

For Abigail it is another story. She licks the fishnets of the girl next to her and then jolts up, energetically to laugh out loud at her own antics. For all intents and purposes Abigail is more alive now than she was two hours ago. The only sign of the extent of her stay here are her eyelashes, half off the left eye, giving her profile the effect of an over-loved marionette.

I cannot go out if I am not on something. I don’t really drink that much but I am always on something. It’s not that I can’t but I don’t see the appeal, I think it’s counteractive because the reason… it’s no fun sitting around your house and like, doing drugs. But it’s always been around and part of what makes drugs enjoyable is amusement and being around people (Anna 2007a).

As all the skins rub, all colors, some in designer jeans and some in underwear together in one room, united, in this fabulous room in Manhattan where no one can get in unless you are in and once you are there you don’t leave until morning. The DJ is still in the corner, steady, one headphone on, one ear to the room. This is your cue to head out through the dance, dance revolution without impinging upon the deeply personal conversation that has erupted somehow through the dominance of the music and turned three stoic looking waifs into black tear-covered screamers. Such a thing you have never seen on the Internet depictions of this Scene.

Now it’s more like, “oh, I can’t wait until tomorrow morning when I can see the pictures of tonight. I feel like a lot of it is done just for the pictures that are gonna go up. When somebody with a camera will come close to you, everybody will act like their having so much fun. (Maddy 2006).

When you reach the stairs they are slightly more lit than earlier, and the few people coming downstairs look wrecked, un-pretty, and un-New York. They look like they are awake at four in
the morning. The liquid mixture of alcohol and whatnot has also made it successfully from the bathroom to the stairs and you are not so sad to leave them behind.

Maddy comes up right behind you **flash flash** you both turn with tired eyed caught by the light. You see now that the shooter is not Bronques nor Ambrel but instead a fellow partier with a point and shoot digital and a satisfied smirk, both similar to those you saw earlier during the Angels’ show.

Me and my friends have noticed lately that people have just been bringing their own cameras and being like “can I take a picture of you?” And I don’t know if it’s because they’ve seen us online before or because they just like what we’re wearing but they just want to take a picture of us, I don’t know why. It’s not for a website it’s not for anything they’re just like, “can I take a picture of you?” and we think it’s really weird and we’re like, “yeah.” And we’ll just pose for a picture. It’s really funny, it’s happened a few times in the past few weeks. I just assume it’s for their personal collections. (Maddy 2006).

You collect yourself and glance around, Maddy and her friends are already at the door heading out. Your feet can still feel the pulsing from the hours of music, like the sensation of falling once you are already off a downward elevator. Your nose, you swear, will never smell nature again as other people’s sweat is too permanently imbedded in the pores. As you push the door open and leave behind the night world of the Club Kids you think, “a bathroom would be great right now.” But the thought is diluted by the sensation of the lights again pouring into your retinas. This time it is not the lights circling the club ceiling nor the flash of a camera, it is the light you left six hours ago, dim and terrific, lining the street for as far as you can see.
CHAPTER II: THE RISE OF INTERNET SCENE PHOTOGRAPHY

The name Merlin Bronques is on the tip of everyone’s tongue these days. Even if you have never partied in the Club Kids’ Scene, you may be one of the many people who feel like you know all about it because of regular visitation to Lastnightsparty.com (LNP). Bronques’ photography centered website provides viewers with the illusion that they are, in fact, a part of a scene that in real time looks very different and exists only in a small part of New York City. The five subjects of this study describe their personal encounters as well as their understanding of Bronques’ vital role in the ever changing and growing popularity of their subculture. One element of the Scene is the importance of Internet nightlife photography which functions in much the same way that music and fashion did for preceding New York nightlife scenes. The following chapter first contextualizes Internet photography’s impact on the Scene through an historical analysis of Bronques. It presents the impact of his time spent as a musician and driven by his artistic philosophy of community collaboration and redefinition of norms. The analysis also takes into consideration how this philosophy defines much of his later work as a pinup and then nightlife Scene photographer. This analysis is accomplished by placing Bronques’ philosophy in context with the dominant power of the photographer in relation to his subjects and viewers. Using Bronques’ cultivation of himself from Scene photographer to idolized personality within the Club Scene and popular media, the chapter further presents the different roles the photographer can take within the Scene.

Bronques first gained recognition in Canada’s music scene with his self-produced album *A Noise Supreme* (Merlin 1993). In 1995, Bronques deviated from his proven path when his band *Ma* released the power pop album *Cool Chicks and Other Babes*. Receiving a cold response from his followers, Bronques dropped his band *Ma* and released *Merlin’s Arcade* (Merlin’s
Arcade 1996). Merlin’s Arcade delighted fans and earned Bronques mainstream attention and publicity through MuchMusic, the Canadian equivalent to MTV until MTV Canada’s introduction in 1996. In 1997 the straightforward industrial album Viddy Well, Little Brother (Merlin) maintained fan favor and success; this new album continued the same rap/industry rock trajectory as A Noise Supreme. Major label MCA Universal released Merlin’s Milkbar Stereo (Merlin 2001) but it received little marketing attention and minimal commercial success. The conclusion of his relationship with MCA Universal found Bronques returning to his roots, that is, the arts community and the process of independent production and recording where he first flourished. This time he arrived focused on the community aspect of the creative process, a philosophy that proved to be a driving force in future endeavors.

Bronques’ first post-MCA project is an art and music collective called NAM:LIVE! that reflects his past experiences, both negative and positive, by focusing on impromptu collaboration.

We think the people we meet on the street are the stars! That's why they're on our albums. We're just the arrangers of the chaos, and we like to arrange the chaos in a funky, minimalist way. That's our aesthetic. But the music only starts to live with the process of interaction: whether it be in a hotel room with a complete stranger that wanted to have sex but instead is doing a spoken word intro to "Fembots", or onstage with the drunk chick that wants to slam dance with the guitar player tonight (NAM:LIVE! CD Baby).

NAM:LIVE!’s description illustrates a creative process determined to break the rules of music production. Instead of meticulously preplanning the album’s lyrics, riffs, and minute details until the production is perfect, NAM:LIVE! believes that “every moment is art” and is thus open to creating at any moment, “There's always a camera around. Or a tape recorder. Your dinner conversation may inspire tomorrow's jam. Tomorrow's jam might inspire the day afters conversation. Everything is music” (NAM:LIVE! CD Baby). NAM:LIVE!’s self-titled and self-released album (2002) was classified as electro hip-hop, but included everything from industrial
to synthpop to karaoke. NAM:LIVE!’s collaborative process produced eclectic creative work, but the name given credit in interviews and on websites regarding the work was always Merlin Bronques. The trend continues with NAM:LIVE!’s most recent album *The Testament: Sex, Scriptures & Rock & Roll* (2005) which features a full length album and a 176 page booklet of photographs and writings.

![Image](image.png)

Figure 1 “The Testament” (NAM:LIVE! 2005)

The cover (Figure 1) of *The Testament: Sex, Scriptures & Rock & Roll* features a black and white scene that includes about twenty women each assuming a pin-up style pose. Taken out of context, one might think it was an audition for “America’s Next Top Pin-Up.” Some of the women are bent over, some are crawling and others hold wide-legged standing positions. One woman lays on her back in the foreground; her arms are cut off by the frame with her head remaining un-cropped along the edge. Another woman stands over the first using her long thin stiletto heel to hold the former woman down. Everyone makes direct eye contact with the viewer. In center stage Bronques wears black from head to toe. With his back positioned to the majority of the women he aims his lens toward the “armless” woman held down by the stiletto while maintaining a gaze toward the viewer through his dark wire framed sunglasses. In spite of
their lingerie, heels, and topless poses, it is apparent that these women are not professionals, nor are they representations of normative beauty. This is not a photograph of twenty tall, thin, blonde haired, blue-eyed, big breasted, white Barbies®, but rather women who are racially diverse and plus-sized. The cover of *The Testament* foreshadows what soon becomes a windfall of erotic images of women in vulnerable positions with Bronques always in center stage.

The most recent NAM:LIVE! description prescribes a new sexual and beauty aesthetic; it is one that refers to the “real” in opposition to the “glossy”.

NAM:LIVE! is a project that serves to inspire artists and people to step outside of society's little box. With our magazine, our pin-ups and our music, we glorify the individuals that dare to be different. Sick of glossy supermodels and pre-fabricated rock-stars? NAM:LIVE! makes art with real people. Sex is our inspiration and art is its expression (NAM:LIVE! MySpace).

This reflects the aesthetic achieved in the cover and contents of *The Testament* and a philosophy that is politically timely considering the growing alternative feminist pornography websites and the strengthening of the pro-sex movement. Pro-sex defines pornography as benefiting women “both personally and politically” (McElroy 1995). One of the goals of the pro-sex movement is to make it more gender equitable. Because of alternative feminist pornography’s rising popularity among women in their twenties, the concept of taking ones clothes off for a camera is an act of feminist sexual liberation (Levy 2006).

Joanna Angel, a frontrunner in the pro-sex movement, is credited by some with starting the first indie-punk pornography website: BurningAngel.com (Burning Angel) (Angel 2005). As part of the alternative pornography genre, Burning Angel, along with other websites such as suicidegirls.com, vegporn.com, and inkygirls.com depicts various representations of female beauty striving to redefine beauty norms. Alternative pornography specifically showcases bodies that have piercings, tattoos, and others modifications traditionally considered non-normative and
incapable of being classified as sexy or beautiful.

With a vibrant, sex positive community of women (and men), Suicide Girls was founded on the belief that creativity, personality and intelligence are not incompatible with sexy, compelling entertainment, and millions of people agree. The site mixes the smarts, enthusiasm and DIY attitude of the best music and alternative culture sites with an unapologetic, grassroots approach to sexuality…In the same way Playboy Magazine became a beacon and guide to the swinging bachelor of the 1960s, Suicide Girls is at the forefront of a generation of young women and men whose ideals about sexuality do not conform with what mainstream media is reporting (About Suicide Girls).

Constructing their sites around community collaboration and subversion of mainstream representation of sexuality and beauty, Suicide Girls and Burning Angel maintain goals similar to another of Bronques’ artistic endeavors—UrbanPinup.com (Urban Pinup).

Manifesting his energy in photography instead of music, Bronques began photographing strangers, both men and women, who struck him as having a certain beauty. The series became an ongoing project titled, *Urban Pinup*. His first pinup was a girl he approached in a bookstore and asked, “Can I take your picture?” She obliged and then returned to Bronques a few days later to thank him for making her feel beautiful. She came to New York to pursue modeling but was returning home after rejections from every agency she approached (Mitzy 2006). Bronques continued his quest for the impromptu moment of art and creation by asking strangers to expose their nude bodies for his camera—an act usually reserved for the privacy of one’s home or for pornography sets. The *Urban Pinup* models would do just about anything for this man whom they did not know and had presumably just met on the streets of New York. From laying across a police vehicle in broad daylight, to having raw eggs cracked over designer clothes, and exposed skin, the answer to Bronques’ call of “can I take your picture” is a consistent “yes”.

In 2004 *Urban Pinup* became an Internet series posted under a link at Bronques’ lastnightsparty.com website. The website’s description of *Urban Pinup* presents the project as
one that enables models to take an active part in the process as collaborators and creative
contributors to their pinups:

LNP's Urban Pinups are non-professionals eager for an alternative to the false, airbrushed
beauty of the fashion industry. They are the hot girls (and some lovely boys) that you
will meet at parties, clubs or on the street. Real people, empowered by eroticism, are
redefining sexuality for a new generation (Bronques Urban Pinup).

The description uses such active phrases as “eager for an alternative,” “empowered by
eroticism,” and “redefining sexuality.” All of the phrases modify the subject which is, in this
case, the models, not the photographer. Upon closer examination of the website’s context, it
appears that the models may not be the collaborative participants that the website suggests. In
2004 an interviewer suggested that Bronques’ photographic process is one of “give-and-take, not
just you [Bronques] telling the models what to do, but listening and interacting and getting
feedback too.” Bronques disagreed:

No. I'm actually a tyrant once the process begins. Usually my models are pretty tired after
a shoot. I do all my listening before the process so I know where that person is coming
from, but a good shoot is one where there's very little talking once we start. I give orders,
but the models always seem to like that (Bussell 2004).

Bronques’ impromptu description of the artistic process is reminiscent of a visionary realizing
his goal with the uninterrupted cooperation of chosen participants, and not of an artist working
collaboratively with his subjects. There is no application process; Bronques is in control of who
poses, how the model poses, which photograph from the sitting is posted on his website, and
what, if any, text appears with it.

One model’s memory of posing for Bronques is highly disturbing as she volunteered to
pose with full knowledge of his website, photography and public image. For her this was a
change at a revolutionary, liberating experience. The consequent interaction and image was not
the expression of her personal perception of self as she had anticipated it would be; instead it was
Bronques’ expression of himself through the use of her body. She did not fully process that she would be “naked on the internet” until after she physically saw herself on her computer screen (Mitzy 2006). An image that depicts her as intoxicated but in reality she was not intoxicated but rather exhausted and traumatized. After recalling the experience, the model made sure to note that she likes the resulting photograph—a technically and aesthetically beautiful shot characteristic of Bronques’ oeuvre.

Since its inception, Urban Pinup’s visual aesthetic has changed. Thanks to improved equipment, visible in his self-portraits, Bronques transitioned from shooting in black and white to shooting in color and producing increasingly bold, glossy images. Some Urban Pinups consist of one image while others are a series of several images of the subject. The majority of early Urban Pinups hold to the feminist alternative pornography aesthetic that the Urban Pinup description suggests; they include punk rock style, tattoos, or a body mass index (BMI) higher than twelve percent. Later, from 2005 to today, Bronques asks more of models during shoots and enforces more heteronormative constructions of female sexuality. Urban Pinup’s description remains the same while Bronques transitions into creating degrading scenes and most recently, glossy and flawless pinups of equally “flawless” bodies.

Figure 2 “Smiley: This was taken at the Bust Party on those couches in the VIP area on the night we met. Tonight was the screening of Joanna's Angel porn DVD” (Bronques c2005)
In Figure 2, Urban Pinup: Smiley makes eye contact with the camera appearing alert and at ease. Her hands lay gently on her heart and stomach, displaying her colorful tattoos and leaving her breasts exposed. This traditional pin-up style of her lying on a bed of pillows is paired with her ear gauge, nose ring, and sleeves of colorful tattoos. The image of Smiley subverts traditional definitions of beauty. Her eye contact with the viewer implies collaboration in the creation of the image.

Following this period, Bronques debuted violent and humiliating themes that have become increasingly prevalent throughout his pinup and nightlife photography. Two primary settings for such shoots are bathrooms and wooded areas. In the bathrooms of clubs, apartments, and planes subjects are often posed with the toilet or lying on unclean, tiled floors. Bronques’ sessions in wooded areas usually take place during dark hours and create series of the subjects in progressive states of undress. The progression usually presents a visual story that looks much like a nightmare ending with dead appearing women lying under leaves, facedown, or covered in debris.

Figure 3 is a 2006 pinup of an almost nude female lying on the ground outside leaves the subject’s face out of focus (enhancing her anonymity); there is no eye contact with the viewer. Her breast is the most prominent part of the composition and short depth of field draw the audience to her red underwear, her heel, and then her lips. The audience only sees one arm and part of a leg and is left to imagine what is happening in the darkness and for what reason mud is covering her chest.
Over the course of Urban Pinup, Bronques has shifted his lens from subversion of beauty norms to the reification of said norms. When not producing those more directly denigrating themes Bronques photographs traditional pinups of long-legged, big-breasted, white women. His 2007 status as a top New York nightlife photographer gave him increased notoriety and subsequent access to willing subjects. Many of his subjects look more like Playboy Bunnies than Suicide Girls. In this 2007 image (Figure 4) the subject poses against a bright solid colored wall; a similar aesthetic to a studio backdrop. Her white shirt hangs from her left arm and the rest of her shoulder, back, and barely covers her nipple leaving much of her left breast exposed. Her long blond hair is loose, her red lips are parted and her left hand grips a microphone in a captured moment where she meets the viewer’s eye as though she has been caught mid-fellatio.
Early in his career Bronques explained his ideal pinup:

If it were up to me the range of people I use would be ridiculous. It turns out that the people who are most likely to say yes to being photographed naked for a complete stranger are extremely beautiful, young and have nice bodies. As more people find out about what I do, I suspect I'll be getting more different types of people. I want to do a series with people with disabilities and an over 60 series. I've asked women over 60 to do pinups with me but they just laugh (Bussel 2004).

Bronques’ description of potential or desired model demographics is not cohesive with the images he has produced over the years. While his recognisability has risen, he has not broadened but instead has narrowed the type of model he represents as beautiful. The resulting art is a product of his vision and execution. Although this is not a rare process for artists, it is problematic for an artist who constructs a project with claims of an empowered subject and feminist framework. Urban Pinup is marketed as collaboration between artist and model for the subversion of normative beauty and sexuality, but the lived experience of the models and the resulting images do not necessarily reflect the website’s description. Urban Pinup’s public image of “empowerment through eroticism [and] redefining sexuality” (About Urban Pinup) is disconnected from its cultural production of an increasingly heteronormative discourse of sexuality and eroticism.

While finishing The Testament in 2004 Bronques brought his camera into the underground nightlife of Manhattan Club Kids and in October LNP went public on the Internet. Bronques’ transition into photographing nightlife resulted in greater success than he ever achieved in the music industry. His use of Internet photography opened doors to economic success and his subjects’ continued willingness to pose facilitated a continued connection to the process and the community culture that fed his creativity in the past.

Soon after LNP’s inception, Bronques is regularly hired by club owners to photograph parties, but he still has the final choice about whom and what is represented on his website. For
those who have never attended one of the parties in person, the website constructs an image of the Scene where every moment, even in the chaos of sweat and drinking, occurs in perfect choreography with every other person in the club. Even subjects on the verge of passing out appear on the website in a composed stillness that comes with photographs of even the most out of control of moments. While the wholistic package of LNP captures what one could call the most extreme moments of the night, the camera’s presence may well be the impetus behind some of the moments.

Other photographers like Weegee, Patrick McMullan and Nan Goldin brought their cameras into New York nightlife scenes, but Bronques was the first to find success in promoting a website devoted to presentation of scene images on the Internet the morning after the party. With a tall stature that produces an easily recognizable photographic style, Bronques found a niche in capturing partiers from a vantage point that presents them as thin, long-bodied and awestruck. Leaving secrets and less attractive faces hidden from view, the faces in focus are bright and brilliant and behind them is often nothing but the black night of a dimly lit room made darker thanks to a well-utilized flash. On those first nights out Bronques documented the parties, Club Kids, and other Scenesters, meanwhile giving them business cards baring his web address as he photographed them (Schatzker 2007). The Club Kids were the initial subjects and also the initial target audience of LNP.

As the first to know about LNP, Club Kids would check the site the morning after they partied with Bronques; they wanted to see their pictures, put them on their MySpace pages and sometimes just get a refresher of the night before. In its first two weeks live, LNP received up to 1,000 hits per day (Chiles 2006b). Regular Scenester Heidi Gallant remembers, “When he first started, everyone was like: Why are you doing this? What's special about me? What's special
about this party?” (Ryzik 2005). Once the Club Kids of Manhattan knew about LNP, saw themselves on it, and started to use it for their own entertainment they received the website and concept with open arms and late night abandon.

It is almost impossible to imagine in the Scene today, but when Anna met Bronques at the very beginning of LNP she had no idea who he was. Anna clearly remembers her first interaction with Bronques as one that was “scary” but also “kind of cool” (2006). Because professional photography was not yet a norm in the underground Scene, her initial response to his interest in her was anxiety-filled and skeptical.

I met Merlin on Halloween weekend in the bathroom at Scenic. It was like 4:30 in the morning and I was standing on the dance floor, I had no idea what lastnightsparty was, like, I just was out cuz my friend Heidi was like ‘come to the Halloween party. We grew up together, we’ve known each other since we were little girls and she is the one who introduced me to the whole club thing. So, it was 4:30 in the morning and this scary man is like ‘can I take your picture?’ and I said ok and the he said ‘do you wanna try something a little bit more risqué?’ and I was like, ‘maybe.’ So he pulls me into the bathroom and I was like what the fuck is this frightening man doing, like does he masterbate to my pictures or something, Like I have no idea who you are, get away from me, you’re really scary, I’m not getting naked. But he took a picture of me anyway, it was kind of cool…But then a couple of days later I found out what lastnightsparty was and I felt like an asshole. (Anna 2006)

Later, when Bronques’ identity is explained to her, Anna’s mentality changes and she no longer characterizes Bronques a “frightening man” but instead she now feels like she is an “asshole” (2006). Labeling herself an “asshole” for being uncomfortable with a photographer she did not know is telling of the systems facilitating his success. Since this first meeting, Bronques’ authenticity as a Scene photographer grants him great access to people who might otherwise walk away from a stranger.

When asked about the man behind the camera, the Kids consistently use two words more frequently than any others to describe Bronques: “charismatic” and “creepy”. The Kids used these two words consistently, but not necessarily in unison, to describe Bronques in interviews
and conversations. Usually cool kids, all kids, avoid creepy guys, but in Bronques’ case it is possible that his charisma and the liberation that he offers to his subjects in the form of alternative, empowering, artistic photographs forgive his “creepiness.” His creepiness may be synonymous with an uncomfortable violation of private, otherwise safe personal and subcultural space; it looks as though his presentation of self and of his artistic mission is consistently winning out over his creepiness within the Scene and is not hindered by intermittent public criticism.

The primary subjects in LNP images are female even if there are men in the frame. Abigail and Anna explain their perception of gender roles inside of the Scene. For Abigail the “fashion world” of the Club Scene is primarily for women, “I think guys can just go out and it’s about something different and I think girls go out and it’s like, we like respond to other girls and or like react to them in this kind of fashion world” (2007). Anna agrees but qualifies her statement, “yeah true, but so do guys, like so do gay men” (2007). Anna also mentions that all of her male friends within the Scene are gay. Maddy attributes website content to the photographers’ choices, who, importantly, are men. Notably, they are also one of the primary heterosexual male populations frequenting nightlife.

I think you don’t see a lot of guys in those pictures because they take pictures of things that are like outrageous. Like, things that catch their eye. Like somebody with a crazy outfit or somebody whose beautiful and dancing or naked. And most of the guys are either in drag and on the websites, or making out with another guy and on the websites, or not really doing anything and not being photographed. That’s what I think. And because the photographers are guys, they want to take pictures of what they want to (2006).

Maddy describes those moments and people worthy of capturing as “outrageous.” In more detail, the crazy outfit or beautiful, dancing, or naked body are all normatively female roles; men who get photographed are those in feminized roles while dressed in drag or kissing another man.
The male photographer is the shooter and editor of the images that are disseminated on the Internet and consequently create mass culture’s understanding of the Scene. She also noted that Merlin has an economic incentive to photograph nudity.

If people see these pictures of people, of girls making out with each other and people having fun and people being naked then people are gonna want to go to that party and then the party makes more money. And for Merlin, he gets paid to do that, to take pictures and make people’s parties look good. So he’s gonna want to take pictures of people naked and stuff so people look on the website and say, ‘oh my god there’s naked girls here. I need to go to this party’ (Maddy 2006).

Maddy’s description shows her keen awareness of the power that the photographer holds within her subculture. The majority of Bronques’ images are vibrant color portraits of the people, primarily women, whom he encounters each night, many of the images reflect his earlier search for pinups. “Every girl he takes pictures of he tries to get the boobs out…that is the story of his life” (Maddy 2006).

He is just like, for instance the other night me and my friend Sam, my good girlfriend, were going to the bathroom the other night and the line was so long that we were like “we will just go in the men’s bathroom real quick whatever” We walk up to the bathroom and he like pushes his way in there. And we’re like “uhhh”? Like he pretty much just wants to watch us pee. And she’s like “you cant take out your camera, like I don’t know what you’re thinking but that’s not cool, you know.” And he’s like, “no that’s cool.” And he didn’t have to go to the bathroom he just wanted to be in there with us. I didn’t pee because I was totally weirded out by it, you know? (Haley 2007)

Just as not all parts of posing appeal to Haley, not all of the images appeal to Helen Job, a Worth Global Style Network trend spotter who attends the parties and clicks on the site regularly. "I get a bad taste somehow," she told The New York Times, "it's like a Peeping Tom kind of thing" (Ryzik 2005). In the same New York Times article, longtime Scene promoter known as Michael T also critiqued Bronques, “He gets a little too 'Girls Gone Wild’…When something is done spur of the moment, I think it's great. But when he does that over and over, it's just Merlin letting his voyeuristic fantasies go to the next level” (Ryzik 2005). Formulaic in its photographic success
the same images that are applauded illicit criticism for demeaning and exploiting the often intoxicated subjects and the Scene.

Anna, Leah, and Maddy have individually experienced the Scene as one that changed from an intimate underground subculture to a heavily photographed, watched, and eventually coveted lifestyle. Leah explained that unlike many of the new Kids who are drawn to the Scene by the pictures she did not know about LNP when she started partying and her favorite party has nothing to do with how much publicity it receives.

I’ve been in magazines and stuff for lastnightsparty. I’ve never been like into going to the main Scene or being well known. I never really saw this happening actually. An ex-boyfriend of mine, when I told him I was moving to NY said, “you’re going to end up on LNP and I didn’t even know what it was. I had no idea what that site was and like, come two years later and I’m like a staple of it (Leah 2007).

Leah is proof that not everyone in the Scene is there to be photographed, nor is photography the primary draw for Kids who remain in the Scene because it is there they find a safe and private space for self-expression, and leisure. “I am pretty fond of Trash I guess, that is because it has become somewhat of a homey environment for me” (Leah 2007). For others, initiated into the Scene by the Internet rather than by other Scenesters, nightlife photography defines their expectations and is synonymous with a good night out.

In late 2005 more photographers, like Nikola of Ambrel.net, DJ Jess of Indierotica.com, and Mark Hunter of Cobra Snake, surfaced and gained notice on the Scene. Haley describes the economy involved,

For the parties if the photographers are there that is a really good sign—that’s a really good sign. You want a lot of coverage and people are going to be there, good people that the photographers want to photograph. It’s a compliment to have Bronques or NikiDigital or Nikola show up without getting paid, because with Nikidigital or Bronques certain parties will pay them to come and take pictures so that they get their name on the LNP website or the Nikidigital website (Haley 2007).

The symbiotic relationship between the party and the photographer results in greater revenue and
notoriety respectively. As Bronques’ professional success rose beyond the consciousness of New Yorkers he received increasing invitations to shoot events outside of the city for pay. Helen Job agrees that LNP is the existential Scene barometer to which Haley alludes. Job explains that if Bronques is at a party, “It’s a good party.” Paul Devitt, an owner of Beauty Bar, hires Bronques to photograph nationally at Beauty Bar’s four venues, “They help promote the place, the venue, the night” (Ryzik 2005).

Now it’s more like, ‘Oh, I can’t wait until tomorrow morning when I can see the pictures of tonight. I feel like a lot of it is done just for the pictures that are gonna go up.’ When somebody with a camera will come close to you, everybody will act like their having so much fun, or all the sudden start dancing (Maddy 2006).

With a more concentrated and attentive subject pool Bronques delved deeper into his study of hedonism, sadism, eroticism and humiliation. Within the alternative club setting Bronques’ taste for nude model is satiated as Kids and Scenesters who, willing to bare all or almost all, model in evocative poses. Others engage in sex acts on the dance floor and in the bathroom. The blank, glazed appearance on many of the faces is a common trademark of Bronques’ photography. On the screen it often translates into the “so drunk she can’t stand up” look.

As the photographer Bronques decides what, who, where, and how to photograph. He edits each party during the night by choosing where to point his lens and after the night by editing composition and content of which images are posted on LNP. LNP itself frames the images as an encapsulation of a lifestyle worth coveting. It makes a visual claim as the replication of the Scene in pictures. If hung in a gallery framed and matted with a different opening statement the impact and reading of the LNP would be different. However, for the subjects, perceiving an image as a carbon copy rather than an interpretation is immeasurably dangerous. Doing so shifts the power dynamic and internal meaning making so vital to this subculture is put at risk. Such is the power of the photographer and the choices that come with
the role, these choices affect the experience of both the audience and the subject in relation to the images. The slogan that frames the images on LNP “Where were you last night?”(Bronques) is loaded with further questions. Were you or weren’t you with the cool kids? Did you make it into the photographs to prove it?

LNP gained popularity within the Scene as a rose-colored reflection of the Club Kid’s late night moves. At the same time, Bronques gained his own popularity as the eye behind the lens and as a new character in a Scene that thrives on exactly that, characters. “They are all such characters. Everyone is a character. It’s like high school it really is. Like a big high school soap”(Anna 2007). Bronques’ charismatic marketing of himself and his website is as responsible for his success as his keen choice of subject. Schatzker of Toro Magazine concluded, “Unlike so many contemporary artists whose cult of personality is part of their art, Bronques doesn’t believe that his audience needs to understand him to understand his work”. Schatzker cited Bronques’ consistently vague answers about his life in New York, his sexual orientation, and his age as evidence. “Age is another one of those categories that doesn’t mean anything to me,” said Bronques (2007). Aided by a tendency to include himself in images by remaining in a reflection or turning the camera on himself, his face becomes as famous as his photographs. Bronques constructed a cult of personality that is fundamentally dependent on maintaining the mystery. Back in his NAM:LIVE! days Bronques said, “People want stars. They want to eat up the cult of personality” (Bussell 2004). Bronques business and social savvy elevated his cult of personality to a point where both the Scene and later the Internet community were eager to “eat up.”

It is not uncommon that Bronques is asked about his sexual orientation during conversations about his access to photograph nude young women. When asked if he is gay Bronques typically dodges the question and labels it as ridiculous and unrelated to analysis of his
work. In contrast to Schatzker’s deduction that Bronques’ circumlocution of personal details is a rejection of the “cult of personality,” Bronques circumlocution is in fact a characteristic of maintaining the personality. While Bronques openly explains that his artistic expression has the tendency to materialize in very sexual ways, he has made it a point to leave his sexual orientation undefined amidst much talk and controversy. The perpetual public discourse surrounding his sexual orientation in relation to his work maintains his high profile status as original and interesting. Additionally, Bronques’ maintenance of ambiguous sexual orientation allows him to remain an attainable object of desire with men and women.

Bronques was asked if a man could achieve the “near instantaneous intimacy” (Schatzker 2007) that Bronques has with his subjects if that man was openly heterosexual. This is one example of a persistent and open discourse within the Scene and the media regarding Bronques’ sex life, orientation, and the role it plays in his work. Maddy and Anna specifically address his undefined sexuality as a trait that is fodder for gossip.

I don’t know what he is, I’ve made out with him before, everyone has, I don’t think he’s gay. He’s an enigma. I don’t know if he goes home with people and fucks them. I want to have sex with him…I like him, I think he’s cool…(Anna 2006) We are not really sure about the sexuality of Merlin…(Maddy 2006)

Some believe that his ambiguity gives him more access to subjects because sexual exhibitionism is a core component of his photography shoots and imagery. Anna’s open affection and apparent disinterest in labeling his sexual orientation does not stop her from assessing the affect his ambiguity may have on the Scene and on other models.

A lot of girls thought he was gay so they would take their clothes off more easily for him, but I never thought he was gay…I mean I didn’t really know what he was, I don’t really know what he is still, but that really doesn’t matter. (Anna 2007a).

The personal decision to leave his sexual orientation undefined may benefit Bronques professionally. The benefits resemble those gleaned by 1990s boy bands that maintain their
primary fan base of preteen girls while also appealing to gay boys by not having openly sexual relationships. The boy bands members’ public identities are constructed as “sweet, soft and young” so that they represent “safe objects of first affection” for their teenaged girl fans. The asexuality of the members also makes them an object of affection for gay boys (Epstein 2000). In Bronques’ business he is interacting with a Scene that claims a mainly female and gay male clientele. Similar to the safety and sweetness found in boy band members, whose publicly straight identities are desexualized, appeal to both gay boys and straight girls; Bronques’ maintenance of a publicly ambiguous sexual identity re-contextualizing work and enables his pursuit of highly sexualized themes that through another lens might be considered salacious.

A testament to his success at building a cult of personality is Merlin Bronques’ life as a photographer who is as much a consumable commodity as his website. Arriving on November 4, 2005, at the one-year anniversary party of LNP, in his Warholian, shoulder-length, jet-black wig, and dark sunglasses, Bronques successfully posed and performed as well as any of his subjects. He was soon known as “the black Andy Warhol” (Schatzker 2007).

Lately when he’s in NY and he’s come out to parties he doesn’t come out in his sunglasses or wig, he just wears his Yankees hat and normal clothes. The hat with diamonds. He’s like “this is just another mask for me, the way you met me like with the sunglasses and wigs that is really like me in my truest form, just like you in your makeup is you in your truest form.” And it’s really true, I don’t know if it’s just natural but I really do just feel incredibly comfortable when I am dressed up as a character. I sound crazy (Anna 2007a).

![Figure 5 “I Fuck’D Bronques” T Shirt. (c2006)
Killshopkill, an Internet apparel company that advertises on LNP, produced a t-shirt (Figure 5) with a negative screen print of Bronques’ head bearing a Warholian wig and sunglasses. This specific t-shirt was popular in the Scene in 2005 and with text that reads “I Fuck’d Merlin Bronques,” it highlights Bronques’ identity as a consumable and sexualized personality.

Refusing to leave all the production of consumable Bronques paraphernalia up to Scenesters and the Internet audience, on September 1, 2006 Bronques released his own coffee table book titled, *Last Night’s Party: Where Were You Last Night?* Sold on the Internet and at hip clothing company Urban Outfitters, the book contains 176 pages of party photographs with the following preface inside the front cover,

> If you missed last night’s party, here’s a VIP pass to New York City’s sexy Club Scene. It’s a voyeuristic spin with today’s downtown demimonde, where hipsters, rocker’s celebrities, and drag queens meet and misbehave with unabashed enthusiasm. Bared flesh, intertwined tongues and *de rigueur* attitudes are all captured by Bronques’ lens. If this is your Scene you may find yourself here; if not, welcome to the best party in town. Merlin Bronques is the controversial nightlife personality behind the website lastnightsparty.com. He lives in New York City (Bronques 2006).

In 2007 Merlin described his goals for the book in an interview, “Whenever I see those books of photos like *Disco Years*, there are so many stars. But what about all the other people on the dance floor at Studio 54? When future generations look back on this era, or at least at my pictures, they’re not going to have that problem” (Sokol 2007). Interviews like this one continue to reinforce LNP’s content as a definitive and comprehensive depiction of the Scene.

However, as the preface describes, the images selected for inclusion primarily project sexualized and erotic moments as the defining moments in New York nightlife. It includes female Scenesters partying in bathrooms and sprawled on the floor of clubs, they are often in the process of undressing or are already dressed provocatively. Other models, both men and women, appear stoned and smiling. The most famous faces in the book include icon Madonna, hip-hop
artist Jay–Z, singer Hillary Duff, actress and business mogul Ashley Olsen, and singer Kelly Osborne. The celebrities are intertwined, with the pages featuring everyday Scenesters. The celebrities are fully dressed and thus pictured not for their overt sexualized activity but for their identities as recognizable famous faces. What is not included, among others are the imperfect outfits, the drunken arguments, the underdressed gawkers and the increasing droves of other photographers. The inclusions and omissions the make up the whole of the book substantiate Bronques’ unerring commitment to present a “true” representation of the Scene the only exists after he has carefully edited it for mass market success.

From clothing, articles, websites, and books covering LNP and Bronques’ photography within the Scene increased the presence of photography as a trend and component of partying and solidified Bronques’ identity as a recognizable Scene personality. LNP also gained credibility among partiers and viewers of the website as the official representation of the New York Party Scene. Merlin Bronques is no longer alone in his efforts to put the Club Scene on the map. While he was hired recently to put the Miami and LA scenes into pictures, Ambrel, Nikola Damidzic and others continue documenting the New York Scene. The prolific Internet representations of the Scene are embraced in mass culture and capitalism which eventually spurs overwhelming change inside the physical space of the Scene.
CHAPTER III: SCENE STYLE AND ITS COMMODIFICATION

Have you taken a trip to Mexico recently? Laid on the beach in Cancun or climbed to the top of Chichen Itza? It is likely then that you carried back with you at the bottom of your luggage a colorful, woven Mexican blanket. The four dollars you spent gives you permanent proof for the sake of bragging rights that you are well traveled. That is, after all, what the blanket is, a souvenir. But the history of that blanket calls it by another name. It is a serape and its natural dyes and hand woven designs once told the story of the origins and class of the man whose back it warmed. The serape is an amalgamation of indigenous and Spanish craft, for workers, horsemen and farmers the cloth served as a shelter from the elements, a pillow, a blanket and a covering for the backs of horses. The many uses tell much about the lives of 19th century Mexican men, but removed from its history the serape becomes a buyable symbol of “Mexicanness”. Our souvenirs have longer histories than we often recognize. Commodifying them removes them from this history; it gives them new meanings.

Internet photography contributes to and benefits from capitalizing on the Club Scene by commodifying it. The following chapter outlines some of the material and visual culture that is a direct or an indirect commodification of Scene style. Misshapes party, one of the most highly publicized and commodified Scene parties, is presented here as a case study of the process that leads to such production and the role and impact this process has on the girls. Misshapes, beginning as an underground party for a tight group of Scenesters, quickly transformed into a financially successful and well-managed corporation complete with endorsement deals and brand imagery with websites devoted to trend spotting within the party. Misshapes’ public identity included a fashion-focused Internet photography component that sculpted much of their image and fan base. However, over time and with exposure, the Misshapes made choices that benefited
them as a business but did not popularize them within the Scene where they began. For the girls, the Scene publicity was acceptable given that the Kids maintained the Club spaces as their own through processes of internal meaning making. However, an increased fan base and a conflation in images between “real” and “representation” proves that maintenance of space is impossible. The Kids’ accounts, both positive and negative, illuminate what within their subculture is valued, how it is maintained, and how it is threatened. The introduction of external meaning making processes to the Scene is a dominant contributor to the Scene’s transition from subculture to mass culture.

Club Kid culture is not exempt from the affects of the capitalist system in which it thrives. The Kids are constantly navigating between mass culture and subculture. As a subculture they value and make meanings surrounding issues of diversity, tolerance, safety, and home. At the same time, they take part in posing and performing for the photographers during Internet photography’s initial stages in the Scene. During this time I observed the Kids posing for pictures while maintaining goals that the resulting individual publicity might serve as a stepping stone for achieving fame or success as Scene staples, as ingénues, as celebrated artists, or (equally rare in some opinions) as fed artists. The process and maintenance of these goals are easily labeled mainstream or capitalistic from an external perspective. However, after further examination and time with the Kids, I find that while their goals are bound by an interaction with the capitalistic frameworks—that enter their lives and their subculture in the form of the clubs, parties, photographers working for-profit and in the form of their own needs to maintain a certain level of economic based lifestyle standards (varying from person to person)—the interaction is fundamentally subversive. A subversion evidenced by their higher commitment to maintaining the values and meanings established within the subcultural environment.
New York nightlife’s history focuses consistently on fashion and presentation of self through performance and style. Whether it be the designer pieces of Studio 54 celebrities or the homemade costume creations of the 90s club kids, authenticity through fashion remains key to the Scene. For the Club Kids who present their style as a key part of their Scene, in many ways fashion is both a form of recreation and of identity. Historically, members of the New York nightlife participate in an internal process of meaning making and of sharing knowledge within the space of the club. This process, in which seasoned partiers introduce new partiers to the Scene, insures consistency through generations. Although internal meaning making continues to exist today, popular media representations and commodification of the Scene externalizes the introduction process, removing much of the control from those inside of the Scene. Thus, the performance and style, so coveted within the Scene, is experiencing change as commodification and consequential externalization takes place. Hopeful partiers drawn to the Scene by representations they see in magazines and on the Internet are now trying to replicate Club Kid style. The Kids have also become the heartbeat and gauge by which the P.R. and fashion industry look for upcoming hot trends. The result is prolific Scene images and articles found beyond New York nightlife websites like LNP. These five Kids and the clothes they wear are part of a larger trend that is solidifying their lifestyle as one that is easily bought and sold nationally and internationally.

For the MisShapes and for Bronques, the Scene’s mainstream exposure expanded into endorsement deals and advertisement campaigns with major brands and organizations. Bronques’ party images set the mood for Converse© Sneakers page advertisements and the George, Gina and Lucy® fashion bag website. The images displayed present party moments of impromptu intimacy that look like they were pulled directly from LNP.com. Entry into
advertising does alter some of the image content. While his preferred locations of dank anonymous ground or bathroom floors remain, as a whole, the subjects included in the advertising campaigns serve as representations of a dominant heteronormative construction of sexuality. He includes only two people in each frame, intimately positioned, one male and one female (see Figures 6 and 7). With a new brand of straightness attached to New York nightlife’s image, Bronques style translates to the viewer that owners of the advertised products have access to the exciting lifestyles of Scenesters.

Figure 6 “ggl07 fashion bags” (Bronques c2007)

Figure 7 “European Converse campaign” (Bronques c2007)
The transition from internal meaning making of style roles to external meaning making through distribution of Scene style as a commodified lifestyle occurred in synchrony with the rise of Internet photography. As style and presentation of looks is fundamental to the Kids’ lives in the Scene, the representation of these looks on the Internet is fundamental to the Scene’s wider success in mass culture. In this case, success is based on standards of capitalist gain and not based on maintenance of the subculture’s established values, meanings, and processes. From 2005 to today, as national magazines like *Spin* and *GQ* and popular blogs like Gawker.com (Gawker) begin to devote pages to Scene images, the promotion of New York Nightlife as a brand popularizes the parties and also the photographers. In June 2006, *Spin* magazine featured LNP. *BPM* magazine introduced LNP to its readers in its February/March 2006 issue with “Lastnightsparty: Civil disobedience or Cultural Nexus” and then again one year later (Lastnightsparty 2007). Including a feature section detailing Bronques’ three favorite club bathrooms to photograph in the March 2006 *BPM*. The four page article begins with a full page picture of Bronques holding a Polaroid of himself, then an article with a focus on the apparently naturally occurring sexual instances that Bronques’ photographs at the clubs (Chiles 2006b). The final two pages are a collage of pictures from LNP with a quote from Bronques, “I have no problem saying, ‘Hey, you know what would be cool right now, is if you were all naked…’”(Chiles 2006b). Illustrated in Figure 8, the full-page collage is a typical technique for features about LNP.
Coverage of LNP appears in a consistently visual framework, found on party and fashion pages; this presentation perpetuates Bronques’ photography as verging on objective journalism and the Scene as a trend to be watched, modeled after, and consumed. As it serves photographers and club owners to portray the Scene in a way that draws more partiers, it also serves the media to portray it as an attainable and desirable lifestyle.

Gawker’s weblog Bluestateslose (BSL) satirizes approximately eight party photographs and the Kids in the images that were published during the previous week on any of the nightlife photographers’ sites. Images from LNP are chosen regularly and paired with commentary like the following, “Last Night’s Party, Eat Cake photo #8673: Hey, you know what would make Last Night’s Party’s ‘stupid hipster chicks pretending to be bisexual like Paris Hilton for attention’ pictures even better? Bachelorette party hijinx!” (Blagg 2007). The satirical nature of BSL can be scathing but remains a popular site that further promotes the Scene. BSL is a prime example of the Kids’ initial enthusiasm towards Scene publicity; they described collecting any and all magazine appearances of themselves and their friends even when the coverage could be construed as negative. Their response is steeped in a feeling of ownership of the image production. For many, posing is a vehicle for much desired personal publicity.
From 2005 to 2006 LNP reached a rank among the top 5,000 Internet sites according to Alexa Web Information Service (AWIS), a company that compiles Internet data. What started out as Scenesters checking out photos of themselves or their friends at their favorite club manifested into a voyeuristic experience for everyone who did not attend. Anna explains, “It’s just because of the Internet and that we have created mini celebrities out of people, like people like hosting these parties, are seen as a New York celebrities” (2007). For those who knew the Scene before the cameras, the mini-celebrity is a surprise and an adjustment. Being seen everywhere, as Maddy explains, is highly personal as it is their faces and the faces of their friends that are getting so much attention.

It used to be just lastnightsparty. I’ve been noticing it a lot lately. My friends were on TV yesterday and when you said you wanted to interview us I said to Anna like, ‘this is really, this is getting crazy. It’s really been blowing up’. And I’ve noticed websites, there are just so many more, so many more photographers, so many more websites…you can just go anywhere and see us (Maddy 2006).

The Kids’ Scene becomes one where some opt to embrace mini-celebrity and others are thrust into it as LNP’s traffic expands across the United States, Germany, Italy, Canada and France (Alexa.com) and the aforementioned attention from popular presses increases. Now they know that every time Bronques posts them on LNP a little chunk of the world is watching, peeping, or obsessing over a scene they could only get close to in pictures. Abigail describes a particular moment when the reach of the Scene became clear to her, “Some guys came up to me and was like ‘you know anorexic?’ and I was like, ‘who’ and he was like, ‘you know anorexic?’ And I was like ‘oh, yeah…’ people like know about her” (2007). Nonchalant about the interaction, Abigail acts fairly unimpressed about the attention but she does not forget it, “People come up to me more and more and I get more and more fan mail, it’s so weird” (Anna 2007a). Whether the Kids claim a group identity or not, their participation in the Scene implicates them in presenting
their style at every party they attend, for the eyes and minds of other Kids, other attendees, and for mass consumption every time their photographs are posted on the Internet.

MisShapes had immense media and fashion clout by 2006; fans were flocking to the party, collecting their photographs, and idolizing them from afar.

They’ve gotten so famous and they have a million little fans all over the world. There is this kid from Miami, I don’t know his name but he has every single MisShapes photo on his wall and is like obsessed with them. And he, like, flew out for his birthday to go to MisShapes. What the fuck, it’s ridiculous (Anna 2007a).

The ‘kid from Miami’ was not the only outside fan flocking to MisShapes. Many Club Kids distance themselves when the fans arrive. I find that there are several reasons for this, which vary from girl to girl. With a fan community of adolescents and adults looking for fashion, entertainment, or pornography and media outlets watching for the next big trend; the Club Kids experiences comprise elements of positive and negative reactions to the publicity.

In addition to Bronques’ advertising campaigns, the Kids’ appearances in national magazines, MisShapes party, as a case study, is an extremely visual example of an expeditious transformation (and the subsequent fallout) from subcultural staple to mass culture powerhouse. The weekly Saturday party, MisShapes, started as an unofficial 2003 New Year’s Eve bash.

“[Leigh Lezark, Geordon Nicol and Greg Krelenstein] came to New York and they set it ablaze,’ Jimmy Webb, 50, the wiry manager of the East Village punk boutique Trash and Vaudeville, said of the trio” (Ryzik 2007). Held on the dance floor of Luke and Leroy’s, a Greenwich Village bar, the MisShapes party was packed weekly with Club Kids and hipsters. Lezark, Nicol, and Krelenstein are friends and a deejay trio that wanted to throw a party that their friends would care to go to; their friends and hundreds of other New York Scenesters did care to go: regularly, and in droves. Dressed up and ready to pose and dance all night long to great music, MisShapes was the party that everyone wanted to be at.
The party is modeled after an already popular regular event in London; the London Miss-shapes party is self-described as,

About a passion to represent the music we all love; if you're bored of hearing the same sets, tired of never being able to dance to the new bands that rock your world, or frustrated at clubs only playing one type of music, then come and hear a fresh take on it all…We believe that good music has no genre boundaries. it's about tunes that just make you want to have a great time; the sort of tunes that sound track your life, even if you've never heard them before. miss-shapes operates a gay and lesbian majority door policy (Miss-Shapes).

The music they play is integral to the identity of the London party, “We like to play...modern alternative, cool retro, cherry pop, grrrl rock, edgy urban, and sleazy electro, plus the odd cover and bootleg as well as your suggestions and requests” (Miss-Shapes). Like its London counterpart, the New York MisShapes opt to spin music that they enjoy instead of a stale one-genre repertoire.

It was like a huge freakin’ dance party and I think people do that now, they play that fun pop stuff and everyone loves it you know, like, Keith will play Spice Girls, or he’ll play a random N'Sync song. He’ll play that old stuff that people know and they remember, like Montell Jordon, and like everyone will freak out when they hear it. So, I think they [MisShapes] started that though (Haley 2007).

Instead of relying on a group of in-house deejays, the MisShapes chose instead to feature celebrities and musicians in their deejay booth.

In the past three years, Madonna, Kelly Osbourne, Hilary Duff, Andrew W.K. and the editors from Spin and Rolling Stone (among others) took up spinning duties at the party.

“Madonna DJing MisShapes was inevitable, with such a refreshing, young, cutting edge new album, she had to expose it to the most refreshing young night in New York…Getting her to connect with today’s and tomorrow’s nightlife is where she needs to be because that is where she has always been” (Madonna djs at New York Club 2005). Madonna’s appearance at MisShapes
illustrates the leverage and social clout that the party holds—in terms of legitimizing trends (in this case music) for other people their age.

The trio’s party began at the same time that LNP became popular and hiring a nightlife photographer was becoming common practice, if not a necessity, to draw big crowds. Instead of hiring on a party-by-party basis, the MisShapes chose to hire an in-house photographer. The MisShapes use of photography is similar to LNP in that they photograph partiers and then post the images on their website after every party for the enjoyment of partygoers, fans, and the fashion industry alike. The marked difference is in the focus and message behind the pictures. MisShapes secured their image early on as a fashion focused party by concentrating their photography on this theme. “Fashion focused” in this case is not defined by showcasing the hottest new dress from the designer of the week, but rather it means, “Whatever you are wearing, make it yours and only yours.” Stepping away from the impromptu mid-mêlée moments that LNP focuses on and photographer driven party shots that dominate much of the Scene, the MisShapes’ photographer snapped every person who came to MisShapes right after they checked their coats. Posed against their venues’ black, and later white wall, every partygoer struck a pose reminiscent of a mug shot gone awry; the shots have a confrontational straight on appearance. Many of the models pose with legs together and arms hanging by their side; rarely is a smile cracked. For these pictures it is all about attitude and commemorating ensembles before wrinkles and sweat impede perfection. This process is an artist statement of sorts that has developed a series focused not on sex, gender, or intoxication, but instead, focused on presentation of personal fashion. This focus is a fundament of Scene values put to pictures, and is very likely one of the reasons that MisShapes was such a huge success from its very beginning.
In the four years since its inception, MisShapes succeeded as the most popular party within the Scene for a time, and then as the most nationally and globally recognized party for its impact on trends from music to high fashion. “I was around for the Studio 54 days, and this [MisShapes] is the only thing that ever matched it” (Ryzik 2007). While they were consistently receiving applause for their efforts the Scene applause ceased once the mass media and popular culture added their hands to the acclaim. The transition began with a venue move in December 2005 to Don Hills. The move to the West Side and its growing popularity made the party less appealing and less accessible to its usual partiers. Then in the summer of 2006, the MisShapes officially became a corporation and “it got too big and then other things started and people started not going there” (Haley 2007). Incorporating the MisShapes as a DJ trio and party meant more publicity and managers; it also foreshadowed their success in markets beyond the Scene.

Professionally and economically the MisShapes continue to benefit from the mass media’s embrace. In one article they were described as the “so-hip-it-hurts Saturday club night” (Colman 2005). In 2006, MisShapes had seven write-ups in the New York Times. Blender put the MisShapes on the "HOT 100 LIST" of the hottest 100 artists of the year to look out for in 2006. Their appearances in the press broadened the identity of the MisShapes from that of an event, to that of a lifestyle and trio of personalities worth fetishizing and mimicking. Everything from the MisShapes’ choice footwear to their beverage of the moment is documented for popular consumption and commodification.

Some of the Club Kids described the “looks” and the “style” that is typical and identifiable within the Scene and that some of the most infamous nightlife personalities come complete with names and personas. To describe the change in the Scene, Abigail and Anna first explain what style means for them as internally educated Kids. Introduced to the nightlife by her
sister when she was sixteen years old, Anna has since imparted upon Abigail, her knowledge of
developing style and identity in the Scene.

I think there are three parts of NYC nightlife at least in our, in the over encompassing
hipster scene that are like three subsets. There are the MisShapes hipsters, which are a
very certain sect of people; they all go to Ruff Club on Friday’s to the Annex. They are
all typical MisShapes and they are very much trust fund kids, a lot richer, they are all
wearing a lot more designer, they are all very hip boys. They are all very gay. They are
all really well dressed, they are all not like drag queenie or over the top. And then there’s
like, more a scene where it’s more trashiness and drugs. This is Rated X, and Michael T
and Trash on Friday’s at Riffifi kind of like a much grungier scene but still kind of like
fabulous and flashy. And then there is the Drag Queen, Duvet, Happy Valley, Amanda
Lepore scene. And you know they all kind of mix mash together but those are the three
sects of friends you can have. I’m mostly between the Hipster MisShapes people and the
trashy Rated X people (Anna 2007a).

The latter subset (Rated X, etc.) that Anna describes is where the majority of the old Club Kids
who are still active in nightlife go to party. All of the groups interact and inspire each other on
some level and while diverse, the Scenesters share an overarching commitment to consistent
ingenuity in style. Anna, Maddy and Abigail describe themselves based on the former
description and Haley parties with a crowd closer to the latter. Leah, as a go-go dancer and Club
Kid, occupies a space in between and is allowed movement between both groups.

Being a Scenester, a member of this Scene, in regards to style means that you dress for an
entrance, for dancing, and to feel fabulous. Your clothes may highlight a nightlife persona, or
may be part of performative expression. Maybe you constructed each piece by hand or found the
perfect pair of $1200 shoes to complement that vest, but in the end the product is yours, it is your
because of how you wear it, and how it makes you feel. Many different types of people make up
the whole of today’s Scene; Anna categorizes the types based on the style they wear and then
enumerate the implications of these styles based on class, sexuality, persona and the meanings
that surround Scene style for those with a nuanced internal education of nightlife expectations.

From the people, to the subsets, to the intersectionality within the Scene—the process sustaining
the Scene thus far are consistent with its history. Internal meaning making and values have sustained the subculture. Recently, the Girls’ and the rest of the Scene members’ agency is diminished as they have no way to control the way they are represented externally and the subsequent meanings made from such representations.

In the *New York Times*, Geordon’s pointy-toed shoes were deemed newsworthy (2005). The British-made shoes date back to late 1970’s punk rock and Jimmy Webb. A statement from the buyer for the store where the shoes are sold verified the shoes’ comeback, “that the style has picked up steam again, rediscovered by Indie rockers who want the most attitude for the least money, about $150 a pair. ‘I can't keep them in stock,’ he said. ‘I sell 15 to 30 pair a week’” (2005).

The trio’s switch from alcoholic energy drink *Sparks* to rosé wine brought the latter into good standing with the party crowd.

A lot of my friends don't want to get wasted on vodka and be sick the next day,” said Greg Krelenstein of the MisShapes, a group of three influential Manhattan party promoters and D.J.’s, who tasted rosé for the first time this summer. "And everybody's off the speed drinks like Spark. I've bought rosé for people, and they've been excited to drink something that's not going to make them crazy like tequila" (Chaplin 2006).

Wine director, Jesse Salazar explained in the same article that demand was up in general and with younger crowds, “the demand for rosé has increased about 30 percent over the last year and 100 percent to 150 percent over the last four years” (2006). The stigma that “pink wine” is a non-serious drink dissolves as influential cool kids like Greg introduce it at their parties.

The style of the Kids is reaching far and wide these days and some Kids, like Haley, are particularly aware of the impact they are having. Haley’s position as a Kid who is originally from San Diego gives her a certain vantage point to notice the West Coast co-option of Club Kid style.
If you think about, like, the clothes the people like you were wearing. You kind of saw that being from California. And then you pretty much saw it everywhere. In a lot of big cities people started wearing headbands. Everyone was wearing head bands. It’s just like things that they do. The styles that kids in my Scene have are definitely reflected on (Haley 2007).

One of the biggest trends that Haley account for the Scene starting recently is a black and white scarf that closely resembles a kaffiyeh; an unlikely trend in the post-911 New York Scene,

There were these scarves that were popular and you could buy them on St. Mark’s and I had one. And I remember that I would where it, and some people would take pictures of me. There were a good amount of people that had them. Then more people had them. And now everyone and their mom has some of these scarves. And I don’t even wear them anymore. It’s funny because in December I went to San Diego and I was wearing it and Keith and I were laughing because whereas everyone would have it in New York everyone in San Diego was like, ‘whoa, where did you get that scarf. I love that scarf.’ (Haley 2007).

Whether for a political or fashion statement Haley does not recount, but her trip to San Diego demonstrated to her just how far the Scene is reaching, “Like everyone just wants to see what these kids are wearing because they know that they are really innovative. I don’t know. It’s weird. It’s really weird. To see it happen first hand. To experience it first hand. It’s kind of funny.” (Haley 2007). The scarf’s popularity did not stop with a few West Coast people asking Haley for it. It moved from St. Mark’s Square and was replicated for Urban Outfitter’s® Spring 2007 catalogue and Delia’s® Summer 2007 catalogue. Haley’s outlook on the scarf’s impact is that it is all much bigger than the scarf. In reality the scarf became popular not because the scarf was groundbreaking but because the Scene is breaking ground.

It’s so funny. It’s just that one black and white scarf. It looks like something an afghani would wear. That is the scarf that started out in New York and was only sold on St. Mark’s and a few people started wearing them, and a lot of people started wearing them in the scene and then now everyone wears them. You know, you will see like sorority girls walking down the street wearing one. It’s just this one little piece of clothing that could be like people in the scene are wearing it, so everyone wants it. So I definitely think that it [the Scene] is really heavily accepted. It reflects what other people are wearing not only in New York but in California (Haley 2007).
As the Kids’ fashion choices are noticed and documented so are those of the MisShapes; however, the fashion industry’s appropriation of MisShapes is more visible as it scrutinizes and reproduces the MisShapes’ style. As they are appropriated and popularized, MisShapes takes on a role similar to Bronques’ within the context of cult of personality. Soon they are not only a party but they are also three people with very constructed, popular public identities. Vogue fashion-news editor described why the industry may be so drawn to MisShapes, “‘They have a great look—the kind that people who work in fashion love…Extremely lean, extremely graphic—it photographs well. It’s not grunge’” (Martin 2007). The Fall 2006 Zaldy line included the MisShapes’ favorite dress and blouse styles. Some have claimed that Hedi Slimane’s July 2006 Dior Homme show in Paris was inspired by the MisShapes look. The New York Times documented Lezark and Nicol’s reaction to seeing his “skinny mop-haired look” strutting down a runway. “‘It was scary,’ said Ms. Lezark, who attended the show, sitting across from Karl Lagerfeld and Elton John. ‘When the first model came down the runway, I said to Geordon, ‘Uh, he really looks like you.’” Slimane, who denied the inspiration, did promote his book, Birth of a Cult, at MisShapes in 2005 and has been photographed with the threesome several times (Horyn 2006a, 1).
In 2007 the now famous faces of the MisShapes endorsed back to school gear for Eastport® (Figure 11). Realizing their popularity beyond the world of high fashion and the cool kids in the Club Scene, MisShapes agreed to an endorsement deal with mainstream school gear company Eastport.® The campaign targeted the ever-expanding tween population but also risked alienating their two original niche markets. They were also invited to pose for the ONE organization’s international charity campaign “The ONE organization stands in an effort to rally Americans to fight the emergency of global AIDS and extreme poverty around the world” (About the one campaign). Both Figures 11 and 12 represent the three MisShapes serious-faced and close together, similar to what is now well known as the look represented by MisShapes party photographs. Leigh Lezark is front and center; a position that she maintains literally and figuratively as the press focuses solely on her.

![Figure 11 “Eastsport: MisShapes” (c2006)](image1) ![Figure 12 “ONE Campaign: MisShapes” (Christensen c2006)](image2)

The photographic process and message of Style that the MisShapes party photographs focus on are not the only representations of MisShapes. Popular magazines and websites cover the MisShapes often from the party’s chosen lens of style but the representations also seem influenced by the highly sexualized Scene photography that dominates it. Thus, the coverage of Leigh, Greg, and Geordon has an unmistakable tilt towards focusing on Leigh. New York
Magazine named her one of the "Most Influential" New Yorkers in 2006; she was also named one of the “Top 25 Under 25” by SPIN magazine (2006). Vogue named her one of the 2006 “50 Best Dressed Originals past and present” (Bowles 2007). In the New York Magazine “the New York Scenesters that are effecting real change” was the following description of Leigh,

Equal parts Louise Brooks and Kate Moss, Lezark is a downtown ‘It’ girl–cum–marketing phenomenon. Her vampy little-girl-lost look was made for the club-scene photos at Last-NightsParty.com, and thanks to a never-ending stream of celebrity D.J.’s—Madonna, Hilary Duff, Hedi Slimane—her weekly ‘MisShapes’ party at Don Hill’s continues to draw L-train mods. And so the product-placers have descended, showering the 21-year-old with freebies in the hope that she’ll propel them to the head of the class. Because where one hipster goes, another inevitably follows (The Influentials 2006).

The magazine also featured a column about Leigh’s favorite looks from New York’s Fall 2007 shows, in it they named her “D.J., designer, and queen of the cool crowd” (Lezark 2007). When the New Wave band The Sounds sought a cover for their album Dying to Say This to You, they chose Lezark and her famous pout to visually connect the band to the Club Scene where their music, looks, and attitudes are popular (Brown 2006). The images and descriptions of Leigh Lezark contribute to the public gender construction and normative sexualization of the Scene, all of which contribute to the expectations of the public regarding what exists inside the subculture and what those representations of gender mean.

The MisShapes press and participation in endorsements comes at a price, as some of the original party devotees prove under-whelmed by the party’s fame. The party that began as a fabulous Manhattan hipster Scene party at Luke & Leroy’s experienced backlash as it entered mainstream consciousness.

Everybody’s like a clone of each other and I really think it has to do with the MisShapes and their style and the few core people who were the originals of it. And now its like everyone and they do it just for the style because a lot of people don’t have their own thing like me. When I go out I wear whatever I want because its fun. That’s what you’re supposed to do (Anna 2007a).
She talks about “what you are supposed to do” referring to her own constant search for a new and original look that is authentic in that it serves her desires and is based on no one else’s expectations. Leah’s account of the MisShapes Scene is not as entranced as that of the fashion industry. Since MisShapes’ entrance into mainstream popularity the people there are different; this supports what Abigail and Haley say about “girls from Jersey” coming into the city on the weekend to attend the popular party. However, MisShapes high profile may have some benefits that more underground parties do not—less drugs.

It’s really bad music, it’s a lot more about a reputation, but people still go there, I still go there every once in a while. I have friends that go there. It’s a different crowd, they are very expensive. The people who go there are regulars and the more exclusive crowd is extremely exclusive and they’re very bitchy to people which is why a lot of people don’t go there. But also, I will have to give them the fact that as someone who is trying to come clean on drugs I probably won’t be able to go out for a couple weeks and if I do go out its going to be somewhere like that. There isn’t a lot of heavy drug use going on at their parties at least within the exclusive crowd. I don’t know about all of the bridge and tunnel there but within their exclusive people that group doesn’t do drugs (Leah 2007).

Interspersed with explaining why they do not attend or why they only attend MisShapes infrequently, each of the Kids attributed some aspect of the Scene’s trends and impact to the MisShapes. Much of what they describe is the MisShapes’ successful use of the Internet to market their party and their brand. The implementation of web photography, Myspace pages, and Internet press brought them enough fans and consequential revenue to continue the party for five years. While the Club Kids can recognize a model of capitalistic success, their dislike for the MisShapes’ final product is a testament to their consistent desire for their subcultural Scene in its original form, or at least on their own terms.

Nicol, speaking as the group’s manager in 2006 (they are now managed by A&M Entertainment) responded to blogs naming the MisShapes passé, “Gawker has been saying there’s a backlash for more than two years, but the head count of the MisShapes parties has been
exactly the same, give or take 100 people. And the amount of money made at the bar is the
same” (Horyn 2006a). The party is still successful based on headcount but the people inside and
their expectations have changed. Nicol maintained the business in spite of its inability to be
mass culture cool and nightlife Scene cool at the same time. New York Magazine summed up its
fate, “‘MisShapes’ proves there is nightlife after hipster death: After attaining most-hated status
last year, it’s still going strong at its new Don Hill’s home” (The Influentials 2006).
Experiencing “hipster death” foreshadowed that maintaining their reputation as hipster cool
kids, fashionistas, and characters accessible to anyone with an Internet connection was a careful
balance. The decision was made to end the weekly Saturday night MisShapes parties. The final
MisShapes was held on September 8, 2007 and was likely a maneuver meant to maintain a
balance or, more likely, an acknowledgement that the mass culture friendly MisShapes is no
longer a shape that fits inside the Scene.

Within a week of that last party, the MisShapes book was released; a timely photographic
tribute to the fashion that developed there. The publication was also about one year after that of
the Last Night’s Party book. From almost 300,000 photographs taken from 2002 to 2007, the
final book includes a colorful collection of 2,000 images. The text is written by Jarvis Cocker,
Vogue’s Sally Singer, and writer Legs McNeil. The photography is attributed to personalities
like fashion legend Karl Lagerfeld, and confessional photographer Ryan McGinley and Patrick
McMullan. The prologue of the book is as follows,

Representing a singular document of the changing face of fashion in downtown New
York City. This extensive collection of portraits ranges from punk rockers to artists,
downtown kids to musicians, DJs, and celebrities with each subject posed amidst
downtown New York's dense and riotous environment (Nicol 2007).

Now that the party is over, the trio plans to transition Misshapes.com into an online fashion
magazine, to tour as deejays, possibly have a show on Sirius® Satellite Radio, and to produce a
fashion line (Martin 2007). Their business model takes full advantage of the popular identity they have cultivated in the mass media.

The Girls describe that style is not necessarily dictated by mass culture trends. “That’s how I feel. I’m just more about creating a new look, a new character each night” (Anna 2007a). Anna and Abigail approach the logistics of their looks differently but their essence is the same; both are focused on authenticity through originality and rejection of trends. Listening to them is similar to hearing about a world where everyday is an ultra-inspired version of Halloween. “There’s caricatures, like you watch and there is this kid and he has a yellow headband in every picture you see” (Abigail 2007). Anna describes her inspiration as drag and theatrics, Abigail does not claim drag as her inspiration but does enjoy joining Anna’s world from time to time.

Woodstock where I grew up is a very open, chill town. I guess I saw Priscilla Queen of the Desert and Rocky Horror and that really won me over to the idea of being a drag queen. I thought it seemed so cool, it was all a show and I loved the make up and I was like, ‘I want to do that too.’ They all had such fucking witty names, it is all just so silly and theatrical so I guess I just sort adopted some of their [image] for myself. It’s like this is me and I am putting on a character for the night and I could be under the same name but I am putting on a different character each night. It just depends on what I look like when you talk to me, where I am, whether I’m in a sequin dress or completely gothic vamped out like whatever (Anna 2006).

Reminiscent of the 90s Club Kids, style is achieved based on the process and the product not the wallet behind it. “We don’t pay for any of it. I mean we pay for cabs sometimes but we don’t pay to get in, we don’t pay for drinks. And I won’t go somewhere if I know I have to pay, I won’t because my friends aren’t going to be there. We never pay to go out so that doesn’t drain our money” (Anna 2007a). Abigail continues, “The only thing we have to pay for is clothes, but even with clothes I can just put on a lot of makeup and do something with my hair and nobody notices that I always wear black tights and a black dress. And sometimes I go out in my underwear” (2007).
Secondhand and vintage shopping is a popular mode of procuring pieces because it provides the opportunity to constantly trade in old clothes for new ones. Keeping your look new and exciting is crucial when you are hoping to make a big entrance every night. “I spend money on clothes, I’ll splurge once a month but it’s not like the fucking $300 that some people do. It’s like $50, oh my god, at a thrift store” (Anna 2007a). Anna’s searches are successful even though she does not spend a lot, “her clothes are really nice, they’re like old, and wedding dresses” (Abigail 2007). On one particular night all that Abigail needed was a leash and she had a look that, for a night, became a dominatrix persona; the look inspired conversation and on that night it sparked her friendship with Anna. I asked Anna to describe one of her favorite looks to me and she and Abigail told the following story, “I know one time she came to my housed dressed really Liza Minnelli looking” Abigail says reminiscing (2007). Anna chimes in, “Yeah what did we do? Cabareti, I had a bowler hat on and a black jumpsuit and jewels on our faces. We were kind of themed matchy, matchy both in black. It was really cute. I don’t know, it’s so theatrical, that’s my favorite part because I am such a theatre person, such a ham, like whatever” (2007a).

Anna describes people in the Scene who she feels have created truly original looks. These are the people who have gained her respect, inspired, and educated her.

She [Scenester] was great; she totally did her own thing. She’s a mermaid. You ask her she’s like; “yeah I’m a mermaid,” she’ll tell you her whole story. She’s like kind of crazy, she O.D.’ed [overdosed] a couple of months ago. She’s like alive, she’s fine…She really is like a drag queen. Like she’s got wigs and she’s got makeup…Nightlife is all about living out fantasies and dreams. I’m just there for the pure visual enjoyment of those around me. I’m there for me to be like “oh my god look at that fucking person they must be on crack”, I don’t know. That’s why drag queens and Michaels T, that’s why they’re all so great because they’re all such otherworldly characters. I wanted to do that and I achieved it. (Anna 2007a)

Creating style without using a popular look as a template is for some an indication of successful production of style, while for others the relevance is disappearing. For publicity-focused
Scenesters, trends and expense are increasingly important as they seek to create looks that are worthy of a photograph. To some Club Kids these Scenesters are creating original looks, but according to others they are part of one more trend that rewards cookie cutter fashion sense.

Meanwhile, the increasing visibility of the Scene also draws new partiers, who I call “lastnightspartiers.” The lastnightspartiers arrive in the New York nightlife with a specific perception of the Scene and what is expected of them. The growing national following of the Club Scene bodes much economic success for both the clubs and the photographers but not so much so for the Club Kids who were partying in the Scene before everyone was watching.

There’s a brand new wave of people and I’ve noticed it, like I was part of the new wave last year 2005 and then 2006/07 there is totally a new wave of people. The new people are trying to climb their way up, and some people are very stealthy about and you don’t notice it and their cool and some of them are like “oh my god, lastnightsparty” and you are like “shut up.” (Anna 2007a).

Aspiring lastnightspartiers now seek Bronques’ attention and their knowledge of nightlife is shaped by Bronques’ cultural construction of the Scene as presented on his site.

Attending parties in New York in 2005 reflected much of what the Kids describe as their favorite elements of the Scene. Diversity in style, partiers, and music were visible but today they no longer dominate. The essentialized media construction is increasingly becoming the dominant reality.

I think some people are like Girls Gone Wild…but smarter. But if you are flashing your nipples to fucking Merlin then that is kind of like Girls Gone Wild and you need to like chill out. He comes up to me and he’s like “I just had 5 girls take their shirts off in front of me, what am I supposed to do?” …I mean it is Girls Gone Wild since it got so popular (Anna 2007a).

Lastnightspartiers are a new population whose expectations for the Scene, and whose presentation of self is sculpted by the LNP construction of nightlife. Lastnightspartiers know more of Bronques, his website, and that of MisShapes than they know of the Club Kids. They
know and will say that Bronques can make anyone look beautiful (Mitzy 2006). They do not know the meticulous attention to detail that the Kids would rarely admit goes into their appearance and tastes. To lastnightspartiers, the Scene is not their safe place, their home, their creative expression, it not a commitment. Instead, lastnightspartiers only know what Bronques’ has shown them, they know glitter and glamour, excess, attention, and fame. This is their truth and education of the “Scene”. Nightlife photographers turn their lenses towards the highly attentive, mainstream, and malleable lastnightspartiers. While still photographed, the Kids are no longer the main focus of LNP and other popular sites.

The “bridge and tunnel crowd” (people from outside the city who come to the parties by way of bridge or tunnel) was also considered a problem impeding on the once intimate sense of community achieved by the best Scene parties.

MisShapes was going downhill. As MisShapes became more famous the crowd got worse. It was none of the original people who had gone there. It was a lot less intimate. A lot less hanging out with your friends. It was mostly just going getting your picture taken, so you could have a memory of what outfit you were wearing that night and then leaving. … it just really died, got popular. (It got pretentious (Abigail 2007).) It was always pretentious. But it got famous. MisShapes used to be everybody, like two years ago, it was just more raw and real and a little bit more trashy and a lot less about this high fashion, like just getting scene sort of shit (Anna 2007a).

Increased popularity of the party made it unappealing to attend for more than a little while from time to time, regardless of its original ingenuity. Anna went on to explain, in great detail, what the MisShapes look is and that once everyone adopted it, it damaged the Scene’s credibility.

The MisShapes styles has just become so much more world wide and expanded …before it was just a few people doing hair to their eyes and really skinny jeans and deep V girl shirts that were really long and like whatever and now everybody’s doing that. (Anna 2007a)

With the complete integration of cameras, modeling’s status was confirmed as integral to success in the Scene. To be ignored by the cameras is to be rejected as socially inept or worse,
un-Scene. “I was really mad that Merlin didn’t post my picture, I was so mad at him for that because I worked so hard on my outfit. It wasn’t fun, it was a bad party” (Anna 2007a). For Anna the difference between a good night and a bad one is directly relational to getting photographed. Maddy is more openly angry about the changes she attributes to Bronques’ choices.

He’ll always say hi to us all the time but I’ve noticed recently, like he’ll give us a kiss on the cheek hi and he like won’t even take our picture. I feel like it’s kind of insulting, like ok, like even if you’re bored of us at least take a picture of us and don’t put it up. Like, we spent all this time getting ready; take a fucking picture of us, you know. Like, you’re our friend take a fucking picture. What do you think I look ugly? You have to take a picture! (Maddy 2006)

The rejection of the Club Kids foreshadowed the coming shift in the Scene. Bronques and others have not stopped photographing nightlife, but the subjects indeed have changed.

The Club Kids differentiate between themselves and the “new kids” or lastnightspartiers. Abigail describes the Club Kids’ identity as real, original, and smart while the lastnightspartiers are repetitive and conventional in style and posing.

We’re way more intelligent…it’s funny; people think that if they are showing a boob it is unique but it’s not. I will do some weird stuff, without like taking off my clothes for New Years we covered ourselves in fake blood and there are all these pictures of blood coming down and bandages and stuff. (Abigail 2007)

The issue of “special” is immersed as a theme during our conversations about the new kids in the Scene. Anna impugns the new kids for diluting the “specialness,” a term which may be synonymous with exclusivity and the groundbreaking art of modeling. “Like, some people get their picture taken and their like ‘oh my God, he took a picture of ME.’ They feel special and then you see all the other naked people on the same page” (Abigail 2007). Ambivalent about their feelings, they mourn Bronques’ (who they refer to as a friend) absence and his discontinuation of regularly photographing them, but are also nonchalant and possibly bitter
towards the growing commonality of posing. “Now it is so normal that at a camera flash you turn the other way” (Anna 2007a).

In addition to being protective of their authenticity, the Kids also exhibit a need to protect their space with skepticism of the lastnightspartiers tendencies to use them for their social status and connections to Bronques. Haley explains that several new people have moved to the city, sought her out, and used her to network until they knew everyone in the Scene, “People use us to get into the Scene. And I am sure it happens to a lot of other people that are already in the Scene, they feel used. Once people get in the Scene they don’t really give a shit about them anymore”(Haley 2007).

In the aftermath and in spite of the magazine articles, the advertising campaigns, the books, the clothing, etc the girls describe how and why they try to hang on to their spaces. They also explain that there was a last straw, a moment when the publicity was no longer acceptable. They did not mind the representations, the messages on MySpace nor the articles; they minded when the outside came into their once private and personal world of Clubs. They minded because the human presence inside the clubs changed it.

The relationship between the photographers and the club is economically symbiotic, but there is little to no lasting economic benefit for the Kids. While initially some Kids viewed modeling for Internet photographers as a networking technique within the Scene and potentially beyond it, evidence of Internet exposure leading to more than momentary Scene notoriety is scarce. In an environment defined by successful presentation of original selves, Internet photography has done more to disassemble that value than to strengthen it.

Today the Club Kid’s internal meaning making process is diminished and the Scene is visibly changed by the lastnightspartiers’ heternormative, hypersexualized, capitalistic
expectations dominating the once private Club spaces. For those introduced by means of a computer screen or magazine layout, meaning making around style more closely resembles the values of mass consumption than those of authenticity and originality. As the Scene’s popularity rises, the chasm between these two definitions of style affect the way the Scene functions and who and what is valued there. Within five years on the Internet, the Scene has amassed fans and in the end it is, like much of New York, becoming entrenched as a tourist stop. The history and meanings that made the Scene a subculture and home for the Club Kids are disappearing beneath a media machine and newly externalized meaning making.
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSIONS

As Club Kids, the five girls who took part in this study constantly negotiate between mass culture and subculture. The introduction of Internet photography is one thing they face negotiating in the Scene. Initially, Internet photography and the work of Merlin Bronques appeared consistent with the values and meanings that sustain the Scene. Eventually, Bronques’ images placed a primarily female and highly sexualized image of the Scene onto the Internet. The Kids enjoyed the initial stages of photography’s presence in the clubs finding the pictures artistic, subversive, and alternative—values consistent with theirs. However, the role of Internet photography and the websites devoted to the Scene quickly transformed from fodder for Club Kids into a magnet for attracting fans and trend spotters. The transformation popularized Internet photography with Club owners, party promoters and others interested in capitalizing on the trend.

The popularized version of Scene Internet photography is both marketed and consumed as an objective carbon copy of what goes on inside the clubs rather than as a representation. The depth and breadth with which these images are distributed and then consumed is a foundation of the industry’s capitalistic success, but at the same time is responsible for the breakdown of the subculture it proudly captures in images. Successes like Lastnightsparty and Misshapes led to the production of Scene-focused books, magazine articles, blogs, Scene-inspired fashion shows, ready-to-wear style and advertising campaigns. The commodification of the Scene also attracted “lastnightspartiers;” the new generation of partiers who are educated about the Scene by its Internet identity. This new generation of partiers arrives not looking for the Scene borne from Studio 54, they are looking for the Scene borne from the lens of Merlin Bronques. The lastnightspartiers expect and fulfill a highly normative and sexualized performance while visiting
the clubs. The result not only marginalizes the existing female Club Kids and Scenesters from the photographer’s gaze, it also marginalizes and undermines the internal meaning making that has sustained the Scene for generations.

“From Subculture to Mass Culture” can be read as a phrase that indicates either progress or regression. In this study it is meant to illicit both. The connotation for New York Club Culture is either, depending on the standpoint and framework from which the Scene is viewed. The integration of photography into the Scene economically benefited a few, while exploiting the masses, and publicizing a subculture until it resembled something new, normative, and increasingly marketable. However, the new, normative, and increasingly marketable Scene is one that undermines and marginalizes the values and historical processes which sustained the subculture that inspired it. Internet photography brought the public into the private and vice-versa for the Scene. The commodification and fetishization of Club Culture is so disassociated from the labor that produced it that the “private” subculture is indissoluble from the “public” mass culture system.

The aspects of the Scene that drew Kids to it before nightlife photographers entered are likely to disappear due to a mixture of shifted focus, lastnightspartiers and the aging out of Club Kids. The shifting focus is evident in both Merlin’s representation of the Scene and in population change with the influx of the lastnightspartiers. Finally, aging out, while a natural stage in subcultural youth experience, appears to be happening more quickly and in a less organic way for the Kids in this study as the environment around them becomes a less desirable one. Their aging out is also paired with a lack of new Club Kids with whom they can pass on the meaning and processes of Club Culture. There is the possibility that in the spaces where the Scene thrives in its new form; there will be no trace, in years to come, of the homegrown art,
style and environment that the most devoted Scenesters built. In this case, the Club Scene will not fall due to a business scandal traced back to owners or promoters, but rather, the fall will be a consequence of hyperconsumption in America.

After completion of my fieldwork I considered that I could have spent a more extended period of time living in New York with the Club Kids. I resolved this with my knowledge that no matter how long I lived there I would still not be part of the subculture, and my experiences would not be theirs. By visiting several times I was able to collaborate with them (an ideal process), hear changes in their feelings about the Scene, and see the changes during participant observation while still maintaining their words as the authority. This study would not be the same in any way without the words of the Club Kids who participated. Each girl confirmed how important the Scene was for them, how rarely if ever anyone had ever asked them what was, and why it was, important to them. Spending time in New York as a participant observer watching as the crowds grew and press crews became commonplace, it was clear how unmistakably impossible it would be for anyone, a photographer, a reporter, an Internet gawker, you or I to ever understand what Club Culture is all about without being an authentic part of it. Their contribution, participation and total enthusiasm throughout this process was vital.

The girls who are part of this study each partake in different parts of the Scene. Regardless of the space they occupy, each articulated that they are drawn to the Scene because of the community and safety they find there. They are “safe” to present themselves in any way they want without any of the negative repercussions that the same actions would illicit in their daily lives. As students, young professionals and members of families their subversion of norms exists only in the dark. In day they work within the system and benefit from the privileges that their place in society affords them. But on the Internet, twenty-four hours a day, from now until
forever they are still images, New York Scene Kids, splayed on pages for free consumption in whatever way mass culture chooses. Pornography, art, fashion or fleeting fad they are cut and copied, commodified and appropriated by the best of teen scene gawkers.

Through my collaboration with the Kids, their words are well represented in a way that illuminates what was a private, safe, and free space. With its dank environment, periodic if not habitual drug use, and other perceivably risky situations, the Scene still remained safe because it was private and away from mass culture expectations of normativity. The importance of the Scene to those who frequent it motivated my research. The depth and breadth of mass culture incorporation into the Scene over the course of this study illuminate this importance by complicating its sustainability. Beginning with LNP’s highest rated months and ending with the publication of two Scene books and the closing of MisShapes party, studying the Scene from early 2005 to late 2007 proved timely.

While at a chronologically and genealogically appropriate closing point for the purposes of this study I am confident that future research in this field could provide further understanding of the subject. Study of the nightlife photographers en masse or the fans of their websites would provide for further analysis of normative cultural expectations of women and of cyber-identities. Because much of this study ends on a note of contention and projection about the effects and future of club culture, re-interviewing the same Kids from this study after they have aged out is another route for extending this research.

Throughout the course of analysis, observation and interviews I had the typical periods of mulling, over coffee, tea, or stacks of books, with those people who came into my path and asked the customary “what are you writing about?” My response was subsequently followed by a skeptical “and why are you writing about that?” I find that we are apt to look at youth cultures
and determine to be transitory and thus incapable of impacting mass culture. To say that youth culture is trivial unless it poses a physical threat of violence is naive. Our attention to subcultures dominated by “at-risk” or “deviant” youth only reinforces hegemonic norms. It allows the population to ask the question “why should we care about a youth culture that appears to be self contained in its hedonistic tendencies.” The Kids in NY have the precious right to private spaces where they can perform their identities and their genders without the risk of disapproving judgment from parent cultures and potentially judgmental peers. However, the walls of their clubs do not stop the images of their lives from becoming public. Out from the discerning gaze of fellow Kids and into the bright lights of Internet viewers, their performances are defined by the images and not by the intent of the acts or the context in which they occurred.

While writing this, I lived in, and saw kids in Philadelphia, rural Ohio, and Mexico City. I found kids in each of these locales whom looked like they fell straight out of the Club Scene. The trend conscious kids are likely unaware of the Scene and equally unlikely to know where the styles they are consuming originate; but they look cool on MySpace.
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