

“Hey hipster! You are a hipster!”

An examination into the negotiation of cool identities

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Summary

This thesis examines the production and maintenance of *cool* identities in the underground culture of New York City. Based on fieldwork in the Brooklyn neighborhood Williamsburg, cool is analyzed as a form of value, which is subject to negotiation and competition among agents within New York underground culture.

The field of underground culture is characterized by the presence of a number of contradicting agendas which are not easy to manage, and the competence of balancing these dilemmas thus becomes an envious one. As a scarce resource, this competence of cool becomes subject to negotiation.

Through a constant recontextualization of signs, agents actively perform mechanisms of distinction in order to maintain cool as something that is not easily accessed. The constant reproduction of scarcity results in cool being a fundamentally ethereal and fluid concept. What is considered to be cool is constantly changing; it is always on the move.

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1. Introduction

Research Questions

This thesis presents an examination of the production and maintenance of *cool* identities within underground culture in Williamsburg New York City.

The world of cool is characterized by a strong sense of individualism, where ‘setting oneself apart’ and being different is highly evaluated. Cool is to a large extent a matter of appearing as admirable; it’s about having an identity that other people want a part of. This implies that the construction and maintenance of identity is strongly characterized by mechanisms of distinction. These mechanisms of distinction are in this thesis examined by analyzing cool as a form of value which is subject to competition, producing a gradient of unequal differences. Further, I explore how agents actively manipulate and reproduce the meaning of signs in order to construct and maintain difference this. In light of this, I point to how cool is closely related to the aspects of how the development of trend takes place over time; it becomes a pressing agenda to ‘stay ahead of the pack’.

In resonance with an understanding of modern identity as one of ambivalence, the landscape of cool is seen to be strongly characterized by the presence of various dilemmas, and the thesis examine how the possession of cool identity can be seen in close connection to the ability of balancing these opposing components.

Theoretical outline

Region

This thesis is based on fieldwork in New York City, The United States’ most populated city. Previous anthropological research in North American culture is first and foremost connected to fieldwork conducted by American researchers in major cities. American

anthropology has a strong tradition in the study of urban life. This is to a large extent due to what is known as the Chicago-school. From World War I and into the 1930s, sociologists at the University of Chicago conducted a number of studies within their own city, which have been recognized as the beginning of modern urban studies (Hannerz 1980: 20). In 1929 a department of anthropology was established at this university (Hannerz 1980: 30).

As ethnicity is a live force in American society, the urban anthropology has to a large extent had the ghetto and its related social problems as its subject of research (Hannerz 1980: 3). This is also visible within the thematics of some of the more well known urban American ethnographies. In “Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community” (1969), Ulf Hannerz examines the life of one of the late 1960s toughest ghettos in Washington D.C., Elijah Anderson’s “Streetwise: race, class, and change in an urban community” (1990) explores dilemmas present among a poor urban community’s residents, while Philippe Bourgois’ book “In search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio” (1995) is an examination of life among crack dealers in a New York City neighborhood.

Previous research

Anthropology does not have much of a tradition for studying aspects of contemporary youth culture within the Western modern society, and research on this field has mainly been conducted by scholars within the traditions of sociology and cultural studies. Apart from sociological accounts like Howard Becker’s “Outsiders” from 1963 and Ned Polsky’s “Beats, Hustlers, and Others” from 1967, few attempts have been made to academically explore the very concept of cool, or its correlating term *hip*.

We have, however, in later years seen several popular cultural approaches to this subject. In his “Birth of the Cool: Beat, Bepop, and the American Avant-Garde” from 2001, Lewis MacAdams gives an account of the history of cool, primarily seen in relation to the development of jazz music. In 2004 the music and culture journalist John Leland published “Hip: the history”, giving a thorough account of the development of hip from the American slave era up until today. Worth mentioning is also “The Hipster Handbook”, a satirical presentation of hipsters in Williamsburg by Robert Lanham, which gained a nomination for the 2004 Margaret Mead Award (Lanham 2003: 2). The concept of cool, however, has remained unexplored within anthropology.

Hip and cool

An examination of the concept of *cool* calls for introductory explanation of what is, and what has been, meant by this term. In his historic account of hip, John Leland calls cool one of many surrogates for hip (2004: 11), and as such consider them as standing for the same. Both terms are strongly associated with underground culture, and are inextricably linked together. I apply both terms throughout this thesis, although I maintain a main emphasis on cool.

The origin of hip and cool has for both terms been traced back to the import of slaves to North America, and is considered to have origin in African languages. In “Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang”, Clarence Major traces hip back to the Wolof verb *hepi* (to see) or *hipi* (to open one’s eyes) (in Leland 2004: 5). Polsky, on the other hand, from his presence among The Village beats, considers hip to be derived from the phrase “to be on the hip”, which was used to describe people regularly smoking opium (1967:151). He further holds that within the 1960s Beat

culture in New York's Village, the word had the meaning of "in the know" (Polsky 1967: 151-152). When it comes to the word cool, Clarence Major finds its origin in the Mandingo word for "gone out" (in MacAdams 2001: 14), and traces it back to African slaves suppressing their emotions (MacAdams 2001: 20).

Quoting Garry Goodrow, a New York actor in the 1950s, MacAdams presents cool in the following manner: "(T)o be cool was to be in charge, unfazed by the bullshit of life...The outward signs of cool had everything to do with an appearance of easy competence... To be cool was to be not frantic, not overblown" (MacAdams 2001: 20). In his essay "The White Negro", Norman Mailer sees cool as the quality of being equipped and in control (1959: 352) while Peter Stearns holds that "(b)eing a cool character means conveying an air of disengagement, of nonchalance" (1994: 1).

Cool as the ability to see, to be in the know or equipped, in control or in charge, as the previous quotes state, points to it being a certain competence, or the possession of a certain quality. What one actually *does* see or know, is in control or in charge *of*, or what one is equipped *with*, will vary. As is visible through its many changing expressions and stylistic forms, cool is a relational and contingent concept. Nothing is cool *as such*; it cannot be related to specific objects or specific stylistic expressions, and can therefore not be considered an essential quality. We might however say that cool is a way of being in a style. Cool as an appearance of easy competence, of being 'unfazed by the bullshit of life', not frantic or overblown but disengaged and nonchalant, suggests that the term implies a perceived presence of knowledge and confidence in the presentation of oneself. It thus receives its meaning as cool if it is perceived as such by someone.

The word cool itself is an evasive one, and apart from using the word in a general meaning of something being good, people within underground culture in

general do not talk a lot about cool. If you are able to appear disengaged and nonchalant, as if you know or see it, talking about cool only implies the absence of this knowledge or confidence. Thus, the main usage of the word is found in discrediting of those who are perceived to want to acquire it. In consequence, cool becomes an underlying and implicit concept.

Hipsters

A related term that appears regularly throughout this thesis is that of *hipster*. “The Hipster Handbook” defines a hipster as someone who possesses tastes, social attitudes, and opinions that are deemed cool by the cool (Lanham 2003: 8). It can thus be said to be a person who is strongly associated with cultural fields which are deemed to be hip or cool (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hipster>). The term was originally associated with jazz aficionados in the 1940s and 1950s, and also used as a descriptive term for members of the Beat Generation. The use of it did however seem to decline in the 1960s (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hipster>). The word resurfaced in the late 1990s, and now describes those who have a preference for and follow the fashions and tastes of ironic retro fashions, independent music and film, as well as other forms of expression that are considered to be outside the cultural mainstream (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hipster>).

In his account of the Village beats, Polsky sums up the status of the hipster the summer of 1960 in the following manner:

Until recently “hipster” meant simply one who is hip (...) Among Village beats today, however, “hipster” usually has a pejorative connotation: one who is a mannered showoff regarding his hipness, who “comes on” too strongly in hiptalk, etc. In their own eyes, beats are hip, but are definitely not hipsters (1967: 151).

Whereas the word hipster was originally a term used to describe those who exhibited hip or cool, it has increasingly become a ridiculing term, and does not describe someone who *is* cool, but rather someone who *wants* to be cool. In an interview with my informant *Rick*, a rock musician who runs his own firm custom making guitar effect pedals, he defined hipsters in the following manner: “Hipsters are someone who is into being hip. Trying to be cutting edge or following trends, keeping up with what is cutting edge.” This can further be illustrated through the answer Aimee Plumley gives in her blog as to whether there is such a thing as a “wannabe hipster”:

“Where I’m from, there’s a road called Tablemesa, which in Spanish means ‘table table.’ I think of that road when I hear the term ‘wannabe hipster’ because it’s exactly the same thing, it’s a mental echo. What I mean is that hipsters are, in and of themselves, wannabes already” (http://www.hipstersareannoying.com/archive/2002_10_06_archive.html#82858012).

As with Polsky’s beats, the term hipster is today seldom a label of self-identification, and it is said that the first rule of being a hipster is denying that you are one (<http://www.blog.ni9e.com/archives/nyc/>). This point is also made by Lanham: “Hipsters never admit to being Hipsters” (2003: 13)

Underground culture

Within the social sciences several related terms have been applied in the examination of the type of cultural field in which hip and cool predominantly operate. I will here explore some of them as part of the argument as to why I have chosen to use the term *underground* to describe this cultural field.

One of the most applied and debated terms within in the study of youth, music and style is that of *subculture*. According to the sociologists Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris (2004), the concept has since the mid 1970s been a dominant one within sociology and cultural studies (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 1). The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) has been and remains central to the academic research on this subject. Drawing on Gramsci, the CCCS saw subcultures in post-war Britain as a form of working-class youth resistance towards existing class divisions (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 5).

The applicability of the term subculture has been much debated. Much of the critique against the concept revolves around how a general model was developed based on a particular situation and particular premises, making it difficult to apply to other subcultural phenomena. Explored as a primarily British phenomenon it has for instance been difficult to translate it to other geographical and cultural contexts (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 9).

In relation to my own study, I have found the concept of subculture inadequate for several reasons. First of all, the premise of subcultures as predominantly working class does not coincide with my own fieldwork experience. Rather I found most of the young people I met to have a middle-class background. They were often highly educated, and had made a deliberate choice in moving to New York, consciously seeking out a scene where they could conduct their creative activity and partake in a certain lifestyle.

The CCCS' concept of subculture further sees it as a form of resistance. I recognize that my informants identify themselves in opposition to a cultural mainstream, but my impression is that this opposition is a way of distancing oneself from it rather than expressing an active resistance. In the experience of being different

from the mainstream society, people seek towards underground culture as an arena where this difference can be realized in the company of and mutual exchange with other people who share their preferences. Secondly, the meaning of anything as underground or *subculture* lies in the very opposition to a dominant culture, and thus the possibility of living out an experience of being different relies on the presence of something one can be different *from*. There cannot be an underground unless there is an 'overground'.

The theoretical problem of subculture has by sociologist Peter J. Martin been identified as that of seeing subcultures as being clearly defined groups, with members who conduct and organize their activities based on an distinct, and thereby shared, set of values and beliefs (Martin 2004: 30). This criticism holds a lot of the reason as to why I have found it hard to apply the term of subculture. During my fieldwork, I encountered an explicit variation in terms of preferences, habits, values and beliefs. In addition, I found quite a bit of negotiation and disagreement as to who and what was considered to be a part of this community.

Trying to accommodate the fluidity and complexity of the field of youth and popular culture, theorists have explored a number of alternative concepts (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 11). One of these is Maffesoli's concept of *neo-tribes*. He argues that in today's mass society where social relations are becoming more unstable and fluid, we see the emergence of new forms of social collectivity. Maffesoli defines the neo-tribe as being less rigid than the forms of organization we are familiar with: "(I)t refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form" (Maffesoli 1996: 98). The main criticism against Maffesoli lies in a failure to situate his concept empirically (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 13).

Another term that has been applied to the study of youth and popular culture is that of *lifestyle*. The concept of lifestyle holds a focus on consumer creativity, and on how individuals actively partake in the process of constructing and redefining their own image and identity (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 13). What might be said in objection to this concept is that it represents a term focusing too much on the person, and thus to a certain extent fails to include the collective aspects of agents' sense of belonging to a community.

An increasingly theorized term is *scene*, on which Will Straw has been especially influential. It has been used to describe local spaces or trans-local phenomena where various practices of cultural production and consumption take place and interact (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 13). It thus encompasses a wide range of cultural practices, and takes differentiation and change into account (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 14). An advantage of this term is that it is also applied by agents themselves. During my fieldwork, I experienced that informants regularly made references to the New York music scene.

In addition to the concepts presented above, there are several other terms that can be applied when speaking of people who define themselves on the side of mainstream culture. As this field mainly consists of young people in their twenties and early thirties it can be understood to be a *youth culture*. Being politically aware, mainly in opposition to the existing political leadership, they can be interpreted as a *counterculture*. Agents within this field are *bohemians* in the understanding of it as people who want "to live non-traditional lifestyles" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bohemianism>), and they can be seen to represent an *avant-garde* in the sense of pushing "the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm within definitions of art/culture/reality" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avant-garde>). The

fact that some people within this field embrace astrology, palm reading, yoga and veganism opens for the use of the term *alternative culture*. *Indie* is short for independent and “refers to artistic creations outside the commercial mainstream” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indie>), which is also an identifying aspect of this cultural field. However, none of these elements can alone account for this field.

When I have landed on the use of the term *underground culture*, there are several aspects that contribute to this decision. Underground culture is a term used to describe various cultural expressions and communities which consider themselves and are perceived as being different from the mainstream society. An important reason for choosing this term has been that this is the term that most of my informants used when speaking about the community they identified with. It is thus to a large extent a ‘native’ term. Secondly, I find the term underground suiting due to how this cultural field to a large extent is organized through unofficial channels and networks. Through mailing lists, blogs and, most importantly, word-to-mouth, information is distributed and exchanged in complex networks which are partly difficult to gain access to. This aspect of my subject of study highly contributes to my definition of it as underground. Finally, what the use of these unofficial networking channels further implies, is the deliberate attempts that are made to maintain a certain degree of exclusivity. Agents within the underground identify themselves as being different from the mainstream society. They further perceive this difference as being threatened by the people who want to be a part of the community, but are not considered to be genuinely different. Thus, efforts are made to make this access difficult; it is kept under ground.

Several of the various terms I have accounted for here will appear in references in the text, and can then be understood as complementary and explanatory in relation to the understanding of New York’s underground culture.

The concept of modern identity

As the remaining part of this thesis examines, cool to a large extent resonates with the aspects and mechanism we find in the modern understanding of identity. As a starting point I will therefore here outline what is meant by modern identity.

The experience of modernity is said to be characterized by transitoriness, innovation and a constant emergence of the new (Kellner 1992: 142). In what the sociologist Anthony Giddens has called the post-traditional social universe (Giddens 2000: 255) the concept of identity has changed both in the way it is experienced by the individual, and in the way it is theoretically handled within the human and social sciences (du Gay, Evans and Redman (ed) 2000: 1). Zygmunt Bauman has identified the main characteristic of the modern understanding of identity to be the fundamentally contradictory agenda of *becoming* what one *is* (Bauman 2001: 144).

In pre-modern or traditional societies, identity was not subject to reflection or discussion. As Kellner points out, it was considered a given entity, and basically the function of pre-social roles (Kellner 1992: 141). Identity signalled what the sociologist Stuart Hall has called a “stable core of the self” (Hall 2000: 17) which remained the same through the course of time and in relation to others. This changes with modernity; identity has become mobile and multiple, and is the subject of innovation and change (Kellner 1992: 141). In modern society the self has become a reflexive project of creating ourselves through making choices among a diversity of options (Giddens 1991: 3): “We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” (Giddens 1991: 75).

The theoretical view of identity today is that identities are constructed through difference, and that they are fundamentally unstable through the continuous process of distinguishing themselves from various Others (Redman 2000: 10). This concept of

identity is thus *relational*, which means that it is only in relation to its negation, what it is not, that identity can be constructed (Hall 2000: 17). In a complex process of mutual recognition, the individual must navigate and choose between the norms, customs, roles and expectations that are present within a social structure of interaction (Kellner 1992: 142). Thus the establishment of identity involves both an element of negation and of recognition in the relation to its Other.

Kellner points out that for the modern self, anxiety becomes something of a permanent condition, as the individual is constantly worried whether one made the right choice, whether one has found one's *real* identity (1992: 142). In modernity, the self is aware of identity as a representation, and that it is thus constructed, meaning that the identity is constantly open to change and constantly being reproduced; it is contingent (Kellner 1992: 142). To Bauman the experience of disembeddedness is the most characteristic of the modern individual: "There is no prospect of a 'final re-embedddness' at the end of the road; being on the road has become the permanent way of life of the (now chronically) disembedded individuals" (Bauman 2001: 146).

Underground culture is characterized by this very experience of disembeddedness and of engaging in a permanent quest to fulfil contradicting agendas. I see the struggle to be cool to have resonance in the modern understanding of identity construction, and thus the question of cool can be seen as a question of identity.

As well as being recognized as a general aspect of modernity, the understanding of identity described above can in this context also be examined as something distinctly American. Referring to the many migrants who sought new opportunities by moving further and further into the Western American landscape, the concept of *the frontier* is seen as a "distinguishing feature of American life" (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/TURNER/>). The image of the pioneer as one who is

“abandoning settled society for the wilderness, seeking, for generation after generation, new frontiers” (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/TURNER/>) has become something of an archetype of the American hero. With ideals of conquest and discovery, he becomes a figure who is always on the move to conquer the unknown. In him we can recognize the fluidity of modern identity. Further, it is not hard to set the pioneer’s “ideal of personal development, free from social and governmental constraint” (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/TURNER/>) in connection with the ideals of agents within the underground community.

Value, distinction and signs

This thesis is built around a theoretical framework which is primarily based on semiotics and on perspectives which see social interaction in terms of exchange of value.

To the sociologist Georg Simmel, all social interaction can be seen as forms of exchange, and the object of this exchange is that of maximizing value (2004: 82). Due to its dependence on recognition, or judgment, value is in this frameset seen as a fundamentally relational phenomenon, one which arises in the relationships that exchange is based upon (Simmel 2004: 68, 78). Cool is in this thesis analyzed as a form of value, which is subject to negotiation and competition among agents within New York underground culture. In particular Simmel’s aspect of the significance of recognition is examined. Further, to describe the mechanisms value exchange, Fredrik Barth’s concept of the entrepreneur is applied to show a particular case of successful accumulation of cool.

The concept of seeing all social relationships as based on exchange and judgment of value allows us to see social relations as relationships of power. This

aspect of power is examined further in the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital and distinction (1986). Bourdieu's concept of capital relates to social resources which are considered valuable within a social community. In this thesis I examine how cool as a form of capital depends on scarcity (Bourdieu 1986: 230), and how this capital through this scarcity creates and upholds stratified differences between people. These stratified differences is what we understand by the term distinction (Bourdieu 1986: 227). Exercising distinction, people negotiate over the acquisition of cool capital, and this negotiation can be seen as a struggle for power.

The struggle over the appropriation of capital can be said to be acted out through the production and reproduction of signs. In Charles S. Peirce's understanding, a sign does not become a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign (Peirce 1958-60: 2.172). Just like in Simmel's concept of value, the meaning of a sign, and its function as a sign, arises in the exchange of and judgment upon it; it is *relational*. Peirce sees the sign as consisting of a three-part relation; the sign, or *representamen*, which in some way stands for something to somebody; the *object*, that which the sign stands for, and finally, in the interpretation of something as a sign, an equivalent or more developed sign is created in the mind of interpreter, a sign which Peirce calls the *interpretant* (Peirce 1958-60 2.228). This implies that through the interpretation of a sign, its meaning is manipulated and changed, in what comes to be an ever-continuing process of *semiosis* (Gottdiener 1995: 11).

In the relational aspect of the value and meaning of signs, lies the foundation for a struggle and negotiation of value and meaning. If value and meaning are not absolutes, then signs can be used as a means to acquire value, or capital, by manipulating and changing their meaning. In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes describes this process as a language of myth, where signs are given new meanings

through being transferred in to new contexts (Barthes 1993). The possibility of assigning new meanings to signs can also be analyzed through Umberto Eco's idea of how the sign can be viewed in light of its *openness*, that is, as containing the possibility for multiple interpretations.

Throughout this thesis, I examine how agents within the underground culture in New York actively produce and reproduce signs in their pursuits of creating distinctions and maximizing value. The value in question can be seen both as an expression of identity and as a form of power; it is a matter of being perceived as cool.

Method

An average Williamsburg Saturday

It is Saturday morning, and I have strolled the few blocks from my apartment on Lorimer Street over to Bedford Avenue. The street is packed with people fitting well in to the common description of a hipster; vintage clothing, expensive hairdos, tattoos, one-of-a-kind accessories, and with an explicit coolness on display. There is a calm and relaxed feeling in the air. People are parading the street with a laid back and confident walk, wearing sunglasses and a serious look, keeping their head up as they nip to their take away coffees. Occasionally people stop by shops selling vintage or custom local designer's clothing, walk in to record stores and independent book stores. Or maybe they stop by one of the many people lined up on the street selling vintage books, records, items, or self made clothes and accessories from foldable tables, card board boxes or blankets laid out on the street.

I sit down at Fabiane's for a cup of coffee, and listen in on conversations taking place by the surrounding tables. Right next to me two girls dressed in black, punk inspired clothes are sipping to their iced moccas in between reliving the accounts from

last night's loft party. On the table in front of me two boys in jeans and black band t-shirts are deeply concentrated leaning over a bunch of sketches, discussing how they might look as a poster for their next gig. Behind me a girl wearing a purple vintage dress and cowboy boots has invited a friend out to lunch to ask him if he might be able to help her out doing some refurbishing work on the café she is planning to open.

On my way out I pick up some fliers to see what's going on this evening. There's a Japanese rock band playing at Mighty Robot. Should be fun. I stop by the pizza place and wait in line with the rest of the young and hip crowd for a slice to bring back home.

Williamsburg...and other places

Williamsburg is a neighbourhood located in northern Brooklyn, New York City, by the waterfront opposite from Manhattan. The Williamsburg Bridge connects the area to East Village and Lower East Side in Manhattan. The subway line called the L-train further connects Williamsburg to central Manhattan.

It is an ethnically diverse neighbourhood with approximately 200, 000 inhabitants, represented by Hasidic Jews, Hispanics, Italians, Puerto Ricans and Polish people. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Williamsburg%2C_Brooklyn). In recent years, the area has seen a growing number of hipster residents, and is referred to as "New York's hippest neighborhood" (Lanham 2003: 77) or "the epicenter of hipsterdom" (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1311640>). With a high density of vintage stores, record stores, art galleries and music venues, it is an area characterized by a lot of creative activity. Several of my informants told me that they had heard that the area of Williamsburg has the highest density of artists in the world, and most of them had moved to the area from other parts of the country

consciously seeking to be part of a creative community. The area is known for having a vibrant music scene, with a large amount of venues and an impressive amount of live shows taking place each night. The area has in recent years produced bands like the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, TV on the Radio, !!!, Animal Collective and Scissor Sisters, all well known outside national borders.

My first three months in Williamsburg I lived with *Olivia*, a female indie musician. *Olivia* became a key person during this period as she put me in touch with several people who turned out to be central during my field work, and she would inform me of and accompany me to a number of concerts, events, bars and restaurants. I had to move out of the flat share for various practical reasons, and for the last part of my stay I sublet a room in another flat share in Williamsburg. My everyday experience of living in the area coincides with that of John Leland: “The streets of Williamsburg in Brooklyn [...] comprise a theme park in the key of hip” (2004: 5).

Within anthropological thinking in later years, the view of culture as an autonomous entity has been undermined (Moore 2003: 11). This has also had impact on the notion of the field. The field is no longer thought of as a clearly bounded space, but rather as a loosely connected set of relations, sites, events, experiences and agents (Watson 1999: 44-45). Conducting field work in a big city neighbourhood, several factors contribute to an experience of the field as being fluid and loosely connected rather than a clearly bounded space. I spent most of my time in Williamsburg, but at the same time there was a large part of Williamsburg as a geographical area that I barely had any interaction with, namely the various ethnic communities. My lack of contact with them reflects the fact that the underground community as such interacts little with the ethnic communities, just as the various

ethnic communities seem to interact very little between themselves. As such, the field pinned down as a concrete geographical area is not sufficient.

Further, my field work was not only limited to the geographical area of Williamsburg. I attended concerts and events, and visited people in other parts of New York City as well. Apart from Williamsburg I would most frequently visit the area of Lower East Side in Manhattan, which is also considered a hip area with lots of bars, venues and shops. The internet was a well known tool among most of my informants, and I spent quite a lot of time on the internet, browsing web sites, checking online events listings and communicating with people through email.

My initial project was to look into a musical praxis called *lo-fi*, short for low fidelity. It is the term for an idealistic approach to music recording, using low scale technology with the aim to obtain a more 'truthful' or authentic sound. During my time in the field I increasingly realized that this praxis was not so easily tracked down, and to a larger extent rendered into a larger context of the underground community. During my fieldwork my focus thus changed from lo-fi to the complex and contradictory field of people negotiating around the concept of cool.

I hung on to the idea of lo-fi for quite some time, and it was not until the last part of my field work, when I had already established a network, that my focus started going elsewhere. From what I saw in connection with the mechanisms of cool, I gather that the fact that I was actually looking for something else, turned out to be a major advantage. One of the very fundamental elements of cool is that it does not want to be found. While it was relatively easy to ask around about lo-fi, I am certain that my problems with access and possibility to gain information from people within the underground community would definitely have been more complicated if I had declared a 'quest for cool'. The fact that I was interested in a *musical* praxis implies

that many of my informants were involved in musical activity, and that a lot of the data I have accumulated derives from musical settings. This might also be a result of the fact that I am myself a musician, and as such found it easier to approach, contact and be accepted in these kinds of contexts.

Total identities

What is considered hip and cool can be said to be expressed as *total identities*, meaning that they are enacted in most, if not all, aspects of people's lives. It is thus expressed through clothing, use of language, place of residence, consumption of food and drinks, what places one goes to eat and drink, which other people one spends time with, what one does for a living, what kind of music one listens to, what films one prefer, which books one chooses to read, which web sites one browses; the list goes on and on. In this context, identities must be understood as being mediated; they are not primarily acted out in social interaction, but expressed through people's use of objects and various channels of mediation. For cool identities to remain cool, they will need to move with the flow of cool, and thus what is consumed, worn and listened to will change through the course of time. These identities can be understood as contingent ones, and this contingency can first and foremost be tracked down through the mediated.

In order to be able to capture the totality of *cool identities* and to track how they are expressed differently over time, it will not be sufficient only to observe or participate in social interaction. One must widen one's scope and take in something of a totality of the world one is surrounded by. What posters are hanging on the wall? What shoes are people wearing walking the streets of Williamsburg? How do people choose to present themselves in internet housing ads? How does the waitress speak

with her friends? What kind of music is the DJ playing? What books do people read on the subway? Such an approach does effect the anthropologist's practical movement within the actual field work.

The anthropologist about town

I was hanging out with some friends at one of the area's 'hot spots'; an old pool supply store turned into a bar. They have kept some of the old décor, added some old fashioned booths and set up a DJ stand where a young boy in tight jeans at the moment was playing electronic music from the eighties. I walked up to the bar to order a Stella on tap. "I don't have it, I'm sorry. Only Brooklyn Lager, Guinness and Hoegaarden on tap, I'm afraid. But I've got loads on bottle." He pointed up on the top of the fridge, where about 20 bottles of different beer brands were lined up. A guy sitting right next to me at the bar turned over to the bartender, laughing "She's probably getting a Miller's Lite. Or a Corrs! Ha ha!". From what I had picked up, drinking light beers is definitely not very cool. I found myself getting nervous. I stared at the beer bottles, and suddenly it became incredibly important to choose the right one. In the back of my head I remembered a DJ I used to work with as a bartender back in my hometown. As just about the only one there he always used to drink a Jamaican brand, and I remembered I thought that was pretty cool. "Uhm, I'll have a Red Stripe, please" I said. I looked straight ahead as the bartender picked a bottle out of the fridge and opened it. As I grabbed the bottle from the counter, the guy sitting there turned towards me with his eyebrows raised in an approving gesture as he said: "good choice".

In my field work I have attempted to be all over the place, to partake in and observe the kind of life the members of this community live, and the account above is

just one of many examples of the kind of situations and settings I have found myself in. I lived in a flat share with an indie musician, and made close friends with my two fashion photographer neighbors. I regularly had coffee in various coffee shops in the area, sometimes browsing through magazines I had picked up at the independent book store on the corner. I met up with friends for Sunday brunch, and gladly waited 30 minutes to be seated at a table. I would spend entire evenings in my favorite neighborhood bar, and whole days in record stores, listening in on and participating in heated musical discussion, enjoying the occasional in-store gig. I attended concerts with strange bands in unmarked warehouses, and celebrated the 4th of July barbequing on a Williamsburg roof with a musician informant, his photographer girlfriend and a bunch of their friends. I got lost in the biggest vintage clothing store I have ever seen. I joined local mailing lists and regularly browsed through New York events listings. I collected posters and fliers, and took photos of stickers and writing on walls. I wrote down descriptions of people's clothing on the subway, and listened in on their conversations. I participated in seminars for indie musicians, learning to deal with the music business. I met with bands and producers, sat in on rehearsals and recording sessions, and interviewed promoters and web journalists. In general, I was trying to blend in with 'the natives'

My activities can in a way be interpreted as participant observation, not because I was at all times in face to face social interaction with other people, but through the fact that I spent my everyday life conducting the same kind of activities as that of my objects of study. The sum of all of these people's agendas, appearances and activities make up a recognizable cultural field that I through my activities in the field was participating in the construction of. This point is for instance made by

Hastrup: “By her presence in the field, the ethnographer becomes actively engaged in the construction of the ethnographic reality” (1995: 16).

The underground community is not overtly excited about people from ‘the outside’ wanting to get on the inside. In that respect, a project such as this is already in trouble. However, due to the fact that I have myself for many years been a part of and identified myself with Norwegian underground culture, the mechanisms within this cultural field is not totally unfamiliar to me. Thus, in order to gain access and enable acceptance within the Williamsburg scene I used these maneuvering skills to make the project of cool my main methodological approach, with which I experienced a varying degree of success. Then again, that is also how I imagine maneuvering in this landscape is experienced by people on the Williamsburg scene, and thus incidents of ‘failure’ have also provided useful information.

Data

This thesis is based on a broad fieldwork in which material has been gathered from a wide set of sources. Firstly, a large amount of data is based on observation, both participant and non-participant. This has resulted in a number of written descriptions of such things as the settings and appearances of street life, people’s clothing, the interior of bars, restaurants and stores, as well the customers present. In addition I have written down conversations I have overheard and situations I have observed or participated in.

Instead of conducting formal interviews, I preferred them to take shape as more informal conversations, where questions would come naturally from the situations, and to a larger extent be characterized by interaction. As I have been interested in creative activities taking place, how people present themselves and how they are presented by

others, I have gathered a number of magazines, fliers, posters and CDs. Regular visits to websites and blogs on the internet have resulted in both a great deal of downloaded images and articles, but also in the recording of the web addresses I have visited regularly. Finally, I have also taken a limited amount of pictures of Williamsburg life.

To ensure the integrity and anonymity of informants, all names of people, stores, bars and venues have been changed. In the cases where internet blogs and articles have been used and the content of the web site might disclose informant's identities, these web addresses are not referred to in the text.

Williamsburg life



Local art store



Hipsters at the diner



Rehearsal room



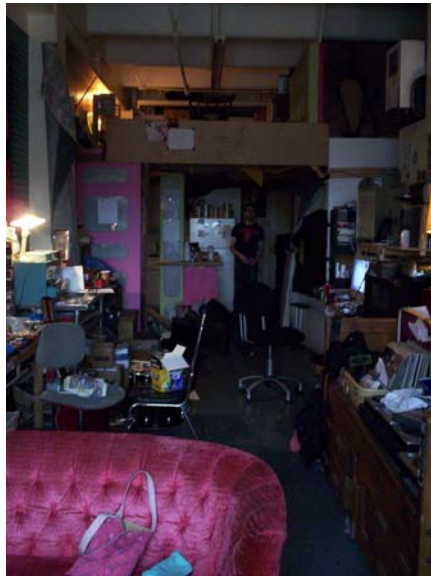
Hipster bicycle



Posters at the record store



A tape DJ's tapes



A Bushwick loft



Wall decoration



Flyers, flyers, flyers...



Williamsburg Bridge



Williamsburg graffiti

2. Cool about town

The concept of cool has always been linked to The United States' most populated city: "Cool as we know it was made in New York" (MacAdams 2001: 28). One of the very first outposts of New York bohemia is said to have been a basement beer hall opened by Charlie Pfaff at 635 Broadway in 1855 (Leland 2004: 48): "His joint was a dim, smoke filled cave, as it were, and a gathering place for a bunch of like minded rebels, who here became America's first bohemians" (<http://www.nycny.com/content/history/pfaffs.htm>). Just as cool constantly moves around through modes of expression, visible in changing styles and trends, it has also geographically moved around the city of New York.

Before World War I: Greenwich Village bohemia

In the years before World War I many young migrants settled down in Greenwich Village, which at the time could offer cheap rents and poor living conditions (Leland 2004: 68). The area was characterized by a variety of types of people, from hoboes and anarchists to starving artists and open homosexuals (Leland 2004: 68). Many of the people who moved here came because they felt alienated from the restrictions and conformity in the small-town life they came from, and were eager to embrace the heterogeneity of the big city (Fishbein 1993: 212). On the streets of the Village they could live out a life on the margins in opposition to the habits of society, merging politics, lifestyle and art (Leland 2004: 70). The area was very much a place for creativity, and the inhabitants were inspired by the ideology of freedom they found in the political Left (Fishbein 1993: 212).

Embracing something of a picturesque poverty, the bohemians allowed themselves to avoid adult responsibilities, and explore creativity, spontaneity, celebrating such pleasures as playing children's games and swimming in the nude (Fishbein 1993: 214). The rebelling residents in the Village at this time were mostly well educated, and had, in comparison to their genuinely poor neighbors, the privilege of choice. The high level of education was visible in the political beliefs among the bohemians, viewing the intellectual as most fit to control and analyze political events, as well as leading the masses (Fishbein 1993: 216). On the one hand they celebrated the diversity of ethnicity in New York at the time, actively seeking out the blacks, criminals and prostitutes as the others of society. Simultaneously they embraced an egalitarian political belief, with a goal of economic improvement for the disadvantaged which might easily come with the cost of acculturation and sameness (Fishbein 1993: 218). The socialist political agenda led to several artists and writers giving up art in order to engage in political activity in Russia, or become active in the American Communist party (Fishbein 1993: 225). The community was eventually scattered and destroyed by the authorities who saw them as a potential threat in light of the emerging war and the rise of communism in Russia (Leland 2004: 71).

By the 1920s, the area had become a popular place to visit for tourists hoping to catch a glimpse of the bohemians, and the standards of the bohemian style also eventually became the theme of fashion trends all over the country (Fishbein 1993: 225-226).

1920s-1930s: The Harlem Renaissance

At the beginning of the 20th century, black people from the rural south started to move into the larger cities in the north, coming to New York for the culture (Leland 2004: 77).

By the 1910s, Harlem was considered the capital of black America (Leland 2004: 77). This period saw the emergence of a generation of black writers, who composed a literary and intellectual movement known as The Harlem Renaissance (Watson 1995: 9). Its writers was supported and promoted by several characters within white literary and cultural circles (Watson 1995: 97-98).

The movement embraced jazz poetics, socialist politics and racial integration, pursuing hedonism and enjoying the Harlem nightlife of musical and sexual freedom (Watson 1995: 8-9). Residents of the city partially saw this as a dark invasion, but offering an exotic nightlife with Prohibition booze, jazz music and dancing girls, the area also attracted a lot of curious white people (Leland 2004: 77-78). The curiosity about Harlem was so big that even the international bohemian crowd visited the area (Watson 1995: 104).

During and after World War II: Jazz in Harlem

During World War II, Harlem was the scene of the emergence of bebop. Of special significance is Minton's, a club operating in the area during this time (Leland 2004: 123). According to MacAdams this was where bebop music was played and the artistic movement associated with it encountered the world (2001: 46). Musicians such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonius Monk were central within this era of jazz, and representatives of a critical perspective on the national aspirations (Leland 2004: 112). Cool became a way in which one could stay below the radar screen of the dominant culture, and receive respect from the people one was surrounded by: "(A)t Minton's, cool became an allegiance, a code that only those who knew could break into or share" (MacAdams 2001: 46).

In 1957, Capitol Records released an LP with eight tunes from a series of recording sessions with Miles Davis and Gil Evans. It was titled *Birth of the Cool*, and it became symbolic to the style and attitude of this period (MacAdams 2001: 13). This was the first time the discourse of hip started to be referred to as *cool*. For MacAdams, the birth of cool is inextricably connected to the ending of World War II. The ones who were in some way considered deviant to society were not drafted, and did not serve in the war, and as such were not part of the victory celebration when the war was over (MacAdams 2001: 23). The atomic bomb had made everyone feel powerless, and the view of history as a development towards perfection became a disillusioned one (MacAdams 2001: 23). In the face of the paranoia and conformity of the Cold War, artists secluded themselves, they went underground in order to explore and express these new perspectives (MacAdams 2001: 23). And so cool was born, “in the shadows among marginal characters” (MacAdams 2001: 23).

1950s: The Beat Generation in Greenwich Village

Greenwich Village holds a special place in the history of American bohemianism: “For better than 150 years, the Village has been a magnet for creativity, a locus for men and women at odds with the larger society” (Beard and Berlowitz 1993: 1). This position was confirmed through the emergence of the Beat Generation, in particular represented by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, who were drawn to the Village in their escape from the 1950s middle-class conformity (Beard and Berlowitz 1993: 2). It is in this setting that the term *hipster* first appears, a social type defined as embracing existentialism, drugs and jazz and representing the very model of bohemian nonconformity (Watson 1998: 121).

The Beat Generation met in this area in the 1940s, and found an atmosphere of tolerance and artistic activity (Miles 1993: 168). It represented a refuge where they could live in the manner they chose without meeting disapproval from their fellow citizens (Miles 1993: 167). Homosexuals could live openly, people pursued their literary and artistic aspirations, and the consumption of alcohol and drugs was encouraged rather than condemned.

Inspired by romantic literature, the Beat Generation created a new vision of their own, which would later be known as “philosophy of the Beat Generation” (Miles 1993: 168). Due to the knowledge of concentration camps and the dropping of A-bombs in Japan, and the experience of the puritan American bourgeois, they turned away from society’s established values, and sought out a new direction in the search for truth, honesty and spirituality (Miles 1993: 169). With a great love for literature and poetry, many of the Beat Generation were themselves writers and poets. Jack Kerouac’s book “On the Road”, William Burroughs’ “Naked Lunch” and Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” have all become modern literary classics. The strong identity of this literature is said to be their ability to transform everyday details, conversations and friends into narratives which seemed to express an uncensored unconsciousness (Watson 1998: 5).

By the end of the 1950s the original Beats had moved elsewhere. William Burroughs left for Tangier, Jack Kerouac spent most of his time in California and Mexico City, while Ginsberg toured Europe after some years in San Francisco (Miles 1993: 176-177). The area had by then become a major tourist attraction: “The Village streets were filled with tourists and weekend beatniks in beards and berets” (Miles 1993: 178). Television documentaries were made, and articles and series about the

beatniks appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines, such as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Post*, *Life* and *Time* (Miles 1993: 178-179).

1960s-1970s: SoHo

The movement of cool around New York has often been related to the processes of gentrification. Gentrification can be said to be “the process whereby a low-rent neighborhood is transformed into a high-rent neighborhood through redevelopment, usually in conjunction with changing demographics and an influx of wealthier residents” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gentrification>). Once areas start to be considered hip or cool within the more general population, pioneers move into more run-down neighborhoods, both in search of cheaper rent and more authentic surroundings, but also to escape the increasing number of people seeking specific neighborhoods because of the areas so-called cool-factor.

In her book “Loft Living” (1982), Sharon Zukin describes how young artist no longer able to afford the increasing level of rent in Greenwich Village in the 1960s, moved into industrial lofts in SoHo (Zukin 1982: 83). A loft can be defined as a large open space, often in a factory or warehouse, and usually containing very high ceilings, large windows and concrete floors (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loft>). The fact that the industry moved out of the old manufacturing centers had made large, impressive lofts available for alternate uses, and thus they became attractive to artists (Zukin 1982: 58). The high ceilings and large windows gave good light and working conditions for artists, while the large spaces made it possible to live there as well.

According to Zukin, the concept of being an artist went through a fundamental transformation during the 1960s: “Previously regarded as rebellious and bizarre, artists became so integrated into the mainstream of American society that they were

practically indistinguishable from other groups in the broadly defined middle class” (Zukin 1982: 96). This implied that art was no longer considered to stand in opposition to mainstream society, but rather became a part of the middle class’ aesthetic vision (Zukin 1982: 97). Most of the loft spaces were regulated for commercial activity, not living. The inhabitants joined forces in unions and associations, and due to artists becoming an accepted and established part of the middle class, they eventually managed to establish a precedence saying that artists were entitled to decent working conditions, and a privileged right to habituate the lofts in the area (Zukin 1982: 49-50).

To an increasingly large extent, spaces in the area were used as galleries and show rooms for art, with a growing interest from the established art world. As the artists in this period moved from a role as the bohemian rebel, to becoming an accepted member of the middle class, the area also saw a similar development. Once the arena for a vivid underground community, the high rents in the area today has driven most artists out of SoHo again and is in addition to trendy bars and designer boutiques it is the home of exclusive art galleries.

1970s-1980s: East Village

The emergence of punk made the East Village the new arena for underground culture in the 1970s. Just like the Beats, the punks were in opposition to the mainstream: “The early punk rock songwriters and musicians thought themselves to be forging new artistic territory within the confines of established society” (<http://www.inch.com/~jessamin/>). As the awareness of underground music and art grew, a downtown scene emerged, which was associated with a variation of cultural experimentation (<http://www.upress.umn.edu/sles/chapter6/ch6-9.html>).

With its high crime rates and financial crisis the 1970s are regarded as a dark period in New York's history ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_New_York_City_\(1946-1977\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_New_York_City_(1946-1977))), and punk emerged as a reaction to this:

Punk and underground style and music extolled themes of despair and destruction that were emblematic of their mainstream critique and, at the same time, derivative of contemporary social conditions in cities. New York in the 1970s proved inspirational and the East Village in particular provided a compatible environment for a subculture constructed symbolically around images of disheartenment and violence (<http://www.upress.umn.edu/sles/chapter6/ch6-9.html>).

In the venues and nightclubs of the East Village, bands like The Ramones, Television and The New York Dolls played rock that was technically limited and shockingly crude, while wearing ripped clothing and spiky hair (Evans 2003: 105, 110).

In these surroundings artists found an environment where they could exhibit experimental work which was not too well suited for the established corporate art world (<http://www.upress.umn.edu/sles/chapter7/ch7-3.html>). Artists and their friends set up exhibition spaces in their apartments, and artists like Basquiat were regular visitors to the East Village clubs and social spaces (<http://www.upress.umn.edu/sles/chapter7/ch7-3.html>). As a commercial art scene East Village was however short lived, and by 1984 the art scene in the area was becoming an integrated part of the New York art world (<http://www.upress.umn.edu/sles/chapter7/ch7-3.html>). As with many of the other hip New York neighborhoods, raising rents forced the creative people out of the area, and brought real estate agents and young professionals in. The underground atmosphere is still recognizable today, but since the 1990s, as the Rough Guide to New York

writes: "(T)he East Village is no longer the hotbed of dissidence and creativity it once was" (Dunford 2004: 98).

1980s: Alphabet City

As East Village experienced an increasing gentrification, the alternative hip and cool culture moved east towards Alphabet City. The area draws its name from the Avenues A, B, C and D, which are the only ones in Manhattan to have single letter names. In the early 80s the area was considered a slum, and had several sayings such as the one below connected to it:

Avenue A, you're all right.

Avenue B, you're brave.

Avenue C, you're crazy.

Avenue D, you're dead.

(<http://www.thedelimagazine.com/content/features/alphabetcity/index.htm>). The saying reflects on how the further east you moved, the more dangerous it was considered.

During the 1980s, struggling artists and musicians started to move into the area, joining the existing Puerto Rican and African American families living there. The area had high levels of violent crime and illegal drug activity, but still attracted a growing bohemian population due to low rents and creative atmosphere

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alphabet_City). The increasing presence of artists and musicians contributed to the gentrification process in the area. Crime decreased at

great rate during the 1980s, and by the 1990s Alphabet city had entered into a distinctly less bohemian era (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alphabet_City). Today, rent on housing has seen a sharp rise, apartments have been renovated, and the area is home to design shops and hip bars

(<http://www.thedelimagazine.com/content/features/alphabetcity/index.htm>). The area

is residentially no longer dominated by either Puerto Rican families or artists, but rather young professionals who can afford the real estate prices.

1990s-2000: Lower East Side

The Lower East Side is one of the oldest neighborhoods in New York, and was where waves of immigrants settled in the earlier years of the city's history. It was long known as a lower-class neighborhood and even described as an outright slum

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lower_East_Side). According to the Rough Guide the area experienced tremendous development in the 1990s, as gourmet restaurants, retro clubs, hip bars and design boutiques started to appear (Dunford 2004: 93).

These kinds of establishments still characterize the Lower East Side, and the area is still known for being the home of some of the best live music venues in New York (http://newyork.citysearch.com/roundup/39720/newyork/lower_east_side_nightlife.html).

My impression is that even if people go to this area for drinks, to see concerts, and also for shopping, not many people operating within underground culture can actually afford to live there. The few people I met who had apartments on the Lower East Side could only afford it due their building being subject to rent control. Just as local Latin and Jewish shops once had to give way to concert venues and chic bars, the Luna Lounge, which was where I had my very first beer in New York during my fieldwork, is now being demolished for luxury condos. (http://travel2.nytimes.com/top/features/travel/destinations/unitedstates/newyork/newyorkcity/sight_details.html?vid=124996104163).

According to Rough Guide, the neighborhood reached its peak of hipness around 2000, as people within the underground started to move to Brooklyn (Dunford

2004: 93). This is a statement which resonates well with a real estate agent advertising for the area: "(T)his neighborhood is truly for everyone"

(<http://www.halstead.com/neighborhoodinfo.aspx?n=22>). If it is for everyone, it is clearly not where the cool crowd wants to be.

Today: Williamsburg

Only one subway stop from Manhattan, just on the other side of the East River, Williamsburg could offer convenient transportation as well as cheap rents (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Williamsburg%2C_Brooklyn), and artists and other urban pioneers started moving across the river from East Village already in the 1980s (<http://www.nylikeanative.com/generic14.html>).

In the 1990s the artist population was growing, with visitors coming from all over the world to see the new cutting edge art scene, and with the numerous music venues establishing, Williamsburg has in the recent years challenged Manhattans position as the main arena for live music and new bands

(<http://www.nylikeanative.com/generic14.html>). In a 2002 feature article in The New York Metro, a Williamsburg resident expressed his relationship to the area:

"Williamsburg is the only place to find people who are still interested in living a bohemian lifestyle" (http://newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/music/features/music2002/n_7734/).

Although my experience of Williamsburg was very much that the area was characterized by an overwhelming presence of coolness, I also at a regular basis came across discussions about whether the Williamsburg scene was over. Already in 2002, journalist Derek de Koff wrote: "The fact that this article is being written will no

doubt symbolize to some that the scene in Williamsburg came to an end a long time ago” (http://newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/arts/music/features/music2002/n_7734/).

Next stop: Bushwick?

Both during my stay in Williamsburg and after my return to Norway, I have regularly read housing ads on Craigslist, a website offering free classifieds advertising, also called “eBay for Hipsters” (Lanham 2003: 77). It has offered an interesting view into how people choose to present themselves, but also as to which neighborhoods are considered desirable to live in. To an increasing extent I have seen ads where artists, musicians and designers are offering housing to what is called ‘creative types’ in the area of Bushwick, a yet rather un-gentrified area east of Williamsburg. Several of the ads expressed resentment about how Williamsburg had been overcrowded with hipsters, and seeking to make Bushwick attractive due to the lack of hipster residents, cheap rents and authentic surroundings. This would for instance be presented in the following manner:

If you're afraid of broken glass on broken sidewalks, bad graffiti, hookers/junkies, &/or burned out cars in a racially diverse, ugly light-industrial area, then this probably isn't for you - the suburbs it's not. (<http://newyork.craigslist.org/>)

Several of my informants lived in Bushwick, and then mainly in loft apartments. The area has a higher crime rate than many others, and I did not feel entirely safe on my few visits there. People who lived there all had stories about being mugged, or threatened by kids on drugs. *Rick* never bothered to lock his old van in this area, because, as he said: “This is not a place where people steal cars. They steel cars

elsewhere, then drive them here and set them on fire.” Some of my informants lived in huge buildings which had all been turned into loft apartments. These buildings were usually still regulated for commercial purposes, and leasing arrangements were often illegal. What was held to be the advantage of living in these lofts was said to be the low rents, and that the open space allowed you to modify it any way you saw fit, adjusting it to creative activities and the number of residents. In the loft *Rick* shared with two friends, they had for instance built a rehearsal space for his band. I also believe that the feeling of being something of an urban pioneer added to the assets of living in the area.

In the beginning of March 2006 The New York Times had a pole on their web site where they asked “What will be the next cool New York City neighborhood?” (http://www.curbed.com/archives/2006/03/06/bushwick_and_the_next_cool_neighborhood_meme.php). Bushwick is in the lead with 16% of the votes, followed by Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn (14%) and East Harlem in Manhattan (7%). Time will show if this pole reflects reality.

Beyond the frontier

The way cool has moved, and is still moving, around the city of New York, finds resonance in the classical American mythos of *the frontier*, which is already mentioned in the introduction. The pioneers who were advancing beyond the Western frontier line, expanding into new and unexplored territory, has become symbolic to the “fluidity of American life” (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/TURNER/>); of ever driving the frontier onward (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/TURNER/>). The fluidity that is described in the concept of the frontier is also characteristic to the concept of cool.

In order to maintain social borders, agents of cool must constantly breach the geographical borders, and constantly advance beyond the frontier.

Map of New York City

Manhattan



Williamsburg (framed)



3. Authentic and different

As I was getting to know Williamsburg and New York during my first weeks of fieldwork, I spent a lot of time walking around, looking at everything, and sitting down for coffee every now and then. Regularly, I experienced that people were staring at my feet. It was February, and the cold weather with snow very much resembled the Norwegian winter. Accommodating the cold, I had brought a pair of Nesnalobb shoes with me from Norway. The Nesnalobb is a wool shoe with a distinct appearance, especially suited for harsh, cold weather conditions. Actually the very first conversation I had with anyone apart from cab drivers and coffee waitresses, took place because a guy came up to me and asked about my shoes. He thought they were very cool, and wanted to know where I had gotten them. This scenario repeated itself on several occasions. What seemed to be the case was that people were fascinated by my shoes because it was something they had never seen before. When I told them that I was Norwegian, and that it was a very Norwegian type of shoe, it seemed to add to the enthusiasm. It was as if that made the shoe even cooler.

The story of the Nesnalobb is a good example of what during my fieldwork gradually emerged as two conceptual realms which seemed to hold specific value within the Williamsburg underground community; that of *difference* and that of *authenticity*. As a visual and stylistic expression the Nesnalobb represented something *different*, it was something people hadn't seen before. Thus it made people curious. People I spoke with in New York tended to know little about Norway. It is considered a small, distant and exotic place in the far North, with extreme weather conditions and a violent history of crazy Vikings. The Nesnalobb thus increased its value by being recognized as a representation of *authentic* Norwegian-ness. This in turn reflected

back on me; I was considered authentically different due to being Norwegian, and the shoes become a symbol of that.

In this chapter I present the conceptual realms of authenticity and difference as two semantic fields applied as analytical categories. Objects, events, actions or persons perceived to hold these qualities are valued higher than others. Reflected in statements as well as actions and creative expressions, I argue that they hold a central position in the dialectic process of producing, reproducing and negotiating cool identities.

Authentic

The authentic can be defined as “being actually and exactly what is claimed” (<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/authentic>); the way something appears is the way it is in itself. In relation to the aspect of identity it reflects an essentialist view that the qualities and characteristics of a person are found within him or her, and as such is fundamentally connected to the body.

Rick lives in a loft in Bushwick, plays guitar and sings in an experimental noise rock band, and makes a living custom-making guitar effect pedals. During lunch one day we started talking about hipsters and what it meant to be cool. *Rick* said:

“It’s about the motivation of what you’re doing. Do you love music, or do you want to work in that record store because it’s cool? (...) It’s cool to be interesting, to be into things. There are people who are just pretentious wanting to be cool. People do things to be different, not because of the content.”

To him it is cool to be interesting and into things, but only if this is based on a focus on content. Working in the record store is cooler if it is something you do because of a feeling that comes from within, you love music, than if you do it because it is considered to be cool. In this sense, cool is considered an essential quality of a person, and not something that is achievable through a motivation of gaining recognition from others. Negotiations around cool identities are thus often revolving around to which extent agents are able to display their coolness as a natural disposition, that is, an authentic representation of themselves. As such they are aware that appearance is a representation. They still strive towards a mode of expression where this representation to the largest extent possible can be perceived as coherent and equal to what is represented; the self which is considered to lie within the person.

Words of authenticity

A number of terms frequently turned up in the conversations about the activities surrounding me. The words presented below reflect the definition of the authentic as being actually and exactly what is claimed, and can further be divided into several subcategories reflecting different modes of authenticity.

- *real, true, genuine, honest*: The way it really is
- *raw, unprocessed, natural, pure*: In its original form
- *from within, heart, essence* : The inside as the location of what is real, also connected to the body as location of a person's self.
- *immediate, spontaneous, improvised*: The mode of representation of the authentic, describing how the process from content to expression should take place for it to remain real.

These different aspects of authenticity stand in relation to each other in a certain manner. For something to appear as what it actually and exactly is, the representation of something must be equal to that which is represented; the sign must appear to be that which it signifies. The movement from content to representation, from inside to outside, involves an aspect of movement through distance and time, and in order to minimize this distance, the production of a representation preferably takes place as an immediate expression of the body. Thus, when something is *improvised or expressed immediately and spontaneously*, it enables the *essence, or what comes from within, from the heart* to appear in its *raw, unprocessed, natural and pure* form and it will thus appear as more *true, genuine, honest and real*.

Examples of use

real

Johnny worked at *Real Discs*, an independent record store just north of Williamsburg that I regularly visited during my fieldwork. Since the record store was not really paying off, he had a day job as a welder in his brother's company. He took pride in being working class, and would often talk about how he despised people who thought they were cool. He told me he'd rather to go local pubs than to hip bars because "that's where the *real* people are."

raw

My flat mate *Olivia* and I had attended the opening of a new club in Williamsburg. This place was located in a loft basement and consisted of one, big room with concrete floor, walls and beams, and had no heating or decorations. When we talked about the

place afterwards, *Olivia* used the following expression to describe it: "It's a very *raw* space. I like it."

honest

I met *Chris* from a local band at a coffee shop in Greenpoint, a neighbourhood just north of Williamsburg. Their first album had been characterized as lo-fi, something he explained by his lack of engineering skills. When talking about the upcoming album, he said he did not think it would be so lo-fi sounding, since his engineering skills had improved a lot since then: "I think it would just be *dishonest* to try to be lo-fi. Why would I pretend?"

essence

I was invited to the birthday party of my informant *Jenny*, a musician whom I got in touch with through my flatmate *Olivia*. We were all sitting around a table in the back room of the Williamsburg bar, and some of her friends were out on the floor dancing. The DJ was playing a lot of chart music, and when Black Eyed Peas hit the speakers, one of the guys came back to the table and sat down. He was clearly annoyed and stated: "I hate this kind of music!" I asked him why. "It's so polished, so overproduced." I further asked why that was so bad. "Because it takes music away from the *essence*."

heart

Johnny has a preference for recording lo-fi because "it's like plugging a microphone straight into your *heart*".

immediate, genuine

Elaborating on music recording *Johnny* further said: "It's about making music for yourself, not for someone else. The minute you do that, it's not the same. You get an idea, and then you just record it then and there. You're not concerned with how it sounds; it's just the *immediate* thing you do. It's closer to what you actually did (...) It's a more *genuine* expression."

During my field work I especially met the ideal of authenticity in relation to the recording of music. Several of my informants stressed the value of immediacy when recording music, and thereby getting an authentic representation of what actually happened. When I met up with a band called *The Dark Siders* in their apartment, they showed me how they recorded on an 8 track tape recorder through a couple of microphones they set up in the room, and then they all played the song together once. The reason for doing it this way was to "accurately represent and capture what was actually happening". Attending a recording session with singer-songwriter, I observed that he would only do one take of each song, singing and playing the guitar at once. If he made a mistake, he would start over again and do a whole take from the top. He would only keep this one take. When I asked him about it, he said: "I want the recording to be as *true* representation of me as possible." This reflects an essential understanding of identity where the self is seen to be located in and expressed through the body.

Different

The definition of difference as a "state or way in which people or things are not the same" (Cowie (ed) 1989: 333) indicates that the meaning of something as being

different occurs in the relation to something which is not. Things or persons as such do not have an immanent quality of being different within them, but only obtain this quality when they are conceived as such in the relation to something they stand in opposition to. Agents within the underground scene identify themselves as different in relational to what they call mainstream society which is associated with normality, conventionality and predictability. These qualities are considered to be undesirable, and there is a strong focus on distancing oneself from that which is considered to represent it. Difference can thus be said to be perceived through the experience of something as being unpredictable, unknown and difficult to categorize. The act of creating difference, can thus be understood as a manner of distancing oneself from a norm, trying to escape that which is expected, conventional and predictable. Difference as a desirable condition also implies that modes of difference are in the course of time imitated by an increasing number of others. Through this institutionalization of difference, it moves from unpredictability to predictability. Rather than being hard to categorize it becomes recognizable, and thus it ceases to be that which it was seen to represent.

Words of difference

All the terms below reflect the definition of different as 'not the same', and can be divided into further subcategories in accordance with what they stand opposition to:

- *crazy, wild, insane*: Not in a state of reason
- *weird, strange, obscure*: Out of the ordinary, hard to categorize
- *chaotic, changing, new*: In movement, unpredictable

These terms only hold meaning as “not the same” in relation to its opposites of sanity, normality, calmness, predictability, conventionality, order, the constant, the old and established. Over time, if actions that are perceived as *crazy* or *weird* are repeated at a certain amount of times, it becomes recognizable, predictable, and thus comes to represent the normal, the established. Its meaning changes from being different to being one of *sameness*. For the difference to be maintained, then, it becomes necessary to continuously distance oneself from that which has become the norm. As such, difference becomes a fundamentally ephemeral and transient concept. What is at any given time considered to be the representations of difference will thus constantly be changing. This is visible in the constant change of trends and style, and in the changing definitions of what is at any given time considered to be cool.

Examples of use

crazy

Some friends of mine had been at a show to see a Japanese rock band. *Kate* was very excited about the show, and told me how the drummer had been stage diving, with the drums. “He was still playing the drums, while the audience was carrying him around the room! It was totally *crazy*!”

weird

I was talking to *Jill* on the subway about the promoter described in a later chapter, and discussed what it was about him that made him so popular. During this conversation she said: “What is so cool about him is that he puts on shows in all these *weird* locations. You never know what to expect.”

obscure

In reference to his preference for underground music, *Johnny* said: “There is so much I have learned from listening to music. The *obscure* made sense to me.”

change

A review of an album by the band The Animal Collective started with this sentence:

“The Animal Collective *changes* far too fast to make for much of a commodity”

(<http://www.timeoutny.com/rock/455/455.music.animalcoll.rev.html>).

new

Tom is a guitar player in his late twenties who plays in a band with *Olivia*’s friend *Jenny*. We met for lunch one day, and on this occasion he said that when operating within the musical underground “you’re always looking for the *new* thing.”

I often met the ideal of being different when I was attending concerts or other cultural arrangements, and when I was out among people. One evening I was with some friends at my favorite local bar *Delicious*, when a group of people came in, all dressed up in costumes. One as a sailor, one as a cat woman, and a girl was wearing a marching band uniform. My neighbor *Laura* got curious and went over to them to ask what was going on. One of the girls explained that they had a friend visiting from the West Coast, and that on a whim they had decided to celebrate Halloween. Not only did they appear as very different and ‘crazy’ from the rest of the people sitting in the bar, but the aspect of celebrating Halloween at a totally different time than what is customary, also represents going against what is considered to be normal.

In a cross street close to the Williamsburg riverside lies The Glass House Gallery, which is called an "experiential art space"¹. It does not have a visible sign, and from the outside it looks like an abandoned garage or warehouse. Once you enter, you are struck by a chaotic impression. The floors and the walls are painted in all kinds of psychedelic colors, patterns and motifs. No two pieces of furniture are the same. Chairs and tables are hung on the walls. Lamps are hanging upside down. The decorations give a strong impression of being different from any normal, conventional and expected way of decorating a space. The space is founded to promote and encourage art making, and hosts 'experiential art nights' where what they call free open painting, dancing and jamming is encouraged and performed (<http://www.brookebaxter.com/glasshousegallery/>).

These examples clearly show how deliberate efforts are made to produce and express difference from that which is considered to be conventional and predictable.

Authentic and different – a contradiction in terms

I first met *Tom* accompanying *Olivia* to an in-store gig that *Tom* and *Jenny's* band was doing at *Real Discs*. On this occasion *Tom* had long hair and a big beard, he was wearing brown corduroy pants and a knitted sweater with holes on the elbows. He resembled a cosy uncle, stomping his feet while he was singing and playing his acoustic guitar. Later, one evening at *Jenny's* place, she showed me a video recording of a warm up gig *Tom's* band had done for a very well known band in New York. In this concert he was wearing a white band t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, the beard was gone, and he was jumping around on stage with a constant sneer on his face, while pounding his electric guitar. It was a distinctively different appearance from the

¹ Not a typo.

previous time I saw him. As we were talking about the band and *Tom*, *Jenny* told me that he was constantly changing the lyrics on the songs they were playing. When they play live, they never used a set-list, and the order of the songs was primarily based on whichever song Pete started to play. I commented on how different he had appeared to me on the various occasions I had seen him. She laughed and said: "It's his style. He's loose. It depends on what he's in the mood for". Not too long after this I met up with *Tom* for lunch one afternoon, to talk about music. He told me about his musical revelation in his youth, how he was constantly seeking out what was different, and that listening to these bands become like a key into what was real:

"You're always looking for the new thing. A new sound that reflects what's really happening. What's real, what's subversive. The real music speaking for everybody."

The account of *Tom* gives an insight into central elements of the mechanism taking place within the underground community. He is looking for that which is real, some kind of an essential truth and state of the world. However, this reality can only be found in that which is different and new, that which 'comes out of secret locations', as *Tom* says. But when the key is turned and the door opens into the new, the secret, the unknown and different, it quickly becomes old news, the secret is disclosed, and through recognisability the difference disappears. Therefore, as is reflected in *Tom's* statement that he is always always looking for the new thing, the quest for the real within the new and different only has a meaning as a quest. Once the quest is completed, it stops being what one was looking for. You are constantly getting warmer in an eternal game of hunt the thimble.

Already in the definitions of authenticity and difference a basic contradiction is implied. On the one hand, in order to maintain difference in relation to others, that

difference must constantly be reproduced, and as such, what represents difference changes. On the other hand, the ideal of authenticity implies that this difference must reflect what and who you really are; it must reflect the difference as a natural inclination, as a constant, essential quality. In this sense, it is hard to imagine something actually being *essentially* different.

This dilemma finds resonance within the notion of modern identity which is based on a fundamental ambiguity of on the one hand being true to one's essential self, while at the same time being unique, representing a difference that can only be constructed and maintained in relation to an Other. Thus, the only way to express 'true' identity is to be constantly looking for it, to be in constant transition to reproduce it.

Likewise, cool might be said to represent a negotiation of identity. A successful construction of cool might be said to be reflected in to what extent a person is able to appear as if he or she is able to combine these two contradicting agendas; to what extent the difference that is expressed can be perceived as a naturally and essential quality of a person. However, one can never reach a place where this condition is permanent, and thus a successful construction of cool implies the capability of continuously reproducing one self as oneself.

4. The outsider as centre

The portrait of the outsider is central within underground culture and in relation to the concept of cool. Even if the image of the outsider brings about associations of a loner standing on the outside of society, those individuals who identify with this image find resonance with one another in a feeling of community. This community might be said to be an outsider community. Further, the degree of coolness an outsider is perceived as possessing is dependant on his or her closeness to the centre of this community.

The outsider

The role of the outsider can be examined through the concept of deviance. The sociologists Clinard and Meier write: "At the simplest level, deviance refers to something that is "different" from something else. "Deviants" are not like "us" – "they" behave differently" (1992: 9). Any social group applies certain rules and norms of expected behaviour, and deviance is constituted through infraction of these rules. According to Becker, individuals within the group who do not comply with these rules are in consequence labelled as outsiders (1963: 9). In this sense, deviance is understood as a *relational* phenomenon, not as an inherent quality of a person. A deviant act stands out as different in relation to a set of rules of a conventional way of behaving. It is a consequence of how others respond to a person's actions; it has to be interpreted by someone as being deviant from normal behaviour (Becker 1963: 9). In accordance with the sociologist Georg Simmel, who views all social interaction as transactions, Becker further states that he views deviance "as the product of a transaction that takes place between some social group and one who is viewed by that group as a rule-breaker" (1963: 10). As such he is primarily concerned with the

processes involved in why and how people are to be *perceived* of as outsiders (Becker 1963: 10).

The black man as an original outsider

Several have located the origin of the outsider, as well as the emergence of hip and cool, within the African-American culture developed among the black slaves imported to America from Africa. In his essay "The White Negro", Norman Mailer presents the black man as the source of hip, due to always having lived on the margin of conformity: "The Negro has the simplest of alternatives: live a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger" (Mailer 1959: 340-341). The outsider role of the African slaves is also recognized by Leland in his history of hip: "Hip begins, then, as a subversive intelligence that outsiders developed under the eyes of insiders. It was one of the tools Africans developed to negotiate an alien landscape" (2004: 6).

In the beginning, the black man was the lonely outsider who had come from far away and did not belong. As new generations of slaves were born in America, the black man became a part of the American society. The rules to keep black and white people from interacting were strong, but some still engaged in interaction with each other. Thus they broke the rules of conduct, the rules that were made to keep them apart, and created a role outside the conformity of the norm-regulated society. They were, in accordance with Becker's definition of deviance, recognized as outsiders and labelled as such. It is in this light that Leland sees hip as telling the story of the relations between black and white America (2004: 6). Apart from its connection to the mainly black hip-hop culture, hip and cool is today primarily associated with white youth who actively seek out the role as outsider.

Outsider heroes

During my fieldwork I became aware of several outsider heroes, who's appearance and expressions were considered to be deviant from normal behaviour. In this section I present three of these outsider heroes.

Many of my informants brought up Daniel Johnston as a source of inspiration and admiration. Daniel Johnston is a schizophrenic musician and artist with an acclaimed song writing talent, a naïve appearance, and a rather extraordinary life history. He is now heavily medicated, but still performs concerts and exhibits his drawings. He is frequently labelled an *outsider artist*, a term which according to the music historian Irwin Chusid refers to artists considered being “instinctively gifted with what might be termed “imperfect pitch” ” (2000: x), “having a “realness” quotient” (Chusid 2000: xii) because they are breaking rules without knowing that there are rules.

Another name that came up on several occasions was also that of Elliot Smith. Elliot Smith had a great reputation as a singer/songwriter, especially acclaimed for the authenticity in his performance. As the story goes, he had experienced a childhood of abuse and terror, and due to this he was a heavy drug addict. The pain these experiences produced was recognized as being very present in his music. He finally died committing suicide by stabbing a knife straight into his own heart. His suicide stands for many as a proof of the truthfulness of his pain being so hard to bear, that he would rather kill himself than having to live with it.

A third and much acclaimed character is Anthony. Anthony has a background as a drag artist within New York's queer community. He has a strikingly androgynous appearance, both visually and in his singing. One of the major figures within underground culture, Lou Reed, has formed a close relationship to him, and

contributes with vocals on one of Anthony's records. Anthony has a bright voice that is said to be extremely moving in its sincerity, and has been known to make grown men cry.

These three figures were, among others, subject to admiration and respect due to their outsider status. This admiration can be said to have its basis in the way they are seen to portray a genuine difference; the manner in which they stand out is seen as an expression of them being true to themselves, as being who they are.

“You want to be different”

In addition to the admiration for outsider heroes, several of my informants themselves identified strongly with the outsider role. Some of them would tell me how they at some point in their upbringing started feeling different, as an outsider. Further, they felt a relief when they found some ground where this was recognized, or where they could share this feeling with someone, through music or otherwise. The lonely feeling of being different and the good feeling of this difference being recognized by a community can be exemplified through *Tom* and *Johnny* telling me how they got involved in musical activity. Over lunch one day *Tom* told me:

“The first time I heard music like that was Minor Threat, Bad Brains and other DC hardcore bands. The quality of the recording was not so good, it didn't sound like what you're used to hearing on the radio. It was different. You're hearing these things they record on home studios, and then you notice all these punk rock bands with gritty sound. You start seeking out bands that sound that way. You feel like, “this is real shit, man”. They're coming out of secret locations, it becomes like a key. They made it themselves; it's not the product of some corporate thing. It feels like the real thing, real rock n roll. When you're a teenager, you're in rebellion, you want to be different from your parents and what they think is normal. You seek out these things. You feel hopeless, disconnected.”

Sitting outside *Real Discs* a warm summer afternoon *Johnny* gave me the story of his meeting with the underground musical community:

“The age of 14 was when the world of music opened up to me. (...) Radio was how I got into everything. I would be sitting up late at night, finding all these weird radio stations and noting down names of bands and titles of songs. I remember there was a guy with an orange Mohawk in school. It took me 6 months to work up the courage to talk to him. I finally did and asked him if he could make me a list. He laughed at me, but he brought in half of the list the next day. Lemonheads, The Misfits. He took me to shows and told me about *Wild Willy's Vinyls*. I would hang out in that record store every weekend.”

Tom expresses how as a teenager he felt hopeless and disconnected, he was in rebellion, and would seek out the things that represented a difference from the normal. When he heard the punk rock music, which was different than anything he was used to hearing, he found something real in it, something that spoke to him, and he thus began seeking it out. He located a key that could unlock his feeling of disconnection and hopelessness, and give him a sense of belonging; it unlocks the secret locations where he can find that which is real in that which is different. *Johnny* also describes this feeling as a world opening up to him. At first he was discovering it on his own, but through the boy in his school he is able to share it with someone, he can hang out in the record store every weekend with people who seek out the same things as himself.

“People like us”

As the examples of *Tom* and *Johnny* show, they felt disconnected from and alien to the conventions of the world they grew up in. They had a feeling they were

standing out, that they were different from the majority in some respect. As such, they fit into the image of the outsider, and they were also drawn to expressions and models reflecting the outsider. At the same time, they clearly state how the sense of belonging somewhere, to finding shared ground with someone else who feels on the outside of the community, creates a sense of relief, comfort and security. This feeling is also reflected in the account another of my musician informants, *Rick*, gave me about how it was like to leave his hometown:

“Moving to New York, everything is so easy compared to Virginia. In Virginia, in high school, there was only one more person who was into other kinds of music. When we played live, people threw bottles at us. And I’m doing exactly the same thing now as then.”

Whereas he in his hometown was considered as an outsider and different, obviously in a negative way, he finds that in New York life is easier, being an outsider is easier because he is surrounded by other people like himself.

The notion of *people like us* can be said to resonate a sense of sameness. In a response to Mailer’s essay “The White Negro”, Polsky criticizes how Mailer sees the hipster as an isolated character: “They come together and create a little world of their own which elaborates its own worldview, code of behaviour, institutions, argot, and so on” (Polsky in Mailer 1959: 368). Becker points to how deviance, or becoming an outsider, “springs from motives which are socially learned” (1963: 30). For social interaction and organization to take place, people must be able to communicate with one another, and communication presupposes some sort of agreement of what are valid conclusions and explanations, a sense of structure which classifications are ordered in. This is why Bauman sees all societies as “factories of meanings” and even “nurseries of *meaningful life*” (Bauman 2001: 2).

In Cohen's definition, a community is characterized by the fact that

the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups. 'Community' thus seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference (Cohen 1989: 12).

It is in this way a relational phenomenon which places specific emphasis on the signification of borders. The underground culture as a community may be said to be a group of people identifying themselves with each other through being outsiders, and also through sharing a set of cultural preferences and values. They see in each other people like themselves who have a preference for that which represents an opposition to the mainstream society.

Cohen focuses his examination of community on the significance of boundaries and the manners in which these boundaries are challenged and maintained (1989). Cohen's focus on the challenging and maintenance of borders offers a perspective which holds resonance with my perception of the dialectics within the underground community. The underground community identifies themselves in the shared experience of being genuine outsiders. They see their community as being challenged not primarily by the mainstream community which they identify themselves in opposition to, but by the presence of those who are perceived as *wanting* to be genuine outsiders and thereby cool; the so-called hipsters. The recognizable in what the community has in common enables imitation, a certain sense of predictability. The struggle to distinguish between the genuine, naturally inclined outsiders and the ones who *wants* to be genuine outsiders becomes a subtle game.

The outsider as insider

The mechanisms used to distinguish between those who appear to really belong on the inside and those who are seen as wanting to belong, points to exclusivity of membership. This means that the value of your status as an outsider of mainstream society is coherent with how close you are to the centre of the outsider community.

The more of an outsider, the more of an insider are you. To protect one's membership in this inner group, one makes deliberate efforts to limit possible access by arranging unannounced, private loft parties, making sure your club has no visible signs on the door or elsewhere outside, spreading information through unofficial mailing lists or arranging secret after-parties where your name must be on a list at the door. Those who should know, will know, and thus you can to a large extent ensure that only the real outsiders will know where, when, who and how. As John Leland puts it: "After all, once people fractionally more clueless than yourself are in the club, what is the value of membership?" (Leland 2004:69). However, there is a fine line to balance in ensuring this exclusivity while at the same time appearing as if it's not intentional.

The New York Post brought a report from the after-party in connection with a concert with the famous New York band Interpol, which was ridiculed by the online gossip site *Gawker*:

Even if you're hooked up enough to know that Interpol's having their after-party at the Dark Room, "there's always a secret after-party to the secret after-party that you're not invited to," says one downtown insider who - surprise! - asked not to be named. "Unless you're in Paul from Interpol's living room and he's like, 'Can I go to bed now?' you haven't made it." Hmm. Do you suppose this person asked not to be named because they just provided the dumbest fucking quote ever? (<http://www.gawker.com/news/culture/nyp-exposes-the-secret-hipster-afterparty-036327.php>).

This quote points to two important aspects. First of all, there is a large element of truth to the anonymous downtown insider's statement that the more on the inside you are, the more you 'have made it'. Secondly, this person is being ridiculed for what he said, because it suggests that he cares about it, that it is in some way important and signifies status to be on the inside. It is cool to be on the inside, but it is not considered cool to *want* to be on the inside or to care about whether you are on the inside or not.

Eat one's cake and have it too

In his exploration of the philosophy of fashion, Simmel presents the idea of a "dialectical interplay of individual imitation and differentiation; the desire, on the one hand, to be like others and, on the other, the desire for differences from others" (Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 14). This same dialectic interplay can be located within the outsider community. Agents within the underground distance themselves from the general society because they feel it imposes conventions and expects certain kinds of behavior; they want to be different from others. On the other hand agents appreciate the shared experience of being in the world they find within the underground community, a community which in turn imposes a different set of conventions on its members. Agents within the underground community thus constantly try to unite these two contradictions in the pursuit of a permanent condition as an ultimate outsider *and* as an ultimate insider.

5. “It depends on who’s looking”

Whether someone can be said to be cool or not, is not only dependant on how the individual agent presents himself to the world around him. It also relies on how he or she is perceived by others. This chapter explores how underground culture and the landscape of cool rests on a fundamental dilemma of simultaneously seeking and avoiding recognition.

Cool is a verdict

To Charles S. Peirce the sign is a three-part relation;

(a) sign, or *representamen* is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, it creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object (Peirce 1958-60: 2.228).

He calls the processual interaction between these three aspects *semiosis* (Peirce 1958-60 5.484). Signs can be words, images, actions and objects, but only means something when it means *to someone* (Daniel 1984: 39); its meaning arises in the act of interpretation.

If the sign is found to be meaningful only in the act of interpretation, this implies that the sign is fundamentally relational. According to the social anthropologist Daniel, culture is located in creative acts of communication, and is thus a product of human beings’ exchange of signs (Daniel 1984: 40, 47). As stated by the social anthropologist Anthony P Cohen: “Social interaction is contingent upon (...) interpretation; it is, essentially, the transaction of meanings” (Cohen 1989:17).

John Leland holds that nothing has meaning as hip or cool unless it is interpreted as such: “(H)ip is a verdict, not an intention” (2004: 10). When “The Hipster Handbook” presents a hipster as someone who’s opinions are ‘deemed cool by the cool’ (Lanham 2003: 8), and Stearns says that cool always suggests approval (Stearns 1994: 1), this aspect is emphasized further. From this we can resonate that the presence and appearance of something’s coolness is dependant on the receiving end: “(I)ts parameter [is] defined by the people watching it” (Leland 2004: 8). Or as *Rick* said once we were talking about what was cool: “It depends on who’s looking”. In this sense, cool is a social relation; it requires a transaction, an acknowledgement, an audience (Leland 2004: 8).

Interaction as transaction

In his central work “The Philosophy of Money”, Simmel holds that arranging objects in an order of value is a fundamental human quality, and that the main characteristic of this ordering is that of difference, not uniformity (2004: 59). Value is here characterized by its subjectivity. That means that value is not an intrinsic quality of an object, but arises in an act of judgment upon it: “(T)he same object can have the highest degree of value for one soul and the lowest for another, and vice versa” (Simmel 2004: 63). In this sense, the value attached to objects, relationships or actions is dependant on recognition (Simmel 2004: 68). Just as a sign only means something when it means *to* someone, value only appears when something has value *to* someone. For something to acquire value, a value must also be offered, and objects thus enter into reciprocal *relationships* through the acts of exchange (Simmel 2004: 78).

Simmel presents exchange as the most pure and developed form of interaction, and as such relationships between people can be seen as forms of exchange (2004: 82). The object of exchange can be seen as primarily being that of increasing the sum of value (Simmel 2004: 82). Even if this value is not an object's essential quality, it might appear as such through socially accepted ways of appreciating and doing things. To orientate us, we need something outside ourselves, a relation, to give us a sense of ideas and reality representing an objective certainty. The individual's need for a sense of stability beyond the self constitutes the power of social institutions, and thus, according to Simmel, society determines exchange (Simmel 2004: 99).

The concept of identities as being constructed in relation to an Other can be further explored through the concept of social interaction as value exchange. Identity is seen as being constructed through difference, in relation to that which is it not (Hall 2000: 17). At the same time, if we do not understand identity as an essential quality of the self, but as a primarily relational phenomenon, it naturally follows that the identity that is constructed, to have validity, must also be recognized and accepted as such. According to Kellner the construction of identity is "a complex process of mutual recognition" (1992: 142). Thus one can argue that identities are negotiated as value through acts of exchange.

If we follow this strain of thought, one might say that people within the underground community, through interaction, are shopping for identity. The complex processes of mutual recognition Kellner speaks of might thus be said to be the dialectic processes through which people offer identities. In convergence with how it is accepted, people either hold on to this identity construction, or, due to lack of success, apply different strategies to appear in a way which might be appreciated and accepted as cool. The degree to which people succeed in constructing cool identities, can be

said to rely on to which extent they are accepted as such by others. In the process, one is constantly composing and recomposing, producing and reproducing oneself through reciprocal relationships and interactions with other identity shoppers. The constantly changing conditions under which these negotiations take place implies that no expressions holds constant value and as such even successful identity constructions must constantly be reproduced in order to maintain its value. As I will show below, the central position these mechanism hold within the underground community is primarily reflected through the strong emphasis on network building.

“Real people”

One afternoon I went over to *Real Records* to see *Johnny* and return a jacket I had borrowed from his girlfriend at a party the previous weekend. He was not at the store, but the other guys told me he was hanging out at *The Truck Bar*, a local bar down the street. *Justin* said: “I don’t understand why he wants to hang out there, why he doesn’t just head down to *The Factory* or something.” *Neil* explained: “*The Truck Bar* is this Polish bar. It’s a really scary place!” *Justin* continued: “If you go there, they will all be staring at you, wondering what you’re doing there.” Walking down the street to the bar, I had worked myself up, and was actually kind of nervous. I was quite relieved when I caught the sight of *Johnny* sitting alone outside, having a smoke. I walked up to him, we said our hellos, and I told him how the other guys had made me nervous to go there. We laughed a bit, and *Johnny* said:

“I don’t understand those guys. This is a great place. Cheap beer, real people. I like just hanging out here, talking, relaxing. These are the real working class people. I prefer hanging out with them. There’s no fuzz, just honest, unpretentious. I’d much rather be here than any of those places where everyone thinks they’re so cool.”

Johnny's visit to *The Truck Bar* can be interpreted as an act of creating difference. As difference is a relational phenomenon, and its meaning only arises in opposition to what it is not, the important issue at hand here is what he is establishing a difference in relation to. Hanging out at *The Factory* can in this situation be interpreted as the common thing to do, and as such represents something conventional, a sense of sameness within the underground community. For *Johnny* the people who go there think they are cool, and as such they are striving to be something that they are not. For him, caring about what is cool or not implies that you care mainly about acceptance from others, not who you really are, and thus going to *The Factory* represents something fake and a strive for being different. By going to *The Truck Bar*, he is communicating that he has no need to try to be different; he would rather spend time with the real, ordinary people. However, if *Johnny* really wanted to be a part of the ordinary society he could easily move out of Williamsburg, into a regular suburban community and live an average American life surrounded by real, unpretentious people. His visit to *The Truck Bar* stands out as different from the conventional and predicted behaviour within the underground community, and thus as a sign of difference if finds its addressee in fellow members of the underground community; the guys at the record store.

The element of risk

In any act of exchange, there is always an element of risk. Risk might be said to be the possibility of losing value. The risk can be high or low, and the size of possible risk can be determined by two factors: "the probability fraction of the loss and the size of the possible profit" (Simmel 2004: 260).

As accounted for in an earlier chapter, *authenticity* and *difference* are considered to be particularly valuable assets within the field of underground culture. At any given time a certain amount of agents are, through interaction and acts of exchange, bargaining for the acquisition of these two types of value. As their value is dependant on recognition, what is at stake is not that of producing expressions that might appear as being different or authentic, but the fact they don't receive meaning or value if it is not accepted or interpreted as such by other agents.

According to Simmel, man creates an order of value based on difference. Any item might be said to have "an infinite number of *differences* around and within" them (Bateson 1972: 453), but not all of these are considered to be of equal value. Some of them constitute what Bateson calls the 'the difference that makes a difference' (Bateson 1972: 453). The fact that some differences are considered more valuable than others is dependant on them being recognized as such, a recognition which takes place through successful acts of exchange. For agents within the underground cultural field, then, the risk involved is the potential absence of recognition, of presenting a difference that does *not* make a difference. In order to obtain this recognition, and thereby value, agents apply various strategies, such as changing appearance or directing their expressions towards a different crowd.

A lack of recognition

In one of the attempts of getting in touch with people for my research, I had posted an ad in Craigslist's musicians section. I got only two answers, one of them was from the band *The Dark Siders*. Two of the members of the band, *Joel* and *Gabriel*, invited me to their house in Queens for a chat, and to see where they recorded and did all the work in relation to their music. During our conversation, they told how they a while ago

had turned down a lucrative record deal in Nashville, because they didn't feel that the production of their music sounded anything like them. After that, they had moved to New York, formed a new band and decided to try and make it on their own. They did recordings and production at the house, took care of promotion and booking themselves, and had released one self-financed record. Despite their efforts, their project was so far not very successful. Talking about the band's efforts, *Joel* said:

"I've sent this album to all the places I could think of. They sell it on consignment at *Real Discs*. We try to find a venue that we fit in. We used to play quite a lot at this venue, it's more of a singer-songwriter venue. But when they heard the album, they told us that we couldn't play there anymore. I don't think it was necessarily because they didn't like us, but because we didn't fit in anymore. We're not pure rock enough to hit the rock clubs hard, we're somewhere in between."

"(A)re there really not enough venues showcasing new bands, or is it just not an audience for it?", *Gabriel* shot in. *Joel* continued:

"I've actually spent more time in experimental art and theatre venues than rock venues. We've done some gigs there, one where it was more part of a performance, like a multimedia thing. (...)I see us in the fall, creating events on our own terms. Renting a space, cooperating with people doing experimental art. I would advertise it as an event. Because, so far, all the shows we've played, we've hardly picked up any new crowd. You play in such short time slots, people just come to see that one band and then they leave. We'd like to tie us in to art to get exposure."

These statements show several elements that contribute to the lack of success. Despite sending their record to all the places they could think of, it is still only sold on consignment in one small, independent record store. They have been turned down by

the one venue that has previously been giving them the opportunity to play, and the last shows they have played have hardly given them any new followers. They see their problem as not being the way that they sound, but in the way that they are received, or rather, *not* received; they realize that their problem is one of recognition.

The lack of recognition is mainly explained by pragmatic reasons. They were not turned down by the venue because the venue didn't like the music, but because it didn't fit in. The lack of venues showcasing new bands makes it difficult to access possible new crowds. The reason they have not picked up any new crowd is that the bands play in short time slots and people only stay to see the one band they came for.

The main goal is clearly identified as getting exposure, and they are applying various strategies in order to obtain this goal. They are making efforts to find a venue where they can fit in. *Joel* is sending their demo to everywhere he can think of. Finally, they want to get more involved in experimental art and thus finding alternative ways of presenting their music. All of these strategies can be seen as active effort to find someone who will appreciate and value what they do.

“Always making connections”

I was hanging out at *Real Discs* a hot, lazy Sunday afternoon, surfing the internet on my laptop, while chatting with *Johnny* about this and that. A man in his late twenties entered the store. I hadn't seen him around before, and from *Johnny's* curious look I got the feeling that neither had he. *Johnny* nodded at him, smiled and said “Hey, how's it going?” The new customer spent some time looking through records, found a few he liked, and when he was ready to pay, *Johnny* popped behind the counter to help him out. They started talking, and I heard him tell *Johnny* that he played in a band on the West Coast, and that he was just visiting New York. As he was leaving with his

bag of records, *Johnny* said: “Anytime you’re coming back to New York with the band, just give us a shout and we’ll set you up for an in store gig”. They exchanged their goodbyes and *Johnny* joined me at the table again and said:

“You see, what I did just now, that’s the way it always works. Making connections, always making connections. Now they might come to play here, and then if I want to make a tour on the West Coast, he can help me out setting up a gig there.”

It appeared to me early in my field work that the activity of networking was a characterizing one for the underground community. As the account of the incident with *Johnny* in the record store shows, agents are very much aware of the importance of recognition in order to increase value. They work actively to establish connections and enter into reciprocal relationships with other agents.

These networks primarily work through unofficial channels, and connections are usually made through word-to-mouth. This implies that you are introduced through a person, or that people tell other people about you. Connections that are made this way are usually considered more valuable than others, primarily because a personal involvement with who you are dealing with is considered to limit risk. Contacts made through for instance emails do not come with a ‘quality check’, an approval that this person can provide valuable assets. This aspect will be explored further in the next section, through the account of my meeting with *William*.

Networks are based on people entering into lasting reciprocal relationships, maximizing value through acts of exchange. This implies that people invest in others, with an expectancy of others being able to offer something of value in return. The way this is acted out in real life, is by going to each other’s concerts, buying each other’s CDs, mentioning each other’s names to others, and thereby increase one another’s

possibilities to enter into relationships with even more people. A producer might give a band free studio time if he thinks the band is good, and in return his name will come up if the band is successful, adding to his reputation and status as a producer.

Promoters and bookers for concerts will give bands a chance to play if they are reasonably sure that the band will bring a good amount of people to the venue. If the band fails to bring in an audience, this decreases the chances that the band will be booked to that venue again. In the case of *Johnny* and his West Coast customer in the example above, they exchange a promise of the possibility that they might be valuable to each other.

A broad contact net is in itself considered to be valuable, and holding a wide and well-functioning network contributes considerably to a person's assets. Due to all the possible connections he represents, a well-connected person is often considered a good object of investment. Approaching a well-connected person will usually imply a higher level of risk, also a proportionally higher possible profit; if they are accepted into his network, they gain access to his connections, and thus increase the number of potential recipients. The role of the successful networker is explored further in the discussion of the promo man in chapter 7.

The value of networking

William is the lead singer and guitarist in a New York rock band. In addition to that he is working his way up as a booker and promoter for various venues and concepts in the city. While I was in New York, he started a regular seminar where local musicians could meet with and learn about the New York music business. I got in touch with him as I enrolled in the seminar and there was a problem with my payment. I asked him if he might know someone I could talk to for my research on lo-fi, and he suggested we

meet up for a cup of coffee at a café in Greenpoint, just north of Williamsburg. We talked for about an hour, about music, my research, and the New York music scene in general. He also asked me quite a few questions about who I was and what I did. Towards the end of our meeting he wrote down several names, with phone numbers and emails, of people I might benefit from talking to. After about an hour, he told me he needed to go work on his music, but it was nice talking to me. We walked together from the café towards the subway, and on our way he told me that the reason he wanted to meet me first, before giving me any of his contacts, was to make sure I was

“a decent person. If I was to put you in touch with this people, and you turned out to be a total idiot, people would be coming to me saying ‘why’d you give that girl my number?’ and so on. It would make me look bad. But you’re ok.”

William is both a musician and a promoter. To make people come to see his shows, and to be able to arrange events that people will attend, he needs to have a reliable network. For his connections to want to be associated with him, he must be seen as someone representing value, having something to offer that others can benefit from. When I got in touch with *William*, and asked for the possibility to make use of his connections, he had to make sure this was something that would not turn out to be unbeneficial to him. What he did was simply to make a quality check of me, to make sure I did not entail a *risk* in relation to his network connections.

The networking anthropologist

To get in touch with people, I spent quite a lot of time on the internet, e-mailing people through information I found there, and inquired about the New York underground scene. I did make a few initial contacts that way, but by far the most successful

contacts were those who were made based on some sort of personal connection. Being able to say “he/she recommended I contact you” usually paid off a lot more than just presenting myself and asking if they would have time to spare to talk to me. This did for instance become visible in relation to my flat mate *Olivia*. *Olivia* quickly turned out to be very good resource, as she had quite a few contacts that she passed on to me. Several of the people she put me in touch with turned out to be important informants, or were the ones who put me in touch with these informants in the next link of the chain.

I often felt and experienced that my success in getting in touch with people and being able to spend time with them and talk with them, relied on to which degree they conceived me as someone representing possible value. Due to this, I would make investments in the relationship with informants, such as attending their concerts, and bringing people with me to see them. By me showing face and supporting the band, it made it easier for them to give something back to me, like for instance time. When I met people who were going on tour in Norway, or who wanted to go there, I gave them inside tips on where to go, what to do and who to talk to. I offered to put in a word for them with concert promoters I knew back home and even offered a band to sleep on the couch in my flat back home if they ever came to play in Oslo. I would tell people about Norwegian bands and other bands they hadn't heard of.

In some situations, and with some informants, such as *The Dark Siders*, I clearly represented a positive value, because I could offer them some kind of recognition. However, in the majority of situations I felt very humble and grateful, almost embarrassed at times, because people were generous enough to offer some of their time and knowledge to me, without it representing any clear benefit to them. On several occasions I experienced that my request for contact was either turned down or

ignored. In the case of *William*, for instance, several of the people whose names or emails he provided, never got back to me. In one case, the person in question turned out to be the label manager of another band I talked to. When I told them that I had tried to reach him, they were not surprised I hadn't received an answer, because he was usually totally uninterested in requests or people which the label or he himself could not benefit from.

In this way I found that my own approach and work in the field in many ways resembled that of my informants' networking agendas. The similarity between my own research strategies and my informants' network building gave me an insight into the difficulty and complexity of work a lot of them put down in order to make it.

Hiding in the light

Cathy is one of two girls in a musical project based on recording songs in their own studio, bringing in friends to play with them every now and then, and then release CD singles on a regular basis. They are in charge of all stages of the process themselves; they write the music, record the songs, burn the CDs, design and print the cover art, and do their own distribution. When we met for coffee one afternoon she was clearly quite frustrated. During the time I had known her, a few elements of frustration had constantly been present, and these were now escalating. The problem for the project was according to *Cathy* mainly that they had "a great product which nobody knows about. What are we going to do about it?" They were spending most of their time producing the CDs, and were frustrated about not having the time or the energy to play concerts and promote the band as well: "Being a non-performing band you're off the off-map. You become a part of a community when you play out. But then we wouldn't have time to make the music we want to, the objects of art."

The main dilemma sketched out by *Cathy* is that of finding a balance in being who you are, doing your thing, without being concerned about what other people think about it. At the same time she is aware of her need of an audience, of the approval from someone else for her expression to have some kind of purpose and value: “You make songs for an audience, but you can also have a vision you want to portray. It’s tricky.” She does not want to change their expression to please anyone; “It’s gonna be what it’s gonna be”, and admires a musician who is not concerned with how his music will be received. She despises the record business because she sees them as being more concerned about pleasing the audience, and about how many records the artists sell. For *Cathy*, if that becomes your main concern, “you’re already fucked.” At the same time she recognizes the problem of her project being the fact that they don’t have an audience, and that they have to work actively to create a market and an audience for their music. She’s aware of the need for promotion, but she is not entirely comfortable with the idea. The only way to solve this problem is by working through the same kind of mechanisms that the record business does: “You have to be able to market it.” One of the main priorities for the project is to find someone who would be willing and able to work as a manager and promoter for the band, and to find someone who can provide resources for them: “We need someone else’s money.”

The contradicting aspects that are presented above, composites an insolvable dilemma which is a subject of existential reflection for *Cathy*, but also influences the way she produces and expresses music and art. For *Cathy* this comes down to how big of a betrayal she commits: “I’ve never been able to decide on the little betray or the big betray.” As such, she recognizes the dilemma as insolvable, and sees the best possible way to deal with it as trying to come as close to a unity between the two discrepant aspects as possible.

Once *Johnny* and I were talking about music and recording he said something that resonates with Cathy's dilemma: "It's about making music for yourself, not for someone else. The minute you do that, it's not the same." At the same time, *Johnny* constantly plays concerts around town and works hard to promote these shows to gain a crowd. An accordance with Hebdige, this can be seen as "both a play for attention and a refusal" (1988: 35), "a hiding in the light" (Hebdige 1988: 35). You just want to do it for yourself, not for anyone's recognition, but you would preferably want to be on stage whilst doing it.

"When things become cool, it starts to ruin things"

Rick plays guitar and sings in a Brooklyn noise-rock band, he runs his own company custom making guitar effect pedals, and lives in an illegal loft share in Brooklyn. At times he expressed frustration over the way things worked on the underground scene, a frustration that can be exemplified through a of his: "When things become cool, it starts to ruin things." This statement reflects what one might call the dilemma of recognition.

Cool is based on the production of new, marginal inventions within groups requiring exclusive membership. These new inventions eventually become institutionalized as stylistic expression due to it being imitated by other members of the group. As a style it becomes recognizable to people outside the group as well, and in their pursuit of cool they adopt gestures and expressions. The marginal group initializing invention feel betrayed when the borders between the groups are breached: "It is a universal complaint that hip ceases to be hip the moment it spreads beyond one's own circle" (Leland 2004:69). However, cool, or hip, needs exposure; it needs to be attractive for a larger group. In this sense we might say that something cannot be

considered cool if no one is looking, but it is not cool if *too many* are looking either.

Cool needs an audience to be valued as such, but the very same audience contributes to the decrease of its value.

Of the many inventions that are being made at any given time, the ones that are considered to be cool are the ones who come to constitute 'the difference that makes a difference'. These are the ones which are recognized and imitated by others, contributing to consolidating the expression as a recognizable style. This consolidation of style is an unavoidable consequence of cool's need for recognition. But cool does not want to be recognizable, it rather wants to be inaccessible. Therefore, cool is constantly trying to move away from form, away from recognizable patterns, towards constantly new ones.

6. Cool capital

The underground cultural field I encountered during my stay in Williamsburg was characterized by dynamics. To understand these dynamics, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of power can be applied to analyze the actions and strategies of agents within underground culture as a form of power brokering. According to the sociologist David Gartman, Bourdieu sees culture as a field of contest where competition takes place between interested actors in order to accumulate various types of capital: "(T)hey compete to appropriate cultural goods and practices that are socially defined as distinctive and hence lend individuals an aura of superiority" (Gartman 2002: 257).

Bourdieu primarily applies his theory to illustrate how stratified differences between classes are produced and reproduced through mechanisms of distinction. As Sarah Thornton has noted in her examination of British club cultures, not a lot of attention has however been given to the hierarchies present *within* groups or classes (1995: 7). In resonance with Thornton I see the dynamics within New York underground culture to be reflecting how agents in this field apply strategies to accumulate cultural goods and experiences for use within their own social worlds (Thornton 1995: 8).

Capital and distinction

Capital can be said to be scarce social resources which are given a certain value by a social community, and which in the power of its scarcity is able to create, affirm or maintain differences between social agents (Bugge 2006: 229). This understanding of capital reflects three main aspects which characterizes it; recognition, scarcity and the ability to create difference (Bugge 2002: 226).

Capital as a form of valued or recognized resources implies that it is a subjective phenomenon which is constituted by, and cannot exist independently of, social agents' perception of and judgement upon them (Bugge 2002: 229). This is in accordance with Simmel: "(T)he value that attaches to any object, person, relationship or happening demands recognition" (Simmel 2004:68). In this sense capital is a relational concept composed by social relations. Social resources are thus not capital by virtue of certain immanent substantial properties, but by virtue of the relations which their possessors have with other agents.

For a resource to function as capital, it is vital that this resource is not accessible in an unlimited volume, and that it is not equally accessible for everyone. The value of capital is decided by its relative scarcity, and is thus based on a form of inflation logic. The power of a cultural possession or practice thus declines in correlation with an increase in the number of people able to appropriate it (Bourdieu 1986: 230).

Another characterizing aspect of capital is its ability to create difference. According to Bourdieu, it is in and through difference, that is, as a relation, that the properties of *distinction* exist (Bourdieu 1986: 227). Distinctions are, as Thornton has pointed out, not expressions of equal difference; "they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of *others*" (Thornton 1995: 10). Resources exist as means of power only in the degree that they are able to produce such unequal differences; that is, distinctions. The appropriation and possession of capital can thus be seen as the ability to create or maintain such distinctions between oneself and others. With an uneven distribution of capital, social agents will have different abilities to look out for their interests and acquire scarce privileges that others are interested in, and it is thereby connected to a conflict of interest.

Several of the aspects of cool resonate with the concepts of capital and distinction. The definition of cool as “in the know” (Polsky 1967: 152), or as being equipped (Mailer 1959: 352), implies that being cool entails the perceived possession of knowledge or abilities that others are excluded from. In this sense, cool can be seen as a form of capital.

Like capital, cool is also dependant on it being a scarce resource. The following was written in an online review of a Williamsburg bar called Boogaloo:

Boogaloo stands out as an obvious purveyor of the myth that to be cool - to be exclusively cool in this town - visibility isn't on the A-list of attributes. If just anyone can find it, then it must not be worth finding.

(http://www.freewilliamsburg.com/bars/archives/2005/03/boogaloo_bar.html#comments).

This quote clearly states that in order for something to be worth finding, to have value as cool, it must not be accessible to just anyone. Or as Norman Mailer put it in his essay on the hipster: “Like children, hipsters are fighting for the sweet (...) Unstated but obvious is the social sense that there is not nearly enough sweet for everyone” (Mailer 1959: 349).

In the previous chapter the aspects of recognition within the landscape of cool were discussed, and it was emphasized that the meaning of something as cool relied on it being interpreted and valued as such. This correlates well with the understanding of capital as being constituted by the judgement and evaluation of it.

One of the characteristics of capital is its ability to create and maintain unequal differences. Within the landscape of cool, such mechanisms of distinction are constantly performed in the efforts to possess the perceived quality of cool.

I argue that cool can be understood as a form of cultural capital. The main field of competition is over legitimate appropriation of the cultural goods and practices that at any given time can be said to represent this cool capital. The acquisition and appropriation of cool is further negotiated through mechanisms of distinction.

The cool body and the smell of effort

One of the main forms in which distinction is performed and the possession of capital legitimized is through bodily appearance, that is, through *habitus*. Habitus can be understood as a form of embodied culture; “a class culture turned into nature, that is, *embodied*” (Bourdieu 1986: 190). Why, then, is bodily dispositions such a powerful means in the performance of distinction?

According to Bourdieu, the body as “a social product which is the only tangible manifestation of the ‘person’, is commonly perceived as the most natural expression of innermost nature” (Bourdieu 1986: 192). This implies that it is through our bodily appearance others conceive an understanding of who we are as a person. If the body is the most natural expression of innermost nature, it implies an authenticity in the relationship between person and body; the outer appearance of the body is perceived as equal to the inner self it represents. Thus, if a person through his bodily appearance seems to naturally portray a possession of capital, this possession appears as legitimate.

Some of the previously noted definitions of cool are connected to the aspect of *bodily* dispositions. MacAdams quoted an actor speaking of cool as the appearance of easy competence, being not frantic or overblown (2001: 20), while Stearns speaks of conveying an air of disengagement and nonchalance (1994: 1). They thus speak of cool as a way of appearance, as communicated through bodily dispositions. It points

to the absence of struggle, and the presence of a natural, essentially given competence. This holds a lot of resemblance to Bourdieu's account of ease as

a sort of indifference to the objectifying gaze of others which neutralizes its powers, presupposes the self-assurance which comes from the certainty of (...) commanding all the powers which, even when they reside in the body and apparently borrow its most specific weapons (...) are essentially irreducible to it (1986: 207-208).

Bourdieu contrasts this ease with the experience that the petit-bourgeois has of the world. This experience starts out from timidity, and reflects the embarrassment of someone who in her body and language is uneasy, constantly watching and correcting herself (Bourdieu 1986: 207). In this bodily appearance one detects the presence of pretension; the distinction is confirmed in someone's effort to possess it (Bourdieu 1986: 251). As Thornton puts it: "Nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying to hard" (1995: 12).

The possession of cool, and thus a place within the upper end of the hierarchical scale, is dependant on the ability to appear as if your 'portfolio of cool' is an embodied quality; that it seems to be *naturally* you. Thus, the main mechanism of distinction is performed towards those who seem to be trying to obtain the capital of cool. As declared in a Williamsburg neighbourhood blog: "If it's one thing a true hipster can't stand, it's the smell of effort." (http://www.freewilliamsburg.com/bars/archives/2005/03/grand_central.html#comments).

A case of trying to hard

One of the many arenas in which the struggle for cool capital is negotiated is through internet forums and blogs, which are characterized by informal written communication.

A girl posted the following in a discussion forum of a Williamsburg blog:

“Hey..

I want to move to East Williamsburg.

But, isn't the scene... over?

Correct me if I'm wrong, but, supposedly, the East Williamsburg hipster/indie scene is dead.

True or False?”²

Her question can be interpreted as an inquiry into whether this place holds value, and whether moving there can increase her portfolio of cool. As such, her inquiry portrays her as someone who is not naturally inclined to possess this capital, but who is trying to acquire it. As such, her statement can be said to smell of effort. She received several answers which all reflect such an understanding and perception of her statement.

“Does anyone really care about "the scene?" Find a place you like and can afford (...) If you want to be surrounded by hipsters, Williamsburg is your place. If by "over" you mean more expensive and written about in The Times, then yes. But does anyone really base living decisions on this kind of stuff?”

“EVERYONE COMES HERE TO FIND A SCENE!

LIKE HILLARY DUFF! AND CHARLIE SHEEN!”

² The postings presented in these sections are gathered from a discussion that followed after a new Williamsburg club was opened by the promoter *Danny* which is presented in chapter 7. To maintain his anonymity, the web address of the blog in question is not referred to in the text.

“You should stay wherever you reside now. It's probably really, really neat.

We've "scene" enough people move here searching for a self-esteem and cool-factor boost. I am correcting you because you are wrong. Nothing is as dead as your creativity.”

All these three answers express contempt for her first and foremost because her decision on whether to move to Williamsburg or not relies on whether the area is still considered to be cool or not. The answers acknowledge that Williamsburg is a place which is considered to be hip and cool, but also consider the act of caring about whether or not this is true is an admission of playing the game, of wanting to be cool. As such she reveals an intention, an effort, which, as we have seen, undermines the entire project of cool.

“hey hipster! you are a hipster!”

Several places in Williamsburg I came across graffiti or stickers saying things like “Die Hipster”, or “Die Trendy Hipster”. As mentioned earlier, the word hipster is usually applied as a descriptive term of someone *wanting* to be hip or cool, which is not considered to be very cool. As value, cool is founded on the ability to appear as if it is an essential quality of a person, and not something that can be obtained through effort. If cool is something that only appears as a given quality, it can per definition not be acquired, and thus the very attempt of acquiring it reveals that one is not a legitimate proprietor. The hipster *knows* that wanting to be cool is per definition uncool, and that admitting to being a hipster means undermining the very project one is trying to fulfil.

This implies that a lot of the negotiation of distinction, the power brokering around the acquisition of cool as capital, takes place in the context of the hipster.

People distinguish themselves by labelling others as hipsters, and do their best to avoid being labelled as such themselves, in the knowledge that it involves a depletion of capital. In the example below, a young man's picture was posted on a website in connection with a new club opening. The caption of the picture read: "one of the 5 million hipsters in attendance". The young man then posted the following statement in the comment section:

"so i was one of 5 million hipsters in attendence...fuck you for using my picture..if there was 5 milion hipsters there why the fuck didnt my band get paid...i guess all the hipsters put the door miney up there nose...why the fuck do you people care so much about labeling everything...just do your shit, and hope somebody likes it enough to post it as a picture in a boring article with a toataly mislead caption..."

He is upset because he has publicly been labelled a hipster. He asks why people care so much about labelling things, instead of just doing their thing, that is, being themselves. He portrays himself as someone who was doing just that, when someone took his picture and decided to post it with 'a totally mislead caption', meaning that what the caption says is wrong. The fault is thus, according to him, not his. He is just being himself, but others have wrongfully accused him of being something else than what he is. He further indicates that the act of actually caring about whether someone is a hipster or not in itself implies that a degree of effort is involved, and that it is not necessarily him, but the ones accusing him who are the hipsters. He receives one short answer which effectively undermines his effort to save face:

"hey hipster! you are a hipster!"

The problem is that as a fundamentally relational phenomenon, cool can only be constructed through some level of effort; it is everybody's project. The field of struggle thus becomes whether this effort is visible or not; the more invisible this project is, the more successful it is.

The anthropologist smells of effort

I did on several occasions myself experience what it was like to be perceived as not being cool enough. In the beginning of my fieldwork I visited *Alternative Records*, a Manhattan record store supporting independent music and specializing in underground and experimental music. It is a rather well known store, and I had even visited it before on a previous trip to New York. This was in the beginning phase of my field work and I was a little nervous, because the store is very well recognized, and holds a high cool factor. The employees know 'everything' about alternative and independent music, and as it is a very popular work place, those who are actually hired can be said to be members of a rather exclusive club.

I entered the store, and as I was working up the courage to talk to one of the staff I hung around a bit and flipped through some records here and there. Caught a little by surprise, I was approached by one of the guys working there, who asked if I needed help. A little perplex I then told him about my project on lo-fi, and asked if he might have any inputs on places to go, shows to see, bands to hear. During my little speech he seemed very uninterested and hardly gave any signs of recognition that he was even listening to what I said. He was petting and playing with a dog that was apparently a part of the inventory, looked away and exchanged a few words with other people in between. I got insecure, and could hear myself that I wasn't able to present

my project in a very interesting or clarifying way. I am quite sure that the look on my face communicated a desperate need for approval, and that my feeling of insecurity and discomfort was quite visible. After listening to me for a little while he interrupted me with a rather overbearing smile and said: "Listen, why don't you prepare a list of questions and come back some other day, and I'm sure someone will have half an hour to spare to answer them". I stuttered a very eager and apologizing "ok" before I left the store feeling very small and insecure, and definitely not cool.

Several factors contributed to the outcome of this situation. First of all, coming in enquiring about information for an academic project probably gave me a rather unfortunate starting point. As we have seen above, nothing undermines capital more than perceived presence of effort. To him, I was trying to find out what it means to be 'in the know'. Based on this impression he almost immediately constructed a hierarchical difference between us, which he acted out through his bodily disposition, seeming unaffected, confident and indifferent. His confident and uninterested attitude further contributed to my feeling of insecurity and discomfort. I would assume that his impression of my appearance was that I seemed uneasy in my body and language, and thus communicated pretension. I was simply trying to hard, and smelled of effort

This was not the only time I was subject to mechanisms of distinction. It was something that I, like my informants, had to deal with on a regular basis. It took place in the meeting with bartenders, waiters, store staff, and even experienced through the examining looks people give you before they choose to ignore you as you walk down the street. At times it was frustrating, because it deprived me from access to certain arenas and potential informants. At the same time, this is the reality of how things work within the world of cool, and as such I gained an embodied experience of what it is like.

“It’s all about being cool”

If the mechanisms of distinction become too obvious, they will come to reveal an effort to acquire and maintain cool. It reveals an intention, and thus undermines its own project. If it becomes too showy or flashy, it “devalues itself by the very intention of distinction” (Bourdieu 1986: 249). It is thus not just a matter of distinguishing oneself from those who try too hard, but also of appearing as if this distinction is not actively performed. This becomes visible when informants talk with contempt about other people or agents who through their speech, actions or attitudes perform mechanism of distinction.

Hanging out with *Johnny* one afternoon at *Real Discs*, I told him about my visit to *Alternative Records*. He frowned when he heard my story. “It’s all about being cool”, he said,

“You’re guilty until proven innocent. This place is the opposite, everyone is innocent. I make sure to welcome everyone who comes into the store, I want everybody to feel welcome.

Alternative Records... They promote the little people’s music, but they don’t care about the little people.”

This ‘double nature’ of distinction implies a contradiction which represents two agendas which at times come into conflict. At the one hand, the agent must maintain the position of being different, something which is performed through setting oneself apart, and distinguishing oneself from others. At the other hand, the ideal of authenticity implies that to be considered valid, this difference must appear as a natural inclination, as embodied, as a bodily disposition. You must try without trying. These opposing agendas reveal themselves through informants’ statements and

actions. *Johnny* would for instance complain that ‘there was no underground anymore’, that the underground way of doing things was now the way everyone did things. He was sad about it. What he communicates here is that he wants there to be a distinguished minority with access to a limited resource. He recognizes that in order to mean something, to have value, it is more attractive when it is limited to a marginal amount of people. He wants to maintain the repertoire of underground activity to the underground. At other times he could, as we saw above, put down those who make an effort to maintain the borders of distinction. Their effort, their looking down upon people, undermines the authenticity of the project. If they really were cool, they would have no need to exercise their distinction, it would come across naturally through their appearance.

Dialectics of cool signs

People apply different strategies to acquire the capital of cool. These different strategies, often contradictory, are frequently applied by the same agents, depending on which strategies are more productive in a given situation. The more success one has in combining these different strategies, the greater is the possibility of obtaining and maintaining the possession of cool.

If cultural goods only hold value by virtue of their scarcity, it naturally follows that these resources are devalued if they become common. Thus, distinction would not maintain its profit unless new goods and new ways of using them were continuously supplied by “the field of production of cultural goods” (Bourdieu 1986: 230). Depending on the state of distinctive signs that are effectively available, the distinction that is at any given time recognized to be cool takes on different form (Bourdieu 1986: 231). As such, it is liable to say that the mechanisms of distinction,

the struggle over the appropriation of cultural goods, is acted out through the production and reproduction of signs, and is in this sense also a symbolic struggle (Bourdieu 1986: 249). Thus, what is at any given time perceived as being cool depends on which signs are perceived to signify it, which is again the signs considered as signifying what is valuable.

In a Craigslist housing ad for a loft share in Bushwick, one of Williamsburg's yet ungentrified bordering neighbourhoods, a young man writes:

Neighborhood not quite yet lousy with stinkin' hipster folk.

Williamsburg's become so ironic that I just want to punch myself in the junk.

(<http://newyork.craigslist.org/>)

This statement can be a good example of what Bourdieu calls “the dialectic of the rare and the common, the new and the dated” (Bourdieu 1986: 246), and of how distinction exists through the struggles that take place for the exclusive appropriation of the distinctive signs that composite a natural distinction (Bourdieu 1986: 250). In the ad the young man states that Williamsburg has become lousy because of all the hipsters; the distinctive power of Williamsburg as a sign of cool, has declined with the number of people which have appropriated the area, i.e., moved there and acquired the cultural practices related to it. Instead of being rare it has become common, and it is no longer capable of producing the difference that distinction is founded upon. Its value has been decreased. This point can further be illustrated through the earlier description of the girl asking whether the Williamsburg scene is over. Her question is another way of asking whether Williamsburg is still a legitimate sign for cool. She is thus making an enquiry into the stock market of power brokering, through exploring which signs she should appropriate to increase her cultural capital, her cool. In this

sense, Williamsburg is moving from authentic to imitation, from true culture to popularization (Bourdieu 1986: 227)

This leads to a redefinition of which is the area signifying cool, and thus holding cultural capital. Bushwick is presented as an area which still holds the value through its scarcity, and thereby the ability to create difference. Being one of few people living there, he portrays himself as someone in the possession of capital, as cool, and this value of his flat share is actively used to attract possible tenants. Williamsburg is being reinterpreted as holding declining capital, which is also a decline in it as signifying cool. This continuous redefinition of signs becomes a performance of distinction, where the scarcity which cool is dependant on to represent a form of value, can be produced and maintained.

7. An entrepreneur of cool

In the very beginning of my stay, a new space was opening in Williamsburg. My flat mate *Olivia* told me that a lot of excitement and expectation was connected to this opening, as the well renowned concert promoter *Danny* was finally opening his own space. She was certain that this would be a great night, and urged me to come along to see the band that was playing.

The space was located on a desolate street by the river, with no recognizable sign on the door. We had to wait outside until someone came out of a door and the music inside revealed that this was where the action took place. Inside, we walked down the stairs to the basement, where a bearded man in jeans and a big parkas jacket checked our tickets and placed a stamp on our hands.

The space itself was raw, a large basement loft with no windows and room for several hundred people. The floors, walls and roof where made out of concrete, and a number of concrete pillars supported the roof. There was hardly any light in the room, and no heating. The fact that it was winter made it pretty cold, so we kept our jackets on. Apart from the stage in front, the only furniture in the room was a sofa placed in the back, a table where the bands sold their merchandise, and a provisional bar made out of a wooden board. The bar did not have a refrigerator, but sold beer from a barrel filled with ice.

The audience fit well in with the description of hipsters, wearing black and military jackets, jeans, vintage dresses and eccentric hairdos. Walking around I would hear comments like “No, I paint at my apartment these days. I have an exhibition coming up next month”, and “Hey, great show the other night, you guys kicked some ass!” reflecting that people present were involved in creative activities.

The experience of the night climaxed when a local, rather well known and popular band hit the stage, playing a kind of music I would describe as slightly psychedelic improvised and melodic folk-pop. At one point the singer was simply shouting and screaming what sounded more like animal sounds at the audience, and they would howl and scream back at him. I found it rather exotic.

After this evening I soon came to realize that *Danny* was a known figure within the underground community. Basically his concept is that arranging concerts with both up-and-coming and more established bands, in various locations around the city. To avoid public laws and taxes he operates in a different place each time, and often in pubs and bars that are not really venues. He has a strong Do It Yourself (DIY) philosophy behind his concept, and he expresses that his main motivation for doing this is to give something back to the creative community. Several known New York publications have given him positive publicity. They have called him a one man scene-maker putting on the most fun and laid-back events, and claim that he must be doing it for the love, because there is no money to be made the way he organizes things. His name would regularly turn up in concert listings, and people I spoke with talked of him with enthusiasm and respect. He clearly held high esteem. When it turned out he worked shifts at *Real Discs*, my awareness and interest was utterly awakened. Especially I was curious as to *why* he was so respected; what was it that he did that was so admirable, and which, in consequence, made him so cool? By applying Fredrik Barth's concept of the entrepreneur I will explore how *Danny* can be said to represent a successful constructor of cool, and further draw a comparison between Fredrik Barth's Arab tomato man in Darfur and my own Brooklyn promo man.

The entrepreneur

Barth defines an entrepreneur as an agent of change, one who makes innovations affecting the community in which he operates (Barth 1981: 110). Further, entrepreneurship involves innovation as an act of creating new paths for the circulation of goods, within existing patterns and barriers (Barth 1981: 110). These new paths for circulating goods are brought about through crossing barriers between separate value spheres, making conversions between forms of good previously inconvertible (Barth 1981: 110). This conversion of goods must preferably entail a small investment bringing about a maximization of profit (Barth 1981: 111).

For this profit to be valid and effective it requires recognition. Barth sees the main constraints on change to lie in the system within which the entrepreneur operates, and not in the range of ideas for innovation (Barth 1981: 117). For a new invention to be institutionalized, it must thus be considered to compose an acceptable kind of pay-off by other agents within given the frames and possibilities.

The tomato man

In his account of the economic spheres in Darfur, Fredrik Barth tells of a society in which the economy was only partly based on money, which again was only applicable to the exchange of items such as cattle, agricultural produce, tools and cloth. Labour was exchanged through beer parties, where people would help each other cultivating fields or building houses, and the receiving person would pay the others with beer made from millet.

A number of social and moral factors helped maintain the barriers between these two economic spheres. The millet used to produce the beer would not be sold and bought through the market place, but was primarily grown, harvested and used by

the villagers themselves. The brewing of beer was associated with the domestic context, and considered an intimate female service, meaning that the wife brewed beer from her husband's millet (Barth 1981: 163). It was therefore considered immoral to sell beer for money. Beer was further, in connection to the work parties, considered a symbol of cooperation and companionship (Barth 1981: 163), which contributed to the morality aspect of exchange between money and beer. Due to value not being interchangeable between these two spheres, one of the most prominent characteristics in this village economy was, according to Barth, that the possibilities for cumulative growth were limited (Barth 1981: 169), and that these possibilities for growth were dependant on "a recognized channel for reinvestment" (Barth 1981: 169).

In 1961, an Arab merchant came to the village and asked for permission to spend the rainy season there. Within the Darfur community it is every individual has the right to the land necessary for substance (Barth 1981: 160), The Arab's request for an area of land to grow tomatoes was therefore granted, and he settled in the area with his wife. Due to far lower prices, he bought a large amount of millet from another area to the north-east and brought it back to the village. When his wife had made beer out of the millet, he called a work party to cultivate the field for tomatoes. After the rainy season he then transported the tomato crop out of the area and sold it with a remarkable profit; from the investment of £5 he had spent on the millet, he gained a return of over £100 for the tomatoes. In the time that followed, both other merchants and local people adopted his strategy with similar results (Barth 1981: 177).

The tomato man thus finds a new path for circulating between previously inconvertible goods; between the sphere of cash, and that of millet-labor-beer. Further, he operates within the existing system and practices. He acquires a piece of land, and can do so because he is entitled to according to tradition. He makes use of

the customary ways of paying for labor by calling a work party and paying the attending workers in beer that his wife, also according to custom, has brewed. Through a small investment of £5 he gains a profit of £100, and has thus made what Barth calls “an entrepreneurial coup” (1981: 111). Finally, as the tomato man’s strategy was adopted by local people in Darfur, one might say that his innovation affected the community and thereby brought about change.

The promo man

After running several clubs in a medium sized American city, *Danny* moved to New York in 2001. When he arrived he found the way shows were being booked in New York “really uninspiring”³. As bars and venues struggle with high rents, they are dependant on full houses in order to make enough money. Thus, venues will primarily book bands they believe can generate an income. “They can’t enjoy stuff as an art form instead of as a generator of cash”, says *Danny*.

For *Danny* art is something that should not be governed by money and profit, but rather should be able to appear in its pure form through creativity. He set out with a goal of representing an alternative; a new way of booking bands and promoting events based on a motivation of giving back to the community and being involved in making creativity happen. As an agent of change, *Danny* can be seen to be creating new paths for the circulation of goods by redefining the rules of why one puts up shows; it is not about the money, but about making art available.

In order to create an alternative to the existing way of arranging shows, *Danny* first of all redefines what a venue is. He holds that to arrange a show, all you need is a

³ The quotes and information about *Danny* that appear in this section is either based on my own conversations and encounters with *Danny* or on a variety of internet interviews with and articles about him. In order to maintain the informant’s anonymity, I have chosen not to quote these publications.

P.A. system and someone to stand at the door. That is, you don't need a rock club, but can use any kind of space. Thus he holds concerts in pubs and bars, even parking lots, which are not primarily designated for the purpose of live music shows. To *Danny*, a venue is in this definition simply any place that live music can be played.

Opening clubs and arranging concerts in New York are activities that are subject to certain laws and regulations, and require licenses concerning live music and alcoholic beverages. Payment of fees and licenses is one of the reasons that venues have a hard time making ends meet. Since working within the system of regulations and bureaucracy requires money that Danny is not willing to spend, he finds a way to move around these regulations: He simply refuses to comply with this set of rules. In order not to get caught, he applies a strategy of arranging concerts in desolate areas, and move his locations around:

“You have to understand the politics of the locations. You have to locate to the right neighborhood. Different precincts enforce different laws, it depends on local pressure, the mayor's pressure... You have to keep a low profile, and not be too successful.”

The success of *Danny's* project can first of all be related to how it appears as authentic. This authenticity is to a large extent established by claiming that his first and foremost goal is wanting to promote art and creative activity, rather than to make money. By keeping costs low and give the income from his shows to the bands playing, he confirms the authenticity and primary goal of the project. He further communicates that although some people want to be a part of the elite and the exclusive, that is not his thing; “I want it to be as inclusive as possible.” Finally, the fact that he mops floors at *Real Discs* contributes to the perception of him as a regular guy, who is just ‘doing his thing’.

In chapter 3 I referred to a conversation with *Rick* where he gave his view on what it means to be cool. He said: “It’s about the motivation of what you’re doing”. In order to be perceived as cool, the reason for doing something must be that you have a genuine passion for it, not that you want to be cool. Making an effort to be cool is simply not cool at all. It thus becomes a question of authenticity; how genuine is your motivation? In *Danny’s* case, his emphasis on the motivation of his project as being that of making creativity happen, and giving back to the community in a way that can be available for everyone, is accepted as a genuine one.

As examined throughout this thesis, the accumulation of cool capital is to a large extent based on the capability to balance between contradicting agendas, and then in particular those of being authentic and being different. The genius construction in *Danny’s* project lies in how the premise of authenticity presupposes a constant movement. Constantly moving his shows around in order not to become subject to laws and regulations provides the people coming to his shows with an experience that they “never know what to expect”; they experience something different. In this sense, *Danny’s* project contains both authenticity and difference, and the way in which they are intertwined requires a minimum of effort in order to balance between them. *Danny* seems to be able to balance between these two contradicting agendas rather effortlessly. Further, through staying in constant movement he is able to constantly reproduce difference and scarcity. These elements allow him to accumulate as well as maintain cool capital.

The capital of cool is also based on recognition. The difference and authenticity of *Danny’s* project is not valid unless it is acknowledged as such. Several elements provide indications that *Danny’s* coolness is recognized within the underground community. First of all, his shows are well visited, and when people talk about him, it

usually is with respect and admiration. Secondly, interviews with *Danny* and presentations of his project have been published in several New York magazines, as well as on the internet. These publications are usually very enthusiastic about his activities. Finally, *Danny* has a very extensive network. When I met with him he gave me names and contact information to about a dozen well known figures within the underground community, all of which I would have no idea how to get in touch with were it not for him.

There are several similarities between *Danny* and the tomato man in Darfur. In their separate ways, they both created new paths for the circulation of value. Whereas the tomato man bought millet cheap from the outside, and extended the intended use of the beer party, *Danny* started to book bands with a goal of promoting creative activity, redefining the concept of the venue and ignoring public regulations. As such, they both successfully challenged and redefined the established way of operating.

An entrepreneurial coup implies converting a small investment into a large profit. In relation to the tomato man this is visible in how he turned an investment of £5 into a profit of £100. The value at stake for *Danny* is not that of money, but that of coolness. He obtains a large amount of cool capital by being able to balance the contradicting agendas of authenticity and difference with a minimum of perceived effort.

Finally, their activities receive recognition from other agents within the community they operate in; *Danny's* shows are sold out and magazines write about him, whilst the Arab in Darfur saw other member of the local community adopting his strategy. Thus, they both fit into Barth's model of the entrepreneur.

8. The emergence of the deer

A central motif within underground culture is to create difference. John Fiske has called this subcultural pleasure; the joy of maintaining a sense of difference, and to create a style and an identity that is one's own, not made and created by and for the interests of the dominant cultural elite (Fiske 1989: 117-118). The anthropologist Roy Wagner understands meaning as being "a product of relation" (1981: 39). Thus, for something to be perceived as different, it must be different *from* something else. As signs are arbitrary, and receive their meaning in the relation to something else, exactly what signifies this difference is not given; it appears in the contrast to other cultural expressions.

In his book "Subculture: The Meaning of Style", Dick Hebdige sees the subcultural search for difference as expressed through style, and communicated through the use of signs; "The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed (...) at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of signs" (1983: 17). Within a community, signs are not understood and communicated in the same way by all its members, and thus the struggle for difference is a struggle within signification (Hebdige 1983: 17). To be different in the sense of sub-culture or underground culture is based on expressions that stand in opposition to what is considered normal, or the majority, and is thus challenging the myth of consensus (Hebdige 1983: 18).

Hebdige's prime example is the emergence of punk culture in England in 1976 (1983: 25). Hebdige presents punk as working-class youth expressing frustration over and aggression towards the bad economic conditions in Britain at the time (Hebdige 1983: 87). Valuing the abnormal, punks embraced a 'scruffy' appearance by taking objects, such as safety pins and plastic bin-liners, out of their known context, and used

them as jewellery and accessories. The punks wore ripped clothing, cheap fabrics and elements from the school uniform together with dramatic make-up and hair dyed in strong colours (Hebdige 1983: 107). Their aim was to shock, and they attracted a lot of attention and horrification within the general society (Hebdige 1983: 26). To Hebdige, punk represents an example of “beautifully broken codes” (Hebdige 1983: 26); by using established signs in unconventional ways, the punks created expressions that stood in opposition to what was considered normal, thus communicating difference.

In chapter 5 I explored the aspect of recognition, and how it inevitably leads to a consolidation of the unpredictable. When the original innovations signifying difference are made generally available, they are made comprehensible and as such become ‘frozen’ (Hebdige 1983: 96). The movement towards a new style, in the search of a new difference, implies a refusal of the existing expressive and cultural codes; it is a movement away from consensus.

The most obvious way of moving away from consensus and refuse the existing code is through *inversion*. This inversion can be enacted either by taking established signs and invoking them with new meaning, such as was the case with the punks and the safety pin, or by applying objects and signs from contexts that can be said to represent the opposite of the established one. According to Wagner, a context is composed by elements that seem to belong together (Wagner 1981: 36-37). The inversion of style can thus be seen as a process through which new elements are combined, producing new contexts. Challenging established conventions, the intention is that of blurring the meaning of signs, and to create something that cannot easily be categorized through the existing codes. Still, since a certain degree of shared conventions is necessary in order to be able to communicate, inversion also

represents a movement towards new consensus, and can be seen as a process of meaning-construction (Hebdige 1983: 118). This inevitably becomes an eternal dialectic of the “destruction of existing codes and the formulation of new ones” (Hebdige 1983: 129).

A new style is established when a new set of conventions, or codes, is established. Somewhere along the movement towards such an establishment, a ‘breaking point’ is reached. This breaking point can be seen as a point of saturation, because it is reached when a certain amount of people come to see the existing stylistic expressions as being too predictable, and thus easily imitated. This will undermine its function as a marginal expression of difference. People will then once again challenge the existing codes, creating new marginal expressions and move towards formulating new ones.

This point of saturation cannot be identified as a moment in time. The movement from existing codes to the formulation of new ones is a processual one, and the transition from one style to another occurs as a form of overlapping. Thus, this change primarily becomes visible in ‘circumstantial evidence’; in the frequency of which objects and signs are applied in the acts of expression.

During my fieldwork in New York I witnessed and experienced such a process; the challenging of an existing code and the formulation of new ones. The following is an account of the stylistic movement from post-punk revival to new-folk psychedelia.

Post-punk revival

The Norway I left in January 2005 was within fashion, music and design to a large extent characterized by what is known as the post-punk revival. This stylistic expression of this genre is strongly influenced by the punk and new wave music of the

late 1970s and early 1980s, and had started to emerge in the beginning of the millennium. Drawing on references from 1970s bands like Television and The Ramones, the visual and musical appearance of new bands like The Strokes, The Bravery and Interpol made sure this revival became especially linked to the New York music scene.

Instrumentally, the music of post-punk revival contains the traditional rock set-up of drums, bass guitar, el-guitars and vocals. The singing contains shouting, sneering and a clear display of arrogance and aggression. Likewise, the distorted guitar sound playing recognizable riffs is aggressive and full of attitude. The songs are short and straight to the point, with a clear structure of verses and refrains, often with an element of sing-along potential.

The visual aesthetic within post-punk revival has the dark side of urban life as its main reference. Photos of bands like The Strokes and Interpol usually depicts the band in some kind of urban context: Standing in front of a brick wall, walking the streets of a big city or sitting behind a table filled with empty bottles and glasses.

The dominant color within the post-punk revival is black. When accompanied by other colors, these are usually clean, primary colors. When combined, the colors are kept apart with clean lines, such as in the form of stripes or hard shapes. This is clearly visible in the design of record covers, which are characterized by few and defined color elements, often with a basis in black and white.

Clothing wise, the post-punk revival 'uniform' consists of tight black jeans, black leather jackets and t-shirts with band names and logos, accompanied by converse shoes or black pointy leather boots. This look is also supplemented by the use of striped sweater; black in the combination with one other color, and bands wearing matching tight, black suits. Common accessories are nail belts and buttons with band

names and logos. Hair is characteristically dyed black and worn in meticulously disorganized hairdos. With references to the classic myths of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, a certain toughness is displayed, along with a pale complexion signifying late nights in basement clubs.

When I left Norway, this aesthetic had already worked its way into the mainstream. International bands representing this wave had sold millions of albums world wide, and it had lead to a renewed interest in a performance of this kind of music also among Norwegian musicians. Clothing wise, tight dark jeans was the new 'it' thing, and in the multinational clothes chain H&M you could buy black t-shirts with "The Ramones" printed on them. However, being a small country, the Norwegian underground culture is not so far 'under ground', and the post-punk revival was predominant also here. This was the frame of reference I brought with me to New York; to where this revival had started a couple of years ago.

A stage of confusion

And so I arrived in a cold and snowy Williamsburg. As anyone arriving in a new and unknown place, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to get in touch with people, what places to go to, and what was the general code of conduct. As underground culture was my 'playing field' at home as well, I felt I had quite a bit of experience maneuvering in this field. Therefore I was pretty sure that the frames of reference that were predominant within Norwegian underground culture would also be valid here.

I was, to a large extent, wrong. I did see references to the post-punk revival; tight jeans, nail belts, converse shoes. And from what I could gather the city was swimming in rock bands. But something did not quite add up. What I heard and saw the most, and what people wanted to show me, did not really coincide with my image

of what the underground in New York would be like, and how it would be presented. Several incidents can serve as examples of this.

My neighbors frequently took me to a neighborhood bar called *Delicious*, which soon came to be my favorite one. With its burgundy flower patterned velvet wallpaper, dark brown leather sofas and a girl's room painted in soft pink, it was nothing like the dark, rock'n'roll clubs I usually hung out in. When I found out that this was considered one of Williamsburg's hippest bars, I was quite surprised.

Several of the concerts my flat mate *Olivia* took me to, or that were recommended in concert listings, were with bands such as Grizzly Bear and the Animal Collective. Rather than straight forward rock these bands played floating, experimental music, and apart from it appearing as strange to me, I did not quite know what to make of this music and people's enthusiasm about it.

Further, as accounted for in chapter 3, when I was stopped on the street by people who were curious about my Nesnalobb shoes, I understood that it represented something different that triggered their interest. At the time I was however not able to see exactly *what* it was about them that made them so interesting, except that they were different in some way.

In the same period I was at one time approached on the subway by a hairdresser, who wanted me to be a hair model for him. As my impression was that dark, straight, 'edgy' hair was the big 'in'-thing at that moment, I did not really see why he was so interested in my big, blond curls. In general I had the impression that my visual appearance in clothing and style was out of touch with my surroundings, and it made me feel uncomfortable.

The lack of understanding of the world around you is by many anthropologists regarded as a necessity for conducting a successful fieldwork. Was this merely an

experience of cultural difference? Was I simply applying an understanding of underground culture which did not coincide with the one present in New York? Was I maneuvering according to the wrong frame set, the wrong codes?

The lack of understanding, and the experience of not gaining access, led to insecurity; I was simply feeling very uncool. The insecurity only contributed to my difficulties in the field, as is clearly shown in the incident of my visit to *Alternative Records* accounted for in a previous chapter. I had come to New York and Williamsburg to research underground rock and lo-fi. But it was as if that was not what the underground wanted to tell me about. Was I simply not getting the message? From my experience within the underground field, I knew that if I was to gain access to the field, this feeling of insecurity had to be overcome. The only way to do that was by breaking the code.

The deer

In the beginning of 2005 my band was in negotiations with a small Norwegian label for a record deal, and the plan was to release a single before the summer. Working on the cover design of the single we were cooperating with a graphic designer in Belgium. She sent me and my band members a number of suggestions which we, one after another, rejected. These suggestions were all based on graphic images of northern nature, and one had a wolf on it, another a seal. The basic idea was good, but something was not right. Then, in the beginning of April, she sent a suggestion which portrayed a chain of mountains, with a moon and the band name over it. And a deer peering out from behind the mountains. I really liked it. Williamsburg people who saw it really liked it.

And all of a sudden I got it. When I was walking the streets of Williamsburg, hanging out in bars, hearing music and picking up flyers, what I saw was the deer, both literally and metaphorically. The reason I had had difficulties manoeuvring in Williamsburg the first time period was that the underground there was moving away from the rock aesthetic; what I had been seeing was a reaction to the minimalism of the punk-rock revival. I was witnessing a creation of difference.

All of a sudden some of the events that had occurred earlier made a lot more sense to me. The Nesnalobb, my blond curls, the wallpaper in *Delicious* and Grizzly Bear's floating experimental songs; they all represented a contrast to the black, strict stylistic universe of punk-rock. I had been communicating and maneuvering based on a set of existing references I knew from Norway, and which I expected to be valid within the underground culture in New York. The underground here was however already well on its way towards a new code. It was time for me to step into this universe and get to know this new code of conduct.

New-folk revival

Now that I had seen the track of the deer, it was time to hunt it down, to see the world around me with new eyes. I did the same things that I had been doing up until then; I read music magazines, I visited record stores, browsed through second hand and local design stores, went to concerts, bars and restaurants, and observed life in general. The difference was that now I was doing it with a quest in the back of my head: What was the new wave? What did it look like? What did it sound like?

On the wall of one of the bars I regularly visited I had previously noticed a deer head hanging on the wall. The next time I visited it after my 'epiphany', I enthusiastically rediscovered it. Set in connection with the wooden floor and walls,

dark leather sofas and the bearded guys hanging by the jukebox playing old Lynyrd Skynyrd songs, I soon came to think about 70s America, hunting, forest cabins and whisky straight up.

Some time later, on my way to the same bar, I accidentally looked up on one of the buildings along the way. In a big, well lit window on the top floor a full sized stuffed deer proudly mounted. Having brunch at a hipster hangout, I noticed the deer on front of the menus which were printed on brown paper bags. During lunch with an informant at a local café, I easily noticed the deer that seemed to be its logo, and the photograph on the wall of a baby deer lying in the backseat of a car. The deer was, literally, all over the place.

The increasingly warm weather made it easier to notice what people were wearing, as they were no longer tucked into winter jackets, hoods and scarves. The streets were characterized by girls wearing bell bottom jeans, loose, patterned dresses and embroidered shirts, accompanied by cowboy boots, espadrille sandals and ethnic inspired jewellery. The colours were soft, warm and earthy, in various shades of brown, purple, green, blue, yellow, and they often appeared in eclectic combinations of colours and patterns. Natural fabrics such as wool, cotton and suede leather was often seen.

Stopping by local design stores I found bags and t-shirts with deer and birds on them, and local design dresses made from 1970s inspired patterned fabric. A glass cabinet by the counter in one of these stores displayed a variety of jewellery. I could see heart shaped earrings and chain hangs made out of wood, with burned images of various animals on them. A set of necklace and earrings looked like gold coated autumn leaves. A pot on the counter contained a large amount of buttons, the kind that are common within punk and rock style, worn on jacket sleeves displaying band

names or slogans. These were however different; they portrayed birds and animals printed on soft brown, green and purple backgrounds.

I would regularly pick up flyers that were displayed in stores, bars and venues. I noticed that many of them were decorated with psychedelic patterns, soft coloured, naïve paintings of people and animals in weird settings, and with childishly handwritten words. The same thing was visible in the covers of new records released, and in the visual design of magazines and websites. Photos of bands portrayed on websites and in magazines and CD booklets had strong references to nature, indigenous culture and naïve absurdity, rather than urban street life and black. The musicians portrayed in these photos would give an impression of calmness and reflection rather than aggression and arrogance.

The music coming out of this stylistic landscape is known by a number of terms; new folk, new weird folk, acid-folk, experimental folk and enigmatic psychedelic folk. What characterizes the genre is the combination of so-called experimental and psychedelic elements on the one hand, and guitar-based acoustic folk music on the other. The basic instrumental set-up of drums, bass, guitar and vocals is often expanded with other instruments as for instance violin or the clarinet. The songs are often long, with elusive and floating song structures. Further, they rather have a gradual build-up structure than the more traditional verse-refrain model. Playing repetitive sounds with the use of effect processing such as delay, reverb and chorus gives the music a floating quality. Further it builds up to climaxes with room for improvisation along the way. The lyrics are often mysterious and dreamy, and sung with multiple layers of voices processed with delay and reverb effects.

The stylistic elements of the folk movement that was predominant during the 1960s and 1970s Britain and America were clearly recognizable in the 2005 New York

landscape. It could be found in the preferences for soft colors and patterns within clothing, elements of soft-sounding guitars in music, as well as in the many references to nature in band photos, visual art and record and magazine covers.

Closely related to the folk inspiration are the many distinctly 'ethnic' or 'indigenous' elements. The use of beads, feathers, embroideries, wide colorful skirts, and natural materials easily gives associations to Native American, Eskimo, Gipsy, Indian and Latin-American culture, maybe even a little from the Scandinavian Lapps. No wonder my Nesnalobb shoes were so interesting.

Clear associations could also be made to the psychedelic influences from the 1960s and 1970s. Experimenting with form and structure, the psychedelic refers to the exploration of unknown aspects of one's mind, and thematically revolves around hallucinations, dreams, the unconscious, the absurd and mysterious. Visually the term has come to be applied to brightly patterned and colored objects.

Finally, elements from the traditional American culture are also incorporated into this style. This can be found in the preference for dark wooden interiors which gives associations to forest cabins, and numerous references to hunting and taxidermy, to mention some. Just about all the 2nd hand stores I visited in this period had cowboy boots and denim skirts on display, and one of Williamsburg's most popular bars even hosted a taxidermy contest that spring.

Folk hits the mainstream

When I left New York the trend just described had already started to work its way into the mainstream. The summer catalogue from Urban Outfitters, a big American clothes chain, was filled with pictures of girls in patterned dresses and t-shirts in warm colors.

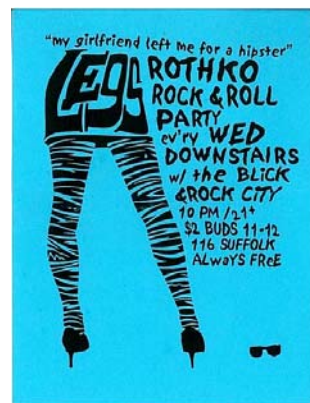
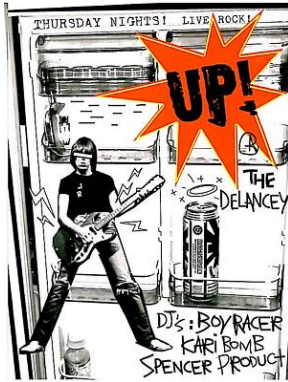
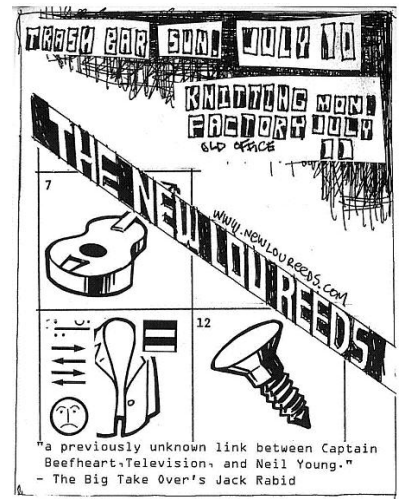
In shop windows patterns, ornaments, warm and mellow colors were visible in the loose dresses, foot wide skirts and embroidered folkloric blouses of the clothing on display. Big underground bands had started to use this aesthetic in their cover design.

Back in Norway, at the end of summer 2005, it was only a matter of weeks until the deer hit the Norwegian mainstream hard. All of a sudden H&M didn't sell Ramones t-shirts anymore, but you could get patterned t-shirts, knitted sweaters with deer on them and in the accessories department wooden bead necklaces became the new thing. Later that fall, commercial posters for lozenges would appear with backgrounds that resembled the patterned wallpaper in my favorite Williamsburg bar *Delicious*.

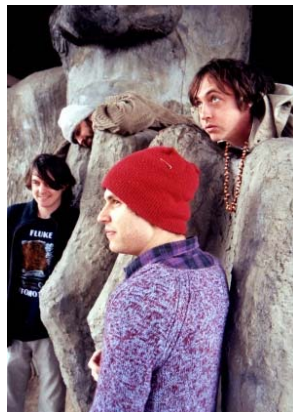
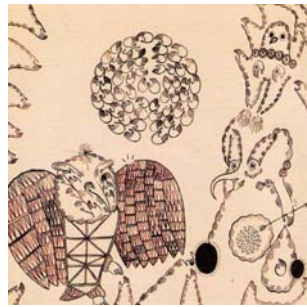
A Norwegian band which gained a lot of media attention that fall was Serena Maneesh. Being a rock band with floating song structures, psychedelic elements, and a basis in layers of noise and reverbed sounds, they fell right into the new folk- and psychedelic inspired aesthetic. Interestingly, in the beginning of my field work, I visited a music producer, who pulled out a vinyl EP of Serena Maneesh and asked if I had heard of them since I was Norwegian. I had not. And I did not hear about them again until well back in Norway more than six months later.

As this thesis goes to print, the aesthetic elements described above can be found in Coca Cola Light commercials, in advertisement for the latest Nokia mobile phone, and on the cover of the internationally known Norwegian band A-ha's latest single. Having had a first hand experience with a stylistic change in hip New York, there was only one thing to do when this trend hit the Norwegian mainstream fall 2005. I removed the flower patterned dresses and wooden jewellery from my closet and went out and bought myself a new, uniform-inspired wardrobe in black and shades of grey.

Post-punk revival



New-folk revival



9. Cool as open category

In the first part of the twentieth century, cool was first and foremost associated with those who were seen to be opposed to mainstream values, and the church, the law, capital and the public opinion saw it more as a disease than as a blessing (Leland 2004: 14). According to MacAdams, this changed towards the end of the 1950s. By then, “cool was getting hot” (MacAdams 2001: 216). This is explained by the emergence of television, independent movies, and last but not least with the emerging youth culture with American teenagers embracing cool rebels (MacAdams 2001: 216). The movement from the edge to the cultural mainstream was rapid, and by the 1960s cool had become an integrated part of the commercial advertisement industry (Frank 1997). Today “(h)ip sells cars, soda, snowboards, skateboards, computers, type fonts, booze, drugs, cigarettes, CDs, shoes, shades and home accessories” (Leland 2004: 8).

What is it that makes cool so desirable, and enables it to have such a broad appeal within the whole of society? One of the main challenges for the individual in the modern world is that of constructing and maintaining, negotiating identities which reflect both a sense of inner, essential self, and a sense of unique difference that can be adjusted in the relation to others. I argue here that one of the main reasons that cool is so desired and sought after, is that it offers a solution to that which Bauman has called “the ambivalence of modernity” (1991).

Up until now this thesis has concentrated on showing how contradictions and opposing agendas are present within the discourse of cool, and how these dilemmas are central to the explanation of cultural change within this field. If cool is in itself characterized by ambivalence, how can it be said to offer a solution to this ambivalence? On the one hand, the experience of ambiguity can be an unpleasant one. On the other, the indeterminate also opens up for the possibility of choice; it allows the

individual to manoeuvre among a variety of strategies in order to obtain a sense of meaning. In this way, cool might be said to offer a solution through its qualities as an *open category*.

The concept of openness

Henrietta Moore presents the act of making meaning out of life as one of the defining features of being human (Moore 2003: 17), and according to Saussure, this meaning is created through the mechanism of difference (Gottdiener 1995: 7). From here, we can resonate, with Bauman, that it is through the act of classification we give the world a structure, and thereby try to create “a world in which ‘one knows how to go on’ ” (1991: 1). In this sense, ambivalence can be defined as “the possibility of assigning an object or event to more than one category” (Bauman 1991: 1). When we experience something that is not within the classifying order, we experience ambivalence as discomfiting and threatening (Bauman 1991: 2).

Eco sees the modern world as a condition in which traditional forms of relationships has withered, experienced as a form of crisis. Through its *openness*, contemporary art tries to find a solution to this crisis (Robey 1989: xv). This solution lies in the fact that the modern work of art offers the possibility for multiple interpretations. According to Eco, the forms of communication which demand meaning, order, and obviousness (1989: 93-94) are the forms which through having a practical function, such as for instance a road sign, needs to be understood the same way by everyone, and are as such univocal (Eco 1989: 94). Eco further holds that the forms of communication found within aesthetic and artistic expressions are in comparison characterized by a multiplicity of possible meanings (Eco 1989: 94). This does not imply a rejection of form, since form is the fundamental condition of communication (Eco

1989: 102). Rather it offers flexibility; it proposes “*form as fields of possibilities*” (Eco 1989: 103).

Eco finds that our modern world is attracted to the indeterminate and that we seek and create ambiguous situations, which give us the opportunity for choice and interpretation (Eco 1989: 44). This is one of the fundamental aspects of Eco’s concept of the the modern art work as an *open* one. Through its formal properties, the modern art work represents the feeling of disorder and ambiguity that characterizes the modern experience of the world (Robey 1989: xiv). This resonates with the understanding of cool as thriving on juxtaposition and pastiche, and connecting the disparate and contradictory (Leland 2004: 11). It thus represents “continuously potentiality of “openness” – in other words, an indefinite reserve of meanings” (Eco 1989: 10).

If the nature of cool is fundamentally open and ambiguous, and represents an indefinite reserve of meanings, it would imply that there are a number of different ways of being cool. It offers a variety of possibilities, of potential meanings which of none are the dominant one, and allows the individual to choose which approach to take (Robey 1989: x). A style expression such as for instance punk, cannot be separated from its objects of Mohawk hair style, safety pins and aggressive music. In comparison, cool allows you to combine any elements you see fit. You might prefer improvised noise music or melodic folk music from the seventies; you can love hamburgers or be a vegetarian; dress up in brand new black jeans or swear to colourful, patterned vintage dresses, or even combine numerous of these elements. One might say that cool offers a great number of possibilities for identity, while also providing openings to restructure this identity (Kellner 1992: 174).

The predicament of unpredictability

Many times throughout this thesis I have pointed to how one of the main characteristics of cool is its ambiguity, and how this ambiguity is sought after within unconventionality. A clear link can be found between this preference for the unpredictable and the sense of openness. That which is conventional and predictable to a large extent represents clear classifications and meanings, whilst that which goes against conventions offers room for interpretations and diversity of meaning. This connection is also recognized by Eco who sees the open work as ambiguous in connection with to what degree it represents a formal innovation (Robey 1989: xi). The less conventional the forms of expressions are, the more do they allow for multiple meanings and interpretations, and the more ambiguous can they be said to be (Robey 1989: xi). However, when these innovations become institutionalized, they too become conventional forms of expression, and must thus be challenged by yet new innovations. This contributes to the understanding of cool as fundamentally fluid, and that the meaning of the concept is the very “process of attributing and shifting its meaning” (Leland 2004: 290).

We can thus on the one hand relate the openness of cool to a sense of unconventionality and unpredictability; it offers an endless amount of interpretation, without giving any definite answer to which is the right one. On the other hand it is fundamentally human to make meaning, and this meaning is created through classifying and making order of the world around us. Thus the unpredictable and unconventional will over time be classified and given meaning. As such it becomes predictable and conventional rather than the opposite. In order to maintain both marginality and ambiguity, signs are constantly transferred in to new context, offering the possibility of new and ambiguous interpretations. In this sense, cool can by definition not be denoted in connection to specific objects or expression, but must be read and interpreted

through connotation, in relation to context. Because cool cannot be related to specific objects or expressions, it also reflects openness in the sense that *anything* can be cool, and that contradictory concepts, such as being a vegetarian versus eating meat, can both signify and represent coolness.

A waitress name tag

According to “The Hipster Handbook” it is not considered cool to go to restaurants where the waiters wear matching uniforms and name tags (Lanham 2003: 28). A waitress name tag would as such be considered a sign for something conventional and conform. On one occasion I saw a young girl wearing a vintage summer dress, cowboy boots, big white sunglasses, and a knitted 2nd hand cardigan. On her chest she had pinned a waitress name tag saying Maureen. From what her friends called her, I gathered the girl’s name was not Maureen, but *Julie*. So, the probability is high that this was not a nametag that she used for work. Rather, it represents an accessory which meaning is no longer obvious. A waitress name tag can be said to be that which Eco considers a form with a practical function, that is, it needs to be understood univocally (1989: 93-94), in this case as signifying the name of the person carrying it, making it easier for customers to relate to him or her as a service provider. When *Julie* puts on the name tag reading Maureen, and bears no resemblance to a waitress else wise, it becomes a different kind of form, one that holds “an unchecked abundance of possible meanings” (Eco 1989: 94). Several possible interpretations can be made of what the name tag now signifies. Maybe her mother’s name was Maureen, and she wears her mother’s name tag out of respect and sentimentality, or it might be an ironic statement, implying that by wearing it she states that she has enough insight to joke around. A lot of the preferences for retro culture within the underground signalize a certain sense of

nostalgia, and as such the use of the name tag can be a way of showing an understanding and liking for the old fashioned 1950s diner style, and the name tag functioning as a symbol for that specific context.

What this implies is that the use of signs like the name tag cannot be deferred from its connection to an object; it must be interpreted within a context to have meaning. If the meaning of the sign 'name tag' was none other than the practical function of displaying the name of a working waitress, the fact that it is worn by a girl who is neither a waitress, nor is called Maureen, would not make any sense. Wagner says that when a symbol is used in a new and nonconventional way, a new referent is introduced with the new symbolization (Wagner 1981: 43). The act of symbolization thus becomes an act of innovation, where the contrast and tension between the symbol and what it symbolizes collapses (Wagner 1981: 43). This enables us to speak of the name tag in this new construction as a "symbol" that "stands for itself" (Wagner 1981: 43).

For the name tag to be perceptible for use in nonconventional ways, it must in some respect be open for various interpretations. In his account of the open work, Eco holds that every reception of a work of art, which we can understand as a sign or a symbol, "is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself" (1984: 4). Thus the interpretation also implies the nonconventional use. We recognize this same concept in Peirce's concept of semiosis. The fundamental aspect of the sign for Peirce is that it does not become a sign until it is interpreted as such, that is, its meaning arises in the act of interpretation. When a representamen addresses somebody, it creates an interpretant, an equivalent or more developed sign, in the mind of that person (Peirce 1958-60: 2.228). This implies that each time a sign is interpreted its meaning is manipulated and changed through the act of interpretation; it becomes an eternal, continuously ongoing process (Gottdiener

1995: 11). Signs are built on top of each other, and new meaning arises each time a sign is brought into a new context.

Cool as a language of myth

One of Roland Barthes' basic presumptions is that the myth cannot be seen as an object, a concept or an idea, but rather a form or a message; a mode of signification and a system of communication (Barthes 1993: 109). Further, as the myth is defined by the way it utters its message rather than the object of its message, anything can be a myth (Barthes 1993: 109). This is also built on his presumption that any object or material can be arbitrarily endowed with meaning and thus composite a message; a myth (Barthes 1993: 110).

Just as Peirce's semiosis represents an infinite process of reinterpretation through existing signs in the addressee of the sign, myth is based on a triad between signifier, the signified and the sign. The concept of semiosis is based on the sign being mediated by the interpretant, an existing idea or sign in the mind of the interpreter (Gottdiener 1995: 11). Likewise, Barthes' concept of the myth is constructed from an already existing semiological chain; it is a "*second-order semiological system*" (Barthes 1993: 114). This implies that when a sign becomes a part of the myth, it moves from being a sign in the first order to become a mere signifier in the second order. If we then return to the example of the waitress name tag, it would as a sign in the first order signify the name of a waitress wearing it. As it is moved into a different context, it will cease to hold this complete meaning, and becomes a mere signifier of the second order; it holds merely a signifying function (Barthes 1993: 114).

The sign thus contains an ambiguity. It can be read as a specific meaning, while when it is moved into a different context, it is emptied of its content and moves from

meaning to form (Barthes 1993: 117). Just like Peirce's semiosis represents an infinite process, the second-order semiological system of the myth allows signs to be built on top of each other in continuously new contexts, creating continuously new meanings. This again, brings us back to Eco's concept of openness, and allows us to see cool as containing "an indefinite reserve of meanings" (1989: 10).

An ironic meal

"What do you mean you've never been to White Castle? You've never even heard of it before? That settles it, we're going there tonight. It's just so totally far out, Ingrid! It is just all so grouse, it's hilarious!" I was hanging out at a local bar with some friends, and we had started talking about a fast food chain restaurant called White Castle, located a few blocks from where I lived. They had been making quite a few jokes about it before, but I had never really quite gotten it. This evening I asked, and they extensively described to me what an incredibly 'white trash' kind of place it was, how the food was grouse, and the clientele 'quite out there'. The concept of White Castle is serving small, square burgers. The smallest meal contains four such burgers, and if you are really craving it, their slogan is "What you crave!", you can buy a 'crave case' with 50 burgers, or a 'crave crate' with 100. I was very sceptical to the whole idea, but in the end of the night I was dragged along as we all headed for the low white building, open all hours and serving square, greasy burgers. The interior was in white and blue, mostly plastic. The lighting was bright, almost harsh, and gave the space an unwelcoming and cold vibe. Several men sat scattered around the room, looking tired and apathetic, some of them even a little scary. Behind the bullet proof glass in front of the counter stood a group of employees, waiting to take our orders. I settled for a cheeseburger, while the others indulged themselves in full meals. In light of the occasion, my neighbour *Matt*

even went for the blue coloured energy drink, which was one of the soft drink options. As we finished our meal we were talking, joking and laughing, mainly about the phenomenon that surrounded us: “How’s your burger, Ingrid? Isn’t it just as far out as we told you?”

As stated above, it is within underground culture generally considered uncool to visit chain restaurants which have “pictures of the dishes (...) on the menu” and where “the waitstaff is wearing suspenders, name tags or matching plaid aprons” (Lanham 2003: 28). However, meals *can* be ironic (Lanham 2003: 28), and the account above is an example of such an ironic meal. The use of irony is quite widespread within underground culture, and according to the Hipster Handbook, “Hipsters believe that irony has more resonance than reason” (Lanham 2003: 12). Let us therefore look into what is meant by irony, and why it applies to the concept of openness.

Irony can be understood to revolve around incongruity and paradox, and represents “a gap between our understanding and what actually happens” or “incongruity between what a speaker or a writer says, and what is understood” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irony>).

In his book “Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures”, Eric Gans writes that the primary characteristic of the sign within a sign-system is that it occupies a different level of existence from the reality it designates (Gans 1997: 65). We recognize this in Peirce’s triadic understanding of the sign, where the meaning of the sign changes each time it is interpreted; what it is understood to signify is altered in accordance with the already existing signs of the mind of the interpreter. Thus, in the very understanding that the sign and what it signifies is not the same, and that the relationship between the two can be manipulated through interpretation, lies already a fundamental incongruity, which opens up for the possibility of irony.

The very concept of irony, that there is an incongruity between what is being said and how it is understood, implies a double meaning; understanding something as what was actually being said, and understanding it as something else. The aspect of incongruity further opens for a number of possible interpretations, as there are many ways that a meaning can divert from what is being said or expressed. What this irony offers, is exactly *openness*, the possibility for statements, actions, preferences to contain several meanings.

As a sign in the first order, a visit to White Castle would signify it as an act based on a preference for this kind of restaurant, going there because it is the kind of meal one prefers consuming. The above account of our visit to this burger parlour must however be interpreted as a sign in the second order. The sign, visiting White Castle, has been removed from its primary meaning and transferred into a different context, where the same sign comes to mean something completely different; that of ridiculing such a visit when based on a motivation of the first order of the sign. What this example shows us is how cool as a language of myth allows for the appropriation of any signs to act as signs of cool, and why, due to its fundamental incongruity, irony becomes a powerful means in the re-contextualization of signs.

Social interaction takes place through communication, and communication can be understood as transaction of meanings through the interpretation of signs (Cohen 1989: 17, Daniel 1984: 40). As a situation of communication, irony implies the presence of three parties; the one who performs the irony, the one the irony is addressed to, and the one who does not understand it as irony, that is, who interprets the statement or action literally. Our ironic visit to White Castle is meant to communicate a certain implicitness to a cool other. However, the meaning of this act as irony has no validity

unless it stands in a relation to it as an act performed and interpreted in its literal meaning of visiting it as a preferred place to have a meal.

This quality of irony makes it an efficient measure in the execution of power through exclusion and distinction. It serves to create a distinction between those who interpret things literally, and as such are what *The Hipster Handbook* calls “midtown – uncultured or unhip” (Lanham 2003: 9), and the ones performing and understanding the irony. In addition, because of this constantly present possibility of multiple readings of a sign, it becomes a means of distinguishing between those who are in the know of what is the legitimate interpretation, and those who want to acquire this knowledge; it becomes a means to distinguish between what Dick Hebdige calls “originals” and “hangers-on” (Hebdige 1979: 122).

“I ♥ sweatshop labor”

As another example of the use of irony and the re-contextualization of signs within underground culture, I will here examine a specific graffiti I observed around Williamsburg on a regular basis. It was the phrase “I ♥ sweatshop labor” printed sometimes in black, sometimes in white and sometimes in pink, on walls as well as streets and sidewalks. As a sweatshop is a “place where people are forced to work for low wages in bad conditions” (Cowie 1989: 1299), I found it odd that someone would actually proclaim such a statement of support to it. I was certain there had to be more to it, a form of ironic statement, with some kind of hidden meaning I still hadn’t figured out.

It turned out to be a kind of advertisement for a local, independent brand of clothing, who on their website says the following about themselves:

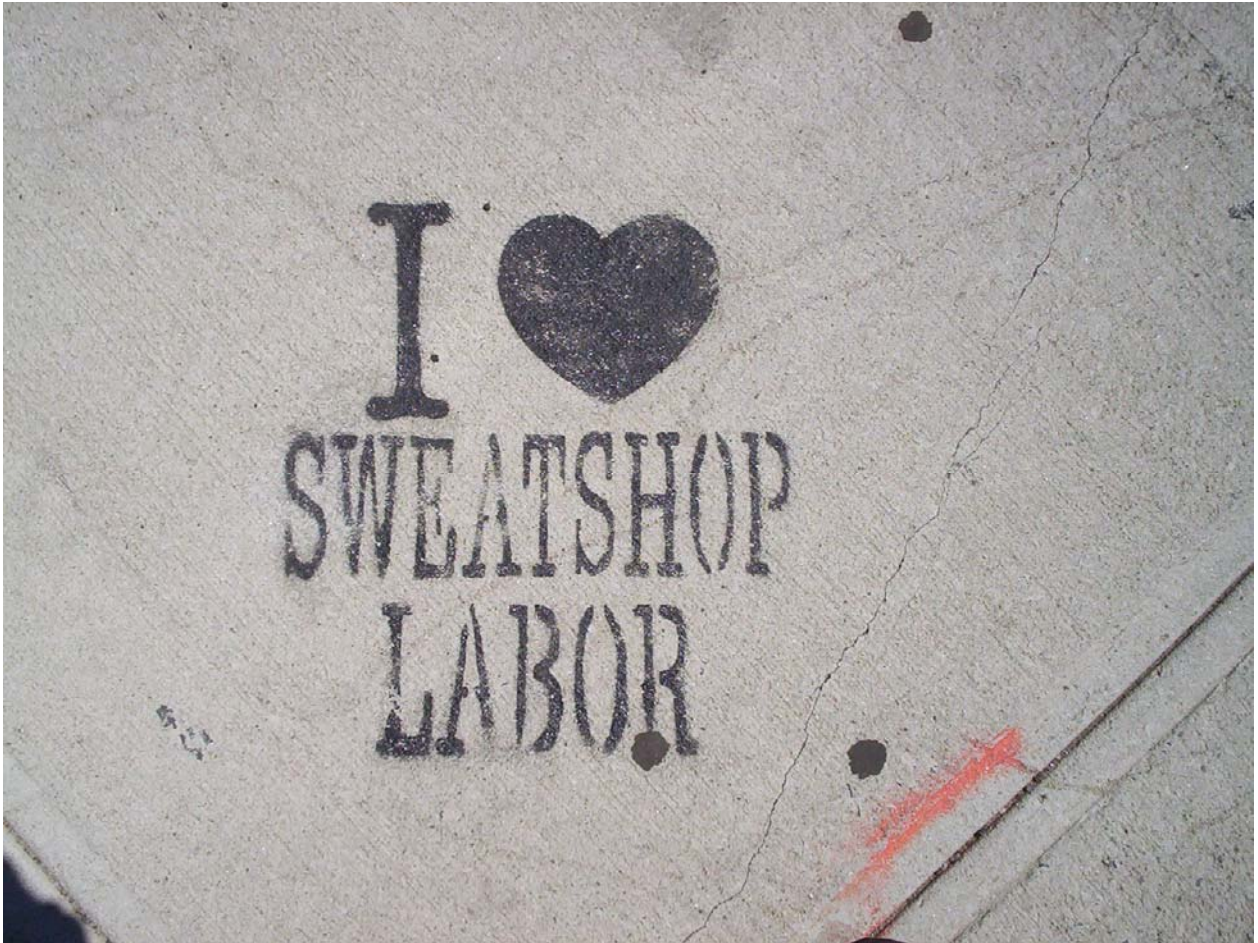
We produce an array of items that critique the awful machine we live in, while recognizing that we are a part of it, and even perhaps promote it in a small way. The ironic stance might at first seem perverse. This perversity is augmented when you find out that we give money to organizations specifically created to combat sweatshop labor. This is perversion. We are perverts. We sell t-shirts that seem to promote sweatshop labor (the “I (heart) Sweatshop Labor” graphic), and at the same time give money to people ending it all over the world. But even though this is perverse, we find authenticity in its irony (<http://www.sweatshoplaborproductions.com/>).

The sign or statement of “I ♥ sweatshop labor” opens for a number of interpretations. The people behind the design recognize and actively apply these multiple possible understandings. As a sign in the first order, the statement of “I ♥ sweatshop labor” signifies that one finds sweatshop labor to be a good thing. In this context it must however be understood as an ironic statement, a sign which in its second order comes to mean the exact opposite; by expressing a positive attitude towards sweatshop labor, by distorting, or perverting, reality, the aspects of sweatshop labor are communicated as being something negative. This leads the designers to find authenticity in this irony; the real mechanisms of everyday life are disclosed through bringing the ‘normal’ out of proportion.

But we can also identify a double irony present here. As we have seen, the brand of clothing uses irony to make people aware of the use of sweatshop labor, and donates money to help combat it. At the same time, they identify themselves as part of ‘the machine’ enabling this practice to take place. One of their aims is to sell t-shirts, and the ‘authenticity in its irony’ works as a good aid to achieve just that. They can refer to the political campaign of ending sweatshop labor, while at the same time knowing that it is this very reference that helps them sell t-shirts.

The appeal of cool

This chapter has examined cool as an open category. The aspect of openness implies that the possibility of multiple meanings is present. On the one hand, this openness might produce an experience of ambivalence. On the other, the presence of multiple meanings can be seen to offer a variety of possibilities; it allows the individual to choose. If the experience of identity in modernity is that of becoming what one is (Bauman 2001: 144), of constantly reproducing oneself as oneself, then cool as an open category offers a playground where this can take place. The possibility of constantly recontextualizing signs makes sure the individuals does not get 'locked' to any specific expressions, and can keep in constant movement in the construction of themselves.



10. Conclusive remarks

Based on fieldwork within underground culture in the New York neighborhood of Williamsburg, this thesis has examined the production, maintenance and negotiations of cool identities.

As pointed out throughout this thesis, the field of underground culture is strongly characterized by a number of dilemmas. One of the most prominent dilemmas is found in the agendas of being *different* and of being *authentic*. While the ideal of being different is based on a *relational aspect*, i.e., that the difference must always be constructed in relation to that which it is not, authenticity is based on being a true and constant expression of an inner self. The contradiction appears in the combination of the two; difference must appear as an immanent quality of a person.

The ideal of difference, of standing out of the crowd, reflects a strong individualistic ideology. This is recognized in the dominant role the outsider holds within underground culture, where agents identify themselves as someone who stands on the outside of the general society. Simultaneously, a strong emphasis is laid on the significance of belonging to a community, of sharing a view of the world with others like oneself. This aspect is further confirmed through how the amount of coolness to a large extent is measured in a gradient of a person's closeness to the centre of this community.

To be considered valid, that is, *cool*, expressions and activities are dependant on recognition; they must be acknowledged and subject to imitation by others. However, once the expressions move out of the inner circle and become so recognizable that 'everyone' is able to imitate it, the value of it as a marginal expression of difference evaporates. This points to a primary aspect of the notion of cool: Recognition is one the

one hand a premise for something being cool, while on the other simultaneously the main challenge and threat towards it.

The elements of contradiction described resonate well with the modern concept of identity, which is characterized by the efforts to stand out as a different and unique individual, while at the same time being in resonance with an inner core self. This implies that identity in modernity is based on a concept of being in constant transition in the construction of oneself as oneself.

Managing the kind of dilemmas that are present here is, due to their contradicting aspects, not an easy task. It can remind us of the tale of Humpty Dumpty; balancing on a thin line between these contradicting aspects, one might easily fall down to one side and fall to pieces. The competence of being able to balance between these dilemmas thus becomes an envious one, and being cool can be seen as the perceived possession of this competence.

This competence of being cool thus becomes something of value; it becomes something attractive, something that people want a part of. It thus becomes subject to negotiation; it becomes a power struggle. However, as a value, it is dependant on scarcity; it cannot be available to everyone, it must be exclusive. As more and more people are able to acquire what is at any time considered to signify cool, the scarcity that maintains its value has to be reproduced.

The reproduction of scarcity takes place through the performance of mechanisms of distinction. New differences and expressions are created and recontextualizing signs, which meanings are to be understood by an exclusive minority. The main mechanism to separate between legitimate and illegitimate holders of this value becomes a matter of authenticity; it must appear as an embodied quality, and not something that can be acquired.

Constantly moving away from the conventional and towards the unpredictable, one of the very characteristics of cool is its quality as something ambiguous, something unclassifiable. What enables the constant reproduction of cool is exactly its fundamental quality as an open category. Cool is not connected to any specific signs, objects or stylistic expression; it holds infinite possibilities, and therefore anything as such can be cool. However, once something is pinned down as being cool, it moves from being unpredictable and ambiguous towards being classified and recognizable. In the solidification of it, it has already started to evaporate and is moving towards new expressions and new ambiguities. This in consequence leads to cool becoming a fundamentally ethereal and fluid concept; it becomes an eternal game of 'hunt the thimble'.

It is the connection to modern identity that can be seen to make cool such an attractive force also outside the primary underground cultural environments. Cool offers a solution to the difficulties of managing the ambivalences of identity in the modern world. However, there is no final identity waiting at the end of the road, one is constantly reconstructing oneself as one self. The mechanisms described and examined throughout this thesis constitute an eternal process of production and reproduction of cool, which has as a consequence that cool is in constant movement. Like the shark, which in order not to suffocate and die must always keep in motion, cool is always on the move, swimming into unknown waters.

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