

What's in a Vibe?

by Melanie Bühler

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I notice myself staring at the faces of people I haven't seen in person for a long time—the kinds of people I run into at openings and art events, who are not close friends but whose company I have missed. I notice I want something from these faces. It is as if I'm hoping they'll tell me what's next, what's coming, or what to look at. Instead, I see only how they have gotten older. I know it's unfair. I want too much, too quickly. I am hungry to hear what's new, starving for something exciting, promising. But these faces return only the same happy-confused look I have on my own face. It's as if we have all gotten up from bed too quickly and can't believe we're out already.

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The bottom line is: after two years of lockdowns, we long for something new that does not enter our perception via a screen, something that we can

experience *out there*, in the physical world, in three dimensions, something that relates to more of our bodies, something we might touch, smell, or taste.

When, back in February, there was talk about a *vibe shift*, this immediately captured the collective imagination. The suggestion effectively fused the two desires outlined above: the thirst for something new with a longing for that which is in the air to be captured, the mood, the atmosphere, a movement of particles between bodies—a *vibe*.

Attached to the discussion around *vibe shift* was a sticky feeling of anxiety: anxiety about missing out on it. The question of where or what the *vibe* might shift *to* seemed secondary to the concern that one could be left behind by it, stuck in the old, not receptive to the new. In fact, reading the articles that circulated, it remained quite ominous where the *vibe*'s supposed to shift to. Granted, Sean Monahan's announcement of the shift in a Substack newsletter gave some hints as to how culture might develop, ¹ but this was soon picked up and discussed in a series of anxiety-laden articles with titles such as "A Vibe Shift Is Coming. Will Any of Us Survive It?" ² "How to Survive the 'Vibe Shift.' It's Coming. Are You Prepared?" ³ and "This Is NOT a Drill. The Vibe Shift Is Coming!" In response, and judging on the basis of titles such as "Worried about 2022's 'Vibe Shift'? Why Not Make Yourself Vibe Proof?" ⁴ and "A 'Vibe Shift' Is Coming, Apparently—and I Love Being Too Middle-Aged to Care," ⁵ Gen X journalists tried to spin this millennial anxiety as something about which they no longer needed to worry.

I don't feel qualified to make any predictions about where this shift might lead us (see above, I just got out of bed). Instead, I'd like to think about the notion of a "*vibe*" as such, as well as the particular kind of anxiety the announcement of the *vibe shift* so effectively induced. I believe it has done so primarily because the change was labelled as a *vibe shift* and not, for instance, a shift in trends. I'd like to put the emphasis on the *vibe* rather than the *shift*.

I will also not give a full-fledged account of where the *vibe*, as a cultural phenomenon, comes from, or the importance of the idea in music. Others (such as Kyle Chavka and Robin James) have done this. ⁶ I

will try instead to think through the vibe as an aesthetic category and how it might link to contemporary art, aesthetic judgment, and art criticism.

Being attuned to a “vibe” means partaking in a shared reality, but it’s more than that. It involves picking up on the lingering notes of that shared reality, on the *je ne sais quoi* that is still in the air after most other things have dissipated. A vibe is more toned down than a buzz, less environmentally encompassing than an atmosphere, more subtle than an ambience. If I were to express it with an emoji, I’d use the elegantly dancing stars (✨); if I were to assign it a time of day, it would be the magic hour; if I were to connect it to a city, it would be Los Angeles.

While contemporary crisis time is thick, ⁷ the time of the vibe is loose and extended, providing momentary relief. Sound scholar Robin James describes vibes as “subjective orientations, perspectival horizon, or one’s mutual situatedness in a milieu.” ⁸ Vibes create a feeling of entanglement with one’s surroundings. Does it have one foot in new materialism and object-oriented ontology? Absolutely. Can it do without human experience? Absolutely not. A vibe creates a situation in which all elements that constitute a given situation momentarily align. If the vibes are off, the elements bounce off each other and friction, tension occurs; the people, objects, and things in a room no longer speak to each other.

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“Vibe,” of course, has a history. One possible starting point could be the late 1960s, when the notion of “vibrations” entered into pop culture, as heralded by the 1966 Beach Boys song “Good Vibrations.” According to Wikipedia, band member Brian Wilson was fascinated with the idea of cosmic vibrations; his mother had told him as a child that dogs sometimes

bark at people in response to their “bad vibrations.” Vibrations tapped into the fascination of the time with extrasensory perception. ⁹ The short form “vibe” became widely used within Black youth culture at the beginning of the 1980s. By 1992, R. Kelly had his first hit titled “She’s Got That Vibe,” and by 1993 *Vibe* magazine had been launched by Quincy Jones and Time Warner to give Black music a platform. “Vibe” remains a key term in hip-hop. ¹⁰ As so often is the case, “vibe” is a concept/term that was co-opted by the mainstream after rising to prominence within subcultures, and Black subcultures in particular.

The current cultural moment of the vibe is also inextricably linked to Instagram and, above all, TikTok. Vibe is often used in these contexts with reference to images or videos that capture very particular moods through the aggregation of other images. By qualifying something with a vibe, you tap into a specific aggregate and add to it. It’s a type of storytelling that emerges through images and conjures specific, and extending, emotive horizons. Attention is often drawn to specific vibes by the phrase “It’s giving . . .,” which is often attached to such threads. Taking a slightly longer view of the internet’s history, this recent trend can be connected to the Tumblr image boards that became popular in the 2010s. Artists interested in this emerging digital aesthetic, such as Kari Altmann and Katja Novitskova, worked with conjuring image patterns of this sort as early as 2009, and sites like VVORK employed the image board logic with a more curatorial sensibility. ¹¹ Whereas these projects were often concerned with a post-human perspective that highlighted images as free-floating agents, today, through TikTok and Instagram, this disembodied perspective has given way to a collage/montage of images that show personally curated experiences providing a window into the staging of someone’s life. Vibes conjure specific moments that may be situated within a certain aesthetic, lifestyle, or habitual settings. For instance, “Cottagecore” (girls in romantic dresses who wear wooden shoes and bake muffins in antique baking tins) is a vibe, as is “Dark Academia” (Harry Potter gone Goth). ¹²

The vibe is an affective relational pattern, a specific

“structure of feeling.” Marxist scholar Raymond Williams came up with the latter concept in the 1970s to capture the structural nature of certain feelings as they emerge across time in a given society. Framing it with examples of changes in language as they occur from one generation to the next, Williams describes structures of feeling as emergent or preemergent, and argues that their effects manifest or become palpable before they can be described in words. ¹³

The vibe encompasses a specific affective quality, one that is modest in its intensity. Vibes create momentary relief in a world threatened by the climate apocalypse and ravaged by war, polarization, and intense discord. The vibe kindles the live, embodied affective experience of the present tense, knowing that its specific enchantment is brief, relative, fleeting, and mellow.

The sublime is often seen as the quintessential modern aesthetic category. Jean-François Lyotard described it as the triumph of “the monstrous and the formless” over beauty and technique, the two modes that had dominated artistic production and reception before Modernism. Whereas the experience of beauty is accompanied by calm, the sublime causes agitation by bringing fear and a sense of impending death to the aesthetic experience. This agitation or ambivalence is key in the reception of contemporary art. It is achieved through the introduction of the sharp edge of pain, to elicit a recipient’s “intensification of his [their] conceptual and emotional capacity.” ¹⁴ Sianne Ngai underlines this when she describes the aesthetic experience more broadly as one characterized by a complex mix of negative and positive affects. ¹⁵

Vibes are primarily positive: they arise as particular moments of connection when experiences emerge as specific sensuous moments. A vibe functions as a connective tissue; it creates a specific feeling, mood, or sensation. If the term *vibe* is to be used negatively, it needs to be qualified as such. “Bad vibes” indicate disruption; if the vibes are off, the sync is gone.

Artworks that have a particular vibe do so primarily because they set the stage for specific moods. Sayre Gomez’s *Something Sensational* (2022), for instance.

emanates a vibe. The painting shows a frontal view of a shaggy sex club with a lit sign next to it that reads “Sensations Love Boutique.” Fireworks explode in the background against a dark blue sky. The sun has just set, the night is opening up, the air seems rich with promise. The setting is soaked in a specific, sensual mood ready to be taken in by someone entering the scene. The painting opens up a moment in time and present it to the onlooker, as if they could step into it and become a part of this environment, to share in its *vibe*.

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Caroline Bachmann’s paintings often have a similar vibe of enchantment that, nevertheless, retains a link to the here and now. In *Lune halo orange avec cadre* (2018), for example, this is achieved by framing a view of a landscape under a full moon through a clumsily shaped windowpane, which points to the presence of an onlooker and their specific, and perhaps idiosyncratic (as suggested by the weirdly shaped outline of the window), living situation.

The vibe isn’t a strong aesthetic category of the sort that might be linked to specific forms or genres. It does not elicit powerful, conflicting emotions; there is little pain, to say it with Lyotard. Vibes, if employed in an artwork successfully, conjure subtle tensions, fragile moods, lingering feelings of ennui, or subtle menacing forces.

Cyprien Gaillard’s early viral video work *Desniansky Raion* (2007) might qualify as an artwork in which the sublime fades into a vibe. A massive and brutal fight between two groups of hooligans (sublime/pain) is overlaid by the beautifully elegiac and soothing sound of Koudlam (vibes/pleasure). Nina Könnemann’s videos, on the other hand, may be seen as examples in which subtle tones reign. Through registering public spaces and the people who pass through them. with their gestures. acts. and

demeanor, a particular, concentrated vibe is conjured, in which the quotidian—that which might be associated with “free time,” boredom, banality, and the everyday—is turned into a focused kind of attention and becomes all-encompassing. The artist often achieves this particular vibe by highlighting or blending out sounds and cropping or overlapping images.

The art of the off-vibe would include that of Jos de ruyter & Harald Thys, their brightly lit settings in which sweaty people and objects uncomfortably and awkwardly share space. Their art is not without vibe, which is to say that there *is* a connective tissue—the vibe is just a strange one. Examples of art from which vibes seem absent might include the videos of Melanie Gilligan, in which people congregate in impersonal, corporate settings where they interact with technology as if they had become pieces of technology themselves. Theirs is a world which appears so generic and cold that any vibe has been sucked out of the room.

Since the vibe heavily leans on experience, it might be more appropriate to connect this specific phenomenon to the staging of art, rather than art itself—to the curatorial rather than the artistic. If art is staged in a setting that is conducive to a vibe, there is an emphasis on experience rather than information, on bodily encounter (e.g., with three-dimensional works) and materiality, on cohesion rather than shock. Cecilia Alemani’s curated 59th Venice Biennale exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams* (2022), is an interesting case to consider. I can’t write from firsthand experience (baby was sick), but the vocabulary of the vibe has featured prominently in critics’ responses to the exhibition. The show has been referred to as “magical” and “beautiful”; one had to be there to experience it. The exhibition design played with environments in different colors, textures, and smells, and the curatorial concept leaned heavily on New Materialism.

In his review of the Biennale, Ben Davis points out that viewing the world through a lens of enchantment feels inappropriate given its current state.¹⁶ It’s interesting that two 2010 currents—Tumblr image boards and New Materialism—seem to

have found a revival through the vibe. Indeed, there is a nostalgic aura to the vibe, one that feels out of step with political urgencies that call for very different affective responses (which might be exemplified through Twitter tropes such as “I scream” and “My brain is melting”). Lauren Berlant knew that these tendencies could go hand in hand when she wrote: “Intensely political seasons spawn reveries of a different immediacy. People imagine alternative environments where authenticity trumps ideology, truths cannot be concealed, and communication feels intimate, face-to-face.”¹⁷ The vibe is such a revery, and provides momentary relief. Perhaps the vibe has been revived because we want our realtime experiences to deliver us that revery.

Melanie Bühler has been the curator of contemporary art at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem since 2017. She is currently working on “The Art of Critique,” a project that reconsiders the art historical movement of Institutional Critique. Recent exhibitions include *Image Power* (2020) and *Noise! Frans Hals, Otherwise* (2018), both at Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem; and *Private Public Relations*, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (2017), among others. She is the founder and curator of *Lunch Bytes* (2010–15), a project on art and digital culture for which she collaborated with Art Basel; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; the Hirshhorn Museum; and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, among others. She is the editor of *The Art of Critique* (Lenz Press, Summer 2022); *No Internet, No Art* (Onomatopoeic, 2015); and co-editor of *The Transhistorical Museum* (Valiz, 2018). Her writing has appeared in various exhibition catalogues and art magazines.

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