

Straight Edge is a curious and contentious arm of the punk subculture. Similar in decibels if not aesthetics and approach, the demanding and oft-maligned jock faction of hardcore exists with its own tribal codes of conduct and dress, dance moves, and sectarian infighting.

For those unfamiliar, a quick history lesson: Straight Edge started back in the early 1980s. Washington DC hardcore legends Minor Threat penned a song called “Straight Edge,” laying out a refusal to smoke, do drugs or drink based on one’s own personal choice as a reaction to punk rock’s nihilistic and self-destructive stereotypes. Little did Ian Mackaye know what his song would give birth to. His lyrics and the practice of underage kids marking an X on the back of their hands to get into hardcore shows at bars mutated over time into a movement, adopting a uniform sound, wolfpack mentality and ideological sub-sects, carrying with it the enduring “X” as its emblem.¹

For the record, I never got into Straight Edge. I spent my formative years involved in the political hardcore scene, where Straight Edge’s increasingly puritanical zealots were seen as villains.² It’s funny now, upon reflection since the battlecry of “The Personal is Political” within activist circles encompassed a cloying sense of inadequacy similar to Straight Edge: a perpetual guilt-trip in that no matter what one does, someone is being oppressed, and it’s you, by extension, who is to blame. Like straight-edge, it was a scene that depended on youth’s black-and-white passion, rooted more in peer pressure than personal choice and clumsy-but-earnest attempts at self-definition, fostering a conformity and yearning for acceptance that was part of the continuum of growing up.

¹Fast-forward a few years to Boston and New York City where bands like SSD, Slapshot, Youth of Today, and Judge pushed Straight-Edge as an ethos along with a uniform sound and look, the bands and fans sporting X’ed-up hands, cropped hair and athletic clothes with band logos rendered in Varsity fonts. There was a “True til Death” wolfpack mentality at work, where meathead antics were legitimized as being part of a “Crew”: a tight posse with a common cultural and ethical focus that stood in opposition to what they considered mainstream culture. Combined with a later emphasis on vegetarianism and then adopting veganism, Straight Edge eventually gave rise to its own micro-bandwagons: influential Edge musicians like Youth of Today’s Ray Cappo and John Porcell went the way of Krishna-Consciousness, while a more militant offshoot known as Hardline developed through bands like Vegan Reich, Raid, and most notoriously, Earth Crisis.

²Embodied by “Hardline,” a sometimes violent sect in the ‘90s that combined strict veganism, anti-sex, pro-life, and homophobic stances along with appropriated bad-ass eco-warrior imagery à la Earth First and the Animal Liberation Front into a threatening, albeit alienating and comical tough-guy image.

My own history was the initial pull while watching Jeremy Shaw's *Best Minds Part One* (2007). In it, looped footage of teenagers rocking out to a straight-edge hardcore band at North Van's Seylynn Hall is slowed down to a crawl, accompanied by an ambient soundtrack. Simple on the surface, disparate symbols of youth culture are brought together. In this case, a title nicked from Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, folded into Straight Edge morality and all-ages culture, while rooted in a definite sense of place: specifically, North Vancouver's Seylynn Hall, a volunteer-run, all-ages venue which was an important fixture in the Metro Vancouver counterculture scene.³ The accompanying soundscape was inspired by William Basinski's landmark audio piece, *The Disintegration Loops I-IV*, where old reel-to-reel analogue tape loops play themselves out to their end: magnetic particles fall off with every rotation, and the sound decays in real time to create one of the saddest pieces of music you'll ever hear.

In the past, Shaw has created work with a direct interest in altered states and expanded consciousness,⁴ whether by hallucinogens or transcendental meditation. There is *DMT* (2004), an eight-channel video installation of twentysomethings tripping out and afterwards trying to describe the great mystic ineffable, his recent works like *This Transition Will Never End* (2008) that recombines the fractal psych-out tunnel-ride sequences of Hollywood films with the relatively new aesthetic of the screensaver, remixing the idiomatic visual language of psychedelia in pop culture in pieces such as *Anti-Psych (Total Black Light)* (2005), and his own electronic shoegazer pop music as Circlesquare, steeped in party/rave culture references (his most recent release is 2009's *More*



³ For myself and my friends who never leave East Van, all-ages shows in North Van, Abbotsford, and Surrey (and even Saltspring Island) became much-anticipated excursions, bringing together people from different areas of the region under the banner of our chosen genres.

⁴ In an *electrobeat.net* interview, Shaw said that he discovered meditation via David Lynch and spoke about how it's next to impossible to describe it without using default flakey New-Agey terms. Similar to his subjects trying to describe a DMT trip.

Songs about Dancing and Drugs). Turning the lens on to the teetotalling wing of the punk subculture points towards the artist's larger strategy.

Watching straight-edge kids dance is a sight to behold. Different than your average mosh pit, space gets cleared like a breakdance circle and kids take turns throwing aggressive moves resembling Capoeira and kickboxing. Their arms and legs flail in windmills and roundhouse kicks as they shadowbox invisible enemies. It's a macho (alpha-) male form of physical expression, providing a form of cathartic release with all of the fireball energy that young hormones can muster. Slowed down and presented in a gallery space, however, the band's volume and fury is muted and replaced with Shaw's own sombre music loop; the imagery on display opens up to a number of associations, especially visions of other dances.

A disco ball's points of light play the role of supporting actor in Shaw's piece, summoning anecdotes and grainy footage of pre-and post-backlash disco: the Black and Latino gay community partying at David Mancuso's Loft, or Larry Levan DJing at the Paradise Garage.⁵ It brought to mind British artist Mark Leckey's 1999 video essay *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore* that has been described as an "extended paean to the unadulterated bliss of nocturnal abandon"⁶ recombining found footage of Northern Soul all-nighters in Britain, and laser and strobe-lit ravers in their 4 AM reveries, evoking the Shakers and Sufi mystics, but in a space fragmented by coloured gels and fog machines, the rotating disco ball presiding over the rite.

Shaw seems aware of this history, with a disco ball's points of light casting less of a judgmental eye on the seemingly-violent dancers, but rather presiding over them with the fragmentation of space, pointing instead towards the ecstatic. As above, the collective abandon of the dance floor is rite of passage set in physical motion. In hardcore terms: boy goes in, thrashes around, and comes out with a shiner as a badge of initiation. We may not have the sociological structure that demands we physically go into the woods alone to confront our inner Darth Vader, (armed with faith, a gram of 'shrooms, appropriated Buddhist/First Nations spirituality, all of the above) and while hardcore and house music may

⁵ See: Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton's book *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey* (Grove Press, 2000) and Josell Ramos' documentary film *Maestro* (2003).

⁶ Matthew Higgs, "Openings," *Artforum* 40.86 (April 2002): 128-29.



Jeremy Shaw
Best Minds Part One, 2007. Looped DVD projection, sound (stills)
 Courtesy the artist and Blanket Gallery, Vancouver

be worlds apart in form and look, they share the common bond of release: transformation found in physical strain and neurochemistry, under flashing coloured gels and the spin of a disco ball.

The transcendental experience is inward and private, but can be equally as intense in a social, communal setting when the volume is just right—it's a space for a larger, archetypal unity to reveal itself, a gateway to a collective, even cosmic, consciousness, regardless of genre lines. Alan Watts' "Joyous Cosmology" can be found not just in a tab of acid but in mosh pits and yoga class, hippy drum jams, dancing to techno til dawn, or structured by youth gangs, frats, and their jumping-in/hazing ceremonies. Shaw's "chopped and screwed"⁷ manipulations of image and sound point towards the mythopoetic, quasi-religious territory of anthropologist Joseph Campbell revealing the porous line between individual and collective consciousness. There's the commonality of fun in the video, but beneath that, there's individual release and displays of tribal affiliation and prowess. Part-ego, part-subconscious mating ritual, there's a thin line between showing off your boss moves and private exorcism.

Shaw explores these altered states through time-based media techniques. One can see this thread running through works like *7 Minutes* (1995/2002), another slo-mo home-video. Here, two girls getting into a scrap at a house party plays against a Circlesquare tune acting like an inverted rock video, a voyeuristic, stoner take on adolescence. In *DMT*, his friends subject themselves not only to psychedelic cowboy Terrence McKenna's psycho-shamanistic entheogen of choice but to the video camera and their own descriptive faculties. In both, observations of (post-) adolescent life and its rites and the recreational/shamanic psychedelic headspace are recombined. Similarly, in *Best Minds Part Two*, he runs the ecstatic high of the dance and subcultural signifiers through the filter of time-based media effects (a slow motion, endless loop with ambient music) into a mercurial combination of the pop-poetics of MTV, experimental cinema, and new media presented in the white cube.

Best Minds Part One initially comes off as ironic with the straight-edge fury rendered soft and poetic, and simultaneously elegiac like its namesake, documenting fleeting youth. The Edge kids may not be of the "destroyed, naked

⁷ Check: a particular subset of rap culture where, armed with codeine-laced cough syrup, beats and rhymes are re-mixed pitched down and slurred, into a drowsy stoned haze.

stark raving hysterical etc” sort (yet) but he documents their adherence to their tribe, a snapshot of their good ol’ days, a testament to virility—and belief systems—that can wane as time goes on. One of the key details in the video is—and it happens too quickly at regular speed, as Shaw knows—these kids are rocking out so hard that they’re getting high. Like any peak experience, he illustrates the rickety bridge between language (both spoken and visual) and the lived moment, and the spectator is powerless to live what is represented in the artwork. The mediated image can only take you so far: the songs can only be about dancing and drugs, unless you happen to be shaking it and/or tripping while listening to them, emphasizing that the dross of everyday life is married to a need to transcend it, and the means to catapult oneself over that barrier takes on many different forms, regardless of morality.



Jeremy Shaw, *Best Minds Part One*, 2007
Looped DVD projection, sound, (installation view)
Courtesy the artist and Blanket Gallery, Vancouver
Photo: Dennis Kulpas





Erik Hood, *Rocky's Ditch*, Mosquito Creek Park, 2009