

The Culturati Are Betting on a Vibe Shift. But We May Actually Be Stuck in Vibe Purgatory

Unpacking a great new catchphrase.

Ben Davis, February 25, 2022



Acrobats descend from the rafters as part of a New Year's Eve party performance at Studio 54, New York, New York, January 1, 1978. Photo by Allan Tannenbaum/Getty Images.

Curiosities is a column where I comment on the art news of the week, sometimes about stories that were too small or strange to make the cut, sometimes just giving my thoughts on the highs and lows.

Here's what I was thinking about last week...

How Seriously to Take This Vibe Shift Thing?

I was already worried that this post would be belated on Tuesday when I started jotting down some notes on the Great 2022 Vibe Shift. And now...? Well, let's just say that the vibe seems to have already shifted again.

But this is a column for trivial stuff, I guess, and part of what I was thinking about anyhow was how this particular proposed Vibe Shift interacted with current events. So here are some thoughts.

Allison P. Davis's *New York* mag piece, baited with the title "A Vibe Shift Is Coming—Will Any of Us Survive It?" was the talk of art-and-media circles last week (even if they were ridiculing it). It claimed that a cultural shift was in the offing—of some kind.

Just so you get a sense of the kind of thing we are talking about, the article lists several "vibes" from the recent past. They are cribbed from a June 2021 post by Sean Monahan, member of the now-defunct art collective K-HOLE, on the blog 8ball (I see the 8ball post introduces its reflections reflections on "hype dads" trying to stay on-trend via an Antonio Gramsci epigraph about the rise of fascism in Italy. Odd!) Broken out, the previous, now-superseded Ages of Vibe are:

Hipster/Indie Music (ca. 2003-2009), or peak Arcade Fire, Bloc Party, high-waisted Cheap Mondays, Williamsburg, bespoke-cocktail bars

Post-Internet/Techno Revival (ca. 2010-2016), or the Blood Orange era, normcore, dressing like The Matrix, Kinfolk the club, not Kinfolk the magazine

Hypebeast/Woke (ca. 2016-2020), or Drake at his Drakest, the Nike SNKRS app, sneaker flipping, virtue signaling, protests not brunch

As for the incipient New Vibe, its exact contours were unclear. We were told that the return of grungy fun in basements after an era of over-driven moralism and moping indoors was in the mix. Monahan also augured the "return of rock" and "Naughtie Aughties nostalgia."

Trendcasting, on this level, is more like astrology than science, a Mercury in Retrograde kind of thing. The great Vibe Shift is the kind of concept that catches on not because it's precise and specific but because it's big and squishy. Less a scalpel, more of a stress toy.

For that very reason, everyone, for a hot minute, wanted a squeeze of the Vibe Shift. Even those scenesters at Amtrak declared itself here for it.

Contrastingly, London's *Telegraph* haughtily referenced the *New York* article in a piece about interest rates: "The Bank of England Has Been Wrong-Footed by the Vibe Shift in the Economy."

Still, I genuinely appreciated the Vibe Shift discourse.

Partly because it is a great new 2020s catchphrase. Partly because its ability to get people worked up affirms my interest in K-HOLE as a half-serious, half-conceptual-art trendcasting operation.

But mainly because there was clearly something to the idea of a Vibe Shift in The Culture struggling to be born. ("Indie" was already the most-Google'd aesthetic of last year, signaling appetites trending away from the blandly affirmative, blobby "Millennial Aesthetic" of the mid- to late-2010s.)

The Vibe Shift, as sketched, is a Frankenstein's Monster formed of different factors: Gen Z taste asserting itself, nightlife rebounding from the pandemic, attention migrating to podcasts and Discord, some version of the "high heel index," etc.

But clearly, one of the things that people are trying to articulate when they talk about a Vibe Shift is that "Pop Culture's Great Awakening," as *New York* mag itself once put it, is hitting its limits. What the NYC tastemaker set *wants* the Vibe Shift to mean is not just a return to irony, but also that it'll be cool to party again.

As Monahan put it in the Davis article, "the 2010s were such a politicized decade that I think the desire people have to be less constrained by political considerations makes a lot of sense."

This is a predictable oscillation. The 1970s followed the '60s. In the cultural imagination, after the era of protest, people retreat into hedonism (even if in actual fact the '70s were high tide for feminist activism and gay liberation and lots of other political stuff).

But this particular kind of oscillation is a bit different than the fashion cycle or the nostalgia cycle, even if it interlocks. Basically, what this highlights is that political affect has a subcultural dimension: In a moment when culture feels decadent and frivolous, political righteousness feels *different, meaningful*—and therefore actually cool.

However, an excess of moralism about cultural consumption exhausts and alienates people and produces backlash. And once "political" becomes a style or is ossified into a rigid set of cultural expectations, it starts to get hollowed out of meaning.

Celebrities mouth platitudes; corporations coopt activist language; press releases start touting everything as “activist” and “radical,” often for unclear reasons. And the demand that culture deliver a hit of ideological affirmation starts to seem hard to defend to cachet-conscious cultural producers and observers.

At that point, decadence and frivolity start to feel not just fun but *different* and *meaningful* once more. The politicians and the party kids both go on with their genuine interests—but what feels mainstream-cool changes.

That’s a cynical and formalistic way to describe what is happening. So I’d just caveat it by saying that while this schematic is in the mix, it’s not *really* how it works, because styles don’t spread in a self-contained laboratory environment.

If you go back and read that “Great Awakening” article by Molly Fischer, all the elements of exhaustion with hyper-righteous culture are already there. It’s essentially a plea to take the foot off the gas and let a little ambiguity and messiness back into acceptable cultural discourse—Vibe Shift *avant la lettre*.

That was 2018. By 2020, an anti-woke backlash was gaining steam on the left and right, and I imagine people were already generally expecting some kind of cyclical return to a less self-consciously moralizing culture.

But then there was a world pandemic and the sincere need to express some kind of togetherness (clapping for the workers), and the largest wave of racial justice protest in memory, and January 6th...

So basically what I want to say is it’s not really clear to me what parts of what people are calling a Vibe Shift now are just what happens before the midterm elections in the U.S. suddenly fill the air with panic again, or before the next financial or geopolitical crisis (which is already here since I started writing this).