In the early 1990s, Stuart Griffiths, then serving as a Paratrooper and Battalion photographer in the British Army, visited Army veteran friends in the English seaside resort of Brighton He became involved in the emerging rave scene and made a series of photographs which were a continuation of his documentation of life in the barracks and on patrol with the Army in Northern Ireland. In 1993, Griffiths left the Army and moved to Brighton*. I liked the place a lot, because it was so removed from garrison towns like Aldershot. The early raves I first went to were at the Limelight Club in Aldershot and a few out-of-town disused warehouse parties.* In2011, he began to write a chronicle of his experiences in the Army and the period immediately afterwards, when he became immersed in a rave subculture and Brighton’s drug scene.

Stuart Griffiths’ narrative of early 1990s Brighton is a picaresque and often disjointed description of a journey through rented rooms, chaotic flat shares, often experienced alongside fellow veterans, including Taff, Jock, Geordie and Crosby, through the prism of a culture formed through the extensive and experimental drug use which characterized youth culture in the 1990s. For the former soldiers, attracted by what Griffiths saw as Brighton’s ‘laid back’ atmosphere, the collision with New Age subcultures could be disturbing:

*‘We all ended up at a party just off Trafalgar Street and stayed in the basement, playing Frank Zappa record. A veteran called Crosby who was a paratrooper was there and kept putting on a song ‘Who Are the Brain Police’. I distinctly remembered his face from somewhere. He worked in the armory in the recruit training. The party itself, no one had a clue whose it was, except Crosby. Everyone there was drugged up and we sat in the basement, talking a load of nonsense. I decided to go on an adventure and see who was around on the other floors, maybe find some action. I’m watching some Indian looking projection moving around a wall, when Taff with his big bright red face, grabs me by the arm, looking scared, Saying ‘This here is devil country, I cannot handle it any longer’. We ended up getting kicked out of the party because Taff nearly torched the kitchen trying to light a cigarette. Back to somewhere else to smoke more, drink more and easy this speed comedown.’*

Griffiths saw himself as the essential outsider, in common with many Army veterans, and is catapulted into a bewildering cast of characters from Builder Dave, a small time drug dealer with whom he lodged when he arrived in Brighton to the captivating ‘Mountain Girl’ who he met at a party which was *‘packed with mainly crusty looking people, who wore chunky dreadlocks and played bongo drums. Strange eyeballs off this people tonight, as this mescaline is real strong I stare around the room and see this girl with beautiful but menacing eyes staring back at me. She is wearing Manchester City socks in blue and white… she is Mountain Girl stomping over the mountains of life, taking no shit and each day I’d like her even more. ‘*

The veterans did not stay together and after the group broke up- some were arrested and imprisoned -Griffiths, by now living permanently in Brighton, made contact with the Church of the SubGenius, a Slacker group originating in the USA and whose philosophy is described online as:

‘*the presence of Slack, which generally stands for the sense of freedom, independence and original thinking that stops you thinking about personal goals. Slack is about finding satisfaction with what you have and who you are, as opposed to searching for satisfaction in accomplishment…Slack is about doing nothing and getting what you want anyway. ‘*

Richard Linklater’s 1990 film *Slackers,* released in the UK in 1991, brought the Slacker philosophy to wide media attention: *We were all part of the Slacker movement*, Stuart Griffiths remembers, *it was word of mouth, everyone who dropped in at the Church of the SubGenius workshop in Brighton, was in on it… While my old army friends were serving time in prison, I had got to know other people who let me print photographs in their small darkroom in a workshop in town. They introduced me to the Slacker way of living, their workshop being a shrine to the Reverend Bob Dobbs and the Church of the SubGenius. My brother Stan came down from the north, and I took him to one of their parties. Here he could see for himself the true meaning of a subculture characterized by apathy and aimlessness. At weekend they organized illegal raves at Black Rock and Ovingdean and I decided to be their ‘unofficial photographer’ and go along and take some photographs. I did not care of people thought I was an undercover cop, my two black eyes [from a mugging on the seafront] were evidence that I was not working on the other side. We got the sound system in place under cover of darkness and soon many people emerged. I stood on the cliff edge to try and catch the scene in one frame.’*

Stuart Griffiths’ progress through the Brighton club and rave scene is like a chronicle of Slacker culture in the early 1990s. He went to the Zap Club, which had opened in 1982 in Brighton to promote a fusion of radical art and music; by the time Griffiths came to Brighton it was famous for its acid house parties, especially its Tonka and Protechtion nights, as well as DJ’s Sasha and John Digweeds’s Northern Exposure nights.

In 1994, he went to the Glastonbury Festival and worked *‘by the Green Fields, in the lock ups, along with many other people I knew from Brighton. Mountain Girl’s Ganesha Acid is very strong…It could only get weird from there, loads of crusties, lots of scallies selling nasty, cheap drugs, people dancing around fires, off their heads. The night I watched Elvis Costello instead of Paul Weller, there was a shooting. This was the first time that guns had ever got into Glastonbury and probably the last.*

Griffiths’ years in Brighton, before he enrolled on the BA photography course at Brighton University were sustained by a succession of casual and sometimes bizarre jobs – he worked as a docker at Shoreham, a cleaner at Gatwick, a kitchen assistant in a restaurant, and as a bungee jump operative at ‘*Hell’s Angel’s Rallies and countryside raves… Taking a big Hell’s Angel up in a cage and persuading him to jump and explaining that it was after all, just a suicide jump, was a strange experience. The raves we worked on, Geordie would get loaded on speed to keep himself sharp. I’d always be the first to test the bungee jump, standing 200 feet high in the cage in a huge field, while the DJ checked the sound system. The Future Sound of London song Papa New Guinea played to all the ravers down below, who were now blowing their horns, all just coming up on their first helping of E and waiting for me to jump- I waited for the song to peak, before hurling myself off the cage in full spectacular glory…We had our bungee jumping company job structure all off to perfect working order…people dressed in Andy Pandy outfits wait in the queue to jump. Wide eyed and off their heads with E. ‘*

In many ways, Griffiths brought the culture which had enveloped him in the Army, and which he now remembers with antipathy, to the Brighton rave scene. Veterans from army days appear throughout his narrative, displaced and angry in a neo hippy rave culture of the 1990s, but attracted by its chaos, anarchy and drugs and its undemanding sense of community. It was an uneasy mixture and Griffiths observes as veterans from his group attempt to deal with civilian life: *‘Geordie and Jock, who also worked on the bungee job, had their own personal ordeal to deal with. One sunny Saturday afternoon, a few weeks before, they met up with a good friend, Taff… they got on the train, to go to Wales, all out of their minds on booze and got violent, letting fire extinguishers off and terrifying the train passengers on their way to London. They only got as far as Victoria Station, where the Transport Police were waiting.”*

Stuart Griffiths’ narrative of the culture clash of rave culture and army life has been echoed elsewhere- in Brighton-born Nino de la Mer’s novel *4am*- which narrates the story of Carl and Manny, two army caterers who encounter Hamburg’s rave and club scene in the 1990s. The artist Tariq Alvi was similarly influenced by the Brighton rave scene of the 1990s, and used art to examine the many contradictions which the extreme flux in culture which arose in the 90s, exemplified in his 1996 work *Fucked up with Flyers and Aesthetics*. Justin Kerrigan’s 1999 film *Human Traffic* follows a weekend in the lives of a group of Cardiff clubbers. The defining motif of all these different artworks was dysfunction- and Griffiths’ narrative, a chaotic tale of tedium, interspersed with hallucinogenic intervals, disillusionment and despair, is no exception. Even the notion of ‘community’ was a nebulous one as spaces and behaviour, alliances and allegiances were mapped out minute -by - minute in a rapidly shifting social and personal landscape.

Stuart Griffiths’’ photographs of outdoor raves in Brighton are a rare discovery. While the youth subcultures of the 1980s produced remarkable photo series such as Derek Ridgers’ portraits of new romantics and punk, there is no equivalent archive for the 1990s. The illegal raves of the early 90s were difficult spaces for photographers to operate in- Stuart Griffiths was sometimes suspected of being an undercover police photographer when he photographed in Brighton. Fashionable wear for 1990s ravers was utilitarian and uniform – boiler suits, smiley face t shorts, neon-coloured clothes and luminous vests, and did not attract the attention of photographers interested in fashion subcultures.

Continuous clashes with the police and officialdom left little room for concerns about fashion; clothes had to be comfortable, warm and challenged the whole tradition of fashionable dress. Griffiths remember that he wore: ‘ a sand coloured hunting jacket with large pockets, Levi jeans and plimsolls, my hair was usually short.’ New York times writer Sam Knight wrote in 2007: *For four years at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Britain’s youth took to the fields, forests and warehouses, took Ecstasy, wore some of the silliest outfits ever devised — like cricket hats, white gloves and gas masks — and ushered out Thatcherism in a strobe-lighted haze of electronic music that shook the ground they danced on.*

If 80s club and street fashion had been an inventive combination of the customized, handmade and idiosyncratically styled, then the 1990s was about play, bright colours, glow sticks, dummies, Mickey Mouse white gloves, Andy Pandy outfits combined with utility- hoodies, oversized sweatshirts and, legwarmers.

*So that's what happens,* wrote one online commentator, looking back at the 1990s *when you refuse to grow up and can’t let go of Sesame Street.*

*Forget the decadence and catwalks of the discothèques… raves were about wide-open spaces, trance-like techno music and universal acceptance. A response to the velvet rope clubs of the past, where money and style garnered entrance through the golden doors and along the red carpet, raves were affairs organized by DJs or a few house music fanatics whose sole purpose was to share the music. Raves were dance-a-thons for music fanatics, not scenesters, but eventually—like all cool underground vibes—the media got a hold of it and raving became the scene of the 90’s.*

Stuart Griffiths’ photographs follow the course of the Brighton raves and also document Army veterans as they encounter a rave culture which could be, and usually was, hostile towards them. Their transgressions on the party scene alienated them from the subculture: *‘Fuck these savage beats and fuck all Hippies’ Crosby shouted, as loud as he could, making a few heads turn as we pulled out of the mud bath that was Glastonbury for the long drive back home. Mountain Girl attacked me a few weeks later…she poured my beer can over my head and punched me hard in the neck and torso.’ Stay off my case, you fucking weirdo’. She thought I was just a freak*.

Made in black and white and colour, Griffiths’ photographs from the early 1990s are bleak and laconic; there is no spectacle, just crowds of young people mill around in casual clothes, dressed to survive, or are intimate studies of friends in chaotic kitchens and sparsely furnished flats. People sleep and wait. For Griffiths, there must have been inverse and bewildering echoes of army life, a focus on endurance, of a community of disparate individuals united by experience. Rave culture seemed not to be, for Stuart Griffiths, an antidote to army life, but almost a continuation of an intense and tribalistic socialization process which defines groups of people who live and work together. Rave denied aspiration in favour of communality, and, while it set out to be rule breaking was as preoccupied with language, ritual and dress as any other subculture. Griffiths found that he was as much an outsider here as he had been in the Army.

By mid 1990s, the illegal rave scene in Britain was declining. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 prohibited unlicensed gatherings of groups of more than one hundred people where ‘sounds characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats’ were played. The focus of the subculture was now on licensed venues, and the scene was increasingly commodified. For Stuart Griffiths, it had been a rite of passage, a journey completed as *‘ the parties on the beach started to get that bit ugly. Stories of people throwing themselves off cliffs, drug gangs moving in from London with guns, selling crack and heroin. People were not interested in getting high, they just wanted to be completely out of it and get completely numb. I knew this exact feeling one New Year’s Eve, sat on my own at Taff’s place, listening to The Pogue’s Dirty Old Town. I fumbled desperately in the bin for old bits of used tinfoil to smoke. It had now got that bad, I thought. All I needed to do now was to find a needle somewhere to bang into my arm and stagger around the streets like a depraved drunken fool, swigging from a warm can of Tennants Super 9% lager, and my image would be complete.*

*The grey void of the morning sky, feeling sick and knowing the cure. I had to get away; I’d got so burnt out from searching for something that no longer existed. This perpetual town had become too small. All around there was some distraction to deal with that usually ended up being wasted again. I was stone-broke and went for a stroll on the beach, to try and find some direction, knowing that I needed to be free from the evils. Staring across the Channel, watching waves meander in and out of view. Here by the seaside I was just another piece of driftwood.*

Note: Stuart Griffiths left Brighton after completing his BA in Editorial Photography at Brighton University. In London, he was homeless for a period, living in veterans’ hostels. He worked as a paparazzi photographer in London and began to photograph injured veterans across the UK. And was also an Intern at the Magnum and Network photo agencies. In 2010, he was the subject of Luke Seomore and Joseph Bull’s documentary film *Isolation,* which has been shown across the UK and internationally. He has published his photographs in a wide variety of newspapers and magazines.