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**Festivals and Events:  
Beyond Economic Impacts  
Volume 4**

# **Festivals and Events: Culture and Identity in Leisure, Sport and Tourism**

**Edited by Cara Aitchison  
and Annette Pritchard**

# **LSA**



Festivals and Events: Culture and Identity in  
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# Dance Events: Ritual, Sensory Experience and Entertainment — An Ethnographic Approach to Dance Culture

Irene Stengs

*Meertens Institute, Amsterdam*

## Introduction: Inncity, 'Fabulous Las Vegas'

*The view from the platforms in the main stage hall is overwhelming. As far as the eye can see, dancing people fill the huge, dimly lit space — ten to fifteen thousand, maybe. From above, they seem an organic entity, rhythmically responding to the predominant beats of Trancel Techno DJ Marco V. The emphatic atmosphere is enhanced by smart light and laser effects. Most impressive are the moments that the music is about to reach a climax; just before the raising beat 'breaks' the public shouts and whistles, raising thousands of hands on the rhythm of the beat, as a tribute to the DJ but also as a physical support to the move to the next track. These are also the moments to switch on the intense white flashing lights of the stroboscopes, not only to enforce the effect of the moving arms, but also to provide sufficient lighting for the public to see each other doing the same, and to create a visual experience in support of what people already sense: being an inextricable part of an immense whole.*

This brief ethnographic impression of my visit to Inncity in December 2004 — the world's largest indoor dance event — sketches dance as a totally embodied, sensory and ritual experience. The beat is heard and felt; the body cannot resist moving; the raising of hands and the cheers naturally follows the beat. Vision is important too; the light effects

reinforce the rhythm of the beat; the sight of the other moving bodies; the immediacy and smell of the other bodies strongly engage the tactile and olfactory senses, all adding to a sensation of the boundaries between the self and the collective moving body being lifted.

Once a year, 45 to 50 thousand people come to Amsterdam from all over the country, to visit Innercity, a mega-dance party lasting from 9.00 in the evening to 7.00 in the morning. Innercity occupies eight different halls; each dedicated to either a specific style of electronic dance music such as Trance, Techno, Hardstyle, Clubhouse, Urban or Progressive, or to a 'theme.' Whether dedicated to a style or to a theme each hall has its own, carefully selected and carefully scheduled 'line-up' of DJs. At Innercity 2004 the most outstanding example of a 'themed' hall was 'Ex Porn Star'. Ex Porn Star is a dance party format which also exists independently from events like Innercity and is aimed at people who, as the Ex Porn Star website announces, "like to dress up and act famous", and which "is all about suggestion with a big lean to porn and bad taste"<sup>1</sup>. Innercity as a whole is also covered by a theme: 'Lenin' in 2002; 'Brasilia' in 2003; and 'Fabulous Las Vegas' in 2004. A theme helps the organisers of the event — in this case IDandT, the largest commercial player in the world of dance entertainment in The Netherlands — in designing suitable and consistent decorations and acts. Fabulous Las Vegas evokes images from the world of gambling, glamour, big money, poshness and conspicuous consumption. A substantial number of the visitors dress up more or less in accordance with the theme: Elvis-outfits; Texan hats; scantily dressed girls; 'brides' with the organisers going as far as staging a real wedding in the wedding-chapel at midnight followed by party-goers staging mock marriages.

Electronic dance music and its related thematic elaborations form a significant part of present-day Dutch leisure culture. For The Netherlands, it is estimated that half of the two million people that go out in a regular weekend, visit at least one, larger or smaller, dance event. A 2002 report on the social and economic meaning and impact of dance on Dutch society speaks of 2.3 million youths and young adults (half of all those aged 15–35) being interested in dance, 650,000 of whom actively take part in dance culture. For 200,000 dance is their way of life<sup>2</sup>. But what does 'dance as a way of life' actually mean? Qualitative fieldwork might offer some insight here. This kind of research should focus both

on 'the people' and 'the events' although it will be clear that the two cannot be separated in the end. However, the specific circumstances of dance-events make it almost impossible to conduct interviews on the spot (leaving aside the music, light-effects and the enormous crowd affecting the researcher).

It is my argument that participating in dance culture is a contemporary way of 'being in the world', of connecting with a wide circle of social and personal life worlds. Its meaning therefore is much wider than 'enjoying dancing'. Dance is a form of sociality which is experienced and shaped through the praxis of collective dancing, or, at least, by collectively visiting a dance event. Its members distinguish themselves through a shared lifestyle and taste. They may be understood, in the words of Michel Maffesoli (1996), as post-modern tribes, unstable, ephemeral 'little masses' that however, take shape over again. Maffesoli's approach opens the possibility of thinking of modernity in terms other than increasing individualism, allowing us to see 'social configurations that seem to go beyond individualism' and to switch our focus from individuals and self-contained identities, to persons and their roles within such configurations.

### The Funmates

To give my argument empirical footing, I will start by introducing a group of friends — playfully calling themselves 'the Funmates' — who, in my opinion, exemplify the idea of participating in dance culture as a 'way of being'<sup>3</sup>. I met the Funmates first on the Internet where they maintain their own website that is concerned with going-out and dance. The Funmates had not only visited Innercity together, but share an entire history — and future — of 'dance'. I am grateful for their willingness to meet me in person and for allowing me an inside view of the significance of dance in their lives.

The Funmates are six young men aged between 20 and 22 years. With the exception of Lex who plans to continue his education next year, all follow higher professional education; and, with the exception of Wim, they all are single. Four Funmates know each other from secondary school and three met at college. Eventually, Robbie, who was a member of both groups, made the connection by inviting both his groups of friends to the same occasion: the Zandvoort Formula 1 races near the

beach. Since then, they have become close friends, and spend much of their leisure time together. This means that the Funmates hang out together in discos or similar smaller dance facilities on ordinary weekends; organise a weekend in a hotel or a midweek in a holiday park every now and then; have a ten-day Mediterranean beach-and-party summer holiday together and attend four or five of the leading annual dance events in The Netherlands. At other times they will visit some of the lesser, but nonetheless significant, dance events. They can afford this lifestyle of partying, dance and leisure because they all still live with their parents. That's also their own perception: once they have to find (and finance) a place of their own — a transition that they strongly associate with 'when having a girlfriend — party life will be over,' or at least reduced to a much less intensive level. This perspective on the future is confirmed by the lifestyle of the only Funmate, Wim, who has a girlfriend already. Wim and his girlfriend live together and therefore, according to his friends, this Funmate is often unable to join the group, particularly during the summer holidays, and regularly misses one of the big dance events. The girlfriend and budgetary restraints are seen to hamper 'full-time participation'.

Although summer holidays and dance events may seem rather different kinds of leisure activities, for the Funmates and many others the two worlds are strongly connected. Tour operators organise cheap beach holidays for young people up to the age of 25. Popular holiday destinations are Spain (Ibiza, Lloret de Mar, Rosas), Greece (Crete) and Turkey (Antalya, Alanya). For most young holidaymakers these holidays are all about dancing, drinking and dating, and recovering on the beach or at the swimming pool during the daytime. In the summer months, a range of better and lesser known DJs will spin at local beach clubs and beach parties. Many (local) DJs begin their careers in these beach clubs and in July or August famous DJs, like the already mentioned Marco V or even the world phenomenon Tiësto, will spin a few evenings in the most prestigious clubs on Ibiza.

A Funmates summer holiday can be best understood as a ten-day culmination of the regular weekend nightlife activities in Holland. Three years ago, the Funmates had selected Chersonissos, a Cretan seaside resort with hundreds of discos and bars — 'the Walhalla for the young tourist,' according to a tour operator — and this year Chersonissos was the Funmates' holiday destination for the fourth time. Every night they

either go dancing in a disco — depending on the DJs spinning that evening in, for instance, the Dutch disco Bio Bio — or they may go to the Dutch place 't Hof van Holland, with Dutch staff and an overall Dutch public, or another place where the DJs or bands — 'the KretaBoyz' — provide Dutch-language party music. Later, back in The Netherlands, 't Hof van Holland will organise an reunion for its regulars, where the holiday experience may be relived once more in the popular après-ski format and, similarly, the Kretaboiz tour the Dutch youth's winter holiday places all over Europe.

When at home, the Funmates mix their own tracks in their rooms, and they will spin occasionally at school parties or comparable occasions before another major event comes round: they participate in at least five big dance events a year. The most significant of all — they are all very firm on this — is Sensation White. This annual dance event takes place in the Amsterdam soccer stadium the ArenA, early in July and Sensation White 2005 took place on July 2nd. The Funmates had bought their tickets (60 Euros each) immediately after the sale had started at midnight on April 1; a vital move as the 40,000 tickets were sold out within two hours. The anticipation of going to Sensation White is very exciting and, as one Funmate expressed: 'the event is comparable with other high days of the yearly calendar celebrations, like one's birthday or Queen's Day, but Sensation entails more excitement.' The Funmates count down the weeks, and when only two or three weeks are left, they start counting the nights. In these weeks, on their regular gatherings for a few drinks in preparation to go out, they play the so-called 'anthem', the last year's Sensation White special. So, what is so special about Sensation?

## Sensation

The Sensation concept was developed, again, by IDandT. The first Sensation, in 2000, was not 'white' — it was just a very large dance party organised in a recently opened, rather special and prestigious location: the Amsterdam soccer stadium, the ArenA (Van Veen 2004: 174–175)<sup>4</sup>. The location make Sensation differs widely from an event like Innercity. Innercity, held in the huge RAI Exhibition Halls, could be described as the theme park of electronic dance; depending on one's mood or preference one may go from style to style, each hall providing a different

ambience through its distinct music, decoration and, consequently, through its own particular public. By comparison, Sensation is the cathedral of electronic dance.

Although, on the one hand, Innercity is one big event (something its organisers — again IDandT — attempt to stress by dedicating every Innercity edition to a covering theme), the concept is constructed around the idea of offering a variety of experiences to choose from. Sensation, on the other hand, takes place in one single large space, a covered stadium. The construction of the Sensation experience is therefore rather different. The music, for instance, must be accessible for 40,000 people for an entire night, and therefore cannot be anything other than mainstream. In addition, the stadium enables, and asks, the public to choose between two options. One may either take an 'audience' position on the grandstand to watch the dancing crowd on the soccer field below, or one may join the crowd, and perform. In the course of the night — Sensation lasts from 10.00 until to 7.00 — people continually switch between the two modalities.

It was the introduction of the dress code 'white' that 'did it', that is, made Sensation *the* unsurpassed dance experience, although unintended as the organisers had not really foreseen the effect. The tickets for the second edition in 2001 invited the audience to dress in white with the slogan 'be part of the night, dress in white'. As it turned out, most of the public complied with the request. The 'enchanted' effect of tens of thousands of people dancing in white was so strong that the organisation decided to maintain the code and to make it compulsory. A closer look at the dress code, its effects and its origins might bring us further in understanding the idea of 'dance as a way of being in the world'. The idea of the dress code 'white' actually has a rather unexpected background: the organisers initially meant it as a tribute to the younger brother of one of the IDandT founders, who had died almost a year earlier in a car accident at the age of 25. This brother (Miles) had been a well-known figure in the dance world, in particular as the man behind the IDandT hardcore parties. In accordance with his wishes — the then IDandT website invited 'everybody' to attend the funeral with the text: 'Miles likes white and happy!' — the funeral dress code was 'white'. Subsequently, the dress code for Sensation 2001 was decided as an extra tribute (see Van Veen 2004: pp. 179–187)<sup>5</sup>.

## United in White

In *Release*, IDandT's monthly magazine, a Sensation visitor is quoted saying:

Sensation White is the event I am looking forward to for months. I don't go there for the DJs, but to be part of that vast white crowd, because of the fantastic show and because of the feeling the party gives you. The trip to Amsterdam is the beginning already. The closer one gets to the Arena, the more white there is on the road. It's cool to see all these people in white at the filling stations.<sup>6</sup>

The excitement of this Sensation White enthusiast on his way to the party is comparable to what Funmates Mark experiences: "Joining the growing stream of people in white, knowing that you're all heading to the same event, that gives a thrill". Similarly, Rob states: "The party actually starts when we gather at Daan, to have a drink, and then go to the Arena together. It's a fantastic sight, all these people in white. It's really impressive; in the train, at the filling stations, all those people in white"<sup>7</sup>.

To return to the idea of dance events as temporary emotional communities, Sensation White has evidently an added value to offer: the sociality to be created already exists visibly prior to the eventual event and is visible around its actual location, another unforeseen effect of the dress code to add to the total experience that Sensation White promises. Once all the trains, cars and busses have delivered their passengers, the excitement is further built up when one joins the white crowd gathering at the entrances. Even 'going there' and 'arriving there' have become events of their own, a dimension also intrinsic to religious rituals as pilgrimage and associations with, for instance, the Haj seem inevitable together with other kinds of secular mass gatherings like protests or important sport events. In his writings on pilgrimage, Victor Turner describes this aspect of awareness of affectionate interconnectedness or 'communitas' in pilgrimages as a characteristic of "both the journey, and the goal (the latter is in itself a source of communitas)" (Turner, 1978: p. 253). The colour white, a religious symbol in itself, is another contribution to the communitas experience. White stands for purity, and its 'modesty' — simplicity of dress is intrinsic to pilgrimage — adds to

the sense of unity (Turner, 1978: pp. 253–254). These significant parallels between 'the working' of an occasion like Sensation White and that of a pilgrimage invites us to pursue the comparison a little further. One other aspect that Sensation White and pilgrimage share is that people have voluntarily chosen to participate.

Voluntariness distinguishes both from activities or rituals in which people are obliged to participate: Optation pervades the liminoid phenomenon, obligation the liminal. One is all play and choice, and entertainment, the other is a matter of deep seriousness, even dread, it is demanding, compulsory. (Turner, 1978: p. 42).

Thus, although pilgrimage shares some of the liminal phase attributes of passage rites, like, for instance 'communitas', it is basically a liminoid (quasi-liminal) phenomenon in the sphere of leisure. Turner proceeds by arguing that the opposition between voluntary and obligatory participation actually characterises post-industrial society as a whole: our time and activities are determined by the strict division between the obligatory condition of work and the voluntary condition of leisure. In such societies:

... religion generally has been moved into the leisure sphere, more and more subject to individual option ('a person's free time is his to do as he likes with'). Even weekly attendance at religious service is becoming increasingly voluntary; failure to attend no longer a sin. (Turner, 1978: p. 35)

Engaging in religion or religious practices has thus become more or less comparable to, for example, people's engagement in sports, hobbies or tourism. An event like Sensation White, however, almost seems to hint at a reverse process, namely, to paraphrase Turner, to 'leisure moving into the religious sphere.' Although Sensation White definitely belongs to the sphere of leisure, people seem to seek and to undergo experiences that might also be described as religious.

Having explored the expectations of the crowd that arrives 'fired-up' at the stadium, it is now time to 'enter' the space itself and to see how Sensation White fulfils its promises. I will return to the Funmates once more by examining what exactly their expectations are and how they express themselves?

Nothing is comparable to Sensation White, it's just ... how to say, the atmosphere ... especially that moment that you have just arrived ... it's a total experience. [Mark]

... and then, we enter into the stadium. In fact, the most impressive moment is when you have reached the upper stairs and have your first glance inside, far away you see all those people standing there, in white. The lasers ... the splendid decorations. In addition to all this, white has something special of its own, I like the colour. And then, once the spinning has started, and the music is about to climax, and all get out of their mind, that's fantastic, a real high point. The lights and lasers have also a very nice effect on all that white. Actually, it is as the trailer shows ... that's how it really is. The music, the colour white, the atmosphere, the show; all together they make Sensation the best party of the year for me. [Rob]

Both Funmates clearly expressed the liminoid sensation of transgressing from the outer world into that enormous white crowd inside the ArenA. The organisers have taken great care to extend the exaltation as long as possible by providing a 'total ambience' and a programme that is a mere sequence of high points in an ascending order. Different from other dance events, the line-up of DJs is kept undisclosed until a few days in advance, and great care is taken to keep the theme and the decorations secret, all in order to add to an overwhelming surprise effect. Once inside, the white crowd, the impressive decorations and acts, the ample use of religious and Dionysian symbols, the music, the collective movements and gestures, the lightshows, the fireworks: all senses are addressed to the full in subsequent waves of excitement. Even stronger than in a dance event like Innercity, the boundaries between self and crowd cease to exist, and action and perception become one.

No other environment is better suited to containing a fully inward-oriented crowd than an arena and perhaps no one describes better this relationship between an arena and its crowd than Elias Canetti in his book *Crowds and Power*:

Outside, facing the city, the arena displays a lifeless wall; inside is a wall of people. The spectators turn their backs to the city ... they have left behind all their associations, rules and

habits. Their remaining together in large numbers for a stated period of time is secure and their excitement has been promised to them. But only under one definite condition; the discharge must take place *inside the arena*. (Canetti, 1962: p. 31, italics in original)

Canetti then continues with a description of how the arena channels the experience of the crowd:

The seats are arranged in tiers around the arena, so that everyone can see what is happening below. The consequence of this is that the crowd is seated opposite itself. Every spectator has a thousand in front of him, a thousand heads. As long as he is there all the others are there too; whatever excites him, excites them; and he sees it. They are seated from some distance away from him, so that the differing details which make individuals of them are blurred; they all look alike and they all behave in a similar manner and he notices in them only the things which he himself is full of. Their visible excitement increases his own. There is no break in the crowd which sits like this, exhibiting itself to itself. (Canetti, 1962: p. 31)

A closer look at Sensation White requires taking this analysis a step further. Unlike Canetti's sedentary spectators of sport events and concerts that also take place in the Arena, there is no differentiation between performers and audience in the case of dance. Moreover, when watching the performance below, the crowd is watching itself, and remains in a sense undifferentiated from that moving whole. Within this unity, there is one place and one figure that attracts the special attention of the public, however: the DJ in his or her temple-like structure on a high platform in the centre of the field, and displayed on the giant screens all around the stadium. The DJ steers the collective moving body but is not part of it. Unlike any other participant in the event, the DJ is connected to the others via a medium: music. The music is a shared language, as it is said in the dance world, but the DJ speaks and the dancers answer with their bodies.

## A plea for fieldwork

Reality, though, is more unruly than the above considerations suggest: diversity remains within the apparent unity. During my fieldwork at Sensation White I learned that people actually continually 'step out' from the unifying processes of the event to engage in personal relationships and concerns. To give an example, three people I had got to know in the entrance queue for Sensation White 2005 had planned to meet some friends at a point decided in advance. However, twenty to thirty thousand people on the dance floor meant that we never met in spite of continuous text messages contacting each other. To me, the 'quests' through this endless 'sea' of people in white were a dreamlike experience that gave the whole event a dimension I would never had thought of in advance. Whether on our 'quests', or while dancing, other groups were also passing by on their respective 'quests.' All the time, everywhere, people were exchanging text messages with friends somewhere in the crowd (and outside the stadium). Thus, rather than remaining as single individuals there were a variety of groups, whether physically together or connected virtually. Understanding the meaning of these spaces, processes and connections will require further fieldwork.

## Notes

- 1 Quoted from [www.expornstar.com](http://www.expornstar.com) (website visited in June 2005)
- 2 See KMPG 2002, page 7.
- 3 For reasons of privacy, the Funmates is a fictitious name, as are the Funmates' names.
- 4 Sensation is not the only non-soccer large-scale event organised in the stadium. The Arena is designed to house all kinds of mass events, and boasts a grass pitch that allows being covered for five days by using a vacuum system and a moveable roof.
- 5 In the week of his death in many discos and clubs a commemorative minute of silence was held. On the website ([www.milesstutterheim.nl](http://www.milesstutterheim.nl)) erected in commemoration of Miles — which is still regularly visited — one is welcomed with the track that he designed in the weeks before he died. Apparently, many people

from the dance scene felt themselves connected with Miles, IDandT and its parties. This initial emotional connection helps to understand the immediate success of the dress code.

6 *Release*, June 2005 (trans. Irene Stengs).

7 My own interest in Sensation was raised when I, still unaware of the event's existence, suddenly found myself in a train boarded by ever more people dressed in white on every station, all clearly heading to the same joyful event.

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