



GARAGE



FASHION

Was Grime Britain's Last Subculture?

A new exhibition documents London's grime kids, ravers, and punks from an age before the Internet. What can it tell us about nostalgia in the gallery?

By [MEGAN WALLACE](#) | Nov 17 2019, 10:45am

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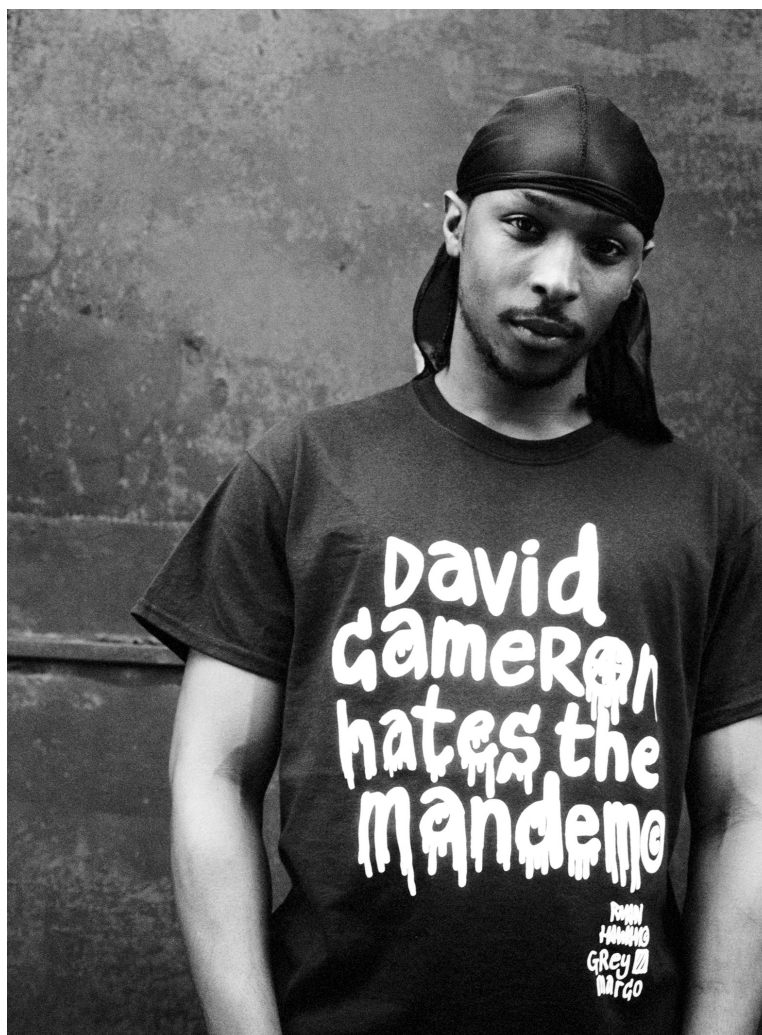
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Sign of the Times © Fiona Cartledge *Sign of the Times* was a stall, that evolved into a shop, initially located in Kensington Market. Owned by Fiona Cartledge, throughout the 1980s and 1990s it sold and promoted items by local London designers and dressed the city's ravers.

Entitled “Streetstyle: from Teddy Boys to Grime Kids”, you’d be forgiven for thinking Trinity Gallery’s latest exhibition would give off *Sartorialist* vibes. But this is not that kind of streetstyle, rather, the show puts itself in dialogue with the 1994 exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk, one of the first shows of its kind, *which* traced the impact of

youth culture on fashion from the punk movement to B-Boys. Taking on the original show, *From Teddy Boys to Grime Kids* unpacks its predecessor's curatorial methods and expands its scope with a deep-dive into the fashion and images associated with Grime.

Taking place in East London, where Grime as a music genre and subculture first emerged in the early 2000's, the exhibition contains archival material including notes from the original exhibition's "Skinheads" display, images of Zandra Rhodes' punk-inspired Conceptual Chic collection (1977) and Fiona Cartledge's personal documentation of Sign of the Times, the boutique that styled acid house. There's also images documenting the emergence of Grime, with the physical display being supplemented by a digital archive by Olivia Rose; the creator of This Is Grime, a project featuring MCs like Skepta and D Double E.



"JME PORTRAITS," PHOTO BY OLIVIA ROSE. JME (AKA JAMIE ADENUGA) IS ONE OF THE MOST RECOGNIZABLE NAMES IN GRIME. HIS LABEL, BOY BETTER KNOW, HAS BEEN RELEASING MUSIC SINCE 2008, AND HAS COLLABORATED WITH SCENE MAINSTAYS SUCH AS WILEY, D DOUBLE E AND SKEPTA, WHO ALSO HAPPENS TO BE HIS BROTHER. JME'S T-SHIRT MAKES REFERENCE TO FORMER RIGHT-WING PRIME MINISTER DAVID CAMERON, WHOSE ECONOMIC AUSTERITY AND PUBLIC SERVICE CUTS NEGATIVELY AFFECTED MANY PEOPLE ACROSS THE UK.

The 1994 exhibition is a tough act to follow, especially for a relatively modest gallery. Yet the space is filled with depictions of items that possess a transportative quality. Clothes aren't just objects of desire; they can also stand in for what we desire for ourselves ("dress for the job you want, not the one you have" etc). Already allowing us a bit of temporal flexibility, then, it would make sense that certain clothes can also help catapult us back to the past—or at least to whatever version of it we can remember. For those who can't remember skinheads and their ilk from first-hand experience, the displayed materials consolidate and expand upon the narratives of different subcultural groups that have infiltrated the cultural consciousness.

There's a tricky distinction between how a youth movement is experienced in the moment and how it is remembered or mythologized. Exhibition curator Tory Turk, who has previously worked on exhibitions documenting punk band The Jam and exploring the impact of Korean style on British fashion, thinks that this fissure between fact and fiction is an important one. "There is beauty in any misremembering; it makes the myth more powerful than the reality," Turk says. "In some way this is more magical than the truth, as these coming of age moments can be more emotional than factual."



OUTSIDE THE SIGN OF THE TIMES SHOP IN 1994, PHOTO BY JEREMY DELLER. JEREMY DELLER IS A TURNER PRIZE-WINNING CONCEPTUAL ARTIST WHO IS KNOWN FOR ACID BRASS—A PROJECT FUSING TRADITIONAL BRASS BAND MUSIC WITH ACID HOUSE AND TECHNO. BEFORE HE WAS ABLE TO SUPPORT HIMSELF THROUGH HIS ARTISTIC PRACTICE, HE WORKED AS A SHOP ASSISTANT AT SIGN OF THE TIMES.

When you're moving within a subcultural moment, it can be hard to take stock of the wider implications of *why* your friends are all dressing the same or listening to a specific kind of music. With fresh eyes, for example, we can see acid house and rave was a form of escapism before the austerity and right-wing politics of the Conservative Party in 1980s Britain—but we can't really be sure this was the thinking at the time. It's only in hindsight that we get this kind of clarity, but by then either too much time has passed, or we're too old to naturally integrate into "youth culture". It's this cruel issue of timing that feeds into *From Teddy Boys to Grime Kids*. "One of the things that makes youth cultures of the past more exciting to reflect on is that there has been a meaningful time lag in the representation," Turk explains. "This means there's enough time for a feeling of nostalgia to manifest." Perhaps in response to this nostalgia, recent years have seen an influx of exhibitions turning their eyes to the youths of the recent past. In the UK, London's Saatchi Gallery mounted an exploration of the 80s and 90s rave movement with *Sweet Harmony: Rave | Today* this summer, and there's even talks of a possible Museum of Youth Culture in the capital.

Turk believes that the retrospective glance of the UK art world is linked to Internet-saturated contemporary culture. "I think that nostalgia has become more special in a time when everything is accessible at a digital fingertip. The feeling that these exhibitions conjure up are about escapism," she explains. She's right—the impulse to inhabit a pre-Internet age before the information glut or the panopticon of social media *is* alluring, even if we know we couldn't survive without our digital comforts.

Within this frame, *From Teddy Boys to Grime Kids*' focus on Grime seems unusual. Rather than being a pre-Internet subculture, it began to navigate the cyberspace with the first millennials. Forming at the end of the '90s, Grime tracks were produced on lo-fi software and spread throughout London via MP3 files sent phone-to-phone via Bluetooth—and now, new gen artists embrace this DIY ethos by self-promoting via social media. However, Turk believes that Grime appeared at just the right time.

"Grime evolved alongside social media and the digital revolution," she says. "It's one of the last new youth cultures to emerge before subcultures became completely accessible online."

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