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This was Berlin: sexual liberation, free of guilt and shame.

BULL

# Laid Bare

People are fascinated by sex and sex-positive spaces, and Berlin is home to some of the most famous and fantastic sex clubs in the world. Yet no one *really* knows how they look inside. Even if you are a regular attendee, you're only seeing the place when it is alive and throbbing – you don't know how it looks when the dust has settled. That changes now. In an unprecedented photography project titled *Playgrounds*, **Gavin Evans** captures the realities of Berlin's sex-positive spaces, showing them in a completely new light. **By Wanda Sachs**



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The world of sex-positive spaces is a covert one – not just to the people who never enter them but also the ones that do. On a night out, our surroundings pass us by. Be it dance floor or dark room, dimly lit and obscured by intoxicated partyfolk, we lose ourselves in the thrill of the action, rather than stopping to take in the space itself. We’re simply not meant to see these spaces in daylight; they belong to the night.

British photographer Gavin Evans is ready to change that. Somehow, against all odds, he managed to persuade club owners to give him access to these guarded spaces and has been capturing their insides in brilliant detail for four years now. The resulting images, collected under the title *Playgrounds*, show 15 sex clubs and hotels in a way they’ve never been seen before: brightly lit and frozen in time by Evans’ camera lens.

The covertness of Berlin’s sex clubs stems, in part, from necessity: partakers deserve privacy and protection. But these spaces – and what happens inside them – are also still fraught with stigma and taboo, despite having long been an integral and emblematic part of unified Berlin. Unique in the world, clubs like KitKatClub and Ficken 3000 attract Berliners and tourists alike, testifying to a need – and demand – for places where people can explore their sexual fantasies free from judgement.

With his project nearing a close, we talk to Evans about liberating this lingering stigma with his work, what it felt like to shoot the empty rooms, and documenting a scene that is adamant to keep its guard up.

**Tell us, where did the idea for *Playgrounds* originate – was it a flash of inspiration?**

It was on a winter afternoon in 2018 when [my wife] The Valkyrie and I wandered into the Fetisch Hof in Neukölln. The club was closed but the door was open. I was immediately struck by the empty rooms. The spaces were themed, each a setting for a different fetish or proclivity. These were theatres, stages for the performance of sex, places where fantasies were made real. They were backdrops or sets where roleplaying was enacted. The Fetisch Hof, like all the places featured in *Playgrounds*, is a safe space where sex is consensual and no money is exchanged for services – these are not brothels. The venues were affirmation that you’re not alone in your needs or desires. This was Berlin: sexual liberation, free of guilt and shame.

**Berlin is notorious for its ban on cameras in clubs, especially sex-positive spaces. How did you manage to gain access to the clubs you’ve photographed?**

From the get-go, *Playgrounds* was conceived as a series of photographs of spaces that the viewer could place themselves within. The images are safe spaces themselves, free of onlookers or obscured by bodies. I wrote to each club clearly outlining my goals and intentions. Some I phoned, others I met in person. At no time did I have to sell myself or the project, they all could see the merit of being part of this cultural and artistic project. Permission was ultimately granted as my intention was not to reveal or expose the clubs’ clientele. The project later took on a sense of urgency with the onset of Covid and social distancing. Uncertainty that the clubs or culture would survive the pandemic made the documenting of the spaces a necessity, and the owners sensed this, too. The project was no longer solely an art project; it became the preservation of a culture unique to Berlin and now under threat.

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Klub Kultur Houze



Ficken 3000



Quälgeist

**Did you face any other difficulties seeing this project through?**

The only challenge was gaining trust with the club owners to gain access to the spaces, convincing them that my plan was not to do a kiss-and-tell exposé.

**Was there anything that was off limits, anything that you weren't allowed to photograph?**

At no time was I censored or refused access to any areas as you can see by the photographs. I was given access to all spaces. These spaces are no limits, not off limits!

**Can you talk us through your process onsite?**

I was given access to the spaces when they were closed to the public, generally in the afternoon. When inside I photographed every space: bathrooms, padded cells, chambers, surgeries... Composition and lighting is how I inject my personality into the photograph. Every scene was shot multiple times from a fixed position. For each take I would change the lighting, illuminating different features. In post-production, the individual images were then stacked one on top of the other, revealing the final photograph.

**In the shots, bright lights reveal excruciating detail, dark basements, peeled-off wallpaper, broken furniture. Some of the photos don't make these spaces look very appealing, almost evoking a sense of discomfort. Was that your intention?**

My lighting techniques vary throughout *Playgrounds*: hardcore lighting for hardcore spaces, rich lighting for lavish surroundings. The appeal of some spaces is the perfunctory act of sex. In some spaces sex is down and dirty, purely physical, and my choice of lighting alludes to this. The lighting must evoke the atmosphere of the space.

**How did it feel to see these places in broad daylight, without the safety blanket of the night and dim lighting, the people dressed the part and the music?**

It was a unique opportunity to experience the rooms bare and to let my imagination go places unhindered.

**What are you hoping people will take away from this series? What conversations do you hope your photos will spark?**

For some, the experience will confirm that they are neither freaks nor outcasts. To others, the project will open their eyes to the scope of eroticism, safe sex and sensuality. I hope that every viewer can envisage themselves in one or more of these spaces. Perhaps they will be inspired to travel to Berlin to experience it themselves. Ultimately, I hope that *Playgrounds* is liberating.

**What was your favourite place to photograph and why?**

The experiences witnessed by the rooms and furniture at Ficken 3000 spoke volumes! The imprint of bodies recorded on the leatherette sofa is a vivid example. The

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Insomnia



KitKatClub

creativity that goes into curating and designing these spaces is an art in itself. Each venue is special and uniquely different. I like them all for different reasons.

**Did the project change the way you think about those clubs or the scene in general?**

I knew from my first experience of the Fetisch Hof that these safe spaces were professionally managed. This impression was reinforced the more spaces I photographed. I was impressed by the care, creativity and attention to detail. Berlin is all the richer for having such a vital scene.

**What's next for *Playgrounds*?**

It's been eight years since I started out on this expedition. The end is within sight, and I would be grateful if the readers of *Exberliner* could alert me to any venues that have gone under my radar. Meanwhile I am looking for galleries and publishers to get the project out there.

**Let's talk about you and your other work – you're best known as a portrait photographer and have shot many household names. How did you first get into photography?**

I was 12 when I discovered abstract photographs of cadavers taken by a neighbour – a former forensic photographer of the Bermuda Police Service. His images seared themselves into my pre-teen brain. I witnessed the power of photography and there was no going back.

**What do you love most about it?**

The photograph reveals the photographer – an inescapable fact.

**In 1995, *Time Out London* commissioned you to shoot David Bowie. How did that come about and what was the shoot like? Was that your first celebrity shoot?**

The first personality I shot was the punk poet John Cooper Clarke backstage at Middlesbrough Town Hall. I was 15. Back then, I would blag my way into gigs under the pretence that I was working for local papers or fanzines. Bowie was a regular magazine commission for a cover and accompanying feature

images. The shoot lasted the usual 40 minutes. He was entertaining and gracious.

**It resulted in one of Bowie's most recognisable portraits, a black and white photograph of the singer placing a finger on his lips. What impact did this portrait have on you as a photographer?**

I am humbled that from the vast array of photographs of David Bowie, fans and admirers have chosen my portrait to remember him by. At the time, the photograph was an illustration to accompany an interview. It took on a whole new meaning and significance on his passing. People are surprised when they find out I'm the author of such a famous image, but on the whole my identity is unknown – I am not the subject of the image, after all. I am content in the knowledge that I have created and will continue to create images that will resonate long after I shuffle off this mortal coil.

**You've shot a lot of other famous figures – Iggy Pop, Björk, Nick Cave, Daniel Craig. How do these shoots come about, and what attracts you to this kind of photography?**

My portraits come by way of commissions from publications. I have no interest in celebrities; I want to be educated or challenged by my subject. Portrait photographers are judged by comparing images of the same subject. A famous personality is the ideal reference to make these comparisons. The goal is to reveal my personality through the subject. That to me is the essence of portraiture.

**How does *Playgrounds* relate to your previous work? Is this a new direction for you, or is this style of project something that you have always worked on?**

I use the camera to investigate the world we inhabit. My collection *Nightscares – India After Dark* draws comparisons to *Playgrounds*. With The Valkyrie by my side we spent three months wandering the seemingly deserted streets and slums of India throughout the night, revealing spaces that were obscured in the day by an endless barrage of vehicles and bodies. New Delhi, Kolkata, Kanpur, Darjeeling and Jaisalmer were some of the locations we ventured in the dark.

**Earlier, you said you're not interested in celebrities. What are you interested in?**

I'm interested in boundaries – how to expose, walk and push them. The camera is a tool of discovery and exploration, and something of the forensic photographer still lurks inside. I'm never short of ideas, only short of time. Berlin is a constant source of inspiration to me.

Keep up with Gavin Evans' work on [gavinevans.com](http://gavinevans.com)

## Facing the Camera

Gavin Evans has photographed some of the most famous faces in the world. Here is a small selection of his work.



David Bowie



Nick Cave



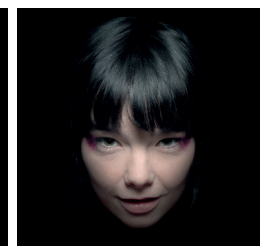
Juliette Binoche



Maxi Jazz



Ai Weiwei



Björk