

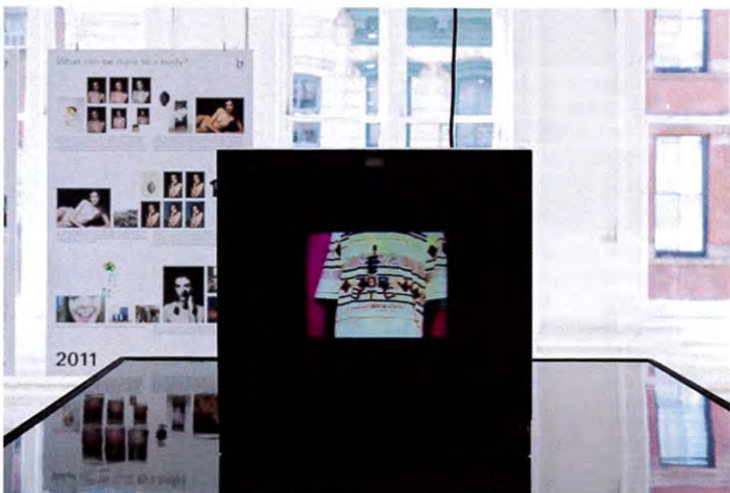


BEST OF 2012

# “Bernadette Corporation: 2000 Wasted Years”

Artists Space, New York

KEN OKIISHI







Opposite and this page: Views of "Bernadette Corporation: 2000 Wasted Years," 2012. Photos: Daniel Perez.

ONE OF THE MOST PUZZLING THINGS about Bernadette Corporation is that it never became truly commercially viable in either the fashion or the art system—unlike many of its peers in the 1990s and 2000s, who were able to capitalize on the interface of those very systems. BC's hesitation, or perhaps just disorganization, could be seen as a lived resistance to market permeation, both inside the bodies of its various "corporate" members and within the *networks* of "cool" it activated. And it could also be part of the reason why its work (including its "new" work) continues to look fresh, unlike, say, the current pages of *Purple* magazine. In fact, BC's "old" work, in particular the fashion shows from the late '90s and the magazine *Made in USA* from the turn of the millennium, may look even better now than when it first appeared—when the group's contributors were also heavy presences on the scene, and when its janky couture, not to mention the gossamer schizo-collectivity of designer Susan Cianciolo, had not yet been endlessly

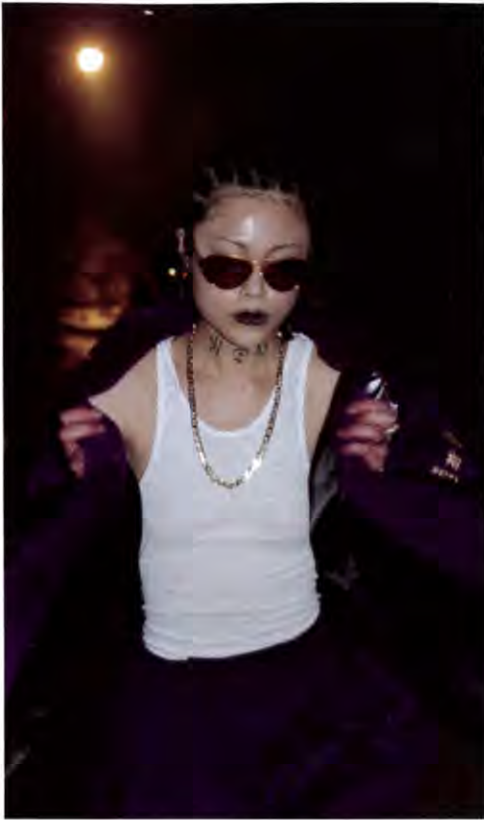
rehashed. Strangely, it is this "originality" that seems most relevant to our climate of ever-hatching niche markets and constantly recycled stylistic detritus—a garbage fashion of microtrends and instant market access, of networked products whose major joy is carefully calibrating an immediate sellout.

As the '90s become confused with the '00s; as the past twenty years are recompressed, repackaged, and remarketed as quickly as possible; as certain strains of ironic fashion that in the '90s were transgressive have reappeared, partially as the look of an earnest hatred of present-day financial capitalism, partially as a way of generating an ecstatic marketability for products and services by savvy magazine and consultancy "collectives"; and as "radical chic" has come to encompass anything that looks fucked-up, a retrospective view of BC also becomes an opportunity to tease out ways in which BC is decisively *not* radical chic. That it is not the purchase of "street cred," or the promise of buying the look of political action,

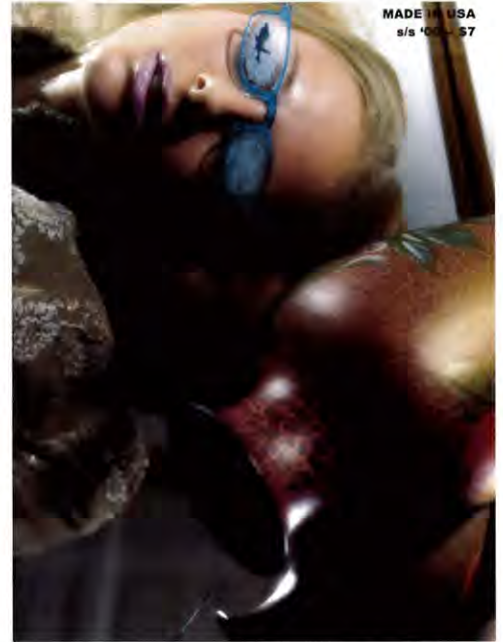
or a mask of radicality for self-promotional aims—but actual politics at work, radical or otherwise.

Which is not to say that BC's direct political discourse, the stuff that sounds the most like "theory," is where the politics in their work really lives. If there is a real weakness in the reception of BC thus far, it is that the group's nostalgia for French and Italian '68-era left-wing politics and '80s theory—and its '00s reprocessing—is taken at face value. I am reminded of an off-the-cuff half joke by one of its members at a rather depressingly earnest OWS meeting, who startlingly described autoreduction (the Autonomist tactic of collectively reducing prices or production) as being kind of like a Groupon. It is at these fissures, when the ardent political impulse runs wild and disjoints competing systems of value, thereby short-circuiting otherwise agile circuits of "community" and "ideology," where the politics in BC's work is most effective, and where its sustained interest in "fashion" still holds the most potential. Especially





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Left: Look from Bernadette Corporation's fall/winter 1997 collection, "Hell on Earth." Photo: Dietmar Busse.

Above: Cover of *Made in USA 2* (1999/2012). Photo: Cris Moor.

now, when these styles seem to be returning everywhere—as ghosts of zombie simulations, with no apparent politics, not even an antipolitics.

Which is also why it is so great that Stefan Kalmár and Richard Birkett at Artists Space had the courage to attempt this show. After all, when word got around that this show was happening, everyone wondered: How could you possibly do a BC retrospective? With so much critical and social contingency, so much “fuck you,” so much probably lost or thrown away over the years?

Well, whatever they did, it worked. With a crackling, pseudolackadaisical analytic precision (and a much larger budget than usual), BC went for the forms of display whose borders could be most contaminated, most warped. In this stripped-down full floor in SoHo, which evokes as much nostalgia for “alternative spaces” as it does fantasies of “loft living,” we are confronted with a monstrous, black, '00s-futuristic carcass of a Dior Homme—cum-airport-lounge-cum-architectural-info-kiosk-dressing-room-pop-up-fast-food-restaurant display apparatus, complete with faux graffiti (AGAINST ALL SYSTEMS) that only makes the enormous object even more ambivalent in meaning; various vitrines, the spawn of said marvelous abomination, where the reliquary is given the texture of the

current trend for displaying objects as if they store Internet data; trashy mannequins, in awful shades of black or white, as hilarious as they are sad, wearing remakes of BC clothes; and, most striking in its unexpected directness, a seemingly straightforward time line of the entire archival history of BC, which is as much *Infoaesthetik* as it is FIT-museum presentation as it is storyboard for a tell-all BC biopic (with K-holes as the primary editing technique).

The retrospective is shocking to many people who were becoming skeptical of BC's work and who were expecting an emptier gesture: It is elaborately detailed and, as a body of work (in its “rebooted” form, to use the artists' quaint term), implicitly critiques much that has come after it. Unlike the MFA-stamped, aspirational youths of today, BC does not confuse the storage device with informational flows, the fetish with the message. They understand that data circulates on and between bodies and objects—not inside USB sticks—and that the true malleability is on the surface of our faces. If there is a metaphor in the current vogue for USB sticks, it would be “dead USB stick”: a fetish for empty information.

And yet there is also something of the touch screen in the way BC parasitically remakes and undoes advertising, the way the bodies look so similar but

“feel” so different in, for example, BC's commission, as part of *The Complete Poem*, of David Vasiljevic's photo shoot based on his 2008 Levi's ad campaign. With “real models” and “real photographers,” the surface of advertising itself takes on the character of the touch screen, like the skin of a person, the beautiful person you love, the skin you touch, which now responds with an automatic sad sexiness to every drag, flick, tap, hold, nudge, pinch, spread, and slide. Tactility is rerouted. No more real fluids—just an incalculable flow of information, a smear inside the screen. Or no information at all: The messages never arrive, even though your in-box is always open, attached to your hand—an openness that is also the transparency of cells, of “transparency” as control, of hand sanitizer. A radically ambivalent affect is injected into the site of desire production. Images that are meant to produce a consumer of branded lifestyles swerve toward other matrices of desire.

Even as this experience seems tied to technology, to a prosthetic body, a much earlier set of photographs demonstrates that this affective mode does not rely on computers and their metaphors. Photographed by Mark Borthwick, with Bernadette Van-Huy listed as “stylist,” this slim, five-page shoot has stuck with





Above: Page from *Made in USA 2* (1999/2012). Photo: Mark Borthwick.

me ever since I first saw it in 2000, in the second issue of *Made in USA*. It features an almost—still—indescribable lack of coherence in every thin, unmade black-and-white image. In one spread, a model who could be anyone, maybe a teenage boy, maybe a girl, leans against the wall, full-length, staring into the fold of the magazine, almost completely covered up by his/her own long hair, a minor lens flare covering up most of the “fashion” that could be for sale here. The heels are much too big. There’s a plastic bag from Domsey’s (“clothes by the pound”) crumpled up against the wall; s/he is standing, leaning against it, but not very hard, and the shadow of the image of the body seems to be holding up the bag.

Only a text that Bernadette wrote herself—or at least that seems to be speaking in her voice, since you never know—does justice to the sheer undecidability of this image. The extraordinary tract is reproduced twice in the retrospective (once as archival material, once as a light box), and it is nearly impossible to excerpt. It reads now like an antimanifesto, on the level of Yvonne Rainer’s “No Manifesto,” in our age of thirteen-year-old fashion bloggers and armies of art school infomaniacs. It also reads with the latent cruelty of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

It begins: “1. I am a first-generation Vietnamese-American, born in Queens, NY. I’ve never been to Asia. 2. I never knew a thing about fashion until I moved to Manhattan after graduating from college with a degree in economics. I had never been cool. I liked the same music as my mother. I never experi-

mented with drugs or alcohol or style. I preferred bowling to rock concerts.” It goes on to tell the story of how BC began, of throwing parties with Cooper Union art students, of “collecting as much fashion data” as she could; of BC’s “volatile” working process, full of “year-long depressions” and “the most productive and inspired moments of our lives”; of realizing a “fiction that we prefer to reality.” With continued, casual charm, it also archives the frustrating states of being an artist in New York at the beginning of the twenty-first century: “Begin a sideline ‘pure’ business venture, no art involved whatsoever, (systems analysis?, pouring concrete?, toothpaste?).” “Sell everything and move to the mountains.” And through these contingencies, the text arrives at BC’s core politics. Unlike the aloofness of modernist strategies of negation or the pluralism of postmodern acceptance, BC unleashes a nonproductive shudder within overproductive, financialized bodies. Not for the market, but not exactly against the market either, BC allows an uneasy supplement to emerge—an ambivalent affect, a stutter, that could, through the precise misuse of the fashion system, come to appear anywhere, anytime: “As much as we love the speed of fashion and information and exchanges in general, we are also interested in putting some slowness back into it. A curious thing happens then. Fashion/information finds some time to ask itself a couple of questions before suddenly speeding off again.” □

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Bernadette Van-Huy (left) at Club USA, New York, 1993.



Bernadette Van-Huy preparing the spring/summer 1997 collection “Streetgangs and Corporations,” 270 Bowery, New York, 1996. Photo: Cris Moor.

