

TONIGHT NEED YORK



SHANZHAI LYRIC



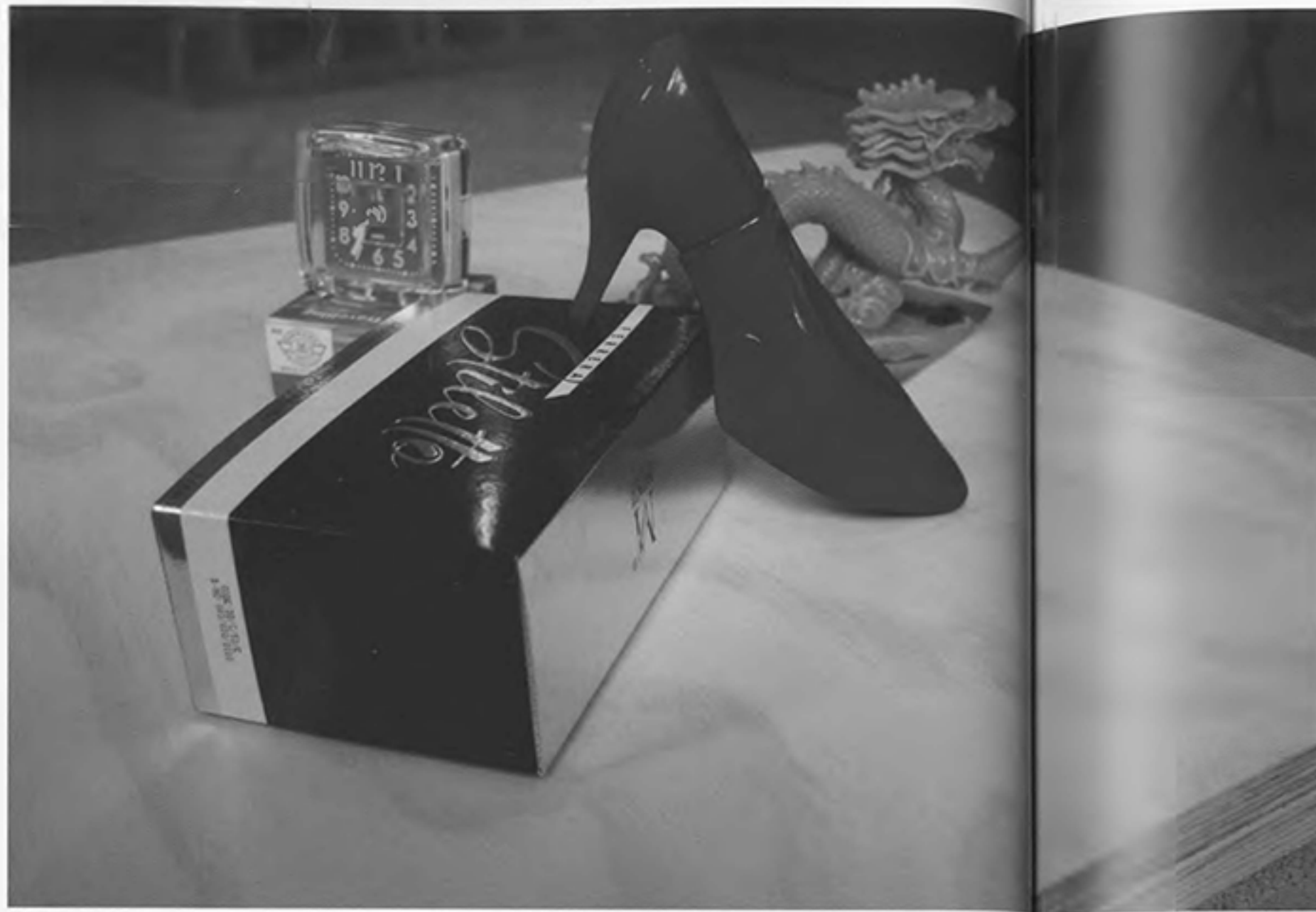
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For the last three months of 2020, the itinerant archive Shanzhai Lyric took up residence at an empty storefront on Canal Street in New York City's lower Manhattan. These months were spent considering the street as a microcosm of global flows and fissures, analyzing this iconic point of collision between high and low where counterfeit luxury items are famously available for streetside purchase from a dense array of blankets. In the midst of the current so-called "retail apocalypse," and political uprisings for racial justice across the US, Shanzhai Lyric invents and occupies the fleeting entity Canal Street Research Association to revisit projects both massive and minute that have transpired on the storied block, speculating new modes of inhabiting this complex interplay of hustles. Using the store window as a frame through which to observe movements on the street, Shanzhai Lyric wrote these initial reflections during their first week at and as Canal Street Research Association.



A pink hat with rhinestones spells out *HOPE*. An oversized Gucci fanny pack lies beside an undersized Louis Vuitton change purse. A platinum silver keychain bottle opener in the shape of the Statue of Liberty is too roughly molded to open any bottles. *FUCK YOU YOU FUCKING FUCK* says a t-shirt that hangs next to a sample garment with all the letters of the alphabet in all different colors, just to show you your options. Perfume bottles with majestic shapes and iconic names—*English Leather*, *Black Pearls*, *Delicious Feelings*—create an allusory mosaic against a pegboard wall. Sequined slippers are sold as a pair, one of them faded from dangling in the sun.



All images courtesy Shanzhai Lyric

Among the bottles is an alluring scent: *ENTERTAIN for women*. Another sits beside it in the shape of a bright red high-heeled shoe. The shoe is so classic in style that it veritably asks to be held up to the ear like a phone in a vaudeville sketch. *Stiletto* is scrawled in gold script across a jet-black lacquered box. *Stiletto* is a diminutive of *stilo*, Italian for dagger—itself a diminutive of *stilus*,



a pointed tool for writing whose hard tip scratches out letters. Style, too, emerges from this root, indicating a distinctive manner of composition. Engraving feeling and observation into language etches the experience into words, styles it. Indeed, style is both pen and knife, wielding the sharp confidence of self expression to keep others at bay, the incisiveness needed to make a mark. The stiletto-clad stride weaponizes each precarious step. The word *stylus* can also refer to a tool used for cutting grooves on a record or a tool used to trace stencils for reproductions, that is, as an instrument of reproduction. Copying. Is style itself always a mark of the most sophisticated copy? Is style a mode of copying that departs from the original just enough that flawed imitation becomes innovation and rebellion to be emulated? After all, the beloved flaws of the bootleg are often the most stylish of all. Style-ish.



Canal Street has long been the center of copy culture in New York, and famously so. But during a time of imposed isolation, passerby seeking to buy the copies have dwindled. Today, the latest items for sale on the streets are masks: *SUPREME* on the mouth, interlocked *Chanel C's* across closed lips, or the latest bold slogan filtered down from above: *NEW YORK STRONG*. Vendors offer their wares at reduced price, sometimes up to 80 percent off: "COVID prices."

Just several seasons ago the street was so crowded one could hardly navigate down the block without brushing up against the crush of bodies. On emptied thoroughfares, only locals and those between homes remain. Borders have closed, leaving migrants stranded. A plastic covering for a Chanel bag is a tumbleweed that bumps along the vacant stretch. Some lifelong New Yorkers celebrate the newly empty city as the flight of

tourists and tenants has revealed the unexpected possibility to re-occupy newly abandoned sites. Diminished police presence invites unregulated street markets to bloom anew.

On the corner of Canal and Greene stands the regal USPS building, a melancholy emblem of a former epoch, both kept afloat and sunk by its new role delivering the e-commerce orders that have gutted brick-and-mortar business. The US Postal Service is suddenly more crucial than ever before, responsible for delivering mail-in ballots for US elections at a time when few feel safe at the voting polls due to COVID-19 and voter intimidation. And yet it is also at this moment that the USPS is being denigrated as inefficient and unnecessary, its very existence threatened by deliberate underfunding.



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The first retail apocalypse was caused by the internet. Some degree of in-person shopping is sustained by the desire to discover in-person secrets, touch things, smell things, taste and sample, spit and be spit on, shout and be shouted at, make a deal, haggle, bargain, coax, and flirt. Hence the proliferation of the pop-up, which satisfied the needs of all parties involved to touch, sell, speculate—with as little responsibility as possible. But none of this is really possible now.

The current so-called “retail apocalypse,” brought on by the current global crisis, has only illuminated what was already there: the profound unsustainability and inequality of the market. Property developers on the block hedge their bets, trading in the currency of cultural capital. The creative class pays to populate space with their ideas and objects with unregulated, unquantifiable value.

Trucks rattle by, ambulances wail, small dogs scowl and pause to piss. Directly across the way, men languidly sell luxury bootlegs. Seated and resting from lack of customers, they sometimes hover around an open grill, sometimes thrumming a rhythm on taut drums or singing along with the radio. The streets themselves are empty of the usual tourist crowds. There is only the whiz of what was.

Since the US uprisings for racial justice in June, the street is marked by a uniform blankness, of plywood and brown paper covering storefronts. It is the fear of looting that disguises the actual looting these properties have stood for all along, in their centuries-long attempt at profiting off of stolen land. Unable to lease their buildings, landlords prefer to leave these sites as closed-off shells, as if opening the doors even just a crack might allow some of that precious cultural cultivation they have been working so hard to escape. The stoops and sidewalks surrounding these empty spaces are repurposed as nooks in which to rest and pray.

Last week, the graffiti artist Honschar jotted the words “Welcome to Little Africa” on the sidewalk in chalk, annotating an unauthorized territory on the western side of the street. A salesman known jovially as Cowboy requested more geographic specificity, and the unofficial signage was changed to read “Welcome to Senegal.” This community of West African street vendors has been growing during the past several months of pandemic life in the city. The colorful splash of bootleg luxury bags, belts, scarves, and watches along the sidewalk harkens back to earlier days of unregulated street markets that once characterized New York before the Neo-liberal turn that turned the city into a brand necessitating the eradication of all streetlife deemed bad for the biz. A lull in official oversight is perhaps a small opening for a beloved industry long derided as less than essential. Today, “Little Africa” constitutes one of the last holdouts for illicit activities that have long withstood ongoing waves of dispossession.

Canal Street has been up and coming since its inception, caught between its function as a gritty supply hub and the desires of developers to manufacture a high-end cultural promenade. 100 years ago, Canal Street was a canal built to channel sewage from the storied Five Points to the Hudson River; designers attempted

to disguise these fetid waterways with rows of riverside trees. For decades, Canal Street was the supply hub between SoHo's industrial manufacturing and TriBeCa's docks, though neither neighborhood was then known by their current real estate nicknames. The block was the place to get all the goods one might need: plastics, metals, rubbers, leathers, glass, woods, paints, neon, foam, antiques, electronics, ceramics, porn. And yet as it served this vital function, the block was perpetually the center of various schemes of "beautification." Prior to the pandemic, a new push for re-branding sought to make the street into a trendy hub for the white-box galleries that might presage overpriced restaurants and fashion. Thus, movement and flow still characterize the block, the detritus it transports today is still part of an ecosystem of waste and contradiction.

To have an office in a vacant storefront on Canal Street is to be at work in the very center of a retail apocalypse, in the very center of the crumbling of the American empire and its myth of capitalist possibility and unending growth. It is a privilege, an honor, a horror to have a window onto this unfolding scene. ✂



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