

**PEOPLES  
PILES  
BY DENA  
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The *cuddle puddle*. I remember my first happening at an all-cast after-party for a high school performance of *Little Shop of Horrors*.

Oversexed adolescents thinly veiling their nubile desire with an overperformed casualness. Entwined limbs, a head resting on another person's stomach.

The laughing game. Slack bodies unaffected by the chaos and rigidity of the world beyond a sanctuary built of one another's flesh. Subsequent cuddle puddles felt more or less the same—filled with a swelling collective, tumescent lust that would ultimately be popped by someone's awkward erection, an unwanted touch, or any pass deemed transgressive to a generally heteronormative, able-bodied pile of teens. The cuddle puddle is a confidence game: maintaining a projection of nonchalance with a dose of ennui while determining — often pushing — the thresholds of consent and desire. The cuddle puddle is Steven Meisel for Calvin Klein [01]—and Bernadette Corporation's 2009 aping of the aesthetic [02]. It's a blank stare; it's touching without feeling. It's sex without fluids, it's a dry hump. It's the bodies of disaffected youth leaning against one another, staring with an empty gaze. It's an aggregated slouch towards whatever against white seamless.

Steven Meisel for Calvin Klein.  
Courtesy the photographer and Calvin Klein.



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Bernadette Corporation, *The Complete Poem*, 2009.  
Photography by David Vasiljevic. Courtesy the artists  
& Greene Naftali Gallery, New York.

Images courtesy of Tommy Hilfiger.

While the cuddle puddle projects a veneer of impenetrable coolness, its sportier counterpart, the *dogpile*, is hot, sweaty and breathless. A dogpile is a chaotic, uncomposed lump of people. In sports, it's a celebratory gesture. Someone makes a score, we all pile on top of them. In images of dogpiles, subjects are active players. They're on the team, not smoking weed under the bleachers. Dogpiles leave grass stains and dirt under your nails. In dogpiles, *you belong*. Heaped under the dogpile are members of a community, whereas cuddle puddles are a collection of individuals, alone together. The dogpile is active while the cuddle puddle is passive. The dogpile is post-activity, whereas the cuddle puddle is just 'cuz. The dogpile is ecstatic, a serotonin rush. It's unapologetically all smiles. It's Tommy Hilfiger [03], it's Abercrombie & Fitch [04]. It's American.

As with most things in our simulacral world, as adolescents we mimic the cuddle puddles and dogpiles that we see demonstrated in the media surrounding us—namely via the advertisements and editorials in which they have appeared cyclically for decades. An early example of this is the 1982 Richard Avedon campaign for Versace that was bluntly titled “The Beautiful Pile of People” [05]—its emphasis placed on the beautiful *pile* of people, rather than the pile of beautiful *people*. The visual typology of “People Piles” is a form that later crystallized as the signature visual style of brands such as United Colors of Benetton, Calvin Klein, and Abercrombie & Fitch. Each of these brands utilized the form towards different ends: for United Colors of Benetton, people piles allowed for a “gotta catch ‘em all” approach to representation. Reflecting a general zeitgeist—or anxiety, if you will—of the 1990s, people pile images produced by United Colors of Benetton during this time, under the artistic direction of Oliviero Toscani, became emblematic for visions of a tokenist “multicultural” or post-racial utopianism to be brought on by imminent globalization [06]. For Calvin Klein, these people piles communicated the blank-stared cool sexuality of jaded youth. The subjects of these images often look dead-on into the camera's lens, furthering a sexualization of the medium of film and



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Richard Avedon, *The Beautiful Pile of People*, 1982. Courtesy the photographer and Versace.

Oliviero Toscani for United Colors of Benetton. Courtesy the photographer and United Colors of Benetton.

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photography itself—something the brand had been invested in since its 1995 Steven Meisel campaign scandalized consumers and caught the attention of the U.S. Justice Department due to its supposed invoking of the aesthetics and gaze-politics of child pornography. For Abercrombie & Fitch, people piles served to communicate a highly sexualized collegial Americana, which was subsequently queered through Bruce Weber's lens [07]. Weber in particular, due to sexual allegations against him by young male models, figures in as the handsy uncle of the genre. The photographer in all three cases—Toscani, Meisel, Weber—is an outside voyeuristic image maker, rather than being a member of the youthful milieu they are choosing to represent. These images of close contact piles starkly contrast those from another iconic brand of the era, the Gap, where Pedro Romhanyi-directed ads include two dozen youths, fully dressed, inspired by neither love nor lust, leaving enough room for Jesus between them. With these era-specific approaches, people piles present as a loose collection of individuals who are brought together for compositional purposes as objects—not subjects—of youth-driven commodity capitalism. They congregate in front of the camera, autonomous zombies devoid of social relations and affinities beyond a shared love of minimal underwear or cords.

PILE  
AS IMAGE

These accumulative images have had a resurgence over the past decade, though today they serve different masters. The Toscani, Meisel and Weber piles present an ad hoc collection of individuals. They are compositions rather than portraits. The models are just that—models—with little exception for celebrity-centered campaigns and editorials. The nodel (non-model), or *model as subject*, *model as influencer*, had yet to enter the discourse. Contemporary people piles function as tools for communicating the authenticity and fixed identities of “real” people, which in turn becomes a tool for accruing cultural capital by the brand or publication behind the lens on the backs of their subject. More

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The Hender Scheme x adidas Originals Collection. Courtesy Adidas.

than representing a crowd of authenticity-signifying individuals, recent body pile images become a vehicle for re-presentation of communal and social relations with the aims of producing an affective response in the viewer.

Response to such images of seemingly ad-hoc collectivity can engender a response ranging from social alienation and isolation (“I am worm, I am alone with no puddle to fall into”) to lustful desire (“I want in”). The people piles of our predecessors banked on the latter. Meisel’s CK One campaigns have always aimed to spark a semi in anyone walking down Houston Street, not being able to look away from the oil-slicked desaturated bodies. In contrast, contemporary people piles do more to address the totalizing reality of loneliness and lack of community amongst many consumers. While these images have become increasingly prevalent over the past decade—an era which notably also witnessed the release of Instagram, Grindr and Tinder—they are even more potent in a time of mandated social distancing, with the closure of bars, nightclubs, and other sites where collective piling, grinding or moshing might occur. These activities today are relegated to the privacy of one’s home amongst close pods or under state sanctioned surveillance during public protest. People aren’t as concerned about fucking, they just want to hang out.

KATAMARI  
DAMACY

In the early aughts Japanese video game, *Katamari Damacy*—translating to “Clump of Souls”—the player’s aim is to roll a magical sticky ball around the world, collecting increasingly larger objects, from chairs and trees to people and mountains. Accumulation is an ends in itself. The image typology of an anonymized ball of limbs can be likened to a *Katamari Damacy* approach, where an accumulation of bodies, and the transformation of bodies into object, is both the process and product. The 2017 campaign imagery for The Hender Scheme x adidas Originals Collection is a case in point [08]. In these



Katie McCurdy for Need Supply/  
Collina Strada. Courtesy the  
photographer and Collina Strada.

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"Nothing Sticks" by Charlie  
Engman for Garage Magazine.  
Courtesy the photographer.

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Jacquemus Fall/Winter 2016 campaign  
by David Luraschi. Courtesy the  
photographer and Jacquemus.

images, models of various race and gender identity are depicted in different positions of wrestling and embrace, of grasp and struggle. We see close ups of hands on ankles and elbows, legs entwined. These images edge towards the athletic over the intimate because of the presence of force and active application of pressure, over the more passive leaning, flopping or laying. In these images, hands, arms and legs, occasionally faces, serve as metonymic stand-ins for subjects – for members of different communities and identities [09]. This campaign imagery fails to call attention to its own instrumentalization in a United Colors of Benetton-style multi-culti approach. What may be claimed as a differential is the use of “real people”—a confusing moniker, seeing as all models are “real people”—or subjects that purportedly go beyond nineties tokenization in that they are utilized for their personalities and leveraged for their influence on communities across social media.

In an effort to move beyond the instrumentalized people pile, certain Katamari Damacy images critically utilize comedy, specifically situational comedy, by taking models out of the studio and contextualizing them within a broader urban landscape. An earlier 2014 Charlie Engman editorial for Garage Magazine featuring model Lily McMenamy titled “Nothing Sticks” takes the decontextualized white-seamless body flop and instead presents an entangled dance in a European cityscape by Austrian choreographer Willi Dorner. These images contrast bodies to concrete, tile, stucco and brick. They are bodies at odds with their environment, and while the models themselves do not appear in a state of struggle between one another, they do stand in juxtaposition to all too often anti-humanist urban space [10]. Also involving Dorner’s choreography, a Winter 2016 Jacquemus campaign image by David Luraschi, titled “LA RECONSTRUCTION” depicts a katamari damacy ball of bodies on a park bench [11]. The intentional awkwardness of this image, with anonymized bodies unnaturally entwined communicates a level of reflexivity that lodges a critique of the utilization of bodies as accumulative material.

Premium Mediocrity, a term coined in 2018 by writer and consultant Venkatesh Rao, refers to the blanding of Millennial-branded items which communicate luxury based on a perceived level of quality that does not often hold true. As described by Rao, “[p]remium mediocrity is a pattern of consumption that publicly signals upwardly mobile aspirations, with consciously insincere pretensions to refined taste, while navigating the realities of inexorable downward mobility with sincere anxiety.”<sup>01</sup> The consumers of premium mediocrity are laden with the anxious weight of needing to make “the right choice,” whether that be a Sweetgreen salad, the Amazon Coat, or whatever DTC product is being hawked at them on the MTA that week. They consume to fill a void, one of the biggest of which is the void of other people—of community. The consumers of these premium mediocre brands seek out the promise of unalienated, real, felt community, on channels—be it social media, or over architected scenarios such as festivals or retreats—that intentionally mediate the experience between individuals, which makes the formation of strong group bonds feel at times contrived if not impossible. The images produced by these brands, specifically Sweetgreen, Everlane, Buffy [12], Casper and Entireworld, harken back to the nineties cuddle puddle approach. Though rather than entice consumers through an impenetrable cool, le style du jour presents an identity-baiting diverse cast of characters with wide, ecstatic smiles, relishing in the presence of one another and throwing the aspirational vibes of chill, comfy and cool. The underlying nefariousness of these images is that they equate sociality and community with a very limited affective range. In these images, collectivity and community never seems to encompass conflict, sadness, grief, frustration, anger or any of the emotions that fill our lived experiences with one another, and ultimately strengthen communal and social bonds. Excluding representation of such

Buffy campaign. Courtesy Buffy

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01 Venkatesh Rao, ribbonfarm.com



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affective states and normalizing positivity, while it might help sales, does harm to a public where an experience of shared “negative” emotions, and engagement in negative dialectics can create a path to social change.

#### PILE AS PRACTICE

Depicting conflict in the context of campaign or editorial imagery may never be able to escape the violent flatness of representation, but images such as those produced by Carlota Guerrero exist in the realm of performance documentation, hinting to an event that may or may not have ever taken place before a live audience [13]. Guerrero’s images, like the more platonic, sanitized performance in a 2019 campaign by the Millennial minimal comfort-wear brand Entireworld, function as artifacts of a performance of intersubjectivity, of subjects negotiating bodily limits when put in direct contact with others. [14]. At the center of these images are interpersonal or social conflict and the potentiality for their cathartic resolution. We see the impressions of skin against skin. Fingertips made pale through the application of pressure.

These images can be closely tied to the practice of Contact Improvisation—originated by dancer and choreographers Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith—as well as having emerged from the collective work of Grand Union, which included collaborators such as Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown. These are practices that espouse an exploration of one’s body in relation to others through friction, pressure and touch. As a practice, Contact Improvisation facilitates a heightened state of intersubjectivity, allowing both partners to utilize physical interaction in order to reach a point beyond it. Additionally, one object of the practice is to combine a heightened sense of internal awareness through responsiveness to another. These “interior techniques,” as Paxton has called them, engage both perception and proprioception. Contact Improvisation, and by exten-



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sion cuddle puddles and dogpiles, are embodied experiences for the participants.

A counterpoint to pile as practice is pile as performance. FlucT, the collaborative duo of Monica Mirabile and Sigrid Lauren who work across sound, dance and performance, often create intimate performances where audiences bear witness to confrontational choreographies between themselves and on occasion, additional performers [15]. They flail, thrust, and with a punk “hard and fast” ethos, they throw their bodies across space and into one another. Through this confrontational interpersonal choreography, they address issues around power dynamics, abuse, and social norms. Struggle is at its core—without promise of resolution, but with the promise of a psychoanalytic “working through” that implicates the viewer, questioning their own role and response as witness to conflict.

While FlucT performances often involve bodies beyond Mirabile and Lauren’s, they clearly delineate the space of performance and spectatorship. They don’t invite anyone into the proverbial pit. Similarly, in the work of New Noveta (performance artist duo Keira Fox and Ellen Freed), the viewer stands on the margins as the two performers quickly escalate a sense of anxiety and imminent collapse through the confrontational use of their bodies, soundtrack, environment and props. Both female-identifying collaborative groups clearly address the anxiety induced by gendered embodiment and threat posed to symbolic order by “female hysteria.”

Body piling as practice or performance are both highly embodied experiences, and while they implicate the viewer they still relegate them to the sidelines. This is either intentional on behalf of the performers, or reinforced by the presence of the lens, which delineates these acts as something to be viewed rather than taken part in. Neither Contact Improvisation nor the collaborative duos’ take body piling to its logical and egalitarian end, the mosh pit. The mosh pit is a synthesis of both performance and practice, where the audience becomes an active





Above: Photography by Hedi Slimane.  
 Right: Dior Homme x Dan Witz worn by A\$AP Rocky  
 Right: Telfar FW19 show

participant. While it is exclusionary to those who cannot risk an elbow to the face, it has historically been a space for collective catharsis within the temporal parenthetical of a show, song, etc.

The mosh pit, like many an instance of youthful angst and rebellion, has been flattened as image by fashion [16]. Such designers as Hedi Slimane has mined the mosh pit-as-image for his work as both photographer and designer, and Dior Homme x Dan Witz has flattened it onto printed textiles. In stark contrast, Telfar Clemens actually opened the floor. During his FW19 show—featuring a reading by playwright Jeremy O. Harris, which heightened the level of theatricality and identification of the roles of actor, narrator, and audience—models bodysurfed off the stage at Irving Plaza and into the crowd, one by one. The performance by Hardcore industrial band ho99o9 (Horrors) which closed out the show opened the space to an actual mosh pit. Documentation of the pit at Telfar’s show is incidental; most photographs capture the models stage diving, not the aftermath. The mosh pit was not planned so much as it emerged. Rather than performing a pile, Telfar demonstrated one aspect of it (stage diving, choreographed by artist Xavier Cha), and then set the conditions for a pile to organically erupt.

#### ANOTHER STATE OF MIND

As I stood in Irving Plaza watching the event transition from NYFW presentation to concert—a venue haunted by the ghost of my teenage self standing in the audience of The Strokes concert in post 9/11 New York—I sensed the rising inevitability of a body slam as the sound of ho99o9’s pierced the billows of weed smoke, White Castle aroma and fashion week chatter. Telfar’s show had created rupture, with Harris opening the show with a monologue on the failings, violence, and beauty of what a word like “Country” (the season’s theme) could mean to anyone having been systematically excluded from it. With friends cast as music makers, models, scene setters. With a ripening sense of gratitude from all, for being invited,



Rob Kulisek for Eckhaus Latta.  
 Courtesy the photographer and Eckhaus Latta.

included, for being present. The resulting mosh pit may be the ultimate form of the people pile: in its non-violent iterations it is egalitarian, it is cathartic, it is embodied and centers presence over its representation. As is often articulated by both Telfar and the label’s Creative Director, Babak Radboy: presence is consistently prioritized over re-presentation, and “being included” over “inclusivity.” [17].

How can one stylize community in fashion? Telfar, as well as the approach of brands such as Eckhaus Latta or Vaquera, provide one path. All three brands utilize close friends as images makers and subjects, and have ongoing relationships with stylists, casting and creative directors—for example Babak Radboy, Emma Wyman, Avena Gallagher, Walter Pierce and Rachel Chandler—who ensure a consistency of integrity through highly stylized self awareness that consistently includes cultural and historical references and visual cues that will be legible to an audience of their peers. These images are coded and, in many cases, they are camp. They intend to communicate, with information as their primary capital. They are intentionally illegible to most, playing a cloaked game of Spot the Difference, aping and subverting known stylistic tropes. Creating work for an audience of peers has, for these brands, created a ripple effect of cultural and commercial success in that it makes visible a community that people want to be a part of.

What differentiates the alienation of following this in-group as a mere consumer from the alienation engendered by hard body people piles in years past? The possibility that those friends could be your friends. That you could become part of the audience of peers if you show up and get the references. And even if this new vanguard is not your peer, it encourages people to explore the potentiality in their own communities, knowing what is possible when the power of image-making is taken into their own hands. It’s an exclusivity that is ripe with potentiality, particularly for an audience that feels a sense of alienation, exclusion and violation by the status quo. Images produced by this new vanguard



Eckhaus Latta SS17 by Heji Shin.  
Courtesy the photographer and Eckhaus Latta.

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Telfar Campaign 2019, System Magazine.  
Courtesy of Roe Ethridge.

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Image courtesy of Vaquera

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Eckhaus Latta campaign by Hannah Moon, 2018.  
Courtesy the photographer and Eckhaus Latta.

also flatten the experience of un-mediated “real” collectivity (particularly referencing black, trans and queer collectivity) into desirable images used for brand building and marketing, but they do so with a “For Us, By Us” attitude. As Telfar often says, it’s not for you – it’s for everyone. Still, the effectiveness of these images are predicated on the viewer having a community in the first place, or having the desire to go find one. They are declarations of presence and demands for visibility.

Much like “Shiny Happy People” images, the images produced by these brands spark a desire for sociality and community, but do so in a way that is bottom-up self presentation, as opposed to top-down compositional representation. Not dissimilarly from the consumers of premium mediocre brands, the audience of this new vanguard also publicly signal upwardly mobile aspirations, though instead of cruelly optimistic aspirations of a materially driven “good life,” are aiming for aspirations of meaning via communal and subcultural capital. It is the lived experience of those whose soft assets are their social capital, identity and community. It is not the stylization of intimacy, it is the presentation of an intimacy that can only exist between people with shared lived experience. Eckhaus Latta has taken this to its logical end in their SS17 campaign shot by photographer Heji Shin, where they feature actual couples cast from Craigslist having sex [18]. If you’re going to hint at the horniness of CK One ads, why cast models when there are plenty of hot couples out there fucking anyway?

These images stand in opposition to the people piles of Toscani, Meisel and Weber, and are rather in the tradition of Wolfgang Tilmans’ photos of friends curled in a post-party ouroboros. The people pile images produced by these brands directly take on their predecessors as Telfar does with Tommy Hilfiger, both queering and de-colonizing the image typology [19]. They re-contextualize bodies in active urban space [20]. And most of all, they slap the shit eating grin off of the shiny happy people, revealing the sad, lonely clowns amongst us [21]. ✂



Eckhaus Latta SS17 by Heji Shin. Courtesy the photographer & Eckhaus Latta.