

CFGNY

BOUNDARY OBJECT

In coming up with the term "vaguely Asian" to describe CFGNY, we are attempting to inhabit the terms and conditions of identity in a way that acknowledges the slipperiness of the subject. While it is widely understood that a cultural heritage and attendant notions of upbringing greatly influence how we view ourselves, as well as how we are seen by others, the way in which these factors interact with other forces to create what we experience as an identity remains underexplored. To engage with the idea of vagueness, we avoid explicit description of what an identity is, instead allowing room for fluctuation that we recognize as inherent to any type of identification.

Tin is Vietnamese, Daniel is Burmese-Chinese, Ten is Japanese-Chinese, KK is Filipinx-Finnish; we have all grown up in the United States by way of different migration histories. Regardless of the perceived "likeness" of these cultures, it becomes impossible to reconcile the differences in details when conceiving a unifying idea of an Asian-ness. And yet there is something that brings us together, in ineffable ways.

Understanding an identity through race allows one to recognize how an identity is constructed



from the outside: it is something that is *done to* a subject. To be seen and visualized is to be racialized, and thereby forced to operate under a set of assumptions that influence how one can move through the world. While there are numerous ways that this condition

Esteban Muñoz proposes this act as a collective "disidentification." Through disidentification, alternative modes of being within the terms of race can be forged, parodied, altered, and built upon. A new form of kinship outside the logic of generational lineage de-



Courtesy of CFGNY

forecloses possibility, it also presents opportunities for new connections: connections that can be shared through alienation. José

velops, confusing and integrating itself with other forms of identifications that are able to converge in a shared difference.

In the section of his 1990 book *Poetics of Relation* titled "For Opacity," Glissant argues for the idea of opacity to be incorporated into how we conceive of notions of difference. Instead of mandating that a political subject of difference make themselves wholly transparent and legible to another, Glissant recognizes that conveying oneself in transparent terms is to reduce one's existence to a set of parameters that will always be insufficient. Only when understanding that parts of oneself are unknowable, even to oneself, and allowing that same opacity to others, do people truly recognize each other. By allowing room for play, we approach the feeling of how an identity is experienced.

In considering a project about Asian-ness and its diasporic expressions in the "West," this sense of opacity is extremely important. Asian-ness as an umbrella term is far too wide to relate or symbolise a particular experience, as it covers a large majority of people. In the context of the United States, it is sometimes hard to discern how Asian-ness exists within the structural fabric of race as opposed to the general expression of racism as plain and direct intolerance. Migration patterns of different populations have a large

influence on the positions people occupy in this society. Some have come more recently as refugees, some have lived in the country for generations initially as migrant laborers, and still others are here for educational or professional purposes. CFGNY is constantly asking how to navigate cultivating a kinship between these disparate groups without papering over these differences. How can our project build links of solidarity that reach beyond these differences, and that can be used in a broader model beyond our own racial boundaries? How can we do this through a joyful act that expresses itself through alienation?

Much of what our project revolves around varying definitions of "We." We imagine an unstable, oscillating notion of "We:" we sense each other through perceived affect on the streets, through friends of friends, and through foundational texts. Inescapably, we perceive each other through images circulated online. We become "We" through the dissemination of these images within corporate, user-generated content channels of communication like social media, and in particular, Instagram. These images take on



a language of their own through their setting, clothing, poses, and captions. Moreover, they articulate a "We" through their target audiences. These factors jointly conjure an aspirational community, pointing towards an image of perfect togetherness that exists only within the photographs and their corresponding channels of dissemination. Existing as a visually smooth, easily transmittable parcel of information, these images become evidence of a "We," although a "We" lacking in fullness, messiness, contradiction, etc.; these images lack the flesh of "We."

As an aside, the "We" shaped through these images and channels of communication have also

deeply shaped our sexualities over the past decade. Mainstream as well as subcultural queer visual and linguistic culture would not look, sound, or feel the way it does without the creation and dissemination of these images through Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and so forth.

A published photo and the making of the photo exist as conjoined beings, each with a distinct face. Publishing a photo creates a type of proof of existence. In a sense, the ability to seek out others who emit the same signaling techniques creates proof of a "We." When casting its first show in 2017, CFGNY turned to Instagram to source models. Through the casting process, the



"Certain Forgotten Gestures Near Yourself," in collaboration with Lucas Odahara. Photography by Mizuki Kim. Courtesy of Berlinische Galerie.

slick, digitally fashioned self-portraits of queer Asians scattered across the internet, across New York City, became calling cards, belying the opportunity for a physical gathering of bodies in real space. We came together for the day, hailed through the internet: the "We" who called and the "We" who answered. We came to understand our relationship with each other through our engagement with the same technologies, nightlife, neighborhood haunts, friends of friends, visual culture, and desires to push against alienation. We shared space, presence. We parted ways and still keep in touch. The photo itself is an information packet; the making of the photo is where the making of the work, the "We" is.

Dissemination of images through social media provides a kind of proof to others of a community in formation. Although it is an unstable base from which to build an actual community, it does effectively act similar to an archive. An archive stands as evidence to a future audience that something has taken place, a mark to record that something has existed. Therefore, an archive requires the information placed within it be legible and easily interpreted in an unspecified time in the future.

This requires the various more ineffable details of an event or life be left out, intentionally or not, in the act of archiving.

In *Sexual Hegemony*, Christopher Chitty describes the formation of a gay subjectivity and the hegemony of a literary archive in defining the terms of that identity. Chitty's book aims to broaden the terms of sexuality in order to show that gayness, as we conceive of it today, is rooted in a bourgeois sense of sexuality. In talking about the archive, he laments the absence of working class expressions of sexuality that existed outside of the literary archive of gayness, which is built upon epistolary exchanges and novelization of desires. He argues the formations of kinship and sexual practices of the lower class, which may have exhibited what we now consider a queer sensibility, were never recognized as so.

In considering how we are adding to the contemporary archive of the image of queerness, how are we able to impart a sensibility that sits to the side of how queerness is imagined today? A specific kind of resourcefulness is an attribute that has become an inside joke between all of us, something passed onto us

through what we read as our Asian-ness. Spoken and taken without too much consideration or seriousness, it motions towards the kind of strategic ingenuity our families have undertaken to exist in this country. It is a mentality that saves every scrap of material and sees potential in a reworking or alternative use of materials. These materials are frequently unstable. It speaks to the material conditions of our past and the way that we, as artists, also have to operate today.

In our images and works, it shows up as trash, repurposed for many uses: objects found on the street for free that are cobbled together in a hodgepodge of colors, textures, and visuals to create the sensibility that it strives to communicate. *Puffy Entrance*, which was shown at Auto Italia, London, in 2020, was envisioned as a textural experience to be felt as much as seen or understood: a warm and fluffy embrace that would only be experienced in its presence, the sensation of which is only ever hinted at in images. This sensibility acts as a counterpoint to a more stable, normative archive, opening up images, documents, and points of proof to the vagueness we are constantly motioning towards. We hope this

illegibility motions to something that can never be captured, signaling the insufficiency of the archive to document fully whatever it is invested in.

CFGNY's project began several years ago maneuvering within fashion, art, and the social economies that produce these languages to explore what it means to be an Asian person outside of Asia, namely within the US. While exploring physical materials, gestural affects, and social patterns that are frequently used to describe and racialize us in the "West," we also began to investigate what an Asian diaspora living in America/Europe could look like to people who had not left Asia, and what we ourselves could look like if things were different.

In 2018, Triple Canopy commissioned us to create a body of work in response to RISD Museum's Pendleton House, a reconstruction of the home of a well-known colonial collector of Asian and American decorative arts. The Pendleton House is also the first American wing of a museum. Intrigued by what the possession of colonial-era Chinese goods signified to America's nascent self-image, we sought to further examine how a national and



Courtesy of CFGNY





Look 22 (KK) in "Surface Trend," 2019. Photography by Mary Inheon Kang. Styling by Averna Gallagher.

cultural identity is delineated through conceptual visual markers and materials.

CFGNY set out to create a collection of clothes that could be displayed within the objects of the wing's collection, which were displayed as a *trompe l'oeil* of a colonial home. As we have worked with the same set of tailors in Vietnam over the years, the workers who physically handle our clothes have a good material sense of CFGNY's work. We asked them to design and produce a whole collection in the name of CFGNY, attempting to draw out their conceptions of what we were trying to do through our project.

A blockage occurred. We had naively mapped the US/Western-centric idea of an Asian diasporic identity onto a non-Western context, where the century-plus of interpellative forces that created our diasporic identity did not exist. We were too presumptuous about the legibility of the ideas we were working with, and were unable to see how they are difficult to translate to a context that exists outside of the US.

Through a series of conversations, we were forced to define and explain the concept of racial

identity, as situated in a Western context, and apply those parameters to a conversation that was more easily relatable to the way in which identity is conceived in a Vietnamese context. From the standpoint of where we operate, specifically the broad assumption of Asian-ness being a unifier across multiple ethnicities as often expressed within a US context, a Vietnamese context is more attuned to the differences in culture between different Asian countries. The project became a process where our conceptions and assumptions about identity and race were forced into an arena where a meta-critique of our own project became necessary.

It is important to return to the point that our project revolves around the term "vaguely Asian." In recent decades, with the rise of China as a global capitalist powerhouse, we have been presented with yet another form of seeing ourselves, although somewhat a rehashing of an old vision. As we learned through our project at The Pendleton House, the *idea* of China, specifically access to it as an elusive and incomprehensible source of trade goods, has always been central to America's self-image. Today, the challenge of China to America's global hegemony adds yet another element to this densely layered historical relationship.

Long having been lumped together as “Chinese,” many Asian Americans, consciously or not, have been deeply affected by the absence of any history of ourselves outside of the American Exceptionalism narrative. We seek out more information: something that can offer relief from alienation, from misinformation; something to explain the reason for a diaspora in the first place. We seek a psychological and emotional connection with an alternative reality, one in which there is historical and racial continuity. For a small but visible number of people, the rise of China, and more largely Asia, provides an outlet for this fantasy. The notion of socialism and communism, though far separated from the reality within these countries, offers a window of escape and potential: a better way and place. Asia, existing in the imagination as the site of anti-capitalist revolution, offers a place of contention and self-definition. This marks a shift in our soporific, suppressed political historical consciousness: people have noticed the absence of any history of communism and socialism in what we’ve learned about the world, namely what we’ve learned about Asia, and having been denied any history of ourselves, we appropriate Asia as a proxy for ourselves.

The point of bringing up this largely online community, commonly referred to as “tankies,” is to highlight another tendril sprouting from the unwieldy Medusa head of what it means to exist within the Asian diaspora in the West. As historian Cindy Gao says in her CFGNY Montez Press Radio segment, “From the absence of this history, tankies emerge.” While it is easiest to find an answer in searching for a binary counterpoint, Gao’s quote reminds us of the shortsightedness in turning towards a hegemonic power that simply seeks to replace the existent hegemonic order. A critique of the United States does not have to exist mutually exclusive of the one lobbied towards China. In avoiding this view point, links that were once hidden are allowed to appear more prominent; we empower the existence of relationships outside of borders or sovereignties. At the same time, we are cautious that in pursuing our version of Asian-ness, we do not force or perceive connections where there are none. The singularity of answers that these two strains of thoughts present, while seductive in appearance, ultimately lead to a flattening that is antithetical to our proposed project.

Synthetic Blend V. Image courtesy of RISD Museum & Triple Canopy.



As a project, CFGNY is a critique of identity through our experience of Asian racialization within the United States. Requests for us to respond to the idea of “Asia” or “Asianness” come to us in many forms. Oftentimes, these requests are actually demands which define the parameters of our participation in a project: to participate, we are required to engage this external assertion of our subjectivity, our seemingly immutable relationship with an elusively defined place and personhood. As we are corralled into accepting both consciously and unconsciously to these processes of socialization, we search for discrepancies

in the narrative webs that entangle us. We pick at loose threads while sensing out the borders of these narratives, coaxing out gaps through which we can observe and present new possibilities of being in relation to one another, and of togetherness. Here, in the vein of Eve Sedgwick as she describes in *Touching Feeling*, we practice non-dualistic thinking in imagining an existence beside rather than in opposition to the hegemonically interpellated experience of Asianness to which we are frequently asked to respond.

Queer people often live in a transitory state, continuously



seeking places and people who can contribute to the ongoing construction of a mutual support system. It is our personal interests that drive these communities together—be it a type of sound, aesthetic, philosophy, or practice—as opposed to a biological relationship, which more commonly forms a sense of kinship. Our interests tend to change through the decades and the ways we invest in our time, too, will vary with age.

We spent our twenties building these communities for ourselves, seeing people move away, shift, and grow in and out of what was present. Our feelings created form: utopic moments would surface at the clubs, familiar faces would appear on the subways. A sense of belonging was gradually created and established. To spend a period of time in our city calls on us to recognize that we are surrounded by new groups of friends every few years. After being untethered from the interests of a moment, we arrive at the beginning of the same cycle again. Like living from paycheck to paycheck, our relationships have been experienced as a series of days, weeks, months or, at most, years. What if we were to experience our communities

through a longer period in our lives? What does a queer community look like over three decades, or perhaps even six?

Fashion brands generally position themselves in opposition to aging, offering a perpetual replacement of the body, a stand-in representing youth on repeat. It has been five years since the beginning of CFGNY and we have aged into our 30s. We do fewer drugs and sleep more. Since we do not participate in the typical fashion schedule, the way we occupy our time as a collective reflects as slow—and we like the feeling. We have presented three proper runway shows and numerous projects in the timespan of our project thus far, casting many of the same friends over the years and getting to know them better through our work. We do not feel pressure to put on fashion shows, but rather host them as we please, and do so when we want to bring this particular group of people together. As we have continued our project, the clothes have begun to reflect this particular grouping of people. The garments respond to a conversation that has happened, realize a desire that was pinpointed, or are simply worn by the group.

As garment makers we understand that dressing is a necessity and can be used as a tool to help manipulate one's perception of another. Queer perception is what allows us to form a community. We cannot help but wonder how our dialogue could mature, should our relationship continue to grow in the decades to come. When we are in our seventies, we will reach out to our models, stylists, and choreographers, and see where they are. We will take a trip to Ho Chi Minh City, visit the tourist area to have a collection made, and put on a runway show in Seward Park in Manhattan Chinatown. The runway will remind us of the show we presented there with Carrissa Rodriguez in 2019, but this time around we will be the grannies filling the benches and eating steamed buns.