

BERNADETTE CORPORATION CAROLINE BUSTA

The creation myth of Bernadette Corporation is as good, and as telling, as any other part of the collective's story. A young woman from Queens graduates from Brown with a degree in economics. She moves to Manhattan and goes into business, the product being herself. Asked by Peter Gatien to host a weekly party at Club USA, off the then still-seedy Times Square, she organizes a kind of human décor, lining the legendary venue's Thierry Mugler room with young bodies, door-listing her friends to create the impression of nightlife that will bring in the paying crowd.

The gig was short-lived, lasting just seven weeks in the spring of 1993, but it led to the formation of Bernadette Corporation. New York looked different then. Violent crime had recently reached an all-time high, cell-phones weren't yet commonly used, and hardly anyone had been on the World Wide Web. As a start-up, BC was very much a product of that moment—one in which twenty-somethings were getting by just by showing up, paid to reframe dead-zones as places of glamorous possibility. Bernadette and BC's other initial members, Thuy Pham and Seth Shapiro, understood how the city wanted to use them, and that by playing along, they would be generating a kind of topsoil for gentrification. They also understood that by doing so, they could use the city back. As the structure of New York changed in the following years, the format of BC's work would change with it, as would the group's members and geographical spread. Throughout, however, the collective would prioritize bodies as a base material for their work: body as backdrop, as avatar, as catalyst, as site. A woman filmed operating a video camera becomes an alien-like form when morphed in post-production through a set of digital effects; a nude model in diamonds is reduced to pixels as her image is enhanced and degraded on screen; the words of anonymous activists are stuck on repeat in Chloe Sevigny's body as the actress speaks them again and again on camera, shifting the delivery each time.



"What kind of body should I be?," Reena Spaulings asks in BC's 2004 novel of the same name, contemplating various selves. Selves "produce bodies. It's the materiality you are," the book explains. "Your body is your response to the state of existing." But bodies can also be dressed and accessorized, placed in particular contexts, and rented out to lend signification to one place or another, such as a G8 protest, or a jeans campaign. All of these strata of surfaces can constitute fashion. And in BC's hands, fashion spans an impressive range, going beyond garments, accoutrements, and gestures, to encompass social encounters, criticism, and forms of illegality. The negative space a body leaves when it cuts across Empire is fashion. A corporate body trying out different selves could be fashion, too.

Now almost twenty-one, BC has taken on a variety of identities available to the creative class—filmmaker, fashion designer, novelist, gallery artist, anarchist, among others—paralleling the corporatization of the arts-and-culture sector (and the concomitant lifestylification of corporate culture) that has expanded in step with the group's own development. "We call ourselves a corporation because corporations are everywhere, and it impresses people... pretending we are business people while we sleep all day like cats," reads a BC statement from 1999. Yet incorporating as a cultural-sector business was more than an anti-neoliberal gesture (though it was that too). It was perhaps foremost a strategy for pooling resources—computers, printers, fax machines, a thousand square feet on the Bowery—as well as for aggregating creative capital under a single logo.

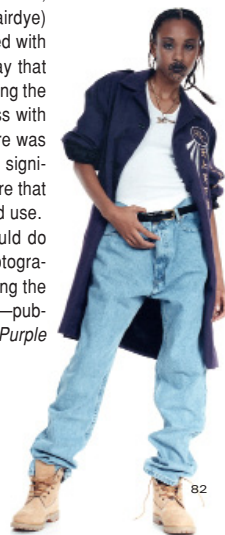
Among the early identities BC assumed was that of fashion designer. For their first show BC—now being Pham and Van-Huy, joined by Sonny Pak and Antek Walczak, dressed models in white trainers and button-down silk shirts, gold jewelry, waxed eyebrows, slicked hair, dark lips—variations on styles that Puerto Rican girls were wearing at the time on NYC's Lower East Side. CBGB served as the venue. None of the BC members were Hispanic. (However, all were first-generation American, save for Pham, who had immigrated to the US). The collective staged its second show, Spring/Summer '96, at the Marc Ballroom off Union Square—Marc, until it closed, had hosted the city's annual Legend's drag ball—with a hyper-

fem, *Baywatch*-era Pamela Anderson theme: sheer bodysuits and pearl chokers, strapless tops, fishnets, cartoonishly enormous blonde wigs. All of the models were female.

In both of these collections, the design of each garment—Levi's partially ripped where the thigh meets the ass for a booty-short effect, a street-bought oversized t-shirt printed with the face of a recently murdered Tupac, a cropped sleeveless puffy jacket paired with an acid-wash jean skirt—had been carefully tailored or selected, but to what end? To assert a new kind of luxury? If so, then for whom? Latina teenagers and non-celebrity drag queens were rarely spotted in the front row during fashion week. And even if they had been more visible participants, what would they have wanted with these exaggerated (and likely higher priced) imitations of themselves? And if the editors and stylists present at CBGB and the Marc were to endorse these looks (which they did; BC blew up in 1995–96 with coverage over the next few years in publications ranging from *i-D* and *The Face* to *Harper's Bazaar*, *W*, and the *New York Times*) what exactly would these tastemakers be consuming? If they were to wear these styles, would they pass? Would that even be the point? But most of all, as these manifold gestures accumulated under the BC logo, what exactly did the collective intend its brand identity to be? And why did whatever that identity was resonate so intensely with the fashion world of that moment? For a consumer or fashion writer at the time to have put answers to these questions would have required reinforcing an ugly mix of class and race-based prejudices. Not that BC at all intended their clothes to have a policing effect; the idea was more along the lines of something that circulates because it shouldn't—something that damages the network as it does, and yet precisely for this reason circulates better than it's more "useful," conventionally beneficial counterparts.

It's poignant to consider, in light of BC's use of subculture or ethnically inflected anti-fashion, that by the mid-1990s, Manhattan was visibly de-ethnicizing—even as all things ethnic were becoming trendier: a restaurateur's construction of an "authentic" Cuban café would replace a fading Italian neighborhood's luncheonette, a subterranean Russian-themed bar had recently opened in an industrial SoHo basement; countless pre-distressed French bistros were being forged from the remains of so many displaced or closed street-level shops. At the same time, Mayor Giuliani, having assumed office in 1994, had begun instituting heightened citywide surveillance, effectively restricting the ways in which public space (not to mention private clubs, Gaten's famously among them) could be used. The psychic terrain of the street was feeling more and more homogenous. So it was almost as though in response to this—and, perhaps to the growing popular preference for quickly legible, minimalist signs (a swoosh, a cK, an apple)—that, in May of 1997, BC launched its "Hell on Earth" collection, ripping into the globalized, sexless agora that NYC seemed to be becoming. Bodies were sent down the runway as quasi multi-culti-subjects-turned-weaponry: neck tattoos, gold chains, white women in cornrows, Latinas in goth, a fur coat sheared and painted (using hairdye) with BC's logo (resembling a Mercedes-Benz insignia or a biohazard warning); ribcages were draped with camisoles made of bones. Michael Jackson (the second leg of his epic *HIStory* tour making its way that year from Bremen, Germany, to Durban, South Africa) served as muse, with several models channeling the King of Pop in silk gangster suiting, fedoras, and white socks. In another look, a nude-colored dress with red slits turned its wearer, via actual hooks, lines, and sinkers, into a fish bleeding at the gills. There was so much here and so many different possible readings. The meaning of any two potentially aligned signifiers collapsed when combined with a third. Like the motorcycles of the Japanese B s zoku subculture that BC declared an influence for this show, the "Hell on Earth" collection customized its subjects beyond use.

BC dissolved for a while after this show and for the next year and a half its members would do basically nothing as around them, a tidal wave of young and generally unknown designers and photographers avidly circulated their work, gaining international demi-fame with remarkable speed. Anticipating the democratizing reach of the internet, a surge of independent but professionally produced magazines—publications made in the vein of *i-D* and *The Face*: Eileen Fleiss's and Olivier Zahm's *Purple Prose* and *Purple*



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Journal (Paris: 1992–98/1998–2003), for example, as well as *Self Service* (Paris: 1995), and *Index* (New York: 1996–2005)—enabled by advancements in desktop publishing, could suddenly circulate in forms and formats previously accessible only to larger-scale commercial periodicals. In the pages of these new small journals, writers such as Jeff Rian and Dike Blair spoke of a "terrain vague," a zone beyond the beltway just before the ex-urban townships begin, where garments and models were taken to be styled.

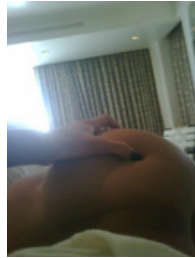
Following this logic, contributors placed a high value on the things and places then considered invisible to—or existing within the fissures of—mainstream consumer culture: slightly outmoded machines, an airport's baggage claim, the interior design of a new housing development's model unit. In one fashion story, a woman stands with her back to the camera, a few inches from a graffitied concrete wall. In front of her, stuck up with packaging tape, is a selection of garments by Comme des Garçons. In another story, two women have stuffed their black Margiela jackets full of bubble wrap. They too are standing on a sidewalk in front of a concrete wall; this time, grass is breaking through the joint between the facade and the ground. Meanwhile, a beauty story features make-up applied as though the entire face were displaced a few millimeters to the left. And in another, make-up isn't applied at all except for gold filaments tracing the soon-to-come creases of age. But by the end of the decade, images of office corridors and highway shoulders, even of a certain kind of trash, started to feel overly coded (the style having come to signify, among other things, the dominant decorative schema of relational aesthetics.)

It was at this point, that Van-Huy and Walczak, now joined by John Kelsey, reactivated BC to create *Made In USA*, the magazine (titled for the Godard film of the same name but also biographically true) that they launched in 1999. As one more title added to the lot, it would follow the design of other small publications—a mix of fashion and more diaristic photography, plus poetry, artists' writings, interviews, and criticism. But rather than reinforcing the tasteful asceticism and sincere stripping down of the commodity-overburdened subject like the others, *Made in USA* assumed the "Hell on Earth" collection's logic of maximum overload by taking cues from supermarket-aisle glossies like *Marie Claire* and higher-end commercial rags such as *Italian Vogue*, as well as its hometown paper *Village Voice*, and hipsterish UK-based *Dazed and Confused*. In a text for the first issue, Kelsey writes about a band called Actress—specifically one of its female members preparing for a show: "She thinks about accessories. Are masking tape eyebrows too Fluxus? Not the Margiela shoes again. Maybe the white belt she found in the neighbors' trash [...] In the end, her clothes will unconceal the idea of rock band in the same way that Van Gogh's peasant shoes speak of days trudging in fields of mud." The origin of a work of art. The object as person. The girl as surrealist landscape, spelling out a sentence of coded things regarding the production of a self and a body. In another *Made in USA* story, a model is shot draped half upside down across an office-type chair. She is splayed out like Christ in Caravaggio's *Deposition from the Cross* or perhaps like the female form in *Etant donnés*, only in reverse, with her legs away from us at the top of the image. The rest of her body, dressed in flesh-colored silk pants and a white oversized BLESS sweatshirt, bridges the chair and a stack of cardboard boxes. On the sweatshirt is a massive colorblock abstract face. And in her hand, she holds a coffee mug from a now defunct consumer electronics store The Wiz. Unlike Duchamp's model, BC's has a head of her own, and unlike Caravaggio's Jesus, also a gaze—taking her into *Olympia* territory, but this model's objectness overrides. Her body is just one more thing in a field of everyday things.

In BC's work, however, bodies are never only objects. They are objects to which something particular is being done (body as substrate, body as material support) or with which something is being enacted (body as tool, body as affective machine itself). The mutation of the woman operating a video camera, the reshaping of the girl wearing diamonds, the unpacking of an actress—whatever the tool used (video after-effects, commercial photo retouching, etc), BC seems to take less interest in the mediating technology than in how this technology ultimately alters us: how we transmit representations of ourselves and how we perceive images of each other. Sometimes the impact is more physical, as has been the case with the smartphone, which catalyzed not just the rise of social media, but also the mass adoption of new postures. Post 9/11,

texting (eyes down, hands by the chest), for example, came to replace smoking (eyes looking out or inwards or elsewhere; hand to lips, hand extended, hand perched on bent arm, etc.) and with it, an entire language of pre-millennial social codes—the nuanced variations of *how* one smokes a cigarette and what kind one carries around. The smartphone caused the twenty-first century body to simultaneously pose itself for present company (often with the busy signal of the texting pose) and for the consumption of its virtual followers.

A decade after putting out *Made in USA*, BC staged a solo show at Berlin's Galerie Neu titled "A Haven for the Soul." Among several components, it featured Rihanna in the form of selfies—specifically trashy ones, the kind usually reserved for private sexting. In these images, Rihanna appears photographing her own celebrity body in a hotel bathroom, cleaving herself into eroticized partial objects: a headless nude torso with truncated legs, a hand with black-painted fingernails squeezing an abstracted piece of ass. No doubt her image circulated well (and likely even better) like this, dissected into parts. Downloading these images, BC printed Rihanna (and other subjects) onto book jackets for cut-and-pasted crowd-sourced literature (composed excerpts of online consumer comments and reviews of a special collection of books including, *Moby Dick*, *I Love Dick*, *The Coming Insurrection*, *The Koran*, *Howl*) and placed the volumes on shelves in the gallery. Additionally, two HD flatscreen monitors resting against the wall looped underwater footage of crude oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico in the aftermath of BP's Deepwater Horizon explosion—a disaster with repercussions only rivaled, that year, by the suddenly high-impact stream of names, numbers, and facts vented via the Wikileaks pipeline.



The claim is frequently made in the cultural sector that an underground no longer exists, or at least no longer has agency. While this may be true, such a framing fails to consider that even as the search continues for those mythic regions of resistance, untold volumes of information are being hidden away every day via an infrastructure that, like the plumbing of an apartment complex, completely surrounds us. There is no periphery now. Gilles Deleuze reminds us of Jacques Rivette's Paris, those "places where Nature does not live [...] the undeveloped parts of a suburb, a rural stretch of city street, or secluded corners and alleyways." Yet, twenty-five years later, Deleuze's conception of these spaces would now seem as mythic as mountains harboring dragons. What zone could possibly be understood as forgotten now, when all of the globe's surfaces and cavities, interior and exterior, are mapped and surveilled? One doesn't find unterritorialized space now, one creates it or allows it to happen, standing in the mainstream rupturing the channels that run through our every day. Toxic spills, whether in media pools or bodies of water, do efficiently alter the ecology. Perhaps some sense of this could be read into BC's Galerie Neu show, for which the collective installed thousands of dollars of high-end chrome and platinum bathroom fixtures (donated by Dornbracht, a luxury plumbing fixture company) throughout the gallery. In this, BC gave us the leak as an ur-symbol of the present, etching into the faucets' perfect metallic surfaces user comments from pages hosting Rihanna's illicit pics.



For the post-millennial generation that assigns value according to levels of access and rates of flow, there may be no more powerful motion than the leak—or of seepage, the inevitable movement of information across barriers and every screen that desires it. If other worlds had earlier been sought in the interstitial regions of the real—in Rivette's backstage; in Pierre Huyghe's *Streampside Day Follies* where the new development meets the woods; on the highway overpass and in the neglected backyards of Harmony Korine's *Gummo*—now younger designers circulating via various web-based outlets (nearly all tied to strong IRL communities), seem to take the entire landscape as operable. (New York-based designer Eckhaus Latta, for example, based its S/S 2013 show around startlingly pedestrian elements: models walking treadmills and standing around drinking energy drinks, looking at their phones or photographing each other and their audience while posting live pics to Twitter.) Taken another way, this scene suggests a neo-1993: young bodies used to harvest value from a



wasteland—albeit one littered not with crack vials or even cigarettes, but with discarded bottles of Smartwater and an overstock of Crocs. But metabolizing the surplus of one's environment, distilling that which is truly desired, has always been fashion's fundamental m.o.—and this is something that BC has always carried out with seeming effortlessness, inverting the metrics of supply and demand, showing the contrivance of the handmade given the mass-production of most luxury goods, isolating the intelligence of cultural crap.

In one of BC's last activities (supposedly "2000 Wasted Years" marks the collective's end) its members participated in a series of anti-capitalist demonstrations in New York, positioning their own bodies between the surface of this city and the forces that police it. The action is represented at the terminus of BC's timeline via newswire photos of Walczak and Van-Huy arrested on the Brooklyn Bridge, hands zip-tied behind them, forming part of a layer of captured bodies arranged by the cops. It was a good look, this fringe, dotted with blueshirts, lining the iconic steel-and-stone structure that links Wall Street to the world's most bohemian borough. The *New York Times*, betting on this picture of activism to attract the paying reader, even printed one of these images as the cover shot of its October 2, 2011 Sunday edition. "What can be done to a body?," BC asks. Everything, apparently, and yet the body persists, as does the city, and their negotiation of each other—modifying themselves ad infinitum, whether via extreme sartorial gestures, hi-tech architectural skins, the manipulation of pixels, or the transmission of partial selves. And so it's a fitting parting shot, if indeed this is goodbye: the photo of a handcuffed BC, kettled on a New York landmark multiplied a million times, distributed worldwide.

(6-May-2010) riri wld har phat pum pum lol island girls sell OFFF!!!