

Against

Nudity

Mary Wang is unsure whether she should return to Instagram.

She started an account after a visit to New York some years ago, where she picked up app-based habits like Tinder and Uber, which had just started to restitch the city's social fabric. She has since removed her photos from the platform, having realized that New York habits brought New York ailments: an inflated sensitivity to other people's feelings and opinions, a debilitating need to interpret every movement as a metric for success.

The thing is, Mary Wang doesn't need Instagram to display her life. Instead, she needs Instagram to display her clothes. (Though one could argue that, for Mary Wang, there wasn't much difference between the two.) She occasionally posted about other people's clothes too, but those photos were mere padding, stuffed underneath the actual garments to exaggerate their shape. She'd sometimes even snap a photo of herself trying on clothes in a fitting room. After she'd posted the photo in question, she'd no longer feel the need to actually purchase the items. The clothes had been seen already, so what's the point?

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The question of whether she should return to Instagram closely follows a classic thought problem in philosophy: If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Similarly, if Mary Wang wears clothes and nobody is there to see it, then why wear anything at all?

@hellomarywang:

*Without a witness,
one doesn't exist
at all.*



The earliest form of the “if trees fall” problem was formulated by George Berkeley, the Anglo-Irish philosopher and the namesake of the Californian city. In his *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), he suggested that the world is represented by our senses, and therefore depends on being perceived to exist. Battling predecessors like Locke and Descartes—who all, to some extent, believed that material objects do exist in the world—Berkeley claimed that objects are mere ideas in the minds of perceivers. “Esse is percipi”, he wrote in *Principles*, a Latin-English phrase translated as “to be is to be perceived”. Let alone asking what the point is—without a witness, one doesn’t exist at all.

Mary Wang can’t help but to apply her limited knowledge of early modern philosophy to her hesitations around Instagram. After all, it seems as if those around her were already taking Berkeley’s theories quite literally: a party hasn’t taken place if footage of it hasn’t been posted online, a relationship doesn’t exist if it isn’t accompanied by its own portmanteau’d hashtag. People had become celebrity’s and politicians in their own right—though some would rather call themselves “micro-influencers”—defining their lives by its optics while comfortably erasing the contingencies of material reality. Going by their photos, they were always holding pizza slices that never reached their mouths, always on their way to laughter but never entirely got there, always mid-jump, floating in the air like weightless cheerleaders.



Mary Wang first deleted her Instagram after she lost her job at a big fashion magazine. Burnt out by her obligation to find narratives and plot twists in celebrity wardrobes, she was happy to turn off the app's notifications on her phone. She no longer needed to follow Beyoncé's profile like a newsroom reporter watching the incoming wire, fighting to be the first to break a story.

But she also no longer knew what to post. At the magazine, she had gotten used to documenting celebrity sightings at the office and high-profile sponsored events where the brand's logo would show up at the oddest places—on Martini glasses, on rolls of toilet paper, on a counterfeited death certificate of Elvis Presley. What was she going to do now? Post photos of her breakfast, her dog?

She doesn't even have a dog.

Perhaps the problem wasn't whether her photos would travel horizontally to retinas around the world but whether they would penetrate vertically through the planes of history. When she had just started at said fashion magazine, Mary Wang counted the days until her name would appear on the masthead in the first few pages of the print issue. She wasn't thinking about the readers who might see her name there—the page was so buried amidst advertisements she doubted even her friends could find it. No, she was thinking

of the lineage of names her name would live amongst in the magazine's archives, and how, perhaps, a curious student of history might find it centuries later in a neglected corner of a university library, by which time print magazines would have gone the way of stone tablets and bloodletting.

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Fashion weeks were the worst, when Mary Wang saw acquaintances of differing degrees of separation attending dinners where no one ate and parties where no one danced. One night, during one fashion week, Mary Wang closed Instagram and texted her friend and said, I've had it, my soul physically hurts, let's find something to do, anything. They ended up at a magazine/cheese creamery launch a few blocks away from her house, where she fought the crowds, with their telephoned hands stuck out, to capture the defunct electricity enclosure that now doubled as a catwalk. After she returned home at the end of the evening, her street looked ravaged. It turned out that one of the most desirable runway shows of the season had been held right in front of her apartment.

But seeing photos of people doing things—or of people sitting on a beach, doing nothing at all—was only one part of the torment. The other came in the form of what kind of doing she should be seen doing, which she, as she scrolls back through her archived posts, realizes can be divided up in three categories. One kind of photo was taken to display her whereabouts (party, party, airport, party), another was to display what she was doing (cycling in hazardous metropolises

like London and New York, attending obscure shows during fashion weeks), and another was to display the people she was with (or that she was with people at all). Of course, these categories overlapped—Mary Wang at a party wearing clothes, Mary Wang on the back of someone’s bike in New York, Mary Wang at an overcrowded airport, reminiscing about last night’s party. The staging of such documentable happenings was exhausting—Mary Wang can barely figure out the plots in the short stories she’s trying to write, let alone the emotional arc of her actual life.



Scroll down.

@hellomarywang:

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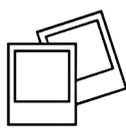


By now, Mary Wang has justified her inability to stay away from Instagram well enough. Something about building her brand, something about Roland Barthes' claim that the representational garments found in images and magazines being the ones containing the most symbolic meaning. Maybe even something about how hard the generations before her had worked to pull themselves out of the scruffs of poverty, and she owed it to them to chronicle the fruits of their labor. Look ma, look pa, these are the clothes I've bought with your hard-earned money, and this is what happened after I'd strolled up and down the boulevards at this sun-drenched destination to find the perfect garden flamingo to serve as the background of this Versace sundress. I've combed every hair on my head and arranged every palm leaf in the flamingo's plant bed, like a food photographer looping strands of noodles with tweezers so they look as if they could bounce off of the page and onto your tongue. I've politely shushed away passersby, alerting them that they were in my frame and that my time is money. I've put on the embarrassingly-happy-face from my repertoire of photogenic expressions to hint at the serendipity of my discovering this pink flamingo while walking around in a lilac dress with pink hair. Of course it's not serendipitous at all: by this point, I've already edited every non-pink item out of my life.

Effort, she thinks. Her mind is transported to opera singers filling 3800-seat theaters with just their own

voice, to aspiring sushi-chefs who spend their first three years only washing rice, to the first time she watched an Olympic snowboarder hurl themselves off of a cliff while somersaulting mid-air. All that human effort, all those years of tearjerking training, all for a momentary capture. The beauty didn't just come from the clarity of the singer's voice or the symmetric curvature of the snowboarder's jumps—it came from the instant visualization of years of torturous physical exertion that had led to this moment, hitting the senses like a thunderous aftertaste.

She thought about the hours she spent in front of the mirror, learning how to control the mimetic muscles in her face just to achieve the desired expression, the ways she plotted Excel charts to compute at exactly what hour she would get the most likes, her reflex to assess each room for its most photogenic corners like a secret service agent scanning spaces for viable emergency exits. The difference here is that Instagram photos are supposed to be perceived as anything but laborious, the physical effort of its staging cropped out of the frame. Betray the cables holding the backstage together, and the illusion of nonchalance collapses, the audience scrolls on. The point is to make it look like it doesn't cost any effort at all, but isn't it precisely the incredulous amounts of effort that allows an act to transcend the realms of our material reality?



Mary Wang thinks, to hell with hiding that effort. To hell with pretending I wear clothes for any other reason than being seen. Isn't that my god-given right, my freedom as a citizen, my responsibility as an engaged member of society, to make myself seen? Doesn't a democratic state consist merely of people who appear to each other and make their appearances explicit? Living in a country where the exclusion of her people was specified by law until a few decades ago, where well-educated Anglo-Saxons call the police on her loved ones for simply occupying the same space, isn't visibility precisely what they're fighting for? Of course I wouldn't wear a taffeta ballgown on a deserted island, but I wouldn't brush my teeth there either.

So, after a brief hiatus, Mary Wang sets the cogs of the machine in action again, tells loved ones with cameras to point the lens in her direction, texts friends to like her new photos.

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There she goes, hauling her not-entirely-metaphoric garden flamingo down the cobbled streets of Soho. Standing on a ferry to Brooklyn Bridge in what can only narrowly qualify as pants, just to get a good shot. Funny, she thinks, how she had been debating what the point was of wearing clothes, and now she's wearing something that barely covers her behind.



@hellomarywang:

“To be is to be perceived.”



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*Text and graphics by Mary Wang.
Photos by
Cédric Jean Pierre Pradel.*

*With many thanks to my generous
readers Mirene Arsanios, Adam
Lenson, and Christian Nyampeta.*

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