

Visual Identity: Meet BFFA3AE, the Duo Exploring the Art of Communication in the YouTube Age

STORY BY: HARRY GASSEL



How two NYU film graduates turned their friendship into an art practice

In his monthly column Visual Identity, Harry Gassel will highlight emerging voices in the ever-shifting worlds of art and design.

Daniel Chew and Micaela Durand are best friends. Forever. Together they comprise an interdisciplinary art practice they call BFFA3AE. It would be easy to lump them in with some generalized category of net.art as much of BFFA3AE's work deals with the images and language of internet culture.

Like their ongoing “Uh duh yeah” video series in which they compile the non-verbal interstitial moments from YouTube karaoke. Think *ROMA RO MA MA* from Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance.” Even their name has overtones of hacker culture leet speak. But if you look closely, they are far more interested in the users than the network, in understanding the emotional impact of growing up in the paradox of isolation and permanent connectivity. Their study seems to be focused on interactivity on a human level and embedded in the snark, glitter and hashtags are people simply trying to communicate with each other. I caught up with BFFA3AE about the deeper meaning of *iCarly*, the things we can learn from the filmic techniques of *Mob Wives* and what it’s like to navigate friendship.

So what’s your name exactly? *Micaela Durand:* Our name’s BFFA3AE. People usually say our name “BFF question mark”? *Daniel Chew:* We just say BFFA3AE or Best Friends Forever and Ever and Ever. We’re kind of trying to be confusing in some way. What’s funny is that someone had tagged this thing all over the neighborhood but it wasn’t us. The thing is what’s funny about it is they put BFFAEAE which is almost our name but isn’t at the same time. I feel like that’s the relationship people have with our name, it’s like they *almost* know it. That’s part of how the name works to us.

How did you start? *Durand:* We went to NYU for film. We were all in the same documentary film class and we had to be in a group—you work on each other’s films, that’s your crew. *Chew:* Like a production company. *Durand:* Every time we presented a film each of us took turns making an ad for BFFA3AE.

Is it still the same group? *Durand:* We used to have a third [Matthew Gaffney], but now it’s just us. At times we had more members, or just different members, when we wanted to work together—it was just a name that we could use to do stuff, a disguise. It’s kind of evolved and changed, just like friends do. *Chew:* A best friend relationship is also a relationship in the end. It changes all the time.

Aside from the production company ads in class, what was the first project you consider to be a BFFA3AE piece? *Durand:* That’s a really good question, because I’ve never thought about it. I guess our blog was our first project. At the time, like 2007, there were a lot of surf blogs happening. Which is basically where a community of people would just sort of post things that they found online. Like Nasty Nets is a good example of that. *Chew:* And it would be a conversation through the posts. *Durand:* Yeah, that was very much what was the art of it—the exchange. *Chew:* We also wanted to be in this community. *Durand:* It was the first time we felt a connection to someone that was our age and that was doing stuff that was interesting.

So how did you transition from a film student run surf club to an art practice? *Chew:* Part of us doing art is trying to navigate the fact that we did come from a film background. A lot of our old work is actually performance or video, it’s ephemeral in that way. We were interested in the internet so video was a very perfect thing for that. We were trying to explore YouTube.

Right, and YouTube had just come out in 2005. *Chew:* Yeah, exactly. You know what it’s like to have the experience of like, “Oh my god, streaming video,” instead of having to wait. In high school I remember having to wait an hour for a Björk video to download. *Durand:* It was like a thing you started doing at parties. People were just like, “Everyone come gather round and watch the YouTube.” It was like when television was invented.

“That’s what made the internet cool. Kids could get really weird alone and then it could go viral.”

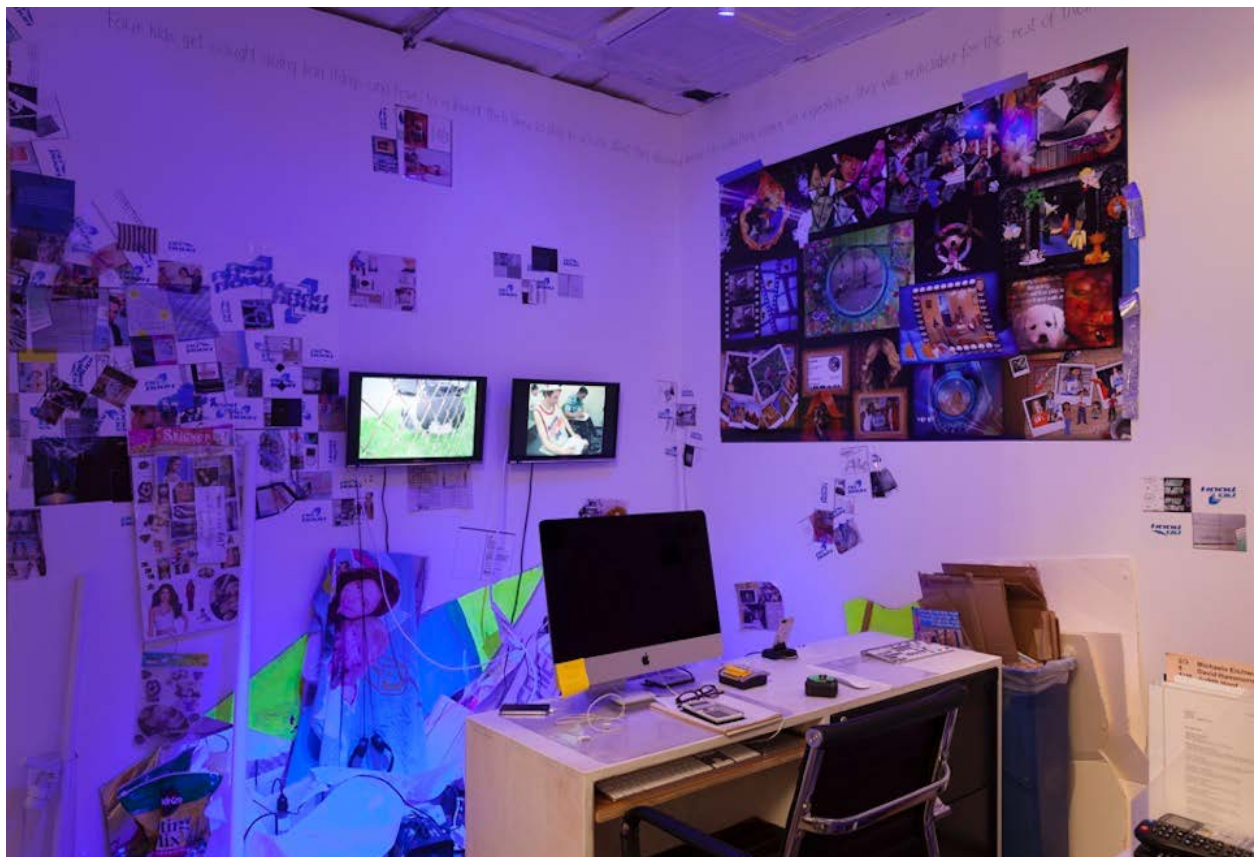
So you got interested in interacting with that as a film medium

basically? *Chew:* I think we were a little bit frustrated with what we were seeing in film school. *Durand:* It was a factory school really. *Chew:* We turned to art because we were more interested in something like video on the internet. *Durand:* We would perform in class and people would just be like, “What the fuck?” You usually show a film. There’s a start and an end but we didn’t do that. We made everyone be a participant which I think was really frustrating for them. That’s what we liked about it, just kind of getting weird. Because we were getting weird online, you know? That’s what made the internet cool. Kids could get really weird alone and then it could go viral.

Your YouTube karaoke “Uh duh yeah” video series is a good example of this. It seems to encapsulate a lot of what you do: its filmic, its very internet-y, there’s this performance aspect, it’s ongoing and changing, and there’s something very childish about it. What was your original interest in it? *Durand:* At the time I was living with Matt and Dan would always come over and what we would do most of the time is just sing karaoke videos on YouTube. We were just like, why not take this thing that we love and make it really weird by taking out all the real words but still making it a performance. *Chew:* It’s also creating this other language—we were interested in that. The language also spoke to the different aesthetics of the different karaoke videos. Some of them are really homemade, some of them are actually karaoke videos and some of them are the normal videos with text on top. It was interesting exploring that visual language but also this other language that doesn’t have any words, just sounds and emotions. It’s also just fun.

It seems to distill the emotional content of a song into these non-verbal moments. *Chew:* Exactly. We were also reacting to this thing where you can recognize these songs as an audience member—you can sing along and not necessarily know where they’re from. It acts as that weird type of memory where it’s almost there but not really.

Your current show at 47 Canal is these two sort of solo shows but there’s also this collaborative part and then a BFFA3AE retrospective? What was the decision to move in that direction? *Chew:* The title of the show is *DTR* which is this acronym that stands for “define the relationship.” We wanted to approach our collaboration in a very different way this time and part of that was to develop our individual work so that we can approach each other in a different way. We were thinking about our collaboration like how we live together. The artworks live together like we live together. It’s also a stepping stone to working differently in the future in some way.



BFFA3AE's DTR show at 47 Canal.

It's funny, it's an apt title in that it does really mirror people in relationships. At first you have no boundaries, and eventually you have time to find them. To survive you eventually have to define yourselves as individuals. *Durand:* The retrospective room is definitely no boundaries. *Chew:* Exactly, it's just us on top of each other, like how things in that section are on top of each other. *Durand:* It's also not linear at all. There's no time online. You can't experience it from beginning to end. One of the ideas we were talking about is we wanted to make it as messy as your desktop. *Chew:* We were thinking about it in terms of the archive and what it means to archive things now, like having everything spread across five different hard drives and not having any order. Your desktop gets to a point and then you put everything into the dump folders so it gets clean again.

Your individual pieces in the show feel like a big departure from the BFF work in that way that it's abstract and very materiel. Although as with Daniel's rag pieces, it deals in similar themes like constructed identity and fashion. *Chew:* Those are a commercial product sold as disposable painting rags but they are actually manufacturing byproducts from factories in Bangladesh and India or Pakistan. It was a way of to talk about labor and the social function of fashion. Thinking about [Martin] Margiela who used rags in his couture collection as metaphor for that. I'm also looking at his H&M collection. Usually when designers do H&M lines they do a watered-down version of their current season, but he mined his archive and recreated old cuts through the production line of H&M. To me it presented this really weird thing where it was easy to buy into the social club of good taste but the flip side of that was that you're using this exploitative labor that H&M employs to get you these garments cheaply. It's this contradiction that I fully inhabit because I like expensive Margiela but I also like cheap Margiela at the same time.



Micaela's work too, feels very quiet. Like the video content is personal and it's covered in a film of seaweed—which is a little funny but it also creates an intimacy, like its hiding something.

Durand: The video is distinct voices from films that I like that deal with people acting out on desire. For example from Cronenberg's *Crash* title sequence. People like getting in car accidents, they get off on it. I was thinking a lot about how desire is socially visible. It can be this weird public thing like car crashes, or just when you're in a relationship.

Is this part of the fascination with teenagers? *Durand:* I think a lot of the work I make is about growing up, not just about teenagers. When you're sixteen and you break up with someone, when you're 40 and you break up with someone, it's still the same thing. It's what's interesting and exciting about being a person: you're constantly growing up.



BFFA3AE's DTR show at 47 Canal.

You once did a dramatic reading from an episode of *iCarly*? *Durand:* I was teaching film at a summer camp, and a lot of the kids were obsessed with *iCarly*. To understand them more I wanted to get in on that and make sure I knew what this content was. Youth is so undervalued but they're also the consumer ideal because they're a consumer as well as a producer. They grew up in a DIY image making generation. They're generating content all the time. *Chew:* That was the thing about [*iCarly* creator] Dan Schneider, he has a really dark read on what society is and I think it's really smart in its own way. Like he had a show based on the idea that everyone wants to be famous because of YouTube and the internet. The show is about a performance art high school where everyone's just trying to become a celebrity.

Is that an attempt to contextualize what he's doing as film? *Chew:* He likes making kids shows and that's his thing. It's like how we approach it, we like kids shows so we try to make work about it.

Is that where you're headed? Do you want to make a kids show? *Durand:* We're gonna make film. That's the future of our collaboration. *Chew:* I think we're trying to negotiate what it means to be in the film world and the art world, and trying to have some type of inbetweenness. We recently made a film for [MoMA] PS1. We hadn't made film for five years. We were so resistant to it but once we started it felt so natural to us.

What type of film? *Chew:* A full-length feature, we're still in the very early stages of planning what that is.
Durand: It's gonna be a very straight and very gay film, that's all we know.

With a narrative and actors? *Durand:* We prefer non-actors. *Chew:* But it's gonna be acted. How we shot the first film is reality television style where we set up situations and just let the cameras roll.
Durand: My friend sometimes camera assists for *Mob Wives*. He was telling me about this technique that they use on that set—it's very real but if they ever are stuck in a moment where they have nothing to say, someone on set will prompt them just outside the camera frame. That's the way we work. We do write it, and let whatever else happen. *Chew:* But it's a loose script, it's not like film script where it's like, "Interior: day." *Durand:* It has that passing through feeling. *Chew:* *Mob Wives* style.

POSTED JULY 23, 2014

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

“DTR”

47 CANAL

47 Canal Street, 2nd Floor

June 27–August 3

View of “DTR,” 2014.

In its latest show, the collective BFFA3AE has erected two parallel walls that cut diagonally across the gallery's main room, sandwiching a handful of Mylar balloons, each emblazoned with a cheerful special-occasion message, an image of One Direction's Niall Horan or iCarly's Miranda Cosgrove. BFFA3AE—made up of Daniel Chew and Micaela Durand—is perhaps somewhat better known for Internet-based work, but here the group takes a thorough turn toward art IRL. Its recent output seems to celebrate the eager-beaver impulse to amass and admire that's shared by distinguished art collectors and enthused middle-schoolers alike, as Niall and Carly's mugs appear alongside pieces bursting with strains of Fluxus, Dada, and other art movements past. A monitor obscured by sheets of seaweed (a piece by Durand), for example, sits near a found soap dispenser in the shape of a lady's shoe.



View of “DTR,” 2014.

Across the room, rags by Chew are framed and decorated with stains, screenprints, and laser-cut lettering. Their titles (e.g., *Look #15: Printed 'trompe l'œil' shirt - Printed 'trompe l'œil' skirt - Stretch linen thigh high boots*, 2014) seemingly allude to both the cyclical transience of fashion and the semipermanence of collected art. Which leads us to the jumble of videos and paraphernalia—placemats, potting mix, and keyboards—in the gallery's foyer. The room, we're told, is BFFA3AE's “retrospective.” When taken as a comment on the pace at which the art world consumes young artists, it's not much. But considered as a hoard that represents both nostalgia and possibility to someone starry-eyed, it means everything.

— Dawn Chan