

cute is the new PUNK

On FriendsWithYou's Mission of Connectivity

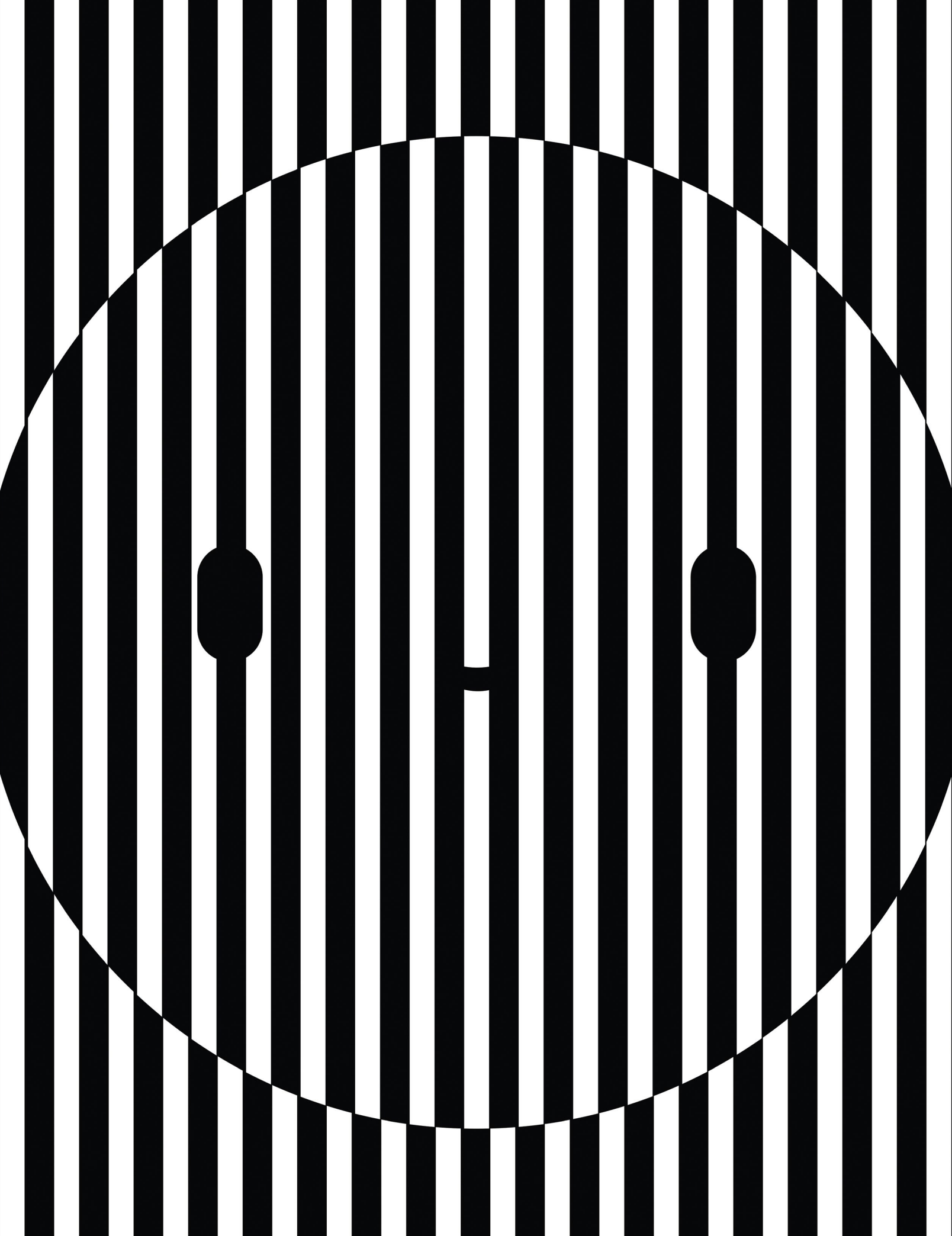
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To understand what Twitter, universal connectedness, psychomagic, and rave culture have in common, one can simply sit down with recent Los Angeles transplants Samuel Borkson and Arturo Sandoval III. The two are the pair behind art collective FriendsWithYou, whose dream is to connect humanity one project at a time. Their style is Murakami-esque and post pop, creating pattern-draped, immersive installations and personified, geometric inflatables. They insist that no medium is off the table, their previous work taking on the form of plush dolls, large installations, screen prints, paintings, and, more currently, apps and a television series.

When I get to the FWY studio, Sam is waiting for me on a large straw mat with his shoes off and pizza-patterned socks on display. As Arturo, or "Turi" walks over, also barefoot, they invite me to remove my shoes as well and take a seat. Having just

biked to their studio sans socks, I am a little worried to oblige, but after some good-humored coaxing from the collaborative pair, I realize that the mat (smelly feet and all) is a potent symbol for their dual creative process. Taking in the good with the bad, the pair transforms conventional dualities into experiential happenings, affirming their message of connectedness and well-being.

While I am generally a positive and optimistic person, I do possess a hint of skepticism—perhaps from reading too much critical theory during grad school. Yet, FWY cut through my skepticism regarding their seemingly naive goals, for their optimism is strongly rooted in realism. While it's easy to be cynical about the often maddening state of our capitalist culture, FWY strategically acknowledge it—and then they move on. They'd rather spend their time thinking about the positive. They think cute is punk.





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Turi explains, “The whole idea of modern culture and the systems we have in place to monetize and incentivize are based on a systematic bracketing of ourselves. They are also simmering down into predictable and limiting ways, and these things can be exploited. We decided early on that we would flow with the capitalistic system to see how it can work for us, and let the ideas flourish . . . There’s no accepting the capitalist system—you’re just in it. Take the thing and shift it to your purpose. Change it from within, and, to some degree, try to move the needle one way or another. I think that is in some ways more progressive than totally going off the grid and boycotting the whole thing.”

“I’m assuming you guys are optimists?” I ask. “I am Optimist Prime!” Sam responds. “OMG. That’s the best tweet ever. I have to tweet that right now. DUDE.” While Sam updates his Twitter status, Turi continues, “We are realists at the same time. We know that we have a long way to go as people. We understand the pain of it, but we are just being the symbol of hope and happiness and acceptance. Well, we are trying to be.”

Optimists, certainly, but not blind ones. The two have clearly worked hard to establish their reputation and credibility. They strive for balance, both internally and collaboratively. They don’t always see eye to eye, but that’s what makes collaboration such a fertile zone. Moving past their individual egos into seeing themselves in the other, their practice allows space for a dialogue to occur. “Part of making art is about generating something that is beyond you,” Turi implores. “It’s the same thing with our relationship. We have found honesty in each other. That’s where our most beautiful art has flowed from. We never have the problem where we don’t have any ideas. We always have five ideas, and the problem is deciding which one to make.”

Sam and Turi met in Miami while both part of the rave culture in the 90’s. Their group of friends at the time embraced their silliness and offered the two unequivocal support in the beginning inklings of their collaborative efforts. Their first joint project was creating a series of plush toys—Sam had asked for a sewing machine for his high school graduation. “We didn’t know about the art world,” Sam confesses. “We came and just *Mad Max*-ed this thing.”

The two relocated to Los Angeles last year to expand their horizons, and take advantage of the creative energy that proliferates the City of Angels. The broadcasting tool that LA has become—sustained in large part by the movie industry—strongly attracted them to the city. There is an opportunity here to reach an expanded audience beyond a more regional one in Miami. While FWY doesn’t align with any specific religion, they constantly talk about the spiritual and the psychic. Los Angeles’ unique blend of cultures and demographics surely speaks to FWY’s blend of spirituality. “It’s a kinda Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, African, Tribal mix. Just a happy-with-yourself kind of thing,” Sam smiles. With a Los Angeles-based solo show at Marine Projects in Venice and a MOCA book release party for their newly released monograph under their belt, Sam and Turi are off to a good start as newly minted Angelenos.

The comprehensive monograph, *We Are FriendsWithYou*, which includes the 12-year oeuvre of the team’s projects, features essays by Pharrell Williams, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Peter Doroshenko. The book is somewhat symbolic—the pair feel the freedom to close a literal chapter on some of their previous aesthetics, and dwell within some new terrain. “If we were trying to build an art career, we would have just kept doing [work in our older style],” Turi explains. “But we’re not just harvesting our career, we are trying to get to something else.”

By something else, Turi means global happiness, peace, self-acceptance, and love. It’s a lot to accomplish in one lifetime, but the pair are realistic about their lofty intentions. Dreamers, yet still grounded in the messiness of modern life. He explains further, “It’s not that you are just an artist. You are a human first, then beyond that you are some cosmic arrangement of atoms. But then beyond that there are layers, and you have this social role to play.”

As FWY foray into the future, working towards enlightenment, balancing internal energies, and managing their prolific idea base, they remain uncertain about which direction the work will take, yet committed to the flow of ideas. “What’s next?” I ask in closing. “Lunch,” Turi answers.

One step at a time.

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