

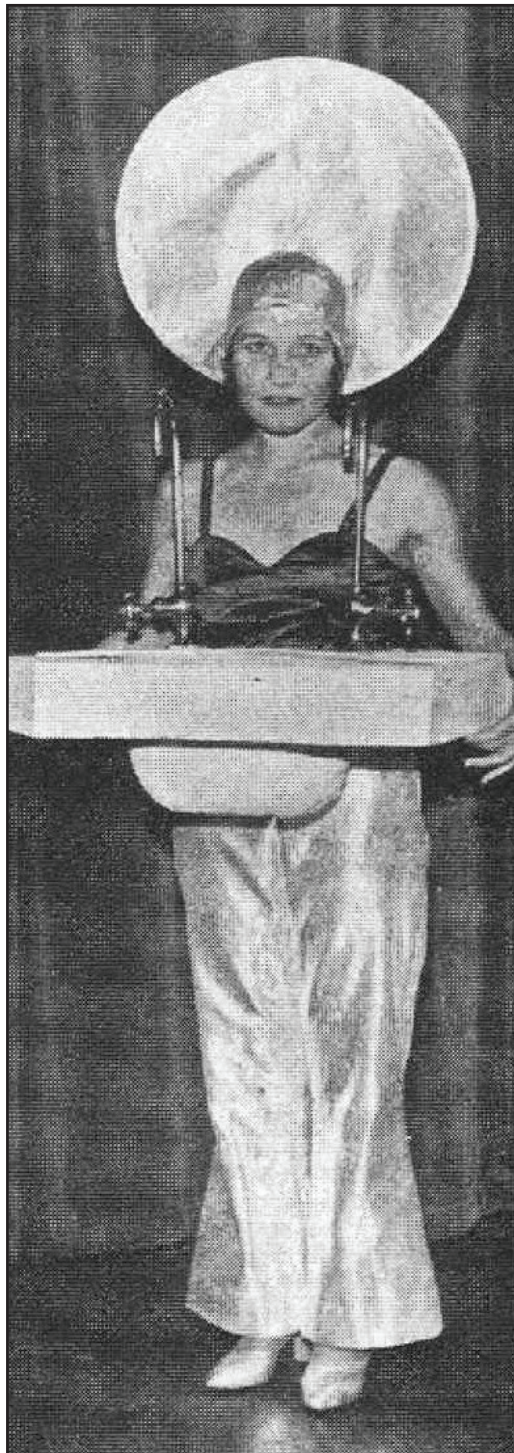
BASIN GIRL IN THE CITY OF ASH

CANAL STREET RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

Among the distinguished architects at the 1931 Beaux-Arts ball, who all came dressed as the iconic New York City skyscrapers they had designed, there was only one woman: Edna Cowan, who came as a sink. With taps over her breasts and a sink over her womb, as if extending from her reproductive organs, “Basin Girl” stood for what Rem Koolhaas has described as the “entrails of architecture”—those biological needs that perpetually thwart the lofty ambitions of architects. As developers insist on turning uncontrollable waters into tidy and profitable parcels of land, Basin Girl emits a drip that, with time, erodes the foundations of cities.

In Queens, the newly approved Flushing Waterfront promenade aims to be a luxury complex rising along the banks of Flushing Creek. One company involved, United Construction, is also responsible for erecting the borough’s tallest building: the Skyline Tower. Just north of MoMA PS1, apartments at the Skyline cost up to 4 million dollars. In its bid to build the tower, United—backed by the Bank of China—pledged to renovate the Court Square subway station, letting visitors off in style for a visit to the art museum.

Developers have long bankrolled municipal infrastructural projects, with dubious promises to clean up the waterfronts or offer affordable housing. During the 1964 World’s Fair, a

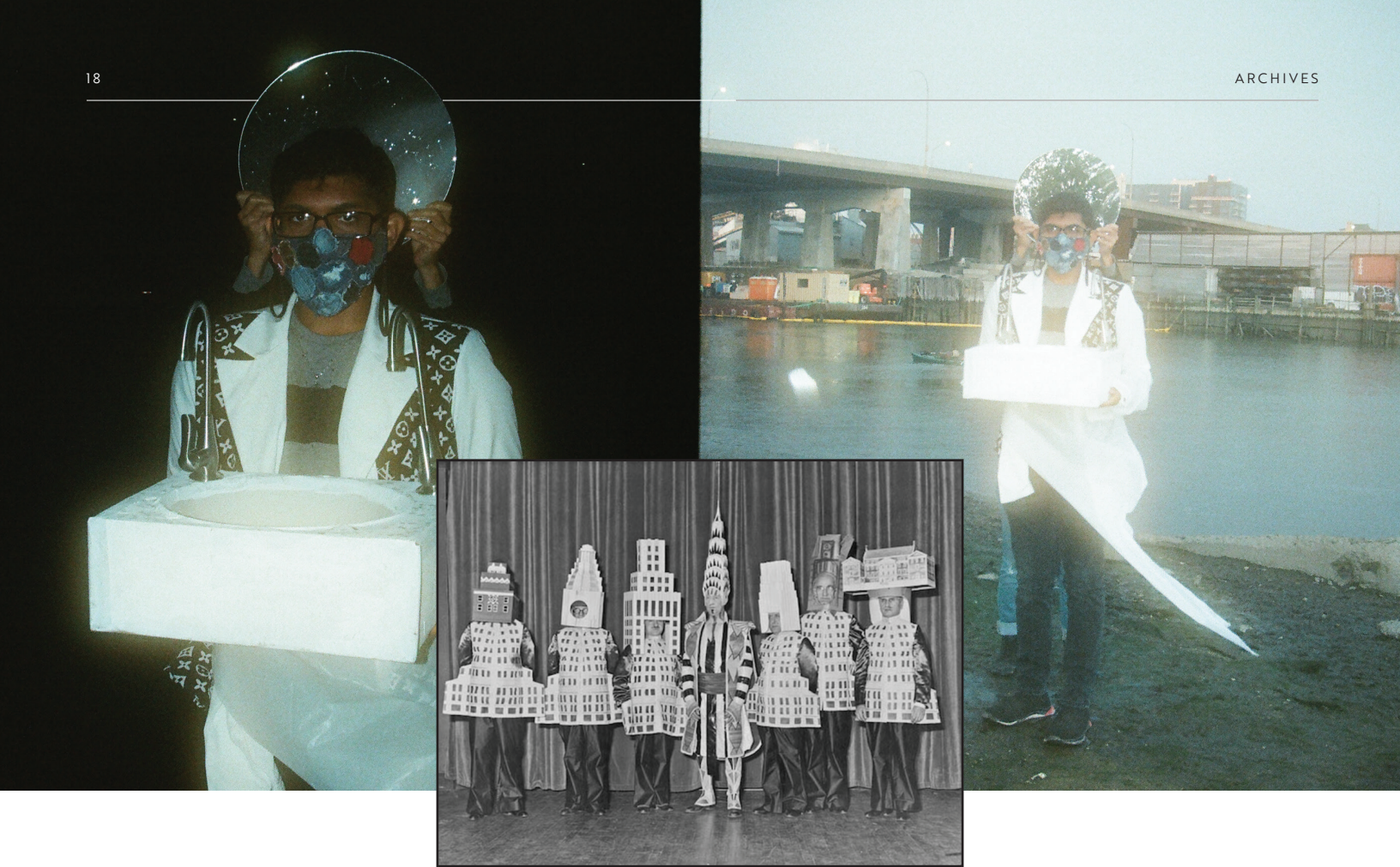


picturesque lake was fashioned from the Flushing Creek—already made toxic by industrial dumping—only to be further neglected and polluted, carved up by highways and overpasses. Today, the roads of Willets Point are pocked and dented. The creek passes through and under various sites: scrap yards, storage facilities, and repair shops in a part of town the city has deliberately blighted in order to justify its removal, and the displacement of the people who live and work there. This was F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “valley of ashes,” where industry shapes the landscape out of its own deathly dust. Phragmites grow higher than a man’s head and water rushes loudly beneath the street as it hurries to the sea. But the swamp holds onto these stories, and its steady seeping thwarts any plans to conceal the neglect with yet more construction.

On October 16, 2021, artists, seafarers, musicians, and pirates gathered on a stretch of marsh to “Freak the Creek.” Canal Street Research Association invited visitors to embody Basin Girl, whose insistence on leakiness defies developers’ visions. Donning her conceptual costume, the Association studies NYC infrastructure via the infamous Canal Street as it meanders into Queens where money, like water, flows—its currents robust and its sources concealed. If waste is an archive of a city’s desires and foibles, what social transformations might be possible by surfacing and celebrating buried waters?







Shanzhai Lyric investigates global trade networks, informal economies, and the poetics of counterfeit goods. 山寨, or “Shanzhai,” means “counterfeit” in contemporary Chinese usage, but translates literally to “mountain hamlet,” a reference to a tale of outlaws absconding with goods from the empire to redistribute among those on the margins.

In the fall of 2020, Shanzhai Lyric founded Canal Street Research Association in an empty storefront on Canal Street, New York City’s counterfeit epicenter, to delve into the cultural and material ecologies of the street and its long history as a site that probes the limits of ownership and authorship. Taking cues from these flows and fissures, we bootleg Basin Girl as a mode of paying homage to under-acknowledged and unsanctioned histories of waste.

This work was carried at “Freak the Creek,” a day of waterward activities organized by the NYC Department of Sanitation’s artist in residence, sTo Len. With thanks to the Basin Girls: Lu, mystery cowgirl, Monica, Maya, Victor, and Francesco.

