

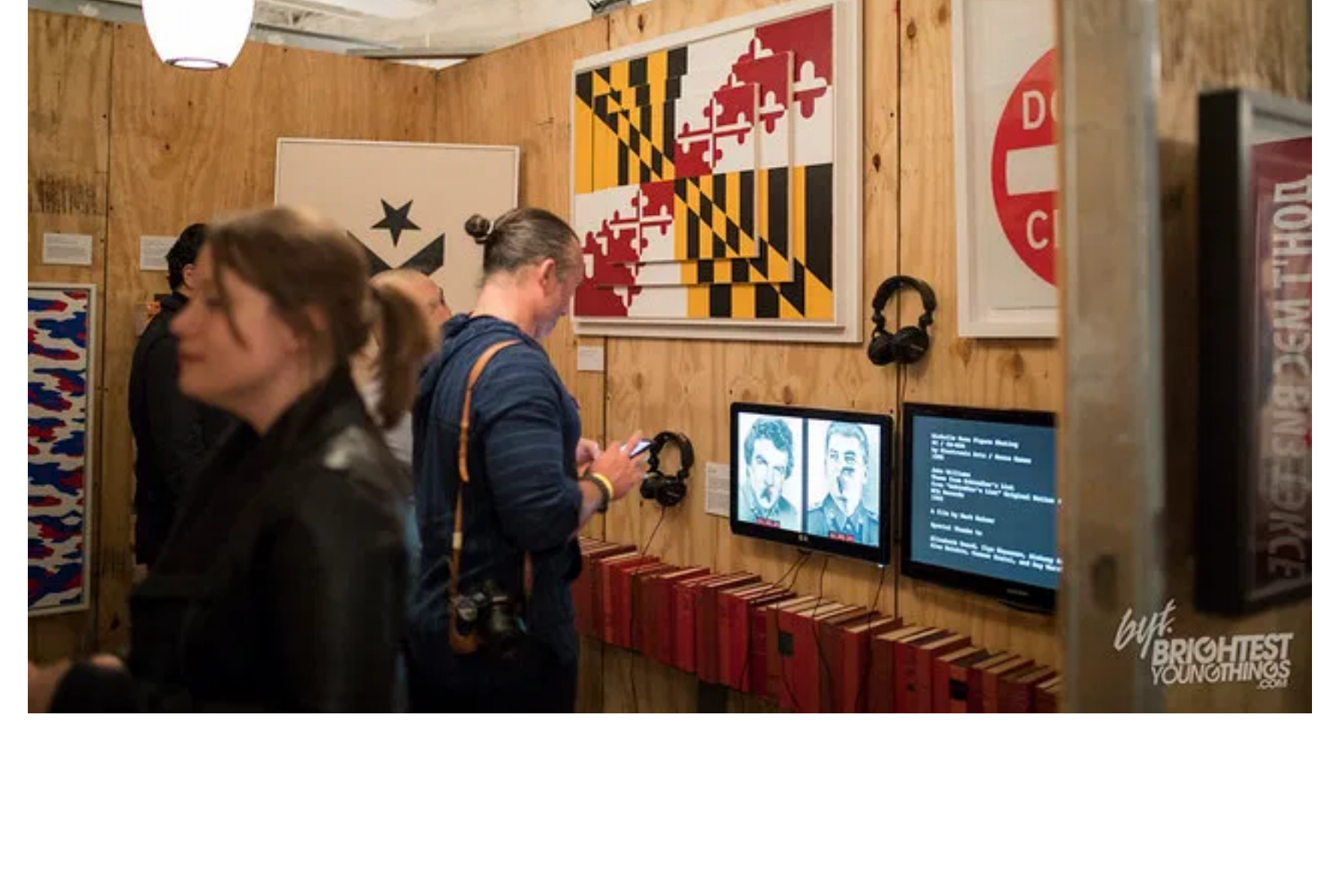


A BOMB SHELTER FOR THE NEXT COLD WAR? MARK KELNER'S SURREAL DREAM COMES TO LIFE

JOHNNY FANTASTIC • JUNE 5, 2019

ART INTERVIEW READ

If you had a moments warning before the world ending nuclear holocaust, what would you put in your bomb shelter? In a time of renewed cold war tensions between the U.S. and Russia, locally based artist Mark Kelner has created a bomb shelter of his own. Rather than fill it with a decades worth of canned food and jugs of water, Mark's shelter is a storage room for ideological supplies. Items like a Tom Selleck/Joseph Stalin clock (the iconic mustaches serving as the hands) and small George Washington portraits with "Da Da" written over them in Cyrillic adorn the walls. There's even a mounted landscape of a beautiful western sunset, which upon close inspection turns out to be a Roy Rogers sign with the "Roy Rogers" part taken out. In the age of a reality TV presidency, the search for truth has led Mark Kelner down an unusual path.



Kelner's Solaris: A Shelter for the Next Cold War, which made a splash at last month's Umbrella on 14th Street, is currently on display at Culture House, tucked inside the flamboyantly painted Friendship Baptist Church in Southwest D.C. The experience of Solaris is surreal and revealing. Just past the entrance, the visitor is confronted with an unorthodox wall of fame. The distinguished members of the human race here displayed are not Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, or Jesus, however, but fictional characters like Vladimir Ivanov, the Russian immigrant portrayed by Robin Williams in Moscow on the Hudson and Ivan Drago, who took on Philly's favorite underdog in Rocky IV. Passing into the main hall, items like a square skateboard, an aluminum foil Stanley Cup, and a red banner displaying the word "HUGE" spelled out in Cyrillic to accommodate the word "HUI," a major curse word in Russian, catch the eye. "Stalinbucks," a Starbucks parody, is one of the exhibits crowning pieces.



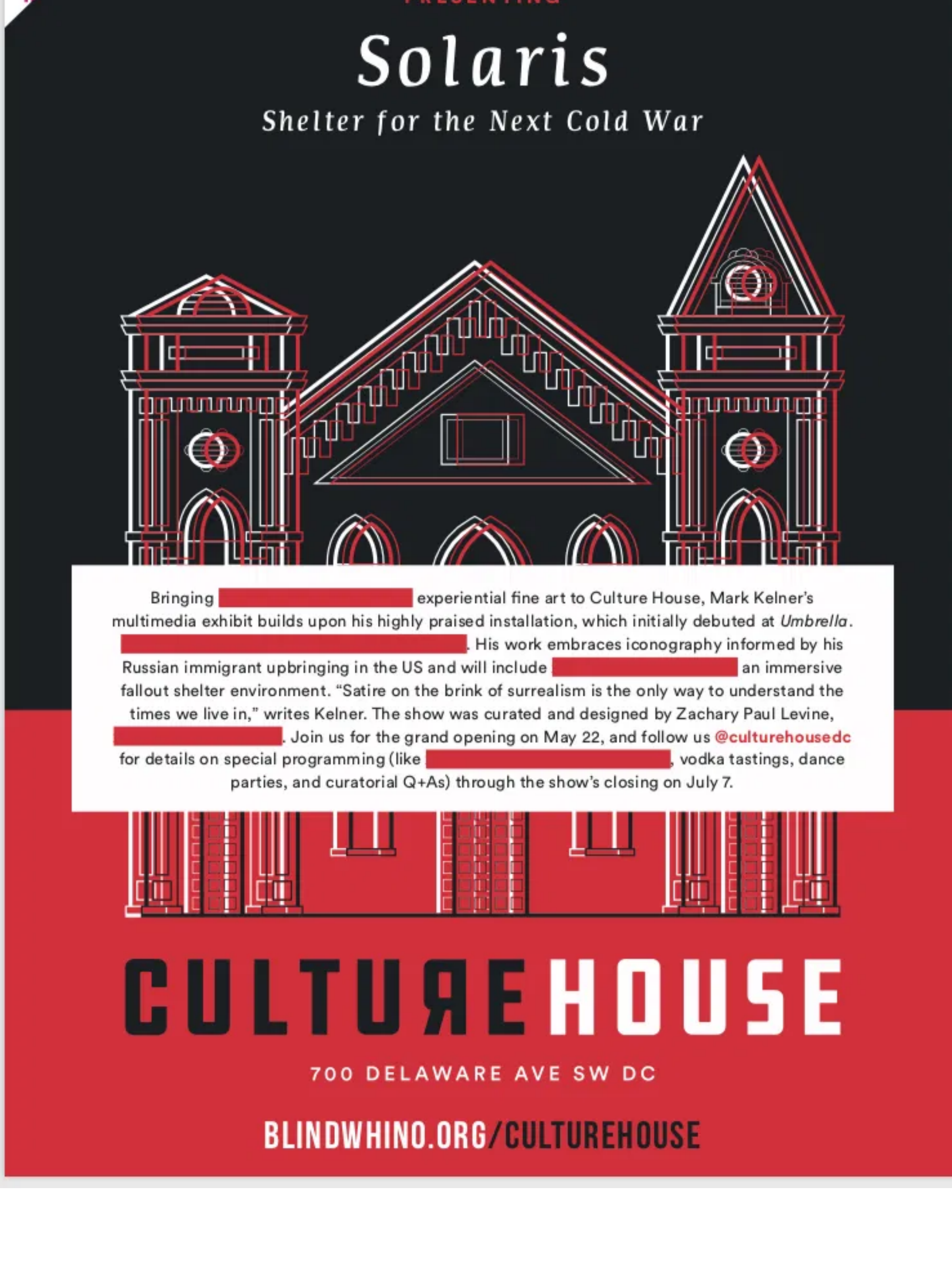
Before long, the visitor picks up on the trend. Most of the pieces combine the capitalist PR of the United States with the propaganda of the communist Russia. The effect is an uncanny distortion of collective memory. What looks like a Macy's advert at first glance turns out to be a quote from Vladimir Lenin. A KFC sign with "Sanders" spelled out in Cyrillic transforms the Colonel into a "Dear Leader." It starts to become obvious how alike the world's two superpowers are artistically, not only in terms of aesthetics, but ideology as well. There is a kind of "nationalism" in fast food iconography. The sight of a KFC sign along the side of a highway evokes a sense of shared cultural experience: wherever that smiling, decorated colonel appears, delicious fried chicken will not be far.

The communist revolution similarly embraced a bold futurism in its art that fortified cultural commonality among Soviet citizens. The sight of a passionate Lenin, hand outstretched behind a bold sunset, signaled the coming worker's paradise his rule would usher in. In the shelter, Kelner simply crops Lenin out, leaving only a sunset eerily similar to that of the Roy Rogers sign. Like Lenin's communist utopia, the fast food paradise over which Colonel Sanders presides is a land of promise: one in which no American can stray too far without access to a delicious bucket of fried chicken. The Sanders piece was inspired by a road trip Mark took with his Russian friend, who was visiting America for the first time. "What are all those Lenins?" the newcomer said as they passed sign after sign portraying the Colonel. It was a Eureka moment for the artist.

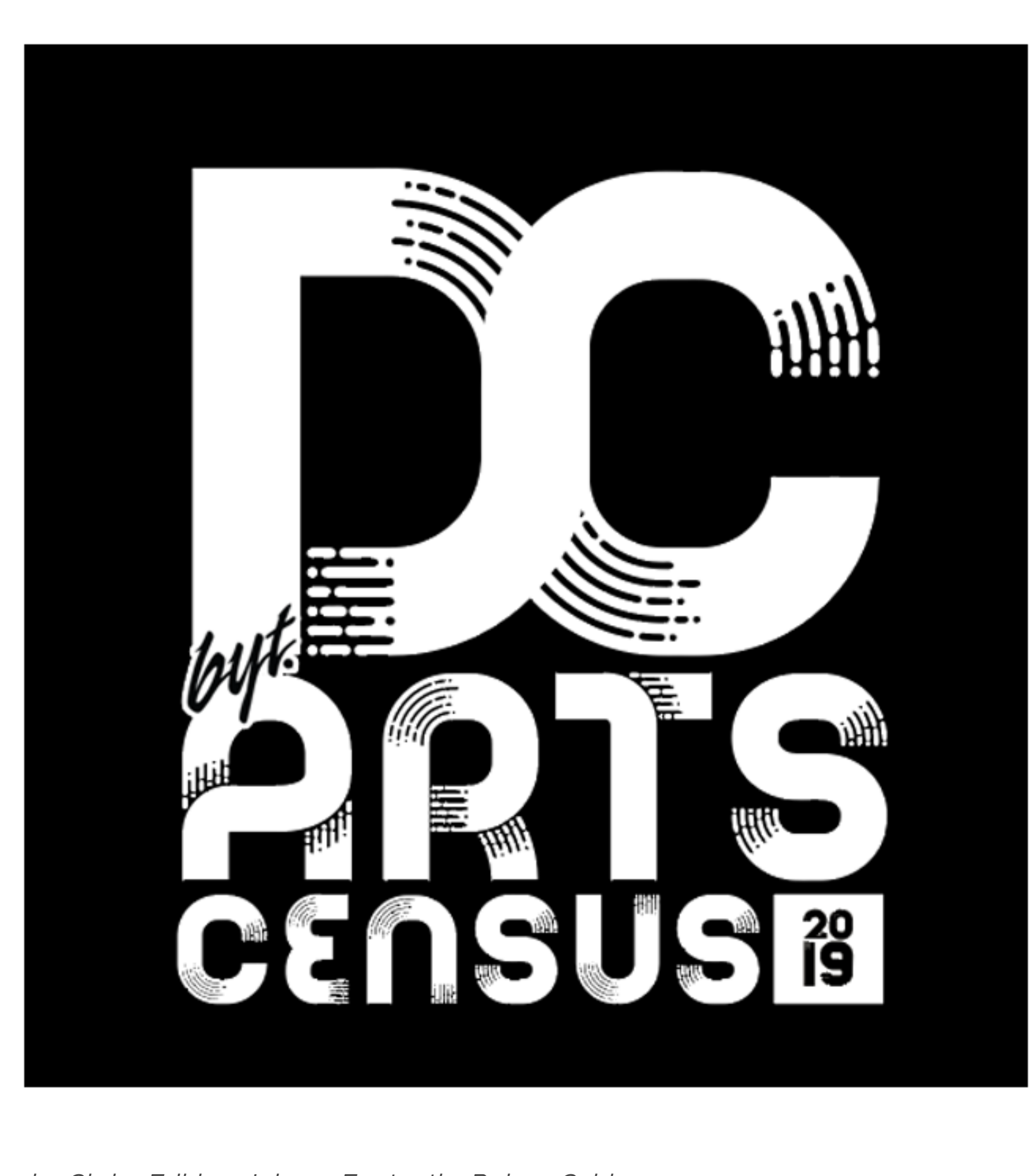


Mark's dualistic approach his art finds its roots in the artists own cultural background. A Russian raised in the United States, Kelner embodies the Cold War. His art displays a man torn between two worlds who can't help but see their obvious similarities. Now as the second Cold War appears to be ramping up, Kelner has brought ideological bomb shelter to life.

Solaris: The Shelter for the Next Cold War will be on display at the Culture House on 700 Delaware Ave SW (open Wednesdays 5-8, Saturdays and Sundays 12-5). Special events include vodka tastings, Q&As and a recently announced Steven Segal themed dance party on June 22. You can walk through the exhibit rather quickly, but to truly appreciate it, you have to stay in there for a while. It takes time to dis-aggregate the familiarity of corporate and fast food logos from their original function and settle into the artist's vision. Its sort of like trying to see a magic eye image: the harder you try, the less successful you are. Through Kelner's eyes, we cast aside the veil of difference and are left with a binding sense that we citizens of earth are actually more alike than we realize: that we all carry the marks of propaganda, that this propaganda shapes our very identity, and that none of us will survive the nuclear holocaust on bread alone. We also need fried chicken.



Part of the BYT Art Census 2019 series



Photos by Claire Edlins, Johnny Fantastic, Ruben Gaziran

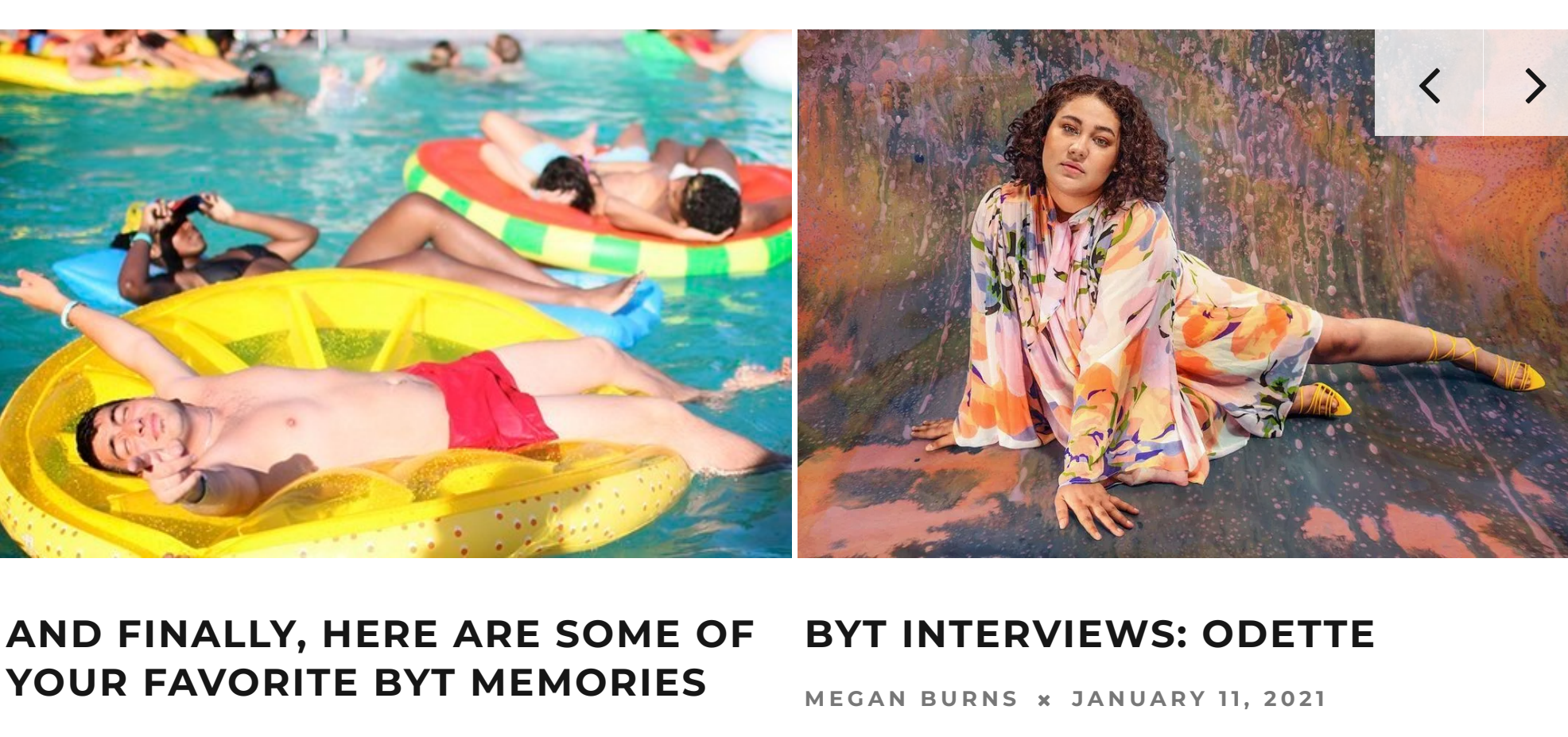
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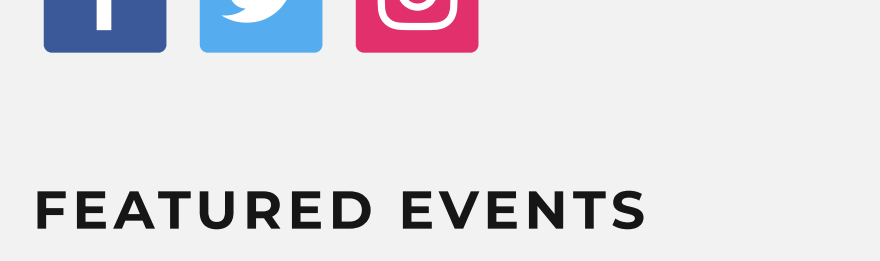
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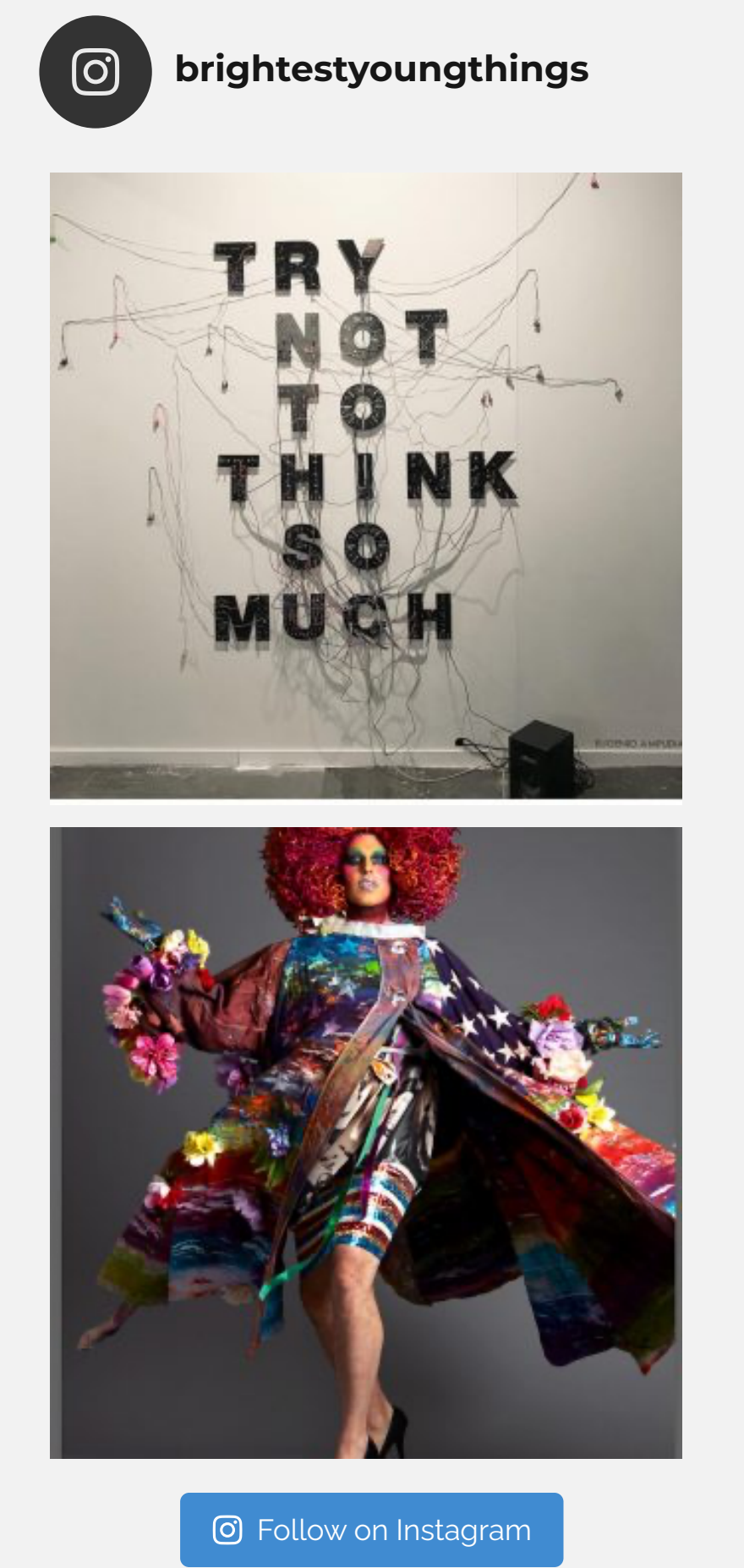


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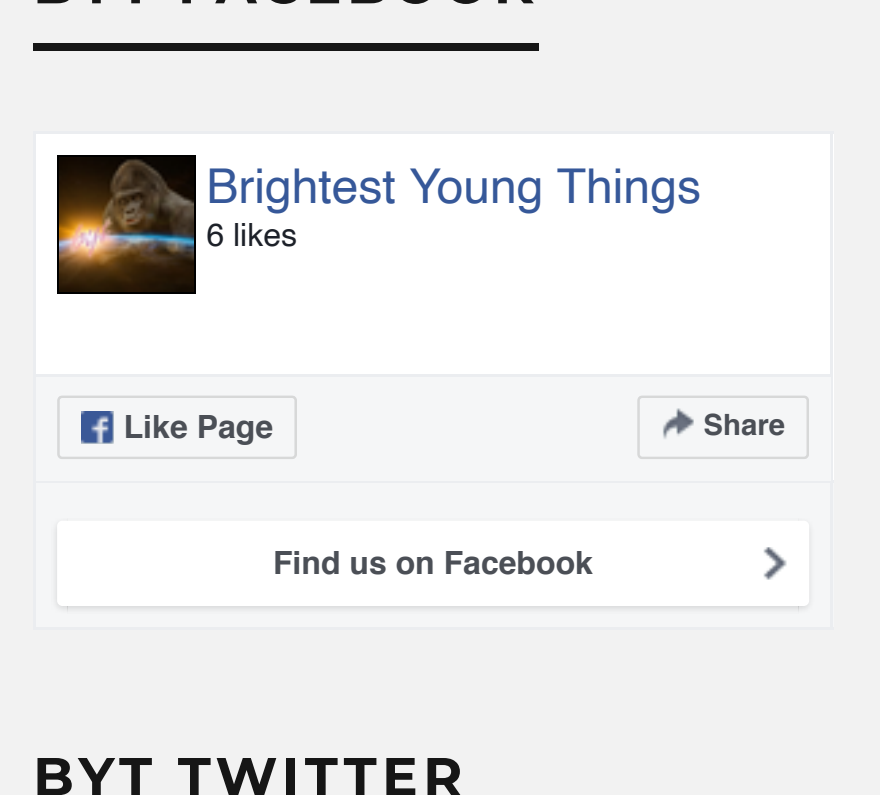
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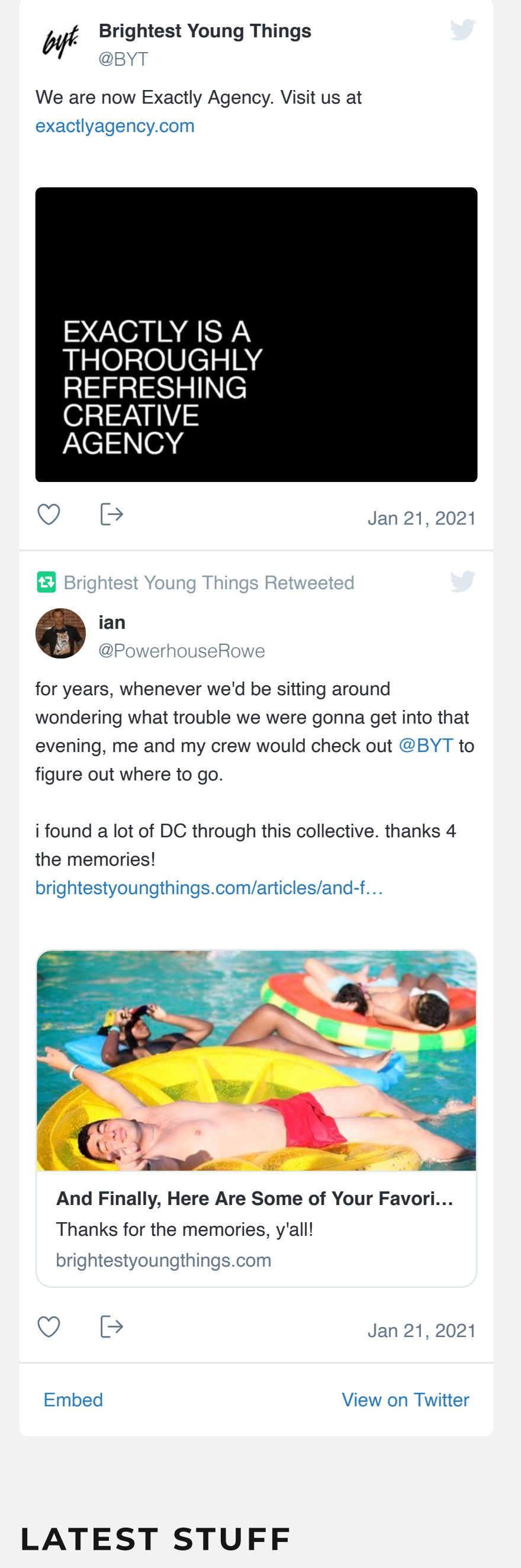
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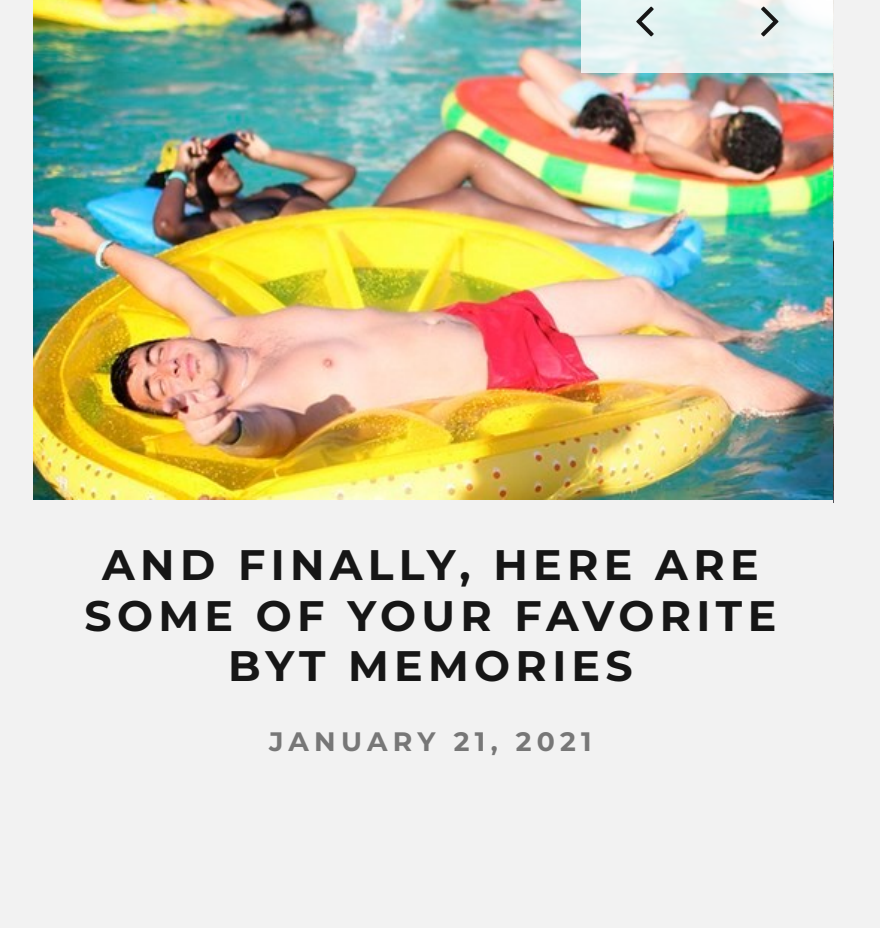
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