

## HELMUT LANG SPRING/SUMMER 2024

I made this photo in the summer of 2008 while on a road trip across America. I was 19 years old and studying at a local community college and had written nothing worth reading and wanted only to know the country that held me in its capacious, sometimes cruel, and often ecstatic, cradle. I was more running away from myself than heading in any true direction. But looking at this face now, my face, I see the same bewildered, curious, and awe-struck stare that I would harness to look at the world when I write. Obama was not yet elected and despite the surge of hope in his campaign, America was still caught in yet another quagmire of senseless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, somewhere in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Peter sits at a kitchen table, the needle on the \$20 Singer machine his mother had bought him from K-Mart hammering through a piece of used pink curtain that will become a dress he'd designed for her. A year before this photo was taken, Peter had lost his father and, in his grief, decided to take up sewing, filling a loss with the beauty glimpsed in his mind. From word to word, stitch to stitch, we were approaching each other, two artists who not so much chased a dream—but questioned whether the dream was enough to hold our desire to live and die by what we made. It's a childish wish, to make a life out of play, but such is the requisite naiveté of making anything. Through our immense joys and losses, unspeakable griefs on scales both personal and historic, we tried to build a vernacular that might hold us, one with the armature of language, the other from the cloth's myriad modes of embrace. Poking my head out the passenger window that summer fifteen years ago, heading nowhere and towards you now, how could I have known that someone so close to me existed, that the car was taking us toward this very moment, albeit going in circles, through the worn routes paved by the mid-century American hope of automobile autonomy? Peter's choice to build his Helmut Lang show around the car is most fitting. In the hands of queer folks, the car is not merely the vehicle of the nuclear family's realization of the American Dream, for which it proliferated, not just the symbol of linear industrial progress, but also, for us, a place to both hide from the world and be more than what we were allowed to be inside it. The car is where we snuck away, often at night, the vehicle itself perhaps "borrowed" from our parents, to arrive at destinations that are no places at all, but the sides of roads, the limbo-ed underside of bridges, a field of asters gone to seed at a dirt fork in the trail, and we cut the engine to fuck or cry or talk to each other without whispering, to finally scream the muffled joy and hurt while the stars wink over us through the windshield. The car, if nothing else, is a room that gains the miracle of movement, a room that's also a portal, allowing us to escape this world into another without leaving our bodies. For we were always on our way here. And we proudly invite you to hop in and join us on this joyride. And like all joyrides, there is nowhere to go but the going itself. In Vietnamese, we call this *đi chup gió*. To catch the wind. So float your hand out the window as you feel the warm breeze fill your palm, the sweet scent of alfalfa, rye grass, phosphorous pavement fumes in your lungs and the acid char of wildfires, the last vapors of nuclear plants in a vaporizing world. Because what they told you was a lie.

**WE WERE NOT BORN TO DIE.  
WE WERE BORN TO GO.**

– Ocean Vuong