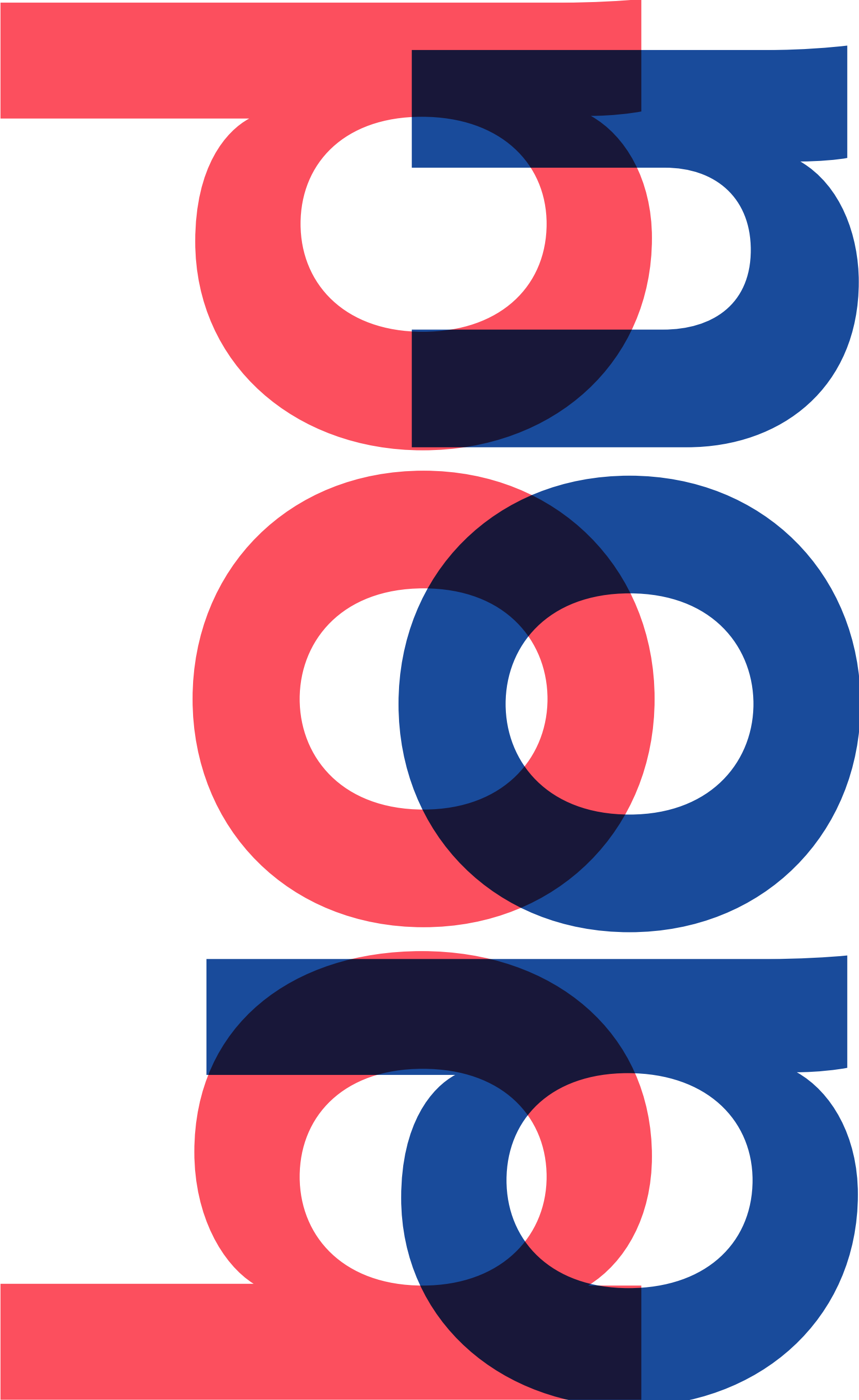




A conversation in response to the issues raised in the exhibition *Body Doubles* at the MCA, Oct 25, 2014–Apr 19, 2015

Moderated by Rashayla Marie Brown

Words and images by artists Claire Arctander, Kiam Marcelo Junio, NIC Kay, Rebecca Kling, and Mickey R. Mahoney

Edited by Aay Preston-Myint and Latham Zearfoss

Artwork (verso) by Edie Fake

A Kind of Liberatory Pronoun

Rashayla Marie Brown: I want to meditate briefly on the title of the show: *Body Doubles*. It represents a kind of subversion or transgression of a binary in a sense. I'm thinking about my first encounter with someone using *they/them* pronouns and this idea of transgressing a binary by using that particular pronoun. Well, gender neutral language has existed in English as far back as *The Canterbury Tales*' usage of gender neutral pronouns. Kiam, NIC, You also use *they/them* pronouns. Can you talk a little bit about your choice to identify in that particular way?

Kiam Marcelo Junio: Yeah, it came from exposure to queer communities. I've always felt that I'm composed of several different people. *They and them* as pronouns articulate the multiplicity that I feel within myself, and the multiple ways that I go through the world in different capacities, whether as a person of color, or as a gay man—all these terms that we subscribe to and that we embody, all these labels that are given to us. I just left the Navy in 2001. After seven years of being in that super-masculine world, using *they* and *them* was a key way for me to really begin to know myself outside of those structures.

NIC Kay: I don't necessarily think that we as people live within the binary, but we understand our actions and our relationships to each other within that binary, which I think is different.

RMB: Even though I'm not identifying as *they/them*, it does expand how I think about myself. But when I was first exposed, I was thinking it was a kind of liberatory pronoun, not just for people who consider themselves gender nonconforming, but for everyone essentially because we're all composed of multiple identities. That was my first assumption.

Rebecca Kling: I think that's interesting purely from a grammatical and syntactical—or an etymological—standpoint. Does the plural part have primacy, or does the gender neutral part have primacy, or both, or neither?

RMB: I'm also thinking about the idea of collectives representing a general set of ideas, principles and goals as a group—multiple bodies within one entity . . . and how there's an ability to be engaged with this idea of multiplicity within a collective space.

Mickey R. Mahoney: I think it would be wonderful if everybody just went with *they*, but not everybody identifies like that.

NK: I remember, when I learned about the use of *one*. In essays, you can write, "One feels. One does," and it denotes this singular body, whereas *they* inherently lends itself to several persons, several beings together representing something similar.

Claire Arctander: Like a fluid motion between the self as a more individualistic thing, and the self within a collective. I've been thinking recently about this idea of the spirit—the spirit is your noncorporeal



Claire Arctander, still from *The Right to Piss in Different Colors Part 2: Tributes*, 2014; color video, 9 minutes 20 seconds; courtesy of the artist

consciousness but also can mean something like school spirit or a collective sensibility. Thinking about that slippage in terms of spirit feels right on to me.

NK: Every time I'm trying to explain queer identity or trans identity, I always go back to my upbringing within the Christian church because so much of Christian ideology is predicated on accepting change and transition. *How many times did God transition?* The Father birthing the Son—which is himself—and the Son becoming this entity that can live within all of us—we are him. You eat a piece of bread, which symbolizes this person's body, which brings you closer to his father. That is within itself transformation right there.

Player's Options

KMJ: I'm thinking about the Lorna Simpson video piece and how first we see the male figure (I guess), and then the female, and then the musician. Then the music itself goes through a lot of transformations.

MRM: I thought, "Is this drag? What's going on in the male part?" The gestures were very determined. And the women were doing this [places hand gently on cheek].

RMB: These are both Lorna Simpson dressed in time-period clothing from photographs that she had found.

CA: What do we all make of the two very specific performances of gender going on and chess as this battle? There's a definite implication of war there, but it's like war with one's self. They're not playing one another. Right?

NK: Yeah, it made me think a lot about the 1960s and 1970s, the conversation around what was important in terms of the visualization of the black civil rights movement, how the black community was going to represent that as well as the role of the woman in the struggle, like what are we fighting for as a collective, what are we fighting for as individuals. In chess, you are thinking about several different things, your options and the players' options as well as the arrangement on the board.

CA: And trying to game out several steps ahead.

NK: Exactly.

RMB: Back to Mickey's comment: is this drag?

MRM: Well, I thought it was drag.

RMB: This idea of the body being read in certain ways just based off of simple dress changes relates back to the Wu Tsang piece and the two characters switching roles—essentially wearing each other's clothes and changing character by being in each other's clothes. And also, Karamustafa's piece, *Double Reality*, in which a male-bodied mannequin has a dress on. A lot of the works in the show are engaging on different levels of sophistication with regard to drag, or at least the idea of dress signifying gender.

MRM: I was looking at how the chest looks. Is there a binding? I think Lorna Simpson wasn't binding, but I think about all those things. What about this body signifies a female body and a male body? The Lorna Simpson piece is really not drag. I think of it as impersonation. I think of drag as more entertaining. When I was doing drag, I had to really think about what kind of man I would be on stage, how I would perform it, and how I could do that without being misogynist because a lot of drag was—especially drag kings.



Mickey R. Mahoney, *The Undergrad*, 2003; Super 8 film; 39 minutes; photo: Christa Holka; courtesy of the artist

KMJ: It’s interesting you bring up drag kings as misogynist because I often feel that female drag can be.

CA: Female impersonation?

KMJ: Yeah . . . and there are different ways of becoming something else or putting on drag . . . not limiting the drag component to gender drag, but cultural drag and social class drag. Who is this or what is this, and is this a caricature, is this a character, is this—

RK: Is this you?

KMJ: Is this me, is this all of the things that I was told not to be all in one thing, or is it something that’s always in flux?

Aay Preston-Myint: I’m interested in the idea of “realness” in the Lorna Simpson work and how there is drag, but then there are these two forms—musical improvisation and chess—which, in some ways, we do associate with blackness. But they also stand in for a certain class and/or classicism.

RMB: Lorna is a black woman with a certain kind of class and represents the kind of trappings of upper middle class black propriety. And how it would be different merely if her outfits weren’t so perfectly designed. You know? Or representing that particular time period . . . how that would function if she were to be in baggy jeans and a jersey, how that would have a different kind of read.

Latham Zearfoss: The piece is about chess but it also has a piano player and it’s in black and white, and it’s so driven by opposites. There’s the battle of chess, but then in the piano playing, there’s this harmony. Even if they’re not producing harmonious sounds necessarily, the keys are still working together, which I think adds a layer to what’s happening that transgresses the binary. That third element is there visually, to not let it just sit so comfortably. It’s another performance. There’s the performance she’s doing that feels like drag or acting, so we put it in a place of pretense. But then there’s the performance that [pianist Jason Moran] is doing that feels authentic because he’s making these sounds. Those two together put you in a place that’s somewhere between.

Realness?

RMB: Some of the work intensely engages with the idea of the gaze: the idea of being viewed and how you’re being identified from someone else’s perspective. And interrogating that gaze—the burdens of representation or being looked upon or people analyzing someone’s identity based off what they visualize, what they see of that person. Different modes of representation can kind of undermine or play with that.

RK: Something I’ve thought a lot about is the extreme scarcity of trans narratives, particularly positive or presented with any sort of integrity. And if no one else is going to do it, I’m going to do it myself. I have found a lot of power in going on stage and saying, “I am trans.” That removes a lot of the power in derogatory language because I’ve taken the first step towards framing that identity. I think that is a tool for artists to—I wouldn’t say disarm a gaze, but to preempt it somewhat.

RMB: You’re questioning the gaze before the person is actually looking upon you.

NK: Very often people say performers are so fake. You just pretend to be all these people. But what makes you think that any of these people are pretending? You know? What makes you think that this isn’t a really vulnerable space for them to feel something about themselves that, within other circumstances, they wouldn’t have the ability to do?

MRM: Authenticity.

LZ: Authenticity, yeah, which is a really interesting notion . . .

CA: In regards to the show.

NK: Realness?

RMB: Yeah, just the idea of realness as it relates to this. Kiam, we were talking about realness and authenticity, and about this idea of an ornamental identity that you can ostensibly put on and then take off. That said, a lot of times either trans or trans-feminine people are viewed as being artfully deceitful as opposed to just expressing what their truth is—their real self.

KMJ: Or sometimes it’s out of necessity, too. I think a lot about my experience in the Navy and how a large part of that experience was this everyday drag of being masculine. It became so embodied in me that now I find myself switching back to a lot of those learned behaviors depending on the context and depending on what kind of reaction I want or don’t want. So sometimes I’ll dress like this, or sometimes I’ll just dress in a t-shirt and jeans and go downtown and not be seen.

NK: It makes me think about training as an actor and theater. Meryl Streep is one of my favorite actors, and I never think of any of her characters as not Meryl Streep because they are so her. They are her body. They are her person.



Rashayla Marie Brown, *You Can’t See Me Fool* (detail), 2014; archival inkjet print; courtesy of the artist



Kiam Marcelo Junio, *Model Minority (Jerry Blossom Wearing Harley Davidson American Flag Denim Vest)*, 2012; archival inkjet print; courtesy of the artist

So, should we go around and introduce ourselves? . . . Is there anything else people feel like they need to know? . . . Maybe gender pronouns would be good.

Rashayla Marie Brown: Yeah. All right. I am Rashayla Marie Brown. I am an interdisciplinary artist and writer, and I’m also the director of student affairs of diversity and inclusion at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. My pronouns are *she* and *her*.

Kiam Marcelo Junio: I am Kiam Marcelo Junio. My pronoun is *they*, and I am a visual performance artist and a yoga instructor.

Rebecca Kling: I’m Rebecca Kling. I use feminine pronouns. I’m a performance artist and educator around trans identity.

Mickey R. Mahoney: Mickey Mahoney. *He/him* pronouns, and I teach at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Columbia College.

NIC Kay: My name is NIC Kay. Preferred gender pronouns: *they/them*. I’m an artist, a teacher, and an organizer in Chicago.

Claire Arctander: My name is Claire Arctander. Preferred pronouns: *she* and *her*. I am also a visual artist working in a lot of different ways, and I currently teach sculpture classes at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Latham Zearfoss: I’m Latham, and I prefer *he* or *they*. I am an artist and an organizer as well.

Aay Preston-Myint: I’m Aay Preston-Myint, an artist, teacher, DJ, and bartender. I use male pronouns: *he* and *him*. But my friends tend to use what they like.