



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

Featuring 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 Daniel Luedtke

Pretty Privilege

NIC Kay: I was thinking about how, when you first get introduced to art, the default is a white femme body, but with no agency—without a head, without arms. And no feet. The stationary placement of that form. It exists also within the show. As the default of beauty, without agency at all. Like one day I’m without arms, without feet, without a head.

Rashayla Marie Brown: Yeah, the Cindy Sherman piece in particular is like a blow-up doll that seems to be mangled within some accident or something?

CA: I definitely think all the time about the history of representation of white femme bodies, not only in art history but in our larger visual culture. How many of these weird, “idealized representations” of that kind of person we’re inundated with.

When I do performative video work, I am very aware of the edge of that razor and fully using that as much as I can to draw viewers in. I can present myself in a way that fits into those standards and ideals that feel comfortable, feel comforting, and feel titillating to the viewer. But through the performance of simple actions, I turn that on its head and hopefully jolt viewers into thinking differently about social and gender norms. Inevitably, I think it’s impossible to escape the history of associations that are made with people who look like you that have come before—a category as broad as “white woman.” There’s so much within that. I’m not trying to reduce it, but there are certain associations. There are certain histories.

KMJ: In my experience, it’s been the white male body that’s been the default as well. As a gay person, the white male body is simultaneously fetishized and made neutral or default. Is the character in *Mishima*—a white male body—given permission to inhabit these roles because he is essentially default, a blank slate?

Latham Zearfoss: Historically in Western culture, it’s the white male as the subject and the white female as the object. Through gay liberation and feminism over the last 30 years, increasingly, the white male is also the object. But the white male is still subject first, object second, and the white female is object first.

CA: I am white, I am very femme-y. Because of my appearance and my self-presentation, there is a lot of caché with that. But I also experience being underestimated, and both of those things are very present every single day. This idea of “pretty” privilege is something I think about a lot. Rather than turn away from it, how do I undermine it or question it? I try to complicate it by embodying this cuteness and being committed to it, but simultaneously questioning and being critical . . . always being thorough in whatever context I’m in, in that moment.

Rebecca Kling: This is not something I advertise, although maybe I should: I am a safe trans person.



NIC Kay, video stills, *Mannequin Walk*, 2011; durational performance; courtesy of the artist

I generally am perceived as cis¹. I’m within this bell curve of physical presentation in terms of height and culturally accepted ideas of attractiveness. There’s a s**t ton of power being near the top of the bell curve. And so I want to use that power for good rather than evil.

RMB: “Pretty” privilege—how someone’s perceived attractiveness kind of can perform in these very privileged ways—can also cause people to think that perhaps you’re not really as rigorous and as intellectual as you could be. But you can use that assumption to subvert general misogyny in our culture.

CA: To assert non-normative desires very clearly while simultaneously embodying more normative ideals.

MRM: It reminds me of Amber Hawk Swanson’s piece, *Amber Doll Project*, where she made a doll of her likeness. She took it around places, dressed exactly like it, and even married the doll. She had the doll laying out . . . it was going to be its death. It was laying out in a—maybe in a coffin—and people came by and violated the doll.

NK: It’s funny because I had never heard of that piece before . . . I was working for an artist in New York. We were at an artist resource warehouse, and I fell in love with these mannequins. I had been thinking about black bodies as workers dating back to cotton production and was really getting into the conceptual levels of myself as a clothing retail worker. Then I fell in love with these fluorescent, white mannequins. I had been doing performative walks with objects that I had been obsessed with in New York City, and I walked around with this mannequin for a few months. The experiences were really strange, like how people would approach this body—a female form—versus me—this gender-neutral figure. Very often what is considered gender neutral is usually masculine, the default still is masculinity. People would approach my mannequin that I was clearly holding and fondle her or just interact with her body . . .

RK: That’s a very literal body double.

NK: Yeah.

Currency

CA: [Laughter] As far as remixing all these different references and inspirations . . . it’s that intangible thing—sincerity and tenderness—that determines the borders of what is okay as far as borrowing . . . Did you have moments with the Wu Tsang piece that were like, “uhh?”

RK: What is “uhh?”

RMB: I mean, is it cultural appropriation?

CA: . . . as far as how this person is engaging with signifiers of a culture that I’m reading to be not their own.

RK: Well that particular piece was interesting as a subset of larger questions on appropriation because the characters were in a short film about making a short film that was . . .

CA: Based on a book by someone else.

RK: Right. There were layers.

CA: But why does Wu Tsang say at the beginning, “Well, that’s why we’re in Mexico?”



Latham Zearfoss and Joel Midden, video still, *Something To Move In*, 2014; standard definition color video with stereo sound; 4 minutes 30 seconds; courtesy of the artists



Aay Preston-Myint, video still, *Peony Mirror (for Mark Aguhar)*, 2012; color video installation, silent; 1 minute loop



Rebecca Kling, *Alone in the Apartment*, 2012; photo: Peter McCullough; courtesy the artist

RMB: Mimicking the telenovela is supposed to be one aspect.

CA: And I got that reference in the way it was performed.

RMB: But then I think it probably could have been any number of places. It’s all about the subversion of it being so Japanese . . . that line just before, “this is so Japanese.” Is it now okay because we have an Asian person appropriating something from Japan as opposed to . . .

CA: The white performer—

MRM: The white cisgendered guy that I’m assuming is white cisgendered in the first place. I think that’s a part of it. I don’t think we’re really supposed to feel comfortable with this piece.

RK: I felt like I was given permission to laugh at them rather than with them, and that’s why we’re in Mexico. Like they don’t have a f**king clue what they’re doing.

KMJ: Since Barbara deGenevieve’s passing, I’ve been thinking a lot about political correctness, with the question of appropriation following that. For instance, a lot of Tumblr and Facebook activism around the issue is about calling people out: “You’re appropriating this culture! You should apologize and not ever do it again!” It ignores a lot of things. It assumes that any one culture is a monolith that doesn’t change, or hasn’t ever been affected by—or taken from—another culture in its history. Like it’s not ever going to shift.

RMB: But how are we all accountable to the cultural material we’re using? Because ultimately, none of it is really ours. I’m not 100 percent resolved on whether or not the term political correctness is problematic in and of itself, yet I find it very efficient in talking about ways we police people’s engagement with cultures that are perceived as not being theirs.

MRM: I think being aware of that and aware of my currency in the world is very important.

KMJ: The idea of authenticity is also heavily embedded in the idea of who can use something—whether or not they qualify as a member of whatever group they’re seeking to address or represent.

Aay Preston Myint: What we’re talking about is risk. Someone misappropriating or making fun of your culture might be button-pushing, or it might be politically incorrect, but it’s not a risk. That energy (vulnerability) is displaced. It’s not really a risk because underneath all of that is the same old historical structure of power. It’s just upholding more of the same, and they—the appropriator—will eventually benefit . . . It’s not just whether something

is “correct” or not or “real” or not, but, in that moment—in that body in that place—which direction is the power going? Are they going against, or are they going with the flow of history and power? And that current can change at any time . . . The first time I saw the dude in that Japanese wrestling outfit, I had that minor recoil, but then you see it’s just part of this fantasy of equal footing, but they acknowledge that fantasy is absurd. And so it becomes this play space. By the time he’s in yellow face, I’m not even phased.

NIC Kay: Political correctness usually is out the window for the sake of camp.

RMB: So does that shift or subvert the possibility of what camp can do? Or do you feel like it’s just an aesthetic component?

NK: I kept thinking, in this day and age, does it matter that neither of them are Japanese? What is the currency of having someone who identifies with the culture that’s being appropriated? Or is this about queerness? What identification is more important when it comes to appropriation? Being queer gives you a certain currency to appropriate things by other queer people. So if that story is more about queerness than Japanese culture . . .

RMB: I think about lineages . . . collectives or communities that we are either identified as part of by others, or that we assume . . . What is allowed to be perceived as a part of my lineage or my kind of ancestry?

Code Switching

RMB: I’m fascinated by the concept of code switching, being able to turn something on or off because you actually have the capacity to, and how that relates to this idea of performativity or fakeness.

NK: I’m really conscious of class and what it means to perform different socioeconomic statuses. Dave Chapelle talks about it all the time. The way in which you talk, the language you use, in a meeting with someone who is going to write you a check versus the kind of conversation you have with your homey. People who come from a privileged class very often are not willing to talk about that upbringing, what that meant for them. People from working class backgrounds also are not comfortable talking about that entry point, and how that shaped how they see the world and how they navigate relationships. If your mother was in construction, you may not necessarily understand femininity in the same way as someone whose mother was doing something else.

RMB: Absolutely. I think artists are in a privileged class in a sense because of the fact that we represent a kind of luxury that people of a certain

income are supposed to have access to, whether or not we’re actually a member of that class.

NK: I was thinking of realness as it pertains to curation too. I think about the frameworks in which you make your work, and then when you’re curated into a show how your work can be reframed as it applies to the subject of the show. So the idea that this is a site for radical personal political transformation . . .

APM: Especially since some of these canonical works are valuable for different reasons than what we think they might be valued for. So while it’s not risky to have a collection that is canon-based, you can at least destabilize that by redistributing its value, and putting it on equal footing with something else, something different.

NK: Like Bruce Nauman’s work—the bound piece—in which a piece of flesh is being tied, and it makes me think about the temporality of our beings as we construct them, which I would not have thought about before.

MRM: The word realness is a bit of a trigger, whether we’re talking about *Body Doubles* or whether we’re talking about gender nonconformity. It made me think about Janet Mock’s *Redefining Realness*, and her questioning of what is authentic. Like what is the authentic body, what is the real body?

KMJ: I think that question—what is the real body?—is implied in the name of the show: which one is the body double?

MRM: Yeah, or it could be body quadruples. It could be body-whatever.

LZ: Body-party.

[Laughter]

¹ *Cis* is short for *cisgender* and describes people who perform the approved gender of their assigned sex more or less according to society’s expectation (man/boy: male; woman/girl: female). The term is used to replace words like *normal*, which assume trans or transgender people are *abnormal*, and that cisgender people simply fall into their gender, rather than actively choose it.

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.