

Mikaela Assolent

## THE BODY-DOUBLE

In the following essay, Mikaela Assolent writes about the background to *The Body-Double* by reflecting on the fate of the minority subject in the public sphere of the majority.

Two bodies made one. The subject of the photograph. The point of contact between them lies at the exact centre of the image. The figure on the right has the leading role, her eyes are open, her right hand is stretched in front of her as if she were in movement, showing the way. The direction of her gaze gives the picture its dynamic, inscribing a diagonal descending from right to left. The other figure is her sidekick; he is outside her direct line of vision but nonetheless by her side. His eyes are closed or semi-closed, oblivious to what is happening. His hands are on his hips, not moving. Their similarity is gauged through the differences between them. Why do I concentrate so much on the shapes of the zippers on their hoodies? One is oval, the other rectangular. It's as if the zips provide the key to the whole secret of what makes them different.

This picture is about hair. The three braids are an identifying sign. A world in which people are deemed similar through their hairstyles, instead of other characteristics. The precious hair is delicately held by an almost invisible person behind the figure on the left. A very specific action: to hold a strand of someone else's hair. The hair is so flamboyant that they seem to be the only ones with in the crowd who have hair. The man with a shaved head, at the front, mirrors the man at the back who has draped a towel over his head. A towel worn as if it was a wig. Beach drag. There is also a tiny puff of white hair in the lower right corner, reinforcing the hair narrative.

Hair colour. Blond highlights. Braids. The colour of one's skin. The shadow of shaved but perceptible facial hair. The jawlines. The shape of a nose. Are there any markers of gender or race identity that cannot be changed in a beauty salon or through surgery? I keep calling the person on the left a "he", even though, right away, I sense I might be wrong. Language seems more rigid than bodies. My use of the pronoun "he" speaks more about my own projections than about any tangible reality.

She is well known. A public figure. I wonder if she is so famous that at least half of humanity would recognize her. Certainly not. I show the image to my flatmate who is from China. She does not recognize her; she does not know the name that I pronounce. I realize that the public sphere acknowledged in this text is a sphere that my flatmate is not a part of.

Jennifer Lopez and her stunt double in 2012 on the film set of her music video *Follow the Leader*.

What does it mean when our cats bring small, wounded animals into the house? Most people interpret these deposits as offerings or gifts, although inaptly chosen, meant to please or propitiate us, the cats' humans. But according to the anthropologist Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, "Cats may be assuming the role of the educator when they bring prey indoors to their human owners [...] A mother cat starts teaching her kittens from the moment they start following her [...] Later she gives them hands-on practice by flipping victims in their direction, exactly as a cat does in play. Mother cats even bring [wounded] prey back to their nests or dens so that their homebound kittens can practice, especially if the prey is of manageable size. So perhaps cats who release living prey in our houses are trying to give us some practice, to hone our hunting skills". [...] the cat assumed (but how could we know?) that its own movements were templates for our mimicry.

Who is the public? Does it include my neighbours? The doorman in my building? My students? The people who show up in gay bars and clubs? The owners of the bodega down the street from me? Someone who calls me on the phone or sends me an e-mail? You? We encounter people in such disparate contexts that the idea of them all belonging to a single body, one which could be addressed in speech, seems to have something wishful about it. To address a public, we would not go around saying exactly the same thing to everyone. When we address the public, we do so in a venue of indefinite reception, hoping that each person will find something of her/himself in it.

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification goes a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it goes on to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.

The toll is one that subjects who attempt to identify with and assimilate dominant ideologies pay every day of their lives. The price of the ticket is this: to find selfhood within the dominant public sphere, we need to deny the self. The contradictory subjectivity one is left with is not just the fragmentary subjectivity of some unspecified postmodern condition; it is instead the story of the minoritarian subject within the majoritarian public sphere. Fortunately, this story does not end at this difficult point, this juncture of painful contradiction. Sometimes misrecognition can be tactical. Identification itself can also be manipulated and worked in ways that promise narratives of self that surpass the limits prescribed by the dominant culture.

Workers employed in cultural mediation (very often self-taught artists) also embody the soft skills so highly acclaimed in post-Fordism: they see themselves, by virtue of their occupation, as socially competent, good team players and good networkers, as inventive in coping with limited resources, as curious and ready to learn new things. Analogous to the artist figure as a role model, cultural mediation is associated with the promise to free up the creative potential of each individual, motivated to no small degree by the interest of economies "demanding workforces that are creative flexible and adaptable". [...] Cultural mediators' aim in one way is to share privileges, create a level playing field in connection to access to the educational resource that is culture. At the same time though, it is to change "the others," to make them more similar to themselves: to convince them that the mediators' ideal of the learning individual is the right one.

The "woman" produced in *drag* is not a woman, but instead a public disidentification with woman.

## Preliminary instructions to act as a body-double in the public space<sup>1</sup>

1. You don't have to choose right away whose body you want to be the double of. It might become clear to you later, when you will be already acting as a body-double.
2. Act as your own body-double. For example, act as more manly, straighter, richer or whiter than you are.
3. Act as a fictional character. It can be very subtle, even imperceptible. You can also be inspired by someone you know.
4. Think about who might be controlling you. Here the image of the puppet and the puppeteer might be useful. If strong emotions appear, such as anger toward the fact that you are being manipulated, concentrate on an artwork. Artworks have usually more subtle ways of telling you what to think, it might even be pleasurable to follow their lead.
5. If you like grand scheme role-play, think about how the city of Oslo is trying to get something out of you. Or capitalism.
6. Find someone to make them act as if they were your body-double. Again, using an artwork can be useful. Try to make them see the artwork the same way as you see it.
7. Expand to anything you would like to become. Animals, plants, objects, materials... Be their doubles or make them be the doubles of you.
8. Combine all the body-doubles that you created into one.
9. Think about whose body you became a double of by following those instructions.

<sup>1</sup> A postcard with this text will be distributed across the city in October 2019.

