Everything is Relevant

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Me and Mel Chin

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In Romantic literature, representations of the self are often haunted by the spectre of the doppelgänger, the concept of the lookalike double being at once a harbinger of misfortune and a symbol of divided existence. The doppelgänger counteracts aspirations of a subject founded on principles of autonomy and represents a rupture to the politics of self-interest. Whether an evil twin embodying a conflicted personality or experienced as a sensed presence, the doppelgänger disturbs the action of self-identification in social space. It deconstructs the either-or dualism that is, according to Jacques Derrida, the foundation of all metaphysical history and logic, and which needs to be rejected in the process of recognizing the self as contingent to others. Through the doppelgänger’s being, hallucination inverts into desire, absence into presence, and Self into Other.

In “Modernity and Ambivalence,” Zygmunt Bauman writes:

In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision of social order the differentiating power hides as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but the other of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation. Thus, abnormality is the other of the norm, deviation the other of the law-abiding, illness the other of health, barbarity the other of civilisation, animal the other of the human, woman the other of man, stranger the other of the native, enemy the other of friend, “them” the other of “us”, insanity the other of reason, foreigner the other of the state subject, but the dependence is not symmetrical. The second side depends on the first for its contrived and enforced isolation. The first depends on the second for its self-assertion.

Mel Chin’s Two Me was produced on the occasion of Monument Lab for the central courtyard of Philadelphia City Hall. It consisted of two identical but oppositely winding ramps, placed parallel to one another, each of which led to a plinth. Both plinths were adorned with the word “Me” on their facades. People were encouraged to make their way up one of the wheelchair accessible ramps to stand atop a plinth, where their bodies would become the statuary, with the attendant authority that comes with memorialized representational figures in public space.

During the opening of Two Me, people waited in line to walk up the ramps and pose however they wanted, while people from the ground looked, took pictures, or communicated in some other fashion. People would often come down from one plinth and then go directly to the top of the second, standing in the place of someone else whom they may
have looked at from the plinth they were just on. The mood was celebratory yet subversive as people on the plinths often posed in amusing ways that mocked the solemnity of statues. Two Me functioned like an interactive theater set, in which the “I” in identity was assembled around a person’s embodied experience while also imbricated within the canonizing language of monumental forms. The ascent up the aluminum ramp was a noisy affair, drawing attention to each participant. The two mirroring paths and identical granite-faced plinths called forth each and every participant as whole and individual, albeit to varying degrees of success.

Yet Two Me also destabilized this sense of individual wholeness as it was insistently accommodative of the most radical pairings of persons—a “me one” and a “me two” that could be marked by the widest set of differences from one person to another, be it any combination of race, ethnicity, age, and gender identification. The work also readily exposed the dangers of the lack of interracial circulation in society, magnifying the Cross-Race Effect, a finding of cognitive psychology whereby a person within a range of physiognomic features more readily identifies with others within the same range of physiognomic features.³ A case in point is that I was twice misrecognized for Mel Chin by people looking at promotional materials for Monument Lab. Twice, I was told that my image was seen on the portrait page for the roster of Monument Lab artists. Of course, I was not an artist for Monument Lab and while my name was acknowledged as a co-curator, my mien was not shown on the Monument Lab website. Two persons (with whom I have had many interactions) had mistaken me for a different me.

I have long been curious about Mel Chin. My curiosity had to do with our shared hyphenated Chinese identity and our respective paths in an art world that once had very few Chinese American or Chinese Canadian identified artists. Although he is not me and his background is far different from mine, I saw in him the possibility of a form of kinship that had more to do with routes than roots. Two Me centred on the idea of the self as ontologically and manifestly split in space, with requital only possible through the recognition of another. There was a parallel between his idea for Monument Lab and my sense of Chin as someone close but long lost. Both of us share family roots from a particular part of Guangdong province in southern China. We ended up having dim sum together, along with Paul Farber, the other co-founder of Monument Lab, in nearby Chinatown. It turned out that we were curious about one another for similar reasons and at one point during our meal Chin called me his Cantonese brother, which moved me.
Two Me is a work about diaspora writ large—not the diaspora of a particular cultural group or groups, but human diaspora. All humans, no matter the separation of geographical distance, are entangled with one another through exchange, hybridity, and métissage. Two Me is structured as an interpellation machine (posed as a monument) that calls forth interaction from a public conditioned by the logic of social media and the presentation of the individual to the world through the form of the selfie. The interpellation is subversive, however, because it is not a reification of the constitutive process of individuals internalizing ideological values in the creation of subjection. “Two Me” operates like a Trojan horse, in which an artistic apparatus purposed for the affirmation of the Me is revealed as constituted by something else—the We.