

When people ask me if I use “they” pronouns in the neutral or plural sense, I’m left without appropriate words. When they learn about my situation, through my work, they presume it involves a degree of simulation. I allegedly simulate a plural identity, one (or two) that correlates with conjoined twin embodiment. That may be, but “they” also implies a gender-neutral identity. What ties these seemingly competing notions together is liminality—the state or states of being neither and both.

I, for one, have found my identity and body-image to be inextricable from televised footage of the dicephalic conjoined twins Abby and Brittany Hensel. I mean this in the most literal and embodied forms possible, with little room for metaphorical insinuation. This is not identification with an ambiguously bodied other in its typical connotation, the kind in which a voyeuristic encounter with such a body affirms the integrity and boundedness of the spectator’s own body-image. No, this is the sort of recognition that only exists as a post-rationalization for a traumatic, permanent rupturing of the integrity of the body, of a neural self in communion with the mediatic doubles of Abby and Brittany.

Little is known about the formation of body-image, the neural mapping of embodiment, that occurs in the early years of childhood. Similarly scant is knowledge of how it intertwines with psychosexual development, except that it often does. There are competing theories, psychogenic as well as neurogenic, for how it can all go wrong. Wrong it went for me, indeed. Many of us are somewhat familiar with the notion of people contending with the grating compulsion to alter a gender through artificial (not to be read as inauthentic) means, but few of us have heard of one wanting to be two, two women to be exact, or at least one of two enfolded in the same body. Don’t ask me why and how, for it is just as confounding to medical experts as how Abby and Brittany can play volleyball or drive an automobile. How do glimpses of a medical documentary irreparably alter a child’s developmental trajectory? How do dicephalic twins jointly compose an email? Consider these mysteries of the neurological body.

I’ve spent most of my life wishing to be normal, if not downright despising my psychiatric and neurological divergence. Perhaps a lifetime yearning for normalcy is not without its inverse: desiring a specific and outwardly visible physiological abnormality. I can’t help but compare my shortcomings with Abby and Brittany’s cognitive and behavioral typicality. In school they were sociable, well-liked, athletic, and conventionally sexed/gendered; I was the prototypical autistic nerd, with gender variant tendencies adding insult to the injury. Television programs picture them enjoying inclusion in an accepting Midwestern Protestant community, an idyllic domestic life with a warm, prototypically American nuclear family. They are presented as energetic, happy children

singing nursery rhymes, pre-teens around a Harry Potter birthday cake, teens engrossed in discussions with their friends on AOL Instant Messenger, listening to the Gorillaz while driving, and as adults travelling the world with friends, snapping selfies and pursuing their casual interest in photography. This is not to diminish the many challenges dicephalic twins face, but to illustrate naïve perceptions I've yet to outgrow, among other things (a situation that is part and parcel of my impairments).

I've chosen to be transparent about the bifurcation of desire my situation implies: wanting to be and to be with. I feel a potent unilateral erotic and amorous relation to images external to my body, but this exists alongside an equally charged relation that loops these images back into it as our body. Like Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, loving is not enough—one must become what one loves. Ariel, so compelled to be human, sacrificed her voice in order to become what she loves and with whom she loves. I am as grateful for the impossibility of my body undergoing a magical transformation like hers as I am troubled by its ethical implications. I am disabled myself, and the deliberate acquisition of a disability or challenging form of bodily difference doesn't sit well with me, even in the face of the strongest feelings I know telling me otherwise.

The few forms of recourse in this situation are simulation and roleplay, as well as the adoration of actual dicephalic twins and their fictional counterparts, such as those found online in fandom communities devoted to illustrations of conjoined and multiplied bodies. I've fluctuated over the years between the former and the latter, something like flipping a switch that redirects the current one way or the other. The binarization of this desire is a double-edged sword, a dance between the inability to realize an impossible embodiment, and a lack of reciprocation toward my outwardly directed sentiments and attachments. Again, I am caught in between.

Perhaps I'm complicit in a cycle of violence I myself am victim to; a transgender “dicephalophilic” person with a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome is not exactly routine. I speak of a naturalized and widespread entertainment culture that ritualizes the display of the anomalous body: conjoined twin documentaries, transgender teen reality television, deviant confessional talk shows, obsessive-compulsive “edutainment,” cognitive impairment as Internet humor, inspiration porn, etc. I speak of a certain objectifying gaze... the way the camera follows those of us anomalously bodied. The twisted irony of it all being that the very conditions that produced my difference could feed back into the same apparatus, perhaps a show on TLC with a punny title: *Me Two*.

I find myself captivated by the failures of these media genres and forms, by how they presume to elicit normal reactions from an allegedly normal audience. They fail to take into account the

statistical outliers in their target demographics, such as myself. A human-interest story becomes a special interest; a medical illustration becomes a schema for the self as selves; an image of an X-ray enraptures a lonely adolescent; inspirational content inspires far more than intended. It's difficult to encapsulate nearly two decades of intensity in words. This exhibition I've produced tries to convey perhaps a sliver of that.

Some would say I am possessed, others that I am insane, perhaps degenerate or morally unsound. I'd say that I am stuck this way, likely for life.

– Andrea Crespo

*Joined for Life* comprises a two-venue exhibition including a presentation of new works at 55 Chrystie Street #203 as well as bihourly screenings introducing the artist's feature length film *parapagus* (2017) at 106 Eldridge Street, commencing at 12pm, 2pm, and 4pm during gallery hours.

Andrea Crespo (b. 1993, Miami; lives and works in New York). Solo exhibitions: MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA; New Museum/Rhizome, online; Swiss Institute/Contemporary Art, New York; vdrome.org, online; Hester, New York; Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin. Group exhibitions: The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; MINI/Goethe-Institut, New York; The Kitchen, New York; Zabłudowicz Collection, London; Musée Espace Arlaud, Lausanne; LUMA Foundation/Westbau, Zürich; Associazione Barriera, Turin; Serpentine Galleries, London; Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; The Fridericianum, Kassel.

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