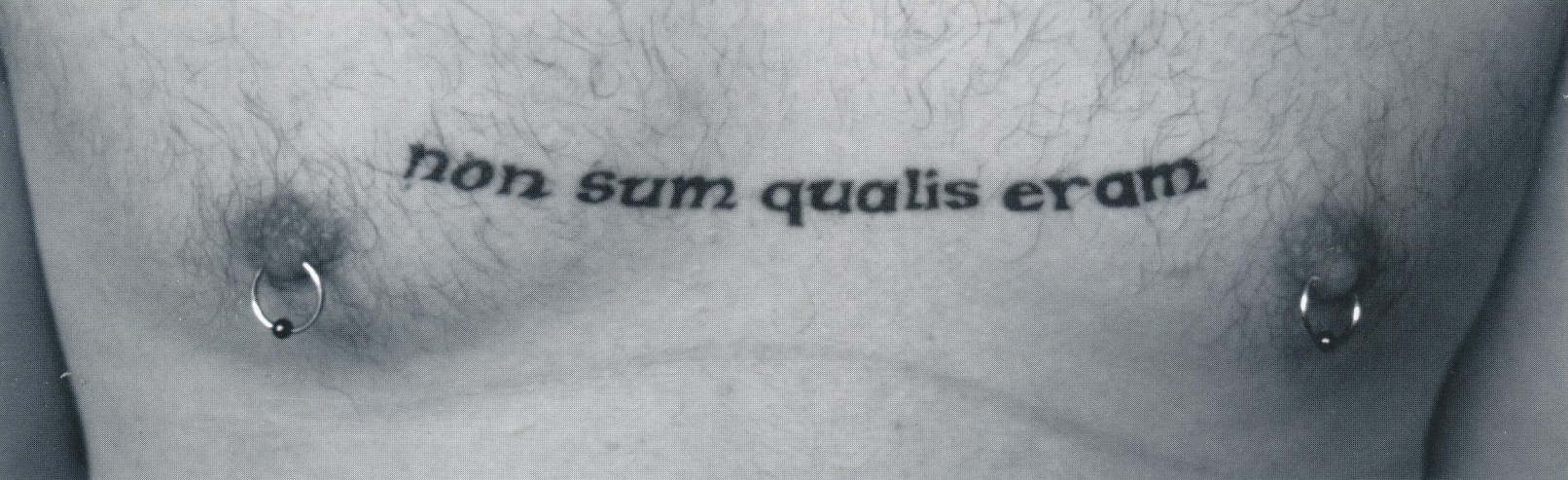
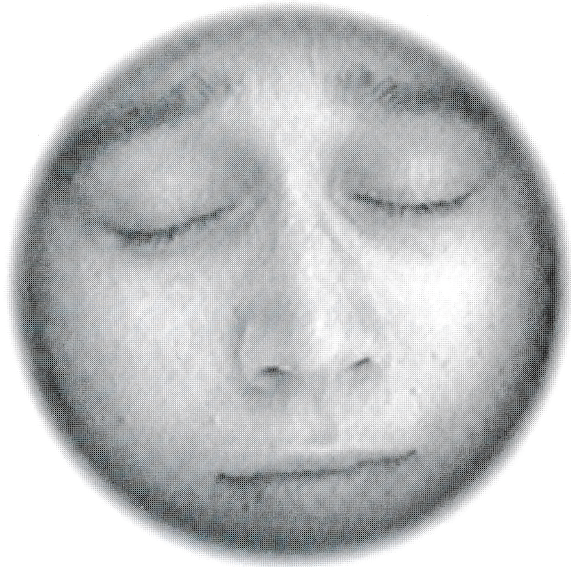


R a c h e l l e V i a d e r K n o w l e s

A close-up photograph of a person's chest. The skin is light-colored and has some hair. In the center, there is a black tattoo of the Latin phrase "non sum qualis eram" in a serif font. On either side of the tattoo, there is a navel piercing with a silver hoop and a black bead. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

non sum qualis eram



we are not who we were

A Particular We by Jenifer Pappararo

For Rachelle Viader Knowles, “we” signifies the personal. She does not use it to generalize experiences or to create grand narratives, but rather to locate and acknowledge her participation and position in the unfolding of particular events. As part of a *we* she becomes an active element in an always-complex series of relation-relations that create stories.

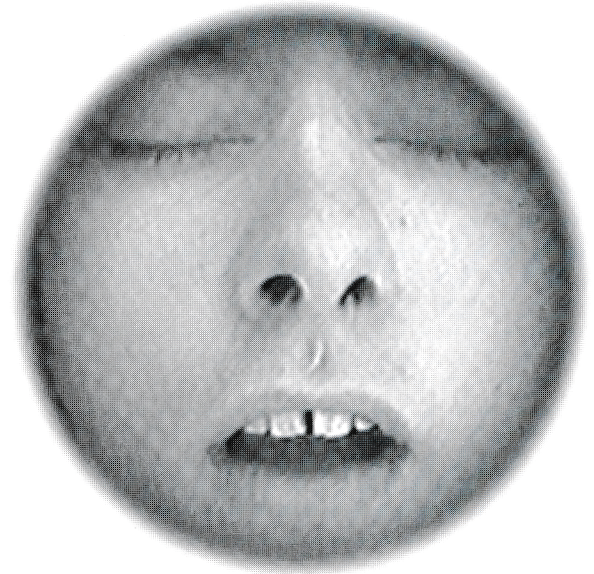
Knowles's title, *we are not who we were* is a play on the quotation, “I am not who I was,” by Horace.¹ She introduces us to the original text with a four-foot long photo-image of a male tattooed chest with pierced nipples framed in a light box. Horace's verse is tattooed in Latin across the bare body in a Celtic font about 1.5 inches in height and spans the width of the chest.² Although the original text prefaces the individual subject, the *I* as singular remains hidden and secondary in Knowles's representation of the text. She conceals the singular pronoun partially through the archaic language, the decorative font, and the image's position at the edge of the main exhibition site. Ultimately, Knowles subordinates the *I*'s singularity by using a body other than her own. She uses this other body to imply a relation between herself and the tattooed figure. Knowles does not simply use this shift in pronouns to undermine the significance of the individual in order to privilege the plural, but does so as a means to inject the personal into the plural. Even though Knowles's body is removed (in this element of the piece), she is identified as an active participant in shared experiences.

In the main site of the exhibition, Knowles becomes a performer. Two circular projections fill opposite corners of the space. Each lunar circle is filled with a tightly cropped, and thus slightly distorted, face: one is Knowles's and the other is that of the tattooed figure. It is hard to say whether their activity is rendered obvious when first entering the main site, but even with the masked shots and slowed motion, their activity soon becomes apparent. Both are masturbating. Although their acts are solitary, at moments the eyes of one or the other figure glances at the opposite corner, seemingly acknowledging the presence of the other. Here Knowles again observes the singular with the plural. When the viewer enters the piece they are presented with two figures framed in the same manner. It is impossible not to relate them. Even when the viewer identifies the nature of their lone activities, it is difficult to separate their actions, as they every so often look across the gallery as if to watch each other perform.

The formal qualities imply a familiarity between the figures, and with this connection comes a history, or more precisely a series of histories. The details of their relations are left vague, and it is this vagueness that unfolds their histories. This ambiguity has the potential to initiate a barrage of questions that in themselves develop possible stories and create complex histories. Beyond the obvious question--do these figures have a relationship beyond their pairing in the gallery?--other questions arise. Where do these two faces meet outside of the gallery? What is their relation? Are they lovers? Were they lovers? These questions are informal, and are framed in order to fill the narrative. Another series of questions also has the potential to surface. These questions relate more directly to the process of art making. How did the artist get someone other than herself to masturbate on screen? Did they witness the taping of the other's performance? Or were they alone? Where they at home or in the studio? Was the video shot in one take or was it produced over a series of time? How much of the video tape was edited out?

Both sets of questions attempt to construct relations between the figures, but they do so differently. The first series looks at narrative in general terms while the latter point to more particular details. The second set work on assumptions made from the initial question, but complicate this generalization by looking at specific moments. Knowles actualates these questions by concealing and distorting certain details. Place is literally masked by the cropped and off-set framing of the images. This skewed sense of space is then heightened as the large circular projections float like planets in a cosmicly darkened room. The artist uses formal devices not only to obscure a sense of space, but also to warp time. She slows the speed of the video, and loops and repeats the footage.

Essentially, Knowles inverts the generalities of time and space by drawing from her personal history(ies). The projected faces are not simply reduced to two insipid and nameless figures, but are imbued with implied histories. Whether the viewer sees the relation between the figures solely through the microcosm of the exhibition or queries into its past and future, these personal stories change not only within the diverse elements of the exhibition, but also outside of it. This pointing to the personal draws out specifics questions--ones that have the potential to continually shift the narrative from *I* to *we*; from a solitary act to one performed in unison; from the recognition of another body; and finally from an acknowledged relationship. In all their complexities, the diverse experiences of this exhibition informs and changes the past. Knowles's play with Horace's verse sums it up, "we are not who we were."



1 Horace. "Book IV: Ode I." *Horace: The Odes and Epodes*. C.E. Bennet, ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. 282.

2 *non sum qualis eram.*

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we are not who we were
an exhibition by Rachelle Viader Knowles
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1969 b. Bristol, UK.

Education

1994-6 MFA Visual Arts (multi media)
University of Windsor, Canada.
1990-3 BA(Hons) Fine Art (electronic media)
University of Wales College Newport, UK.
1989 Advanced Diploma In Art and Design
London Guildhall University, UK.
1987 Foundation Certificate in Art and Design
Cardiff College of Art, UK.

Solo Exhibitions

1999 Red Head Gallery, Toronto, Canada.
Pekao Gallery, Toronto, Canada.
YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto, Canada.
1998 The Art Gallery of Windsor, Canada.
1997 MFA Thesis Exhibition, Windsor, Canada.

Selected Group Exhibitions

1999 *Cluster*, Pekao Gallery,
Toronto, Canada.
1998 *Faculty Exhibition*, Lebel Gallery,
University of Windsor, Canada.
1997 *Oh, Canada... Artcite Inc. Celebrates 15 Years.*
Windsor, Canada.
Staging Like Spaces, ArtLab,
London, Canada.
1995 *Between Machine and Story*, Artcite Inc.,
Windsor, Canada.

Residencies

1999 Braziers International Artists' Workshop, UK.