

THE LIFE MODEL: BETWEEN NUDE AND NAKED PAUL SANT CASSIA

Our human evolution and cultural variability is manifest and realized through our bodies. From an evolutionary perspective we are the tool wielding, hairless, ‘naked ape’ who developed clothing as an adaptive device enabling us to colonize the whole globe from our African origins. From a cultural perspective our bodies are decorated and clothed to communicate signs and properties: of gender, age, sexual attractiveness, status, and wealth. Of all the species, humans have *made* their bodies as a result of evolutionary processes, cultural decisions, and applied techniques. Both ‘naked’ and even more so ‘*the* nude’ are specifically human cultural constructs. Strictly speaking, other animals are neither naked’, and even less so ‘nude’ – only humans are. And within our western Judeo-Christian tradition (though not for the Greeks) ‘naked’ is something ‘minus’; ‘nude’ is something ‘plus’ – which helps explain why the Renaissance, which drew upon ancient Greco-Roman models, re-discovered the nude attaching the definitive article ‘the’ to the condition of nakedness and thus re-creating ‘the nude’ as an object of aesthetic contemplation. In so doing, a long-standing tension was initiated with the guardians of morality, the holders of ecclesiastical and political power, and the displayed representation of the naked body became both a vehicle through which, and a territory over which, socio-political and ideological battles were fought – indeed over the ‘nature’ of human beings and of what is ‘proper to’ humans. If nakedness is culturally variable; ‘the nude’ is a culturally specific aesthetic construct.

Let us begin by considering that peculiar and distinctive human condition of nakedness that is as much cultural as natural. If it is not the natural condition of humans to be naked, nakedness is as much *made* by humans as ‘the nude’ is. But it is made differently. It moves from the extreme of the corpse in the mortuary, through the naked body under the surgeon’s knife or the physician’s probing dactylic diagnosis (the Greeks who glorified the naked body as close to Divinity paradoxically saw physicians, that is those who mess with bodies, as low status *technites*), to the disclosure of one’s body to one’s lover. And it seems to me that *disclosure of vulnerability* is the key to the presentation and apprehending of nakedness: it implicates the disclosed self to another in a dialogic exchange. That is the underlying message in *Genesis*. This extends *a fortiori* to that of the corpse, for death, suffering, shame, nakedness and vulnerability are all linked together in that First Book. As Julia Kristeva has noted: ‘The corpse seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection’ (1982). For the naked corpse is nothing other than the ultimate somatization of vulnerability. Few classical western artists ventured that far into naked abjection, although the Younger Holbein’s ‘Dead Christ’ (1521) whose rigor-mortis extended middle finger pointing to the ground is the deictic clue that faith can be difficult to sustain when faced with death. For nakedness is warm, living, sentient, aware of its condition, a property of living subjects as well as a mental state. And in science, nakedness can become even more abject: a previously sentient skin cut open to reveal anonymous organs, tissue, blood, bones, arteries, veins, ligaments and muscles - properties common to all of us, to be dissected, displayed, studied, and minutely recorded through art - as indeed occurred through the sixteenth alliance of art and science in anatomical drawings and wax models, and which not unnaturally disturbed authorities. Scientific dissection, allied with art and the printing press, helped accelerate the process towards viewing the human being dualistically: the body as a machine, and the mind.





If Nakedness is Dyadic, 'The Nude' is Triadic

If nakedness is a mental condition of the viewed subject-as subject and the apprehension of that subject by the viewer, the nude is a mental perception by an object-constructing viewer. It becomes a thing, a representation, external to the viewer and the viewed. Four conditions are necessary for this movement: a "frame" (which includes the emergence of a specific discourse), a representer (i.e. the artist), a represented (a 'model'), and a viewing public. A triangular relationship replaces a dyadic one. This applies to what one can call the 'classical art' up till the early 20th century. Contemporary art is quite different and often aims to break these distinctions.

Inevitably when there is a movement from a dyadic nakedness to a triadic nude, which involves a public and a viewer, a tension is created partly due to the nature of the image. All imagery and representation is ambiguous and even more so when the subject matter is predicated on the transgression of intimacy, or the presentation of nudity. The transgression, or more precisely the transgressive act of the representing artist and the transgressive *gaze* of the viewer involves two operations: it needs to have a purpose for the former and an end for the latter. Art historians and art theorists have long commented and sometimes moralistically on the fact that subjects of nudes were often women, and that the artists and consumers were often men. That is true but perhaps rather obvious. In any case that criticism, if it is a criticism, could be applied to contemporary female artists who have certainly taken up the male nude with what Feminists would call a scopophilic male relish. What may be more significant is that the very act of 'modeling' transforms the relationship between the representing artist and the subject: a portrait is a portrait *of*; a model is a model *for*. The 'model' often represents something else, there is a transference, but model of what: of nakedness, of the person being depicted, of an ideal, of a concept? And for what purpose? The fact is that any public depiction of nakedness has always been inherently transgressive and can stimulate the passions. This extends from Phidias's celebrated sculpture of Aphrodite based upon the courtesan Phryne stained by the masturbatory emissions of Athenian men, through Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel whose naked figures had to be clothed, and to Manet's *Olympia* and Courbet's *The Origin of the World* which caused a scandal.

The Life Model: From Signifier to Signified

Scandal is therefore always potentially the wind in the artist's sails, and nowhere more so when an erotic charge flows back and forth between the autonomous object of contemplation ('The Nude') and the disclosed subject whose nakedness is exposed. But there is a sense in which many of the previously held traditional assumptions about the complex inter-relationships between artist, model, representation, the body, and transgression are changing. Let us begin with 'The Life Model', the theme of this exhibition. In classical art, the model was often used either to depict an allegory or a narrative. The 'model' was often a model *of* some *other* thing or person, rarely of the person himself or herself - in short, a substitute placed there in the artist's conceptual scheme of things and whose skill transformed that model into something else (as, for example, in the work of Poussin). To be sure, the model's irreducibility sometimes intruded into the picture, to sometimes create a shocking effect, as with some of Caravaggio's paintings. Clearly, it would be disingenuous to deny the erotic charge of paintings such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, but that figure does not represent a specific woman but is an allegory of a bride at ease looking at the viewer, her husband. The key to the *bridal* Venus is the dog curled at the foot of the bed (signifying fidelity) and the servants busying themselves with her dowry, her *corredo*. In short, a process of *substitution* operated. The presentation of nakedness through the nude figure was a *signifier*, both for the narrative schema of the painting or sculpture in question, or to indicate the artist's skill and virtuosity – and it was the latter that artists had to

demonstrate to obtain prized commissions by wealthy aristocratic and ecclesiastical patrons. To view all classical art nudes as an expression of the consumption of eroticism for men, as a pandering to scopophilia, would be grossly distortive of the complexity, richness, and philosophical concerns of classical art. This is not to deny the significance and place of the erotic charge in such representations (or even the long history of privately circulated imagery of specifically erotic art), but that was only part of the wider picture and even eroticism may sometimes have had a moral purpose rather than its mere consumption. In any event, representation of the figure naturally lends itself to eroticism for complex psychoanalytical but also obvious reasons, and the development of any new medium (from printing to lithography to photography to electronic media) inevitably leads to increasing, semi-underground circulation partly because of the almost-magical power of the new medium.



From the early 19th century onwards, and increasingly in the 20th, the life model becomes more autonomous, the actual subject of the narrative; it becomes the *signified* – due no doubt to the movement away from public and ecclesiastical commissions to the production of canvasses for a bourgeois collecting public, and other factors. Goya's *Maya Desnuda* (1800) marks a notable break in the presentation of the nude. For the first time, a naked woman is neither engrossed in her own reflections (as for example with Boucher some 50 years earlier), nor embedded in a narrative or engaged in a visual exchange with some other figure in the painting (even if her reflection, as in Velasquez's *The Rokeby Venus*), nor allegorical (as with Titian's *Venus*), but a suspiciously attributable individual (rumoured to be The Duchess of Alba), gazing unflinchingly at the viewer, and one whose hands and arms are raised behind her head no longer engaged in a complex choreography of concealment and display. It was not just the secularization of the nude nor just the pose and the stare that created the scandal, but the suspicion - whispered as real possibility - that the life model was a member of Spanish high society. The Life Model was becoming a real person with a real history and identity. It is no accident that this occurred during the upheavals of the French revolution.



If the Life Model now enters the artistic scenography as a character in her own right rather than as a substitute or signifier, she does so rather scandalously, and again by social intrusion. That was precisely the artistic epiphany of Manet's *Olympia* which was none other than a depiction of a specifically identifiable individual (Victorine Meurent), as a prostitute (or what we would nowadays call a 'sex-worker') staring at us, who become - through our return gaze – cast in the role of her potential next customer. This painting contained three 'scandals': the 'nominative' scandal, the 'representational' one, and the 'social' one.

Meurent was Manet's favourite model, a girl from humble origins with artistic ambitions and who - partly because of this exposure - became publicly identifiable as the model, perhaps negatively affecting the realization of her ambitions. In this triangulation between model, representation, and specific identity, Manet performed first an unveiling (*devoilement*), second a transference, and third a homology. The unveiling consisted in the presentation of the nude not as goddess (*Venus*: goddess of Love) or allegory, but as a specific woman. The transference consisted of the renaming of this specifically identifiable model as a secular goddess of sex (*Olympia*). There is no Greek Goddess called Olympia, so the name is both ironic and deeply suggestive of a shared conspiracy in transferred/adopted identities. French prostitutes, like many prostitutes elsewhere, were known by their *noms de travail*. In 'concealing' his model's identity - who was nonetheless recognizable - and renaming her in a movement that shadowed the socially recognized renaming that prostitutes adopted with respect to their own identities, Manet created a homology between the renaming of the prostitute and the renaming of the model but in opposite directions.



The second scandal, the representational one, was not merely that Manet painted a nude woman staring at the viewer without any intimation of awareness of her own nakedness (i.e. a disclosure of vulnerability), but on the contrary - of her self-presentation of her nakedness as an essential feature of her identity, i.e. as a prostitute whose life-work entails a suppression of the 'natural' (i.e. social) expectation that any woman would feel uncomfortable displaying her nakedness in front of strangers so openly. Artists are also engaged in a competitive exchange with their predecessors and Manet was no exception. His *Olympia* was a direct engagement with Titian's *Venus*. To complete the visual cue Manet places a black cat at the feet of his model in place of Titian's dog. As Robert Darnton reminds us in *The Great Cat Massacre*, in French culture "the power of cats was concentrated on the most intimate aspect of domestic life: sex. *Le chat, la chaste, le minet* mean the same thing in French slang as "pussy" does in English, and they have served as obscenities for centuries. French folklore attaches special importance to the cat as a sexual metaphor or metonym". The meaning could not be clearer: this was not just "pussy" but cuckoldry: not a metaphor for a wife within the ordering of marriage but a direct representation of sex, procurement, and cuckoldry outside marriage.

'Normally' a life model undresses; that is what we expect. But Manet makes his model undress as if she had never undressed, or more precisely he presents her as if she is always naked. Whereas Goya's *Maya* was of a woman who *undressed for the artist* (in response to social reprobation, Goya refused to paint clothes over her naked body but painted *another* picture of her in same pose, but clothed - as if to say that both representations were equally true and valid for the character depicted), Manet's *Olympia* is almost one where the artist *moves to* the environment of the model/character not to paint a woman who has undressed for him, but rather because he has an opportunity to paint her 'at work' as it were. The modern equivalent would be an Amsterdam's Red Light District (the *Rossebuurt*) His *Olympia* receives and surveys the world naked, almost as if in her 'natural' state- not the natural state of a goddess, but the 'unnatural' state of a woman without *pudeur*. Nor is she a courtesan, that is attached to a particular high status male (who often

had their mistresses painted in the nude, where the artist had to try to see her through the eyes of her keeper), but he paints her with cold distance as a ‘common’ prostitute – in other words accessible to all, as indicated by the black maid presenting her with a bouquet of flowers: the type of gift bourgeois men presented to prostitutes as an indication of their interest (and one she merely accepts without emotion or recognition as the opening expected gambit of the routinized commercial exchange that is to follow and which we intuitively anticipate precisely by registering at her non-reaction). The painting, in short, provided all the signs of a sexual transaction. That indeed was the third scandal, the social scandal within the representational one, for by displaying this picture in bourgeois society to itself, Manet disclosed the public secret of its seamier underside and one that preoccupied many artists and novelists of the period. Manet himself was to succumb to syphilis.

By the late 19th century The Nude had become irreversibly secularized. It had become irreducibly human, not divine. It was no longer an allegory but a tracing of the artist’s engagement with his or her world through the life-model who begins to have an independent social history. The Life-Model begins to appear not as an invisible untraceable means to an allegorical or narrative end but becomes a separate entity with an identity. And in the art of Yves Klein (whose interesting experiments in the early 1960’s pre-date by some 30 years the ‘discovery’ of what became called ‘performance’ art) and others, the model moves from being the subject of the artist’s concentration at reproduction to become the agent of production. We could trace the parallel but intertwined histories of the Nude as Sign, the underlying narrative, and the visibility and agency of the Life Model:

16th -18th Century → 19th Century → 20th Century → Late 20th Century
 SIGN: An Embedded Signifier → An Externalized & Centred Signified → An Internalized Centred/De-Centred Signifier & Signified

NARRATIVE: Textually Exegetic: Allegorical/Mythological/Religious → Textually Generative: Secularized/Dualist → Somatized & Mediatized

LIFE MODEL: ‘Invisible’ → Visible, Autonomous but Passive → Active Agent in production (e.g. Yves Klein) → Somatized & often autobiographical





“In Our Own Image/Imagings”

‘The Nude’, therefore, is not a transcendental aesthetic category. It is rather a socially and historically contingent way of pictorially presenting nakedness-as-disclosure-of-intimacy for social narration and imaginative reflection through aesthetic devices and setting. That ‘nakedness’ can mean very different things, and there is a sense in which many contemporary artists are pushing the boundaries of its conventional perception to the biological-reproductive and to the media appropriative. Because it is a socially constructed category and aesthetic it is influenced by, and influences, the presentation of bodies in society and its intermeshing with the self. But because such aesthetic frames are so powerful and so normalizing we must guard ourselves against how we perceive art from the past. The danger is that we often approach art from our western heritage from our culturally informed perspectives periodizing art history in terms of a positivist cumulative progression of which we are the heirs, and therefore that all ‘good’ art nowadays must be scandalous and (often sexually) shocking. The art of the past is another country and it must be approached in terms of its own culturally specific discourses and concerns. This is not to say that artistic re-workings of dominant themes from the past are not valid. On the contrary as we have seen, they have provided, and continue to provide, some of the most valid, challenging, and aesthetically interesting *reprises*. But we must guard against seeing the nude in classical art as always erotically charged, or always genderised (i.e. depicting women), or even youth and fertility specific. Much of its symbolism was highly textual and allegorical and modern viewers are sometimes ill-equipped to read and understand them except as images. Nearly everything was there for a purpose. If the narrative had the purpose of showing transience or human frailty, it was often St Jerome or some other early Church father or Biblical character with his emaciated frame and frail flesh that was depicted. Elderly naked women were less commonly depicted in classical art, and it is interesting that as our bodies have changed and the cult of youthful trim muscular bodies has become *de rigueur*, it has been artists who have forced a return of the gaze towards the ageing of the flesh and nakedness as intimacy. Patrick Dalli’s works in this exhibition force our gaze not towards the pin-up model (who is not just everywhere in the mass media but instantly achievable through plastic and cosmetic surgery), but towards time-contingent, irreducible subjects in their intimacy of disclosure. Likewise, the nature of the relationship between the ideal and the real has changed. Because bodies in the past were subject to natural imperfections and ageing, the artist had the job of projecting an ideal. By contrast, nowadays, semi-naked bodies have moved from the boudoir or the artist’s studio to the beach, that competitive visually voracious arena that emerged in the 1930’s for bodies to display themselves, replacing the ancient single-sex gymnasium (from *gymnos*: naked) where bodies were disciplined by motion and exercise. And the bodies displayed are increasingly our invention through plastic and cosmetic surgery and other interventions. Perhaps more than in any other epoch, the Nude (rather than nakedness) has become commonplace. No longer in our temples, churches or art collections, the nude is literally part of our landscape, on billboards or magazines advertising everything from soap to mobile phones, and displayed on the contemporary beach. I use the phrase ‘the Nude’ rather than naked, purposely. Recall that nakedness is *disclosure of vulnerability*; the Nude by contrast intricates the *public display* and *visual consumption of bodies*. Nakedness is private; the Nude is public and it is a visually consumed representation, even self-representation.

The body is of course a social construct. And it is not surprising that contemporary artists, as in this exhibition, have been influenced by the way the body is currently conceived through two important developments: its mediatization and bio-medical science, as well as the relationship between the two, for they are also intimately related. Artists have long engaged with science, and in place of the anatomical drawings of the 15th and 16th centuries and the 'Life-Model' as cadaver and cadaver-study, contemporary artists (as in this exhibition) are concerned with bio-medical developments such as New Reproductive Technologies (NRT), such as in the work of Astrid Steinbrecher which plays with the female body, human (and other) eggs, autobiography, and domesticated technologies. Others, such as Zygimantas Augustinas, are concerned with flesh as landscape. The Nude as item of playful female voyeurism is explored by Alexandra Pace, whose work nevertheless could arguably betray that female desire is still biologically determined by evolutionary notions of fitness. There is much to reflect and engage with in this interesting and provocative exhibition.

Paul Sant Cassia is Reader in Anthropology at the University of Durham, UK.