

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



Special Issue – Models and Sitters: the Art and Aesthetics of Posing

Introduction to the Special Issue

Author

AURÉLIE DEBAENE

Affiliation

OPEN UNIVERSITY

‘Models and Sitters: The Art and Aesthetics of Posing’ was initially conceived following the British Society of Aesthetics (BSA) symposium on ‘Revaluing the Life Model in Art Practice’. The symposium’s development arose out of my doctoral research ‘The Aesthetics of Posing’, which I completed between 2017-2022 at the University of Kent (UK). I would like to express my gratitude to Michael Newall for his brilliant guidance in creating and pitching the event when we applied for the BSA grant in 2019, as well as the collaboration with Hans Maes, C. A. York and life model and artist Dominic Blake when it came to organising it. The COVID-19 pandemic meant that, in practice, the symposium happened in May 2022, followed by this special issue in December 2023.

What was great about the symposium, and what is so compelling about posing as a philosophical phenomenon, is that there are inevitable and concrete connections to today’s working professionals, to contemporary philosophy, and to long-standing art historical traditions, which have fed and in some ways mirror some of the questions we might ask ourselves today. The symposium was reflective of this, as it focused on three key areas; the first was to rethink life drawing as a practice, considering how models are viewed and treated by artists and institutions, the second to explore how the creativity of models is acknowledged by considering their place within a gallery or museum space, and the third to make an art philosophical assessment of

whether modelling can be considered a form of art, as well as whether working from a life model may be considered a collaborative art form. Not only were we able to engage with at least a number of rich discussions regarding posing and modelling as topics lead to, the audience of the symposium also proved to be a mix of students, philosophers, artists, and, importantly, models.

The special issue has grown since the symposium: 'Models and Sitters' includes three additional papers by myself, Peg Brand Weiser and Tzachi Zamir. We presented these as a co-organised panel called 'Musing on Models: Creativity, Instrumentality, Practice' at the American Society for Aesthetics' 81st Annual Meeting, which took place in November 2023 in Arlington, Virginia (USA). Where the symposium focused on the contexts and practices surrounding life models specifically, our panel and by extension this special issue broadens its considerations of models and the media with which they work. This issue calls attention to the richness of the emerging debate that investigates the role of models in art practice, whether these are models in life sessions, or models who pose in front of a camera or fashion models who walk down a runway. Models have remained shrouded in an air of mystery, often relegated to the realm of private anecdotes or romanticised tales.

This special issue also focuses on a particular artistic genre: portraiture. Portraiture has a unique connection to its sitters and the poses they maintain. As is the case for models, the creative and artistic input of sitters has not always been recognised and has rarely been theorised. It is only more recently in philosophical aesthetics that portraiture has received greater interest.¹ We present this intersection as a valuable opportunity to examine an important aspect of the artistic process and to investigate the role of the sitter alongside the nature of posing.

What 'Models and Sitters: The Art and Aesthetics of Posing' demonstrates is how the phenomenon of the pose is not only worthy of philosophical consideration, but in fact it also connects to a multitude of areas of research, both philosophical and artistic practice-based. This special issue therefore is by no means the final word on models or their poses, but it serves as a selection of exploratory papers which I hope will stimulate your thinking and future work to come.

The broad areas of research that this issue explores are, first off, an ontology of posing; pinpointing its nature and interactions across a variety of artistic media and indeed genres. Dawn Kanter explores such an ontology of portrait-sitting in 'Constructing and Using the Portrait Sitting as an Art-Historical Research Object'. In her article, she presents a portrait-sitting database which enables a systemic analysis of twentieth-century sittings. In so doing, she illuminates the contributions of both sitters and artists to portrait production, highlighting shared cultural ideas, and proposing new interpretations and periodisations of portraits. In my own piece, 'Why it matters who poses', I argue why philosophy should invest in a greater understanding of the phenomenon by calling out the value of research into models and

their poses. I consider modelling as a collection of creative practices that works with numerous art forms. I use phenomenological reflections to argue against models as mere props and highlight aesthetic considerations: what are ‘model reasons’? What is the model’s impact on artworks? Does enhancing our knowledge alter our aesthetic understanding and appreciation?

This leads me to the second line of questioning throughout the special issue, which draws on phenomenological, practice-based observations to consider model contributions, their value, how they can feature in the art making session, or indeed the resulting artwork that we might behold. Peg Brand Weiser writes about ‘Empowered Amateur Poses’, moving beyond the professional model to the posing amateur. Drawing on her own artistic practice, she details the intricacies of self-portraiture, particularly considering a complex history of female artists who posed for their own works. Importantly, she explores through her own artistic work what it means to invite viewers to pose in artworks that are designed to co-create an aesthetic experience and shared creativity. Sue Spaid then takes the reader on a rich exploration of her history and experiences as a model in the nineties. Alongside her work as a curator, she modelled with different artistic media and artists. This culminated in ‘Used and Amused’ (2000), an exhibition at the Jan Baum Gallery in Los Angeles centred around ten of her collaborations. Spaid draws out salient thoughts stemming from her interactions by employing ideas explored throughout this special issue. In ‘Gestures of/at Art’, Tzachi Zamir’s starting point is a phenomenological investigation into nudity within the life session. He follows by tracing the model’s motivation to pose, degrees of agency in posing, and the role of ‘art’ in the life session given that many works remain incomplete or indeed private to the artist. Eventually, Zamir arrives at the life session as a creative space, which engenders a unique exchange of gesturing and corporeal attending.

Zamir also connects to the third area of inquiry, which is necessarily centred on the body itself, given how modelling is a physical endeavour where the model’s body is their site of work. Diverse model bodies engender a range of moral inquiries, constituting challenges but also proposing positive lessons in how the body is at the heart of these complex exchanges, precisely because of its position within art making, and the gazes that behold it in the flesh, or indeed in the eventual artwork. For instance, model bodies of colour, naked bodies, disabled, or fat bodies present especially promising areas of research and are a great demonstration of the richness and interdisciplinarity that research into posing as a phenomenon within artistic creation can achieve. ‘From Model to Sitter: On Reclaiming Colonial Photography’ by Michelle Green and Hans Maes introduces an intention-based account of portraiture to consider the depiction of people in colonial imagery. The authors investigate a range of images – some intended as portraiture but not necessarily – to detail how these colonial depictions can be and indeed have been reclaimed in contemporary movements to recover Indigenous cultural heritage, deal-

ing with problems of recategorisation, repatriation and restitution of colonial photography. Finally, Anne W. Eaton's 'Naked, Fat, and Fabulous' traces issues of fat oppression and discrimination, but importantly she arrives at an account of the positive lessons we can learn as she argues for the merits of the life class as 'an important artistic liberatory space that combats fat oppression'. Her account of the life class is one that becomes a safe space that invites and nurtures the creative autonomy of life models, that aesthetically supports and appreciates fat bodies.

aurelie.debaene@open.ac.uk

ENDNOTES

1. Some recent examples in philosophical aesthetics are Freeland 2010; Maes 2020.

REFERENCES

- Freeland, Cynthia. 2010. *Portraits and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Maes, Hans, ed. 2020. *Portraits and Philosophy*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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