

# Aesthetic Investigations

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## Streaking in the Museum

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It's very gratifying that *Aesthetic Investigations*, which launched just six years ago, can boast that it not only published the first-ever *peer-reviewed* philosophical article regarding life models' under-acknowledged art historical contributions, but now two years later, *AesthInv* has published a special issue devoted to this burgeoning field. Of course, this issue would never have happened had Aurélie Debaene not submitted her groundbreaking paper 'The Art Model as Performer' in response to our 2021 CFP for papers addressing the question 'Isn't All Art Performed?'<sup>1</sup> That issue, co-edited by Rossen Ventzislavov and Sue Spaid, not only carved out a space for modelling as performance art, but we made space for stand-up specials, gift-reception, architectural improv, feminist art pedagogy, and audience interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

Following on from that expansive approach, our special issue's guest editors, Aurélie Debaene, Hans Maes, and C.A. York, have collected papers that, aside from the purely aesthetic, also raise ethical, political, and art-historical issues regarding the art model.

While this issue does not restrict itself to considering only female models; still, one can read the various contributions as continuing a conversation that was shaped by the feminist collective, and self-proclaimed 'conscience of the art world', Guerrilla Girls. Active since 1985, the Guerrilla Girls started out by distributing posters calling for a better representation of female artists and women's artistic achievement in the art world. But it was their 1989 poster that contrasted the low number of female *artists* with the remarkably high number of female (nude) *models*, which earned the Guerrilla Girls lasting

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fame. ‘Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?’, the poster asks cynically, adding that, in 1989, less than 5% of the artworks on display were created by women, while a whopping 85% of the nudes exhibited were female.

The statistical discrepancy is poignant, but it also raises the question: what does gender equality demand in the artistic sphere? Everyone can easily agree that an increased number of female artists would be a good thing.<sup>3</sup> As regards the first statistic gender equality is, maybe not wholly, but at least to an important extent, a numbers game. Would the same hold true for female nudes; the fewer the better from the viewpoint of gender equality? Not necessarily, it seems. One can easily imagine a world devoid of female nudes that is no less misogynist than our current one. The same goes for a world where, say, male bodies must endure the same kind of obsessive imaginary to which female and nonbinary bodies are subjected. Conversely, would it perhaps be possible to imagine a world full of female nudes, yet without the domination of female bodies?

That might be difficult, perhaps hampered above all by our present inability to explicitly imagine *any* world without domination. But at least the question serves to foreground the fact that what is at stake in the female nude is something other than sheer numbers. Might it have something to do with the role and function of the female nude throughout (art) history? In *Ways of Seeing*, which remains as sharply observant as ever, John Berger et al. point out a basic distinction between being naked and being nude:

To be naked is to be oneself.

To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude . . . Nakedness reveals itself. Nudeness is placed on display.<sup>4</sup>

A streaker, someone who wilfully disrobes in a public situation, to make a political point or the evening news, is not a nude, but rather naked. The streaker’s non-nudeness derives from their *active* role in the process as the agent in charge of revealing themselves. That makes the streaker different from the nude that is put on display as a passive thing-to-be-observed. The role of the nude is to gratify the observer’s pleasure. It is a thing robbed of agency. That is why the high number of female nudes should be a matter of utmost concern to the feminist aesthetician: because nudes are forms of objectification.<sup>5</sup>

But then what should we do about this? One suggestion would indeed be to remove female nudes, or at least minimise their presence as much as possible. This may be a good idea indeed, but it does not address the deeper issue concerning the practices and ideologies that lead us to gaze upon the female body as a mere thing to be displayed in the first place. Though many

of the contributions of our special issue are not explicitly feminist, it is at this junction that they seek to intervene. Instead of conceiving of the role of the model or sitter as a passive ‘object’ in the process of artistic creation, this special issue argues for a re-examination and re-evaluation of modelling or sitting as having a crucial influence on the end product as well as an ineliminable aesthetic aspect, that makes it a worthwhile activity which can be practised for its own sake.

This re-evaluation of modelling and sitting, consequently, might also lead us to think differently about the presence and prevalence of naked bodies (depicted or not) in the art museum. Instead of displaying naked bodies, we ought to see streakers in the museum, autonomous agents in the process of exposing *themselves* rather than simply their living tissue upon which observers can gratify their pleasure. To be sure, that process of thinking differently would require different forms of curating as much as different forms of spectatorship. It requires, in other words, not only a renewed appreciation for the role of the persons who are modelling and sitting on the part of the spectator, but also on the part of those in charge of selecting and presenting the artworks in which their bodies become perceptible.

That appreciation, in turn, requires not only that we pay attention to different things than just the sexy parts. It requires frankness about the supposedly ‘disinterested’ nature of the gaze, especially *when* it is focused on the sexy parts. In Jerome Stolnitz’s ‘On the origins of “Aesthetic Disinterestedness”’, he discusses Edmund Burke’s study on beauty and sublimity as follows:

Disinterestedness is especially important in Burke’s theory of beauty. He holds that things are beautiful when they are small, delicate, smooth, soft, curved (p. 124). Indeed they are probably best epitomized by the female body, to which Burke alludes continually and which he apostrophizes so eloquently. When he speaks of ‘the affectation which possesses an ordinary man at the sight of a delicate smooth skin’ (p. 108), or of ‘the deceitful maze . . . about the neck and breasts . . . through which the unsteady eye slides giddily’ (p. 115), then it is important to be reminded that a beautiful object can be perceived as such only if the sole interest of the perceiver is in perceiving.<sup>6</sup>

You could call Burke’s reflections many things; pervy perhaps, a heteronormative male vision of human sexuality, a natural expression of what gives Burke a hard-on; or all of the above. But disinterested it is not. Stolnitz’s article is infamous for starting several decades of scholarship informed by rather glaring misreadings of the theories under discussion.<sup>7</sup> But the most striking error committed here is not poor interpretation of long-dead philosophers. It is the glaring contradiction that stares the reader in the face,

that rampant desire is somehow the best epitomisation of disinterested aesthetic experience, a contradiction which feminist aestheticians have long since pointed out.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps there is a place for heterosexual male pleasure in artistic interactions, but for a good-faith enquiry into that question, the theorist would do better than to dress it up as something that it is not. Feminism requires that all of us, male aestheticians especially, must be naked in order to get into the museum.

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### ENDNOTES

1. Debaene 2021.
2. Spaid and Ventzislavov 2021.
3. Everyone is in agreement, except for the big institutional players themselves, it seems. The Guerrilla Girls conducted several recounts, the last one in 2012, that showed no increase in female artists at all (even a slight decrease). See Guerrilla Girls.
4. Berger et al. 1972, 54.
5. According to Martha C. Nussbaum's famous paper (1995), objectification is not harmful *per se*. Note a response, however, by Timo Jütten (2016), according to which objectification is a form of domination *by definition*.
6. Stolnitz 1961, 135; the references are to Burke (1757) 1958.
7. Zangwill 1991; Rind 2002.
8. Korsmeyer and Brand [Weiser] 2021, see section 3 'Aesthetic Categories and Feminist Critiques'.

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