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THOUGHTS ON THE NUDE BODY

1. Zeusi's strategy

«What love was for novelists and poets, the nude was for the artists of the human form». There is a hint of nostalgia in Valéry's statement on Degas, as if the beauty of nudity previously exhibited or exposed had been irrevocably lost and modern art had forever averted its gaze from charm and beauty. It is useless to insist upon the postulate (or tautology) that «the nude is always the nude» (Klossowski). By now, its image appears to have 'moved', both because of the shift in our gaze and its point of reference.

That is, unless this 'negative emphasis' is seen only as the uncritical acceptance of that 'polarizing question' that declared the end of Classical art and the decisive advent of modernity or as the effect of an hermeneutic excess – of a philosophical definition of the nude implicit in our figurative culture – is it now the moment to go beyond the observation of the canonic nude and to develop new approaches to nudity? Is it time to create an experimental 'logic' of 'situations' that does not make use of these situations as an essence – a golden apple to award with Paris' judgment – but as the renewable outcome of a reconstruction *à la* Zeusi: the assembly of different parts with a view towards an approximation. For a mathematician it is not easy to describe unambiguously the spiral (which, to be sure, constitutes the basis of life in the form of DNA). Similarly, despite its obviousness, the nude, too, is difficult to define. Where does the garment begin and the gown end? The skin and the flesh? How are we to describe the forces, movements and gestures of the body and its involucre?

I will argue that the nude should be neither a pictorial genre nor a philosophical concept, but a «thought of the body» (De Chirico). It is an aesthetic figure with the power of affection and perception, but also a conceptual figure. It is not a 'critical operator' – a cognitive 'walk-

on' or extra – but an actor with the power of speech, capable of forming and transforming new relationships with observers. The moment is ripe: against the revisionism that would return to the 'picturesque' nude, can we elaborate on the nude in a way that goes beyond the closure of art without proclaiming its end?

Without canonic rules, Zeusi's strategy is a disjunctive synthesis. The interface of the Harwood CD-ROM *Rehearsal of memory* depicts one of its databases with a black-and-white image of a nude figure (the database is the symbolic form of our times, in the way that perspective was for the Renaissance). We navigate this nude by clicking on the textual passages and videos which are contained within it. I will take as my model such hyper-narration, for which Coleridge – with what might be considered a sort of prescient plagiarism – coined the term 'exemplastic', meaning the collection of disparate parts of a corpus in order to construct a model in progress.

2. The prototype nude and perfect communication

The nude has always been a meta-genre – the only one, for Berenson, capable of establishing perfect communication. Its superiority lay in «making the language of forms perceptible». It was not only an instance of an understandable anthropomorphism, for which «nothing tangible equals the human body as a subject of art». It is a law derived «naturally from the general conditions of perception, just as tactile values descend from the psychology of vision». Even cloth would be an obstacle or a mask, because what counts is only what it conceals. In fact, the visual painter would render only faces and fabrics, while the «true artist, [if] forced to dress his figures, will make us feel the bodies beneath the fabrics and will know how to make these fabrics transmit to us the language of human forms. The more he is at ease, the more he will make his language persuasive and personal – that is, if nothing gets between him and the model! *Only the nude can establish such perfect communication*». Thus in the mid-twentieth century, with his modernist position on man/nature and the categories of psychology and communication, the great *connoisseur* secularized the prevailing philosophical idea of the nude and the academic practice of copying from the ancients and from live models, both in the museum and the studio.

Clearly, Western arts were obsessed with the nude, just as European philosophy was with being and with truth. Through comparison and contrast in his dialogue with classical Chinese culture, Jullien demonstrates that there is a continuity of tradition spanning from ancient Greece and leads to the rupture of the nineteenth century. In the variety of artistic treatments of the nude one can perceive a metaphysical essence: the incarnation, in human nudity, of an *eidōs*, the archetypical form that transmits beauty and transcendent grace. It is an intelligible model, a *logos* for which man alone is nude: «man [...] pauses to admire himself. He recognizes himself in the nude, not as a particular entity caught up in an indeterminate worldly plan, but insofar as it is he who is 'Being' – as 'man' in his particular destiny of being». This ideal – and perhaps this is the very model of representation – becomes concrete in the form, a *forma distincta* that sublimates empirical nudity in the idealized essence of the nude. Artistic mimesis is not a creative process of nature, but the imposition on the substance of the world of a model of beauty that protrudes into the visible as a revelation. Venus arises from the waters, offering herself as a nude, a pure representation that reflects a metaphysical addressee. «The nude [...] standing out against background of the world, exposes itself to the gaze – to the gaze of the eye and spirit. This is why, ascending as though from a hollow, it reveals itself and imposes its *presence*; and rising up from the tangible to the intelligible form it makes itself conspicuous». In the imperfection of the visible sphere, the nude conjures a 'beyond' that is more than perfect and more than visible.

This is the tradition we find at the heart of the philosophy of the image: «vision [...] is a thought that strictly deciphers the signs present in the body [...] sometimes insufficient, that speak more than they actually mean». It arouses «sleeping forces, a secret of preexistence». The delight we experience before the sublimity of a great nude – just think of Michelangelo – is the sensory effect of the normativity that renders it an 'absolute totality'; it exceeds the cognitive capacity of representation and even of imagination itself. It is for this reason that Christianity, which is opposed to nudity, has hoisted on its altars not a naked Christ but the nude of Christ.

Unlike other cultures, where nudity, divested of ontology and metaphysics, is seen as indecency or eroticism, European thought has accomplished an extraordinary *tour de force*. It has converted the at-

traction of the flesh and the rejection of modesty into the need for spiritual essence and power. It has taken the bare body to its heights, transforming the tangible and the desirable into an icon of beauty through mythology and the objectification of forms.

In his *Arte dei Cenni*, the Renaissance author Bonifacio wrote: «the power and virtue of the nudes of the gods is evident to the extent that no hidden vices are visible». Pygmalion and Phryné, fauns and nymphs, Daphne and Adonis, Diana and Marsyas, the Graces and the satyrs, and the Venuses and the hermaphrodites continue to appear in the representations and narrations of nudes, even in their secular and modernist guises as bathers, concubines and prostitutes. For Renoir, «the nude woman will emerge from the water or her bed and thus she will be named Venus or Nini». The mythology surrounding the nude is what lies beneath the representation of nudity; Picasso, for example, was always intensely inspired by Renoir's nudes and their mythological substratum (see *Eurydice*, 1921).

3. Type and token

With regard to the formal strategies of objectification, they can be described in an open-ended list of distinguishing traits. The ideal-type of the academic nude (its 'type') privileges fixity over process (the pose more than the transitory and evolving movement); static synthesis over regulative process; distinction and discontinuity over the indistinct and continuous (the outline more than the *sfumato*); the articulation of parts over the disjoint body; the concordance of the limbs over their disagreement; a somatic hierarchy over the shapeless; and external and internal symmetry over asymmetry. It favors a fixed hierarchy of involucre (skin, veil, ornament, clothing) and a purification of outgrowths on the involucre (hair and other imperfections). The prototypical nude is isolated in time and space (to the point of containing its own shadow) rather than being contextualized and placed in flux of time. But if the process articulates the essence, it will be more intransitive than transient (any halt is a transition in equilibrium). It will privilege the movement of the limbs over the emerging movements of the flesh (the incarnate) and its rhythm will reflect an already-established harmony (or disharmony). With regard to the visibility to which it exposes and imposes itself, the nude prefers direct presence to allusion and the implicit; it shows itself with

an external clarity that corresponds to its internal unity. The nude is theatrical; it performs among the flats and curtains, the tresses, costumes and gestures.

It is thus possible to demonstrate how the calculated deformation of these characteristics can generate ugliness (the dissolute old woman or drunken Noah, Bacchus and Silenus), or the monstrously animalesque or demoniacal; we can see, in other words, how attraction can be inverted into repulsion.

There is no single representation ('token') of the nude that embodies *in toto* this figurative canon. It is probable, instead, that the nude as a 'type' will emerge as lines of perspective from the practices of painting rather than from the aesthetic theories that accompany it. It remains the case, however, that the identity of species is a model that guides the production of exemplars. Mathematical calculation and anatomical research are a consequence – and a concomitant cause – of this idealization. There is an epistemology of the nude that reinforces its essential identity through scientific inquiry into somatic morphology.

On the other hand, the list of 'type' characteristics enables Julien to acknowledge the inverse configuration of Chinese painting, just as it enables us to attempt a typology of the alternative choices whereby modern and contemporary painting abandoned objective sublimation for subjective encounter and the conflict of cognitive and sensory experiences.

The model-making effects of the nude are not exclusive to the field of the arts: «political thought lays out the plan of the ideal city like a painter draws the canonical nude». To understand the use of the nude in the (relative) autonomy of the artistic series, some sociological considerations are to the point: changes in the sense of decency and the care of the self; the modern *afrodisia*; the altered relationship between body and machine; the new systems of surveillance and control. But it is the artistic model of the nude idealized by Winkelman and put into practice in the ateliers that structured the political use of the body in the twentieth century. Despite Goethe's warnings («Belvedere Apollo, why do you show yourself to us in all your nudity, making us ashamed of ours?»), modern society has made use of the ideal male nude to construct a notion of virility capable of exerting control over the order and the movement of actions and passions. From the stadiums to the war monuments, through the sculptures of

A. Breker, the nude has flanked totalitarian cults of sport and war that aspired to take the place of religions. Nazism and Fascism based their notions of the state upon the male comradeship of the Neoclassical nudes – the effigies of Stalin’s workers and Hitler’s women were dressed for the most part. Deviation from the somatic ideal was construed and perceived as a social anomaly (the Jew, the homosexual). The physiognomic prototype of Winkelmann’s nude was used by those who sought to classify the races and construct negative counter-types of ‘degenerate art’ that were believed to be in contrast with the form of the nude deemed correct.

4. The anatomy of painting

«The body [is the] advocate of immanence, the palpable refutation of metaphysical falsehood». (Nietzsche). It was against the sublimated anthropological ideal of the nude and against the academicism that imitated the ancients that the avant-gardes were to react. For example, the futurists declared: «We fight against the nude in painting, especially the female which is a symbol of passivity, for it is as nauseating and boring as adultery in literature». The relationship to the real was upturned. To the ‘falsehood’ of the nude, with its antiquated corporeal reference, the Futurists contrasted the ‘truth of geometry’ and proclaimed to prefer «the intersection of the planes of a book and the corners of a table, the straight lines of a match, [and] the frame of a window to all the interlacing muscles, all the breasts and all the thighs of heroes and Venuses that excite the incurable stupidity of the contemporary sculptors». The humanist reference to the body shifted to nature and machines. For surrealists, like Max Ernst, animal limbs are grafted onto human bodies, while for Man Ray, parts of machines mixed inextricably with the limbs of the female nude. For Martini, «a lemon is as much a source of ecstasy today as a Venus», and there are still some today who complain that more attention could be paid to Manet’s *Asparagus* than to his nudes.

The nude nevertheless continues to represent a background – an allusive or repressed reference – destined for ironic commentary and/or formal distortion. In addition to the explicit references to erotic magazines, Francis Picabia elevated to the dignity of a nude the profile of a *Spark plug* (1915) inscribed with the saying ‘for-ever’ and presented as the *Portrait of a young American girl in a state of nudity*.

And he titled an abstract painting of dance *UDNIE: young American girl* (1913), which is a recognizable anagram for 'Isadora Duncan NUD [nude]'. On the other hand, in 1929 Man Ray entitled a solarized photo of a classical nude *Primacy of matter over thought!*

The distinctive features of the academic nude were persistently visited by the avant-gardes, and distorted and transposed onto a formal level, thereby deconstructing the model of representation to the point of 'presenting the unrepresentable': examples and symbols can no longer be given for the nude as an object of an idea; it is reduced to a state of nudity, demythicized and uncamouflaged. A new body was sought beyond the nude, a body that the 'futurist' Arthaud called a 'body without organs', upon which new and different meanings would be transplanted. In this way, Gombrich felt that the unrepeatability of absolute beauty was lost, independently of any cultural relativism or strategy of pictorial representation.

In any case, Paul Klee was responsible for carrying out the most radical gesture of stripping the classical nude: «Like man, a painting too has a skeleton, muscles and skin. We can speak of a certain anatomy of a painting. A painting with a 'nude man' as its subject should not be portrayed according to human anatomy but to the anatomy of a painting». The human anatomy of 'beautiful nudity' is absorbed into the anatomy of a painting. The ideal nude loses its mythical nature and with it the capacity to portray its vicissitudes and transformations (violence, surprise, modesty, etc.). It thus gives rise to the nude-motif or to fortuitous nudity; it is interiorized, neutralized and then disarticulated or dissolved according to the laws of painting. The painting becomes a simulacrum that exorcises – through its syntax – already-existing imaginary obsessions; it can communicate the experience of nudity only through ideograms or it must renounce expressing it altogether.

But nudity has been displaced even further: from Cézanne to the Futurists, the vanishing point is no longer in the painting but in the eye of the beholder. In the past, to look at the ideal nude would arouse neither excitement nor repulsion: can Botticelli's *Venus* even arouse carnal desire? It was Guercino's nude *Venus* in *Venere, Marte, Amore* that showed the observer where to look: to Cupid's pointed arrow, seen in perspective. A passive receiver, impassive or perhaps ecstatic target of an ontological revelation: even the eye was nude. On

the other hand, the gaze cast upon contemporary nudity – in the cacophony of the arts and the ‘univisive’ aesthesia of daily life – has (re)discovered its ambivalent potential.

5. *Ecce Olympia*

«We are entering a new world and the curtain is rising on *Olympia*» (G. Bataille). Let us return to this over-heralded turning point in the long narrative of the nude by examining an epistemological precautionary principle. The alleged aesthetic ruptures are often revealed to be wrinkles, inflections and accentuations. Even agents responsible for bringing about transformation do not belong to the repertoires of the most innovative and recent disciplines but, as in the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, in the oldest and most consolidated areas of knowledge, such as astronomy.

Once again, it is precisely the nude that functions as the agent of change bringing us into the ‘new world’ of art. As Manet said, «It seems that one has to execute a nude. All right, I will do one». And to reach *Olympia*, Gombrich marks out the ‘evolutionary logic’ of the «great step in the struggle to liberate art from academic affectation». After the «progressive distancing from Ingres’ cold ideal (*La grande odalisque*, 1814), Delacroix’s pathetic and picturesque use of color appeared as the first challenge (*Woman with parrot*, 1827) and Courbet’s rather brutal realism (the lost *Reclining nude*) as the second phase of the revolution». Then came *Olympia*.

The mutation of this painting, if that is what it was, led to the prototype nude, mediated by Titian’s classical representation, and to the very ideal of beauty established by Ariosto in canto 11 of *Orlando furioso* (stanza 69): «To sum the beauteous whole, from head to feet, / In all her loveliness is found complete». It is a definition of the nude that Tasso defined as canonic in his dialogue on beauty, the *Minturno*. There is no need for a Zeusi who «so many nudes together saw: and who for making one in perfection / borrowed here and there / not needing any other than she / in whom all beauty lay». She would have won Paris’ apple in the celebrated judgment of nude beauty.

It is upon the most firmly-established model of the nude that the ‘seditious’ mutation of *Olympia* is carried out. For Gauguin, painting begins with Manet, and for Bataille, the distance from the contemporary Meissonnier was no different than that separating Meisson-

nier and Picasso. What Manet did was to deconstruct the majestic edifice of the nude as an intelligible totality by introducing disorder in the pose and indifference with regard to the subject. Despite the old vocabulary of physiognomy and the classical grammar of composition, the change in the nature of myth (from Venus to a prostitute) and the modification of the forms (Baudelarian sinuosity) radically alter the meaning of the nude. As Leiris observes, «*Olympia*, like modern poetry, is [...] the negation of Olympus, [...] of the mythological monument, and [...] of monumental conventions». In the cold light of rediscovered nudity, the latent possibilities of painting are again opened to new and undefined complexities. The nude leaves the realm of timelessness to discover a raw presence, due not to its figurative expression but to the way in which it is expressed. Light comes from the outside – from the space in front of the canvas – and makes the viewer an actor. But *Olympia's* provocative gaze (Ariosto's and Titian's characters eyes were lowered) is trained on us (as in the nudes of Rubens or Guercino): it denudes our gaze and makes us responsible for the desire or rejection of *Olympia's* visibility and nudity. She «is visible to our eyes because it is we who make her nude. Every viewer is implicated in this nudity. And it is in this way that an aesthetic transformation can provoke a moral scandal». The laughter of the viewers at the first exhibition of the painting marked, for Bataille, the renewal of nude beauty. The tightening of a new knot that ties the gaze to the image: Merleau Ponty fully understood that we will no longer be able to «dream of seeing things 'completely bare' for it is the gaze itself that covers and dresses them with its own flesh». And he added: «how is it possible that by covering things my gaze does not conceal but unveils them by veiling them?».

The nude *Olympia* preserves «all the tartness of those unripe fruits that never mature» (Delacroix) and it is perhaps for this reason that it was and is the object of innumerable reworkings. Gauguin painted numerous variations in which the magical force of natural 'barbarism' takes the place of the nude inscribed in 'decadent' civilization. From his letter of 1892, we know that the erotic pose, the *art sauvage* style and the unnatural colors alluded to the novel presence of secret forces and religious anxieties (Belting).

Even Cezanne's *A modern Olympia* (1872-73), which follows his 1870 version, is a variation on Manet that proceeds with the dissolu-

tion of the nude. Here, the nude is only hinted at: there is no body but only a mass of pink flesh without the clean outline possessed by the other elements of the painting. This *Olympia* is not made to capture the eye. The space, as Delacroix recalls, is constructed in an ascending way: beginning with the rug and moving through the nude flesh, it leads to the top and the background where the upward tension – characteristic of the nude itself – finds its culmination. But once we arrive here, we find nothing: «the eye slips along the shapeless nude and is not held; it shifts in order to see better and finds itself outside and distant from the center of the painting» (Subrizi).

But reference to *Olympia* does not end here; it will persist until paintings become like *objets trouvés* – a still life that conserves only a trace of the memory of art, like Tom Wesselmann's series *Great American nudes* (1962) in which an *Olympia* and a Matisse avoid the nudity of pornography thanks only to the 'artistic' pose and the reference.

6. *Nuda veritas* and *vera nuditas*

«European art is fixated on the nude just as its philosophy is fixated on the truth» (Jullien). Or, better, it is truth itself that is nude: the metaphysical roots of the nude are exposed as the nudity of being. The persistence of this ideal model survives in a contradictory way in the new treatment. The work of Klimt – a visionary painter, but also a modern philosopher (Altenberg) – exemplifies the effort to maintain allegorical tension in the new forms of representation of the body. Carl Schorske invites us to read both the threat posed by the female body and the explicit construction of a renewed speculative mythology in the frontal stance of the two-dimensional figure of Klimt's *Nuda Veritas* (1898) and the mirror that she holds: «with vernal symbols at her feet to express the hope of regeneration, she holds the empty mirror up to modern man». In *Hygeia* (1901), painted for the University of Vienna, this is even more the case: «Hygeia, herself an anthropomorphic transformation of the snake, offers to the serpent the cup of Lethe, to drink of its primordial fluid. Thus Klimt proclaims the unity of life and death, the interpenetration of instinctual vitality and personal dissolution».

But the novelty of the formal signifier impedes the adoption of the newly proposed signified. The non-canonical treatment of the outstretched and suggestive female nude, or of a pregnant body,

would provoke a sentiment of collective indecency and divert the philosophical signified toward a meaning charged with sensuality and eroticism (see *Goldfish*, 1901-02). In *Hygeia* the impression of nude bodies drifting at random (whether in embrace or isolation) lacking communion between them ensures that «the individual psycho-physical experience of sensuality and suffering is abstracted from any metaphysical or social ground. Mankind is lost in space». In the failed attempt to find a new mythical philosophy – a Schopenhauer mediated by Wagner, as it has been suggested – Klimt preserves and redefines certain motifs of the figurative lexicon of the idealized body. The pictorial role of the tresses that cover part of the *Nuda Veritas* are certainly not accessory (see also *Blood of fish*, 1989, and the *Water serpents*, 1904-07). They are a salient feature in the depiction of the veiled body and the complex hierarchy of its involucre.

7. Clothing and the veil

In the history of the nude, the skin of the figure encloses the body, but it permits a glimpse of what is embodied and enables the access to the physical interiority. Painting, Diderot suggested, is a sentiment of the flesh that can be wrapped, like a second skin, by the gestures and the positions of the limbs (especially the hands), the hair, the make-up and ornament, and by the veil or clothing (or armor). The 'nude' form is seen or glimpsed, its propositions of 'truth' expressed or modulated. Mario Perniola has noted how the philosophical cultures that reflect the various considerations on the body have assigned the values of truth alternately to the nude (Hellenism) or to clothing (Hebraism). The theory of dress is identical to that of the nude. It can be a supplement to – or a manifestation of – identity, whether personal or social. The nude, on the other hand, can be the exact expression of itself or simply the clothing of the mind or the soul (for Gregory the Great, «the body was the abominable clothing of the soul»; for the Gnostics, the truth was covered; and for Roland Barthes, «clothing is the smooth involucre of that coalescent matter of which my imagination is made»).

The veiled nude has played a unique role in the philosophical presentation of the *Nuda Veritas*: not only the male nude (like the veiled *Dead Christ* in the Sansevero chapel in Naples), but especially

the omnipresent female nude (for Clark, a great investigator of nudity, eroticism lies in the veil).

In fact, the veil possesses the force of a philosophic and aesthetic metaphor; it is a rhetorical device, comparable to that which separates the literal meaning from the tropes that adorn or disclose it. The veil is a 'figure' that conceals or betrays the truth; it is a sophistic simulation to remove or tear away in order to confront the true nude or, contrariwise, the only access to an otherwise inaccessible truth (for Warburg, for example, access to the body is obtained through the veil). In the tradition of the nude, this truth, as we have seen, was not inscribed in the natural order but pertained to the cultural ideal, while in Hegel's formulation, the spiritual meaning resides in the veil (or in the clothing) that conceals beautiful natural nudity. For this reason, Huysmans encouraged us not to look at the nudes of the Louvre but the clothed ones he found in the city *flâneries*. Finally, for others, like Kant or Charles Sanders Peirce, the veil is an «article of clothing which can never entirely be removed, only substituted with another, more diaphanous one». The nude body of the truth can never be reached; it can only be approached asymptotically by indefinitely increasing the transparency.

As to the tradition that runs from Heidegger to Derrida, the sensory effect resides in the process of unveiling itself – in an alternating movement similar to that of the Mannerist aesthetic. The nude is only a stopping point in this maze: «the event, in removing the veil, does not consist in what is shown: the thing bared, the sex uncovered, the phallus. The event is [...] the operation of revelation, the moment in which the veil is neither lowered nor raised, the time in which the lifting of the veil occurs. What matters is not the alternative revealing/veiling, the truth as *altheia*. It is not the veil that veils, nor the thing that is veiled, but rather the event of revelation of the performativity that is its own. This is the event that takes our breath away [...] the anachronism, the difference at work in the work» (Derrida). The veil is not a *parergon*, an accessory of beautiful nudity, because there is no longer a center of truth and reference in the body. Like clothing and hair, the veil is an agent of movement that animated the archetypical nude. But for modern art, just as for Zeusi, the veil is painted and it is no longer possible to remove it. It is a constitutive part of the meaning of the nude, as Derrida observes – in opposition to the Kant

of the *Critique of judgment* – with the example of Cranach's *Lucretia* with her veil, necklace and dagger. The nude has become impossible, as Belting says apropos of Duchamp: «art is a *'robe de la marié'*, a bride's veil that cannot be removed, either because there is nothing but the veil (that is, only art) or because there is something beyond art, for which art is nothing but the garment».

8. Transitions 1: the skin

A history of the representation of the nude body as an agent of truth and beauty ought to recount the movements that take us from the clothing to the body (stripping or denuding) and from the skin to the flesh (effraction or flaying), as it is in the Reformation and Mannerism. Or it might begin with the intimate flesh to show how it is embodied and adorned, how it is veiled and dressed, as it is in the Counter-Reformation and the Baroque. It would reconstruct, in short, the representative or implicit movements that lead from exhibition to decency and to complete concealment. Or it might begin with this – the process of displaying – to shameless exhibition.

The skin lies on the frontier of these movements, a somatic membrane ready to transform itself into a veil or clothing, as it is in the case in contemporary fashion. Following Baudrillard, «Skin is not defined as 'nudity' but as an erogenous zone – a sensuous medium of contact and exchange, a metabolism for absorption and excretion. This skin – porous, perforated, orificial – does not seal the body (only metaphysics establishes the skin as a line of demarcation); it is repudiated in favor of a second, non-porous skin that does not exude or excrete and is neither warm nor cold (it is 'cool', 'tepid': perfectly air-conditioned), with no grain or roughness (it is 'delicate' and 'velvety'); without its own thickness (the transparency of the 'tint'), and above all without orifices (it is 'smooth'). It is functionalized like a cellophane wrapping. All these qualities (freshness, elasticity, transparency, uniformity) are qualities of *closure*».

Or on the skin, like an emergence of living flesh, a tender tension is drawn – a semiotics of swellings and recesses that mark the movements of the flesh. As Serres writes, «The fabric folds and unfolds, the skin puckers and creases, adapts itself, presses on the organs, contains the complex itineraries that link them; not the seat of sensory organs, the skin mixes them like a vane; the tattoo of a nude

woman before a mirror is similar to Bonnard's palette». The discoloring of the incarnate flesh, from vitality to sickness and to death, is what for Leonardo marked, in the paragon of the arts, the superiority of painting to sculpture. It is not by chance that, in the devastating irony that he directed toward all aspects of the figurative tradition, Duchamp sheathed the great cast of the *Etant donné* (1946) – a counter-nude – with pigskin.

9. Transitions 2: from dress to flesh

The transition that leads from dress to the semi-nude and to the full nude in order to establish authentic communication is best seen in Bataille's *Eroticism* and his analysis of the great erotic paintings (*Les larmes d'Eros*): «the decisive action is undressing. The nude is the negation of being closed upon itself; nudity is a state of communication». Unveiling is revelation: it can go far beyond the skin – which is a vestige of dress – and in its violation and torture (wounding, amputating, flaying) seeks access to an incorruptible truth of which the flesh is the veil. It is the complex of Marsyas or Saint Bartholomew with his hide, which is, etymologically speaking, *Spaltung* or split. It is an active motif in the splendor of the tormented nudes of Christian martyrs, upon whose serene, ideal bodies the cruel earthly law is inscribed in vain. While that sacred nude was intended to transfigure, now the intent is to disfigure the ideal model from any transcendental pretension to beauty and art, as it is in the case of Body Art. Smashing the image of the aestheticized and socialized nude, Gina Pane and Orlan bear witness to a sort of primitivism of nudity: they are in search of a primitive cry in a world of flux and intersections. This desire for violent disruption does not bring about an innocent, somatic utopia, but a new degraded mythical body. As it has been remarked, they are the last convulsions of a symbolic body before its absorption into virtuality (Jeudi).

Dalì is an unexpected witness to the undressing that leads to the discovery of the abstract deepest flesh – that rawness that already existed in Courbet. «In the art of feminine dressing, geodesics play an important role – an imperious role – conditioned by what is called the weave of a fabric. The art of a fabric is itself related to a branch of advanced mathematics. Moving from clothing to the muscle we find new examples of geodesics. Moving from the muscles to bone, from

the surface to the mass, we find wrapping lines of pressure and tension». To conclude this presentation of the flesh in the female nudes of pre-Raphaelite painting, which Dalì preferred to Botticelli, «too close to the living flesh of the myth to reach the extenuated, magnificent and prodigiously material glory», of these «carnal ghosts of the ‘false memories’ of childhood [...] gelatinous flesh of all the most guilty sentimental dreams».

10. Transitions 3: from the flesh to dress

This radical march, which gradually strips away all involucre until it stops before the unattainable intimacy, is the traditional course of denudation. Here, the passage through the form shows up like a footprint. But, as Perniola observes, there exists another one which is the inverse of the first one and which starts from the most secret impulses that fight to progressively manifest themselves: from the flesh to the somatic membranes, to the sensory involucre – heat, smells, and so on – to its last prosthesis: the veils and clothing. This is a course masterfully theorized in Klossowski's semiotics of impulse: «That I make of this denudation a pictorial motif means that I must simulate [...] a form of visual palpability. Nudity is thus itself a garment. It is its own clothing. The ghost of the deepest desires, it has control over the involucre within which it is wrapped: dressing itself in flesh, the covering itself with skin, scents and clothing». As Baudrillard remarks, «it is not a game involving the undressing of signs revealing a sexual ‘profundity’, but on the contrary an ascending game involving the construction of signs». Like the vibrant tunics, skin and light, that cover the ecstatic bodies of Baroque saints: exemplary is Bernini's *Saint Theresa*, whose mysterious and glorious body haunts Western culture and is not sought through introspection but found through extrospection. Did not Classical painting practice call for beginning with a drawing of the nude which was then dressed? And in today's plastic surgery, have we not gone from scraping and ablation to the inflatable?

Think of Schiele's nude self-portraits, in which deep anxiety about death and the desire connected with it are not at all sublimated. In order to get into himself, the subject of the painting must expel the shapeless motions that leave on the dermis their anomalous traces of excretions and hair. It is a paradoxical body in which «the

beautiful involucre of the skin disappears under the fantastic pressure of the organs and, above all, sex» (Jeudi). Think of the clothes exhibited by Boltanski, of the olfactory whiffs they give off, as a reminder and allegory of the stripped bodies of the Holocaust. Think of Bacon's nudes and Deleuze's masterful characterization: «There is still, certainly, an organic representation, but even more we are witnessing a revelation [...] that makes organisms and their elements crumble or swell, forces them into spasm, relates them to forces, either an internal force that lifts them or external forces that run through them, or with the eternal force of unchanging time, or with the variable forces of time that flows». Modern art arrives, in this way, at a paradoxical result: «The very notion of the nude is the *neutralization* – a social and aesthetic compromise – of a *primitive and violent* fact; and it is against this neutralization that the most subversive temperaments of modern painting arose, with the strange result that their insurrection has destroyed what they wanted to liberate» (Klossowski).

But by choosing this course, contemporary Western art achieved certain of the characteristics of classical Chinese figurative culture. Here, the body is conceived in a vitalistic way from the very beginning: it is not objectified, but arises from an encounter with experience; it is not an anatomical form, heroically imprinted in flesh, but an energetic process regulated by the rhythm of breathing. It is not, therefore, broken down into separate objects, as our drawing practice would have it; the allusive presentation of interiority is transferred to the undulations of the clothing that signal its vitality. It is an irradiation of internal resonance, an atmosphere that more resembles smell than sight (Jullien).

11. Limbs and forces

This inversion of perspective, from interiorization to exteriorization, leads us to think of the nude in modern painting and sculpture as a space of unbalanced forces, the site of all deformations and metamorphoses. The intimate movements of the flesh – diastole and systole – are subjected to all sorts of rhythmic distortion: from contraction to release, through tension and distension. Immobility itself is represented as an intense effort of waiting or as paralysis – a negation of movement. Beyond the distinction between figurative and abstract, this de-

corative rhythm was to give the nude an experimental future. Rodin and Bacon offer masterful examples. In Rodin, the nude persists in the guise of absolute beauty. It is not, however, the model form that is fully incarnated, thus quenching the unchanging and metamorphic life of the material, but the inexhaustible and never-ending emanation of a natural body. In Rodin, it is movement that constructs a new monumentality of the nude body through the transmutability of a continuous slippage. It is a becoming that renders the body's internal vitality perceptible, comparable «to the musical element of the lyric and [...] thought content of poetry» (Simmel). Neither is the construction of nude bodies by means of repertoires of pre-formed parts without any harmony between them constitutive in the traditional sense (as it is in *The gates of Hell*, 1880-1917). Indeed, what matters is not the assembly of the limbs but the rendering of the internal forces, which translate into a useless frenzy, a murmur of febrile movements in which every action is unresolved and every desire unsatisfied (Varnedoe).

With regard to Bacon, there is little to add and, again, we can learn much from Deleuze, who does not stop at describing the acrobatics of the flesh and the athleticism of the nudes but delves into the «impression that the body takes particularly affected postures, that it bends under effort, pain, anguish» (see the *Study for a nude figure*). It is an impression that is certainly possible, reintroducing a story and postural figuration, but it prevents us from inferring the invisible forces that act upon the represented figure, beginning with the nameable passions, such as the forces of isolation, deformation, dissipation, coupling, joining and separation – forces that prompt new sensations and new ways of seeing. Lying beneath the model organism that the nude organizes is an organless body in the manner of Artaud, which art clothes with successive transplants – an open-ended experimentation with possible bodies. Should we want to, we could arrive at a resemblance that is not the mainspring of perception but one of many possible results. Klee entrusted to his titles the decision as to whether the painting represented a nude, a face or a flower. By contrast, Matisse's line ensured that his nude women (*Pink nude*, 1935) – derided sarcastically by his contemporaries – «became nude, if they were not already so; Matisse taught us to view their outlines not in a physical-optical sense, but as neurations, axes of a system of carnal activity and passivity» (Merleau-Ponty).

12. Faces, landscapes and still life

Removal does not equate to disappearance. The qualities of the nude have crossed over to other genres and themes in the history of painting that would be an error to consider in isolation, such as portraiture, landscape and still life. While the canonical nude neutralized the expressivity of the face, we could say, with Klossowski, that the «reminiscence of feminine nudity in the traditional execution of the nude carries out a function analogous to the function resemblance plays in the portrait».

The feeling of nudity is expressed in the physiognomy of the face – and perhaps reflects the painter’s gaze (think of the state of wakefulness of the nudes in Courbet’s *Two girls*). The entire face is denuded or the entire body becomes the face. It may become an arrangement of proofs borrowed from the model nude or it may be the body which expresses the passionate movement of the faces. The body can be shown either with or without a face or the faces of the nudes may be covered with a primitive mask, as Picasso does in his *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907). The same thing can be said for the landscape: the undressed and isolated body can be arranged in an ideal nudity or be integrated with the natural context. This brings us back again to Chinese painting, in which the landscape carries the physiognomic sign of the clothed figures.

Even the mute, the estranged presence of *Olympia*, has been compared to a still life, not unlike the *tableaux vivants* that were a *topos* of the atelier. But it is in Cézanne that this shift left the deepest traces. It is as if he said to Renoir: «I paint a still life; models frighten me». Meyer Schapiro has clearly shown that the great French painter’s still life possesses the features and the erotic tenor of feminine nudity. After his first attempts (such as the *Five bathers* and *Nude woman*, as well as *Bacchanal*, 1875-76, and *The eternal feminine*, 1875-77), Cézanne painted a *Leda* (1886), «a striking example of diffusing a sexual theme through the substitution of a figure with still-life objects». In the latter part of the painter’s career, we see a shift from the representation of the body to the representation of an object, a change destined to have a great future. But the caressing gaze the painter turns on the apples should not be misunderstood: it is again Paris’ gesture in his judgment of the divine nudes. With regard to the nude Yadvigha in the *Dream* (1910) painted by the customs officer

Henri Rousseau, the nude's forms are entirely distributed throughout the landscape: the breast mirrors the moon while the sinuosity of her hips mirrors the snakes.

13. The Faun's eye

«In the scopic field, the gaze is outside; I am observed, that is, I am a painting» (Lacan). We know what Zola thought – in his *Salons* (1864) – of the Gérôme's famous painting *Phryné before the Aeropagus* (1861, two years before *Olympia*), a painting that had also impressed Cézanne and Degas, each of whom made sketches of it. He recognized Gérôme's technical skills and cultural capabilities, the archeological fidelity, and the way in which he accented nudity with a gesture of modesty («a woman surprised while changing her shirt»). But he was primarily interested in the passions expressed by the old judges of the Aeropagus, who observed nudity 'like a ragout' with a palate tuned to pure consumption. Here, Zola appealed, without moral overtones, to a new ideal of perfection that would come to dominate modernity: to denude the eye. But how can we express today the impure truth of nudity with a pure and naked language if the pure voice of myth has been extinguished? For Foucault, it would be necessary to write with the prose of an Actaeon that escaped from Diana's vendetta!

In the canonical genre of the nude, the presence (in the text of representation itself) of a witness charged with desire and eroticism – a stand-in for a real observer – compensated for the abstraction of the model. In fact, 'uncovered' is not yet 'unveiled'. And Gérôme's nude was no longer the paradise of the senses that flows from Titian's beds but rather the daily Eros of Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas and Gauguin.

The ideal body of the nymph becomes desirable in the eyes of the satyr. For Klossowski, «the nude as such belongs to a bourgeois conception of painting; considered academically, it exhibits only the residue of an apparition separated from its content. A witness is thus needed so that behind the stereotype of 'beautiful anatomy' we may feel a little of the original trauma of which it is a replica». At the service of the scopic impulse we find the biblical and classical traditions, each with its mythological variants: Gyges and the wife of King Candaulus, Diana and Actaeon, Galatea and Polyphemus, Pygmalion and the statue, as well as Susanna and the old men, David and Bathsheba,

Saint Sebastian and Saint Marta. Eroticism constitutes itself in voyeurism: a game of attraction, but also repulsion when the nude embodies obscenity and repugnance – Silenus, Noah, the dissolute old woman – that presupposes all of the beauty that it disavows. Without making recourse to psychoanalysis – which proffers interpretations of art that demonstrate too much – censorship is the best enduring indicator of erotic efficacy.

The visual agreement that the classical nude proposes – often lacking the pupil – is constantly subverted by the eye of the faun, which may be internalized by nudity itself, as in the case with Phryné's 'modesty' or the frontality of *Olympia*. And it may leave traces in the very form of the body or of the desired flesh. Valéry compared Ingres' *La grande odalisque* to a strange plesiosaurus bred for pleasure. In Bellmer's nudes, which are anagrams of flesh obtained with the permutation of all the limbs, even the kneecap looks at us. Even the latent hermaphroditism of Neoclassical and contemporary art is a sign of the reversibility of the desiring gaze (see Karl Hubbuch's *Erna*, 1930).

Contemporary art searches for polyscopy and lends us a polyvalent eye. In fact, there are many ways of veiling, filtering or averting the gaze of Actaeon or Gyges, with its erotic clichés, its pornography of sensation. One can distance the observer decisively from the background, as it is in Cézanne's *Bathers* (1906), or construct a gaze that observes not from a simulated space but from the painting itself, as it is in *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*. Or one may return the gaze ironically back to the 'sender', as it is in Nam June Paik's performance entitled *TV Bra for living sculpture* (1969), in which a nude Charlotte Moorman wore two monitors on her breasts which returned the voyeur's stare (Belting).

14. The model's pose

«The nudity of the woman is wiser than the teachings of the philosopher» (Max Ernst). Behind the artist's eye is a thought of the body, and between the eye and the 'real' nudity there was for a long time – and there still is – the atelier, with its rhetorical figures: the plaster cast and, of course, the model. Until Rodin, who was the first to allow his models to move freely (he loved to sketch them in motion with swift strokes and without looking at the paper), the model held the

pose, offering the body as an emblem of the work that represents the body of art.

The pose idealizes the body, hinders denuding it, and permits the transformation into the nude. The immobility and temporal duration of the pose facilitate total comprehension and interrupt perception of detail. Above all, they efface or, in any case, disturb the undressing eye, the voyeuristic view: «when viewing a nude body, the subject that looks is negated before the example of a body objectified like a work of art» (Jeudi). Even the abstract gaze of the model becomes a neutralized stare of the hypnotic autoerotic state.

The incessantly theorized relationship between the painter and the nudity of his model is paradoxical and sometimes parodistic. «Prohibiting himself from caressing the woman», Butor notes, «the painter will proceed to simulate at length that caress on the image of the woman, which will be outlined little-by-little». Between the inquiry into real intimacy (see Hayez's pornographic sketches) and the final idealized representation, anything is possible, like the nude in Courbet's *The painter's studio: a real allegory* (1855), in which the model is not in a pose and looks from behind at the landscape depicted or the painter who is painting it. Or take Picasso's oil *Painter and model* (1914), in which the painter is barely sketched, while the entirely painted model «undresses for him, in vain, before the easel» (Belting). Or take Casorati's *Conversazione platonica* (1925) in which the reciprocal gazes of the painter and model are veiled in shadow, leaving the observer as the only recipient of the splendid posed body. Or Schad's mysterious painting bearing the same title (1927), in which diaphanousness – transparency and opacity – is transferred onto the nude body of the painter watching us.

For Arthur Danto, contemporary art has conjugated all the possible forms. It has apparently arrived at total intellectual indistinguishability and the post-historical renunciation of the idea of progress and appropriateness to its time. We shall let De Chirico have the last word.

The nude and bearded *Odysseus* of the 1921 and 1924 self-portraits watches us, pointing behind himself. There is a strong temptation – and there are those who have not been able to resist it – to attribute to him Schiele's words from his *Diary*: «Art cannot be modern. Art eternally returns to its origins [urewig]» (Clair). But this is

not the case. The gaze turned upon us sees history behind us with its ruptures that are by now concealed. Behind Odysseus the painter, we discern, instead, the future which is denied to him, but which he shows us. Is this future one of navigation in the archipelago of forms introduced by new technologies and the much-discussed threat of a loss of the body? It is difficult to say. We may note, however, that the opposition is not between the body of fashions, overly invested with symbolic features, and the ingenuously naturalistic body of nudism. The virtual, with its weightlessness and plasticity, increases freedom to play and experiment with simulacra of the body. Like art, digital technology heightens the emergence of a corporal virtuality.

Whoever observes De Chirico's painting must pass through its nudity in order to arrive at the suspended gesture. Much nude painting derives and will derive its meaning in this indecisive gesture that at once indicates, invites and remains quiet. As Montale writes, «all images take the written to another level».