

# Being Nude

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THE SKIN OF IMAGES

Jean-Luc Nancy and Federico Ferrari

TRANSLATED BY ANNE O'BYRNE AND CARLIE ANGLEMIRE

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# Preamble

Preamble: before ambling off or taking a walk, for example, through a picture gallery . . . This one offers twenty-six pictures, paintings or photographs chosen for no reason but the arbitrariness and chance of our two tastes and interests. This arbitrariness exposes us in a certain nudity. We have not clothed ourselves in knowledge or philosophy. We have no pretext or end to motivate a particular approach. In fact, it's not even really an approach, just a walk, a flaneur's wandering, which doesn't have to justify itself.

Our interest in the nude is the most widely shared thing in the world—at least, in the world of Western art, since other regions and periods of art have made nudity serve other interests. In fact, one might say that everywhere else, nudity seems to be understood in erotic and/or sacred terms, whereas the Western nude seems to be exposed for its own sake and to offer an interest in itself that is not related to the ends of knowledge or pleasure. Undoubtedly, it always seems ready to be turned toward something true or an experience of *jouissance*. But it nevertheless remains suspended, withdrawn, and undecidable. We are likewise exposed, without theory or art history, in our own encounters with the figures or singular moments of this nude that interests

art for its own sake. Of course, it always also awakens some movement of curiosity or desire, but is never reduced to it. This movement is so obvious and conventional that it is clear that the nude wants something else—or that it wants nothing but to be nude.

What guided us both, each in our own way, is this sort of presence that is both filled with and stripped of itself, a withholding of complete exposition, the mingling of modesty and audacity in an appearing that assumes or consumes being. It is not really being, but rather a flash, not permanence, but the instantaneousness of what cannot take root. It is not a sense to be discerned or deciphered behind all the signs and strokes, but above all something true right at the skin.

Something true right at the skin, skin as truth: neither the beyond-the-skin sought by desire, nor the underside that science aims for, nor the spiritual secret of flesh revealed. For us, the nude is neither erotic nor anatomical nor authentic. It remains on the edge of or beyond these three postulations. The truth right at the skin is only true in being exposed, in being offered without reserve but also without revelation. After all, what the nude reveals is that there is nothing to be revealed, or that there is nothing other than revelation itself, the revealing and what can be revealed, both at once. It doesn't have the power to lay bare; that is to say, it is naked only in this very narrow place—the skin—and for this very brief time.

If a nude is not relentlessly its own stripping bare, if it is not each time its appearance and the simultaneous fragility, modesty, and flash of this appearing that makes nothing appear other than appearing itself, then it is not “nude” but “nudity,” a spectacle for the science of observation or lascivious manipulation.

That is why the image is its element, and its skin is always the skin of an image. What renders itself naked makes itself an image, pure exposition. It is no accident, then, nor a matter of objective

or sensual curiosity, that the image devotes itself to the nude. The image of the nude replays its own nudity each time; it plays its own skin of the image: the complete presentation there in the foreground, on the only plane of the image, of what has precisely no other plane, no dissimulated depth, and no secret. The secret is on the skin (the secret and the sacred). Painting, drawing or photographing the nude always poses the same challenge: how to represent the unrepresentable fugacity of stripping bare, the instant modesty that comes to conceal revelation, and the indecency that comes to reveal the evasion.

The one and the other take turns exposing just this: here is a subject in the strict sense of the word, *sub-jectum*: there is nothing beneath it, and it no longer hides anything else. It rests on itself, and this “self” is the skin, the thinness of skin and its flesh color. What painting paints when it colors itself with “flesh” and what the photo captures when it takes a “body” is the trans-parency that plays on the skin, or that makes skin. This is an appearing that makes nothing appear, a luminosity that sheds light on itself alone, a diaphanous touch that allows one to make out nothing but its touch itself.

Today nudity has become a relentless motif of thought; perhaps it goes back to Nietzsche, the first contemporary thinker to scoff at Europeans in their “moral clothing,” unable to get undressed without shame.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it goes back much further, to those Greek statues whose nudity seems to us to have been divinity itself and whose artful nudity undoubtedly still retains a memory mixed with Christian anxiety about flesh, as well as the sense of an exposition that is both fragile and precious. These three tonalities of the nude—the divine nude, naked sin, and naked skin—occupy thought today in many different ways, and Levi-Strauss’s title *L’homme nu* can serve as an emblem for this thought. The preoccupation occurs in different registers, from the horror of

## Preamble

bodies thrown onto the charnel heap to the desperate desire to make bodies their own icons, and it always leads us back in the direction of stripping bare and coming undone. This ambiguous proximity is also an opportunity for thought, if, for thought, it is a matter above all else of remaining stripped bare of all received meaning and figures that have already been traced. The nudes of painters and photographers expose this bareness and suspense on the edge of a sense that is always nascent, always fleeting, on the surface of the skin, and on the surface of the image.





# Trans

Jean-Marie Pontevia sees a lack or indeterminacy of sexual identity in Renaissance painting. In his view, there is at the origin of the Renaissance “a sort of hesitation with regard to difference” that makes the categories of feminine and masculine waver, with each continually reappearing in the other across a variety of compositions. On one side would be Leonardo’s effeminate men and on the other Michelangelo’s virile women. This hesitation, one that is able to make identities vary, would seem to reappear with great power in contemporary art, reaching its limits in the iconography of transgender, whose ostentation is seen as grotesque and banal.

Placing herself in this situation of movement and drift, Nan Goldin offers a different sensibility. Her photographs show us how impossible it is to mark precisely the nude’s sexuality. Her subjects are often “trans,” but Goldin’s originality resides in the capacity to show how the nude, beyond the represented subject, is always this placing into question of sexual identity, this never-ending crossing of identities. In Goldin’s best photographs, stretching from the 1976 *Ryan in the Tub* to *Joanna’s Back in the Doorway* of 2000, one cannot see what is transpiring; in them movement remains indefinite, suspended. It is here, in the suspension of

crossing, that the nude is configured as the infinite transition of sexual identity. But what do we mean by transition?

Mario Perniola defines transition as the passing from a presence to another presence, that is, from something that is to something else that is. (There is no move from a negative to a positive or vice versa, and there is no going beyond.) In the nude it is this movement that is at stake, this crossing of the pictorial or photographic space by the gaze. The gaze does not go beyond but cries out in bare [*nuda*] presence and is not to be referred to the other.

Thanks to nudity, the presence of the other moves space; presence in this case is uncanny, disquieting. More than a simple vision and more than an activating of the sense of sight, the nude is, therefore, a disturbing of the senses, indeed, of all of the senses and in all senses of the word. The disturbance of the soul and of the senses—an arising of sense, in the sense of a body that floats on the surface of the image. Ryan rises up out of the water, immobile and without a gaze. His gaze is negated and opens onto nothing. It is in the eyes of the other, of the one who sees Ryan. The gaze of the nude is blind to itself. It does not know and cannot see itself. It only knows how to be exposed in its absolute trans-parency to the other. The nude appears, moving in the gaze of another body—a bare question of a gaze that vouches for its own existence.

The two gazes—the nude's and that of the one who sees the nude—meet in an indefinite point. Perhaps it is at the skin of the eyelids, this aperture/shutter, much like the diaphragm of a camera, which allows the external world to come inside. And it is in the meeting of gazes, at the limit of the threshold that divides them (and, naturally, at the surface of bodies) that the nude takes on its true significance. The nude is given as a specularity of the gaze and the space that it opens, as a never-ending deferral that

hinders fixing one's attention on a single detail. It is as if the impossibility of seeing the point at which two gazes meet forces us to retrace them, to get the eyes moving again, following the curves to see that which always already is placed outside but which is removed from vision: the desire to understand the meeting of that body and that blind gaze, meeting it in our turn. But bodies are not immobile in space. Bodies float and meet and assert their own existence, which is to say, their own being outside of themselves. In this sense, the nude is no longer about absolute immanence, as if the nude enjoyed a defined and apodictic depth, as if nudity, as in *Ryan*, sinks in its own absence of depth. Nor is it about trans-cendence, a moving beyond, a passage to a further dimension with respect to the presumed artificiality of ornament that would cover over the bare [*nuda*] truth of a full presence that is to come. Perhaps it is about a trans-immanence or, more simply (and so as to avoid any misunderstanding), about a passage between two or more presences: that of the trans, which is to say, the crossing that goes so far as to touch, verifying it, the presence of the other, and bounding back to my presence. The meaning of the nude is to be found right at the skin of bodies and in the inexpressible movement from one body to another. Here, then, the meaning of nudity is located completely in the singular experience of a meeting, in the exposition of a body that emerges as if suspended and that opens onto itself and outside of itself toward the infinite. The "trans" of the meeting of nudity and this uninterrupted transition of sense from one body to another is this incomprehensible transference in which the body itself gives itself, in which it experiences itself as its very own outside, as that which comes from outside, but from an outside that is all there. In those breasts, in those hands, in the hair. The transference of the nude is precisely the site of a passage in which the psyche understands itself as

extended, as the extension and spatializing that has as a consequence that I have a body, even if that body is never exactly my body but instead the corporealization of the body in the sharing of bodies and gazes and their mute “language.” The transference isn’t, therefore, a process of identification with the other, nor is it a projection onto the other, which would presuppose two already defined subjects. Rather, it is the experience of an exposure to alterity that constitutes the subject. It is exposure to the stretching that constitutes the psyche. And it is the sharing, at times painful and at others joyful, of a gaze that emerges from and ends in nothingness.

—Translated by Timothy Campbell