

Research in Practice. Proposal.

Nude. Controversy and Censorship

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Programme of Study: Photography in the Arts

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Module: ADAD5004

Word Count: 2270

Character Count: 13961

The three words that I chose reflect my area of interest and my passion for nude photography: Nude. Controversy and Censorship. This research attempts to link them and raise deep and meaningful questions on different levels - personal, social, political.

Nude

'Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display... The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.'
(John Berger, Ways of Seeing)

The naked body has been, since ancient time, a fascination for artists of all backgrounds. Prehistoric cave paintings, greek or roman statues, erotic sculptures from India or Africa and many artefacts from all over the world, stand as evidence. While male nudes were dominant during Antiquity, the trend has shifted and now, it is the female body that has become the ultimate muse for art creators.

Nude photography occurs almost at the same time with the invention of the photographic technique. Hippolyte Bayard, a french pioneer of photography, developed his own method of producing photos, claiming that he did it earlier than Daguerre and Talbot. The French authorities failed to recognise his discovery. As a reaction to this injustice, Bayard created what is believed to be not only the first nude with a deep political message but also the first nude photograph ever. The image, entitled 'Self Portrait as a Drowned Man', presents himself as a victim of an act of suicide. The dead body is represented in a theatrical way, as nude from the waist up.



Hippolyte Bayard (1840). *Self Portrait as a Drowned Man* [photograph]

In the early days, nude photography was limited to being just a visual aid for painters, or a tool for scientific or physiological research. Beyond these limited uses, the camera, sadly, has played an important role in the growth of pornography. It took a while until photographers began to break down the barriers to nude photography's acceptance as a serious art form. Edward Weston and Alfred Stieglitz began to change things. In the search for individuality and freedom of expression, they presented the nude in an artistically beautiful and alluring manner. Stieglitz's images were stunning surveys of form and figure while Weston's nudes were radiant recordings of shape and structure, of contours and curves. It was somehow proven that eroticism had nothing to do with their pictures, although it exists, of course in photographs of the female nude. It becomes art when it is combined with emotion, when aesthetic qualities of the image stir the imagination. *"I am stimulated to work with the nude body, because of the infinite combination of lines which are present with every move"* (Edward Weston, Daybooks)

Plenty photographers that followed made their own marks on the history of the nude photograph: Imogen Cunningham's abstract images added a distinct sensuality.

Man Ray's surreal creations were groundbreaking and continue to influence artists today. Bill Brandt's Perspective of Nudes series challenged viewers with haunting shapes, contrasting shadows and extreme angles. The harsh sexuality of Helmut Newton's work intimidated and entranced at the same time while the super-realistic photography of Robert Mapplethorpe presented male nudes in a new and provocative light. Les Krims and Joel-Peter Witkin combined shock and humour. Jock Sturges and Sally Mann displayed innocence and beauty in the young, nude body, attracting both critical praise and controversy for their conceptions.

The question that has been on everyone's lips all along was 'What is the difference between artistic nude and pornography?' The definitions shift dramatically through the years and fluctuate with each set of ethics and eyes. Culture, background, education, religious views are some of the variables that change one's opinion. It's often said that the difference is a simple matter of lighting, but there is a difference of intention too. While one involves beauty and delight, the other is just disgraceful and coercive. The debate is as long as the first nude photograph. To the puritans, nude is filth. To the libertine, all nude is defensible. And then there's the grey area in between, where most people fall, and this is why an agreement is seldom achieved.

My belief is that nude photography is about authenticity. It must capture genuine emotions. And it is not only about the model but about the photographer too. Most professional models can learn to 'fake it' in front of the camera, covering imperfections and striking poses. A great photographer has to recognise a woman who can truly share herself with the camera. It takes a lot to create an intimate connection with the model, not physical but emotional, in order to fuel a creative relationship. The photographer projects his own feelings and energy onto his model. How much self you're willing to sacrifice is what separates artistic nude photography from porn.

"Study the model's figure. Is it frozen in a pose that serves no useful purpose in everyday life? Do the breasts project from the body with a taut buoyancy inconsistent with the laws of gravity? Are the fingers of one hand formed in a V and used to separate the labia for no apparent reason? The really important part: examine the face. Is it expertly painted to Barbie-doll perfection? Do the lips resemble an inflatable hemorrhoid pillow? Does the overall expression suggest smouldering passion, while the eyes say nobody's home? Regardless of the lighting, I'd say you've got some pornography here." (Dian Hanson, The New Erotic Photography)

Controversy

'The photographer was thought to be an acute but non-interfering observer – a scribe, not a poet. But as people quickly discovered that nobody takes the same picture of the same thing, the supposition that cameras furnish an impersonal, objective image yielded to the fact that photographs are evidence not only of what's there but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world.'
(Susan Sontag, On Photography)

What is right and appropriate for an audience? This ethical question has always been a real challenge once photography was accessible to the public. Social taboos, artistic freedom and the journalists' urge to record are essential elements of today's polemics.

The controversy regarding the ethical limits of the photographic act began only with the mass publication and reception of the images. At that time, the aspect of the author's quality of the photographic product had already been clarified. It was not an independent process and thus objective, but had a completely subjective side, a creator, who was responsible in equivocal cases, in situations where the limits of what is ethically acceptable were exceeded. The fact that these ethical boundaries have been and still are fluid - depending on the cultural circle, moment or object - is obvious.

A photograph taken, without authorisation, by Max Priester and Willy Wilcke, of the former German Imperial Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in the bed in which he had died became the object of an embittered lawsuit. Fifty years later, Frankfurter Illustrierte magazine published one of the images on a full page and without causing a big reaction.

Press photographers are especially blamed - perhaps because of their extremely relaxed ethics in photojournalism, for campaigning for the aestheticization of drama to achieve a shocking effect. One of the most iconic and controversial pictures ever taken is 'The Vulture and the Child' by Kevin Carter. The photo became the symbol of famine in Africa. It is self-evident that he encourages emotional identification through the means of visual impact. Carter won a Pulitzer Prize for the picture in 1994. It was first published on the front page of The New York Times on March 23, 1993 and it sparked a global outcry. It was one of the most discussed and controversial examples that have arisen moral dilemmas about whether photojournalists should photograph or help their suffering subjects.

'The photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened', as Susan Sontag observes in her essay. 'The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is what's in the picture. As Roland Barthes declares, the photo is a 'message without a code', it is unique in a way that it is self-sufficient as a 'perfect analogon' of reality. The use of clear symbols (the nakedness and the vulture) empties the composition of any polysemy that would challenge the 'disturbing' reading. Carter's experience when taking the photograph was traumatic even when he was compelled to maintain a professional distance. It was reported that after taking the image, he had chased the bird away. Two months after winning the Pulitzer Prize, haunted by 'the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain', Carter committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in Johannesburg.

The debates have been and still are heated by the unauthorised photography of the dead, of the victims of wars or accidents, but mostly of nudes or erotic subjects.

If the British photographer David Hamilton could still sell his colour photos with semi-naked girls in the 1970s without any problems, today he would have had big problems, given the discussions around child nudity and pedophilia. What in the

1980s sparked only minor discussions has become a criminal case in the meantime.

Sally Mann, called “America’s Best photographer” by Time Magazine, is best known for her intimate pictures of her children, many of which being nudes. The criticism surrounding her photos is questioning the line between pornography, fine art and objectification. As her images became iconic and the topic is still controversial for debate, it goes to show that an artist has to second guess himself as others could find his work as sick, disturbing or vulgar.



Sally Mann. (from the book *Immediate Family*, 1992) [photograph]

“I hope these photos of my daughter are provocative” - words by Betsy Schneider, an artist (assistant of Sally Mann) that shocked the audience at the Spitz Gallery in London, exhibiting naked pictures of her daughter between birth and age five. Her aim was just to document her, in the idea that time is inexorable. She was aware that her work could cause tension, but as an artist, that’s one of the risks you have to take while also trying to provoke thought. The purity of her photographs was tainted by how modern society sees them. Even though the public is more relaxed about the naked body, in comparison to the past, a constant climate of bad faith prevails. In America and Britain, countries that share many views, the attitude towards children is one of constant fear. (Other countries value children a lot more. It is reflected in their social policies. And the attitude towards the body is not as paranoid). Such attitude contaminates adults’ relationship with children, devalues innocence and limits artistic freedom.

“Shame fall on the one who has evil thoughts” (Edward III)

Censorship

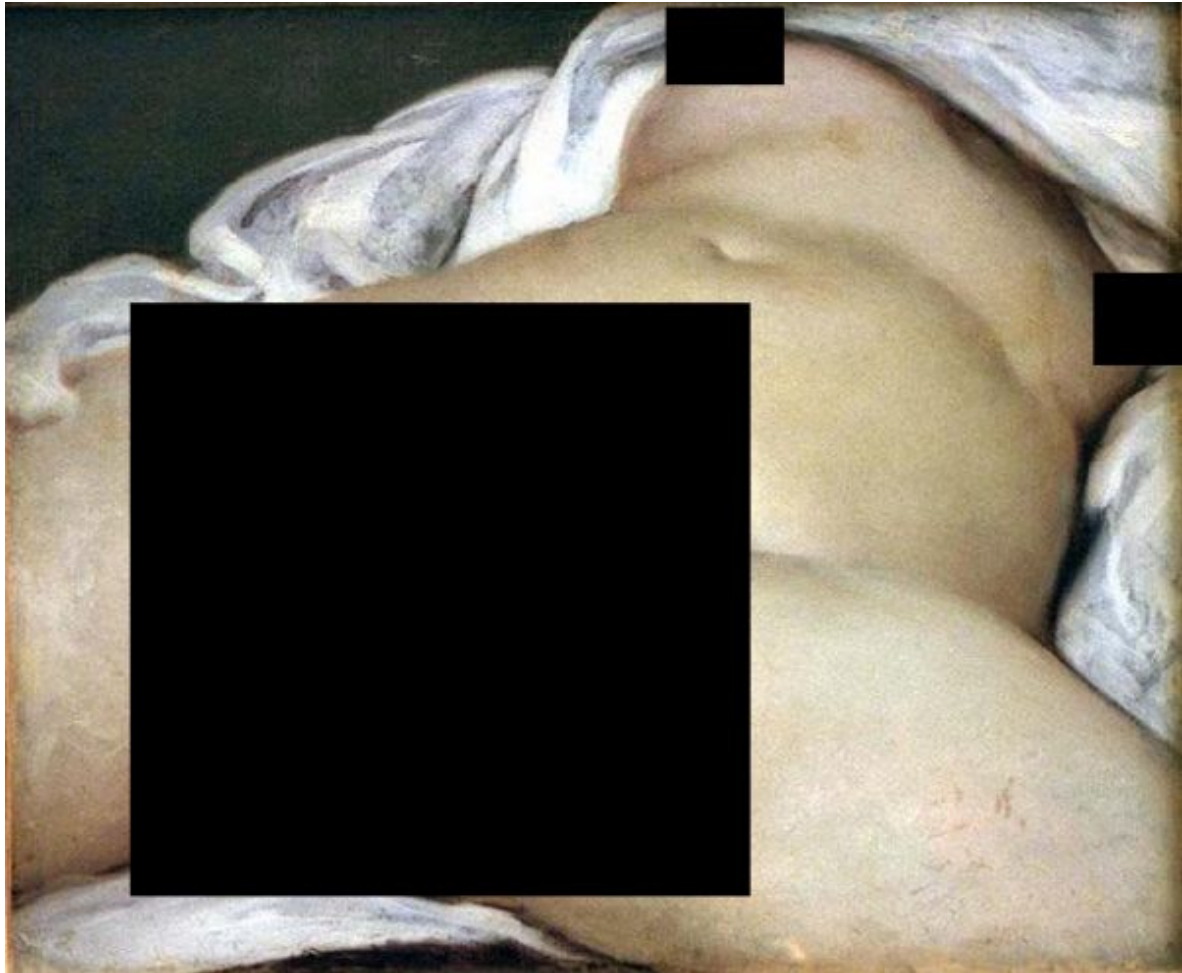
‘ A free society is a society where it is safe to be unpopular. Where it’s safe to swim against the current and be perfectly safe from the other fish. ‘
(Adlai Ewing Stevenson II)

Censorship raises the question of how an object is deemed art or obscenity. Although sociologists have studied how cultural objects are interpreted according to the cultural frameworks of the larger society, little has been written on what makes one interpretation more compelling than another.

The right to representation is a core democratic principle commonly associated with the right to vote. But that right has also become allied with the presumed liberties associated with visual representation. Photography acts as a key site for the expression of self and nation and, as such, has become intrinsic to the articulation of a right to visual freedom. Yet that visual freedom, so often taken for granted, has so frequently been denied. Censorship of images is particularly controversial in a nation that exposes the democratic ideal of freedom of the press.

Representations of nudes in painting, sculpture, and photography frequently become subject to controversy. If the ancient history depicts the human naked body as something natural, the Middle Ages brought religious rigors. The Catholic Church often interfered, 'rectifying' works that did not correspond to its views. The controversy over nudity in the Sistine Chapel, painted by Michelangelo, is famous. The artist Daniele da Volterra was hired to cover up some of the genitals in The Last Judgement by adding fig leaves and loincloths

We live in a world where 'The Origin of the World' by Gustave Courbet, has been banned by social media on pornography basis. Education is continuously censoring art. A teacher was fired for making the work of Amadeo Modigliani and Jean-Auguste Ingres cases of study. So called political correctness is throwing mud at masterpieces such as "Huckleberry Finn" and "To Kill a Mockingbird", accusing them of racism. MeToo movement start petitions on banning art in museums.



Gustave Courbet(1866). *The Origin of the World* [photograph - censored version]

Censoring art is censoring a person's mind and preventing them to freely express. It alienates people from the world and causes marginalised groups to be even less visible than they were before. Free speech is what sets us apart from the civilisations of the past and what motivates us for the future. If censorship is taken to such extremes, when will it end?

'One man's vulgarity is another's lyric.' (John Marshall Harlan).

Upon exploring these three words, contextualising them has led to numerous questions: How does today's society understand and accept nude in art? Is there an easy way to determine the line between nude art and pornography? What is offensive? What is more offensive, an image or the censored version? Is the freedom of expression in art growing or diminishing in today's 'modern' society?

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