

“Just Act Natural: Models, Mannequins and Muses”

Part II

Margaret Mayhew

In late nineteenth century Paris, female artists' models were working class, and many worked part time in service industries such as cleaning, housekeeping, or laundry. Some critics have argued that these artists' models were the natural antecedent to fashion models which emerged at the same time, but it is important to note that artists' models came from both genders and many different ages and races, whereas fashion models were almost entirely young, Caucasian, and female. The earliest fashion models in Paris, called sosies, were usually shop assistants in haberdashery stores. Young, attractive, and docile, sosies, if they bore a resemblance to a particular client, would be asked to model a new style of gown as means of persuading the client to order one, thus acting as living mobile versions of the life-size dolls that had previously been sent across Europe. The physical presence of mobile models was an important aspect of the increasing urbanisation of fashion. Couturiers and clients encountered one another face to face, in the liminal zones of arcades, and nineteenth century fashions became increasingly focussed on the sensuous qualities of bodily movement. The rustle and sway of skirts, the falls of pleats around hips and legs, and the posture of corseted and bustled torsos were something best demonstrated on a living model rather than a limp and rigid armature. The sosies, acting as live mannequins for fashion customers, weren't really functioning as models on whom the clients would base themselves, and are less an antecedent to supermodels of the twentieth century, than to 'fashion mannequins,' still employed by prêt-à-porter manufacturers in Australia such as Rockmans. Often called 'floor assistants' and classified under the Australian Industrial Relations Commission Award as "house mannequins," these models are usually employed according to torso measurements of dressmakers' size charts, and generally perform clerical duties with occasional fittings for the prototypes of new garments. The poor rates of pay and anonymity of such house mannequins are a world away from the agents, contracts, and high pay rates of glamorous catwalk models.

The development of fashion models as spectacular figures of modernity, emerged from a cultivated and specialised group of young urban women, trained in personal grooming and deportment in order to imitate the living exemplars of style, the demimondaines. Such women occupied a precarious social condition in relation to their wealthy male benefactors (as courtiers, lovers, fiancées) and relied on physical display of their talismans of association with men as a (somewhat risqué) form of social recognition. Promenading in public parks, balls, and racecourses in expensive clothing, jewellery, and millinery, such women became living fetishes for male financial display and it was the mobilisation of these fetish elements of urban feminine display that characterised the development of female fashion in modernity. In the late nineteenth century model agencies associated with specific fashion manufacturers developed. Maison Lucile became the most famous of these early 'model agencies.' Initially from London's West End, Lucile recruited middle and working class girls and trained them in deportment and hairdressing and arranged them to be presented in theatricised choreographed displays of the latest clothing. Remaining silent, these women would not reveal their grisette or cockney accents and were able to complete the illusion of being sophisticated contemporary figures, worthy of emulation by the wealthy clients of the fashion houses. These new models were silent and nameless, usually named after their fashion houses, and interchangeable. The continuing, changing spectacle of eternally young, almost identical women, produced the contemporary figure of the model, and reinforced the spectacle of fashion as an eternally timeless circuit of artificially seasoned neo and retro.

The development of fashion spectacles was twinned with developments in popular theatre such as music halls. While Lucile's troupe prefigured the dance troupes such as Blue Bells, posing itself became a minor music hall craze. Tableaux vivants became a brief craze particularly in England, where actors clad in flesh-coloured body stockings would arrange themselves on stage in imitation of famous paintings. Emerging in the 1840s, they had their cited origins in the salon performances of pose plastiques by Emma Hamilton during the previous century. Tableaux vivants facilitated some exchange between stage actors and artists' models. Apparently, while artists' models were less likely to be employed on stage than chorus girls, many chorus girls used the format of the pose plastique to pose for artists or photographers 'in character.' Distributing etchings or photographic prints allowed actors to promote themselves more widely. The emergence of

photography in the mid-nineteenth century quickly fuelled a demand for nude images, both among artists painting nude studies and for general use as pornography. The proliferation of tableaux vivants, nude photography and, increasingly, nude paintings, caused a considerable public controversy in England and led to the passing of the Obscene Publications Act in 1857. Provision was given for allowing models to appear naked, as long as they remained completely still. This allowance had effects in the life class, of ensuring a strict protocol of robing between posing, which persists in English-speaking life classes to this day. Paradoxically the legislation led to the degeneration of the tableaux vivants from a public spectacle to a genre more associated with prostitution. By the 1860's, men-only clubs as the "Coal Hole" in London's Soho, featured naked women on stage, adopting an 'art pose' before the drunken male clientele who would later hire women as prostitutes. In a downmarket imitation of the scenes played out across the channel at the École des Beaux Arts, women's posing provided a theatricised fetishising of their bodies as icons of male sexuality and consumerism. Even in its most lugubrious setting in the late 1860's, the tableau vivant operated within a set protocol that still governs contemporary sex-based performances such as strip clubs and peep shows. The presence of the naked dancer, actress, or model in a live setting amongst a group of men is still charged with considerable social anxiety that club owners are eager to regulate according to the socioeconomic identities of their clientele.

The nineteenth century featured increasing social mobility and social instability for women in Europe, the United States, and some colonies, particularly in urban centres. In England the threat of women's social mobility was projected onto the image of the prostitute as an independent, socially mobile, and socially contagious element of urban societies. The spectre of physical contagion was harnessed by concerns about the spread of venereal disease from brothels into respectable middle class families, and it echoed the enormous fears of social contamination between the classes. As urbanised men were seen to be moving in a number of different class-based circles, urban women were also able to engage with and move through social classes. Service-based occupations such as retail, modelling, and performance were sites where different classes could and did come into extended intimate contact, and it is arguable that the emergence of fixed gendered models provided a means of mediating the complex and volatile social exchanges that were possible. While prostitutes encapsulated the social dangers of

independent, socially and sexually promiscuous/socially and physically contagious women, female artists' models acted in an increasingly mnemonic function for illustrating the transgressive and sexualised possibilities of nudity. In England, there was an enormous social gulf between artists and models, and artists' models could be regarded as working class victims of middle class exploitation. In the late nineteenth century this changed in France as bohemian cultures of the avant-garde circles emerged. Rejecting bourgeois morality and critical of academy conventions, avant-garde artists came from many regions of France and Europe. Many of these artists were poor, and disdained or were excluded from bourgeois society and conventions. Unable to afford models, many bohemian artists posed for each other or entered sexual and emotional partnerships with women who would pose for free in exchange for lodging company and art education. The emergence of avant-garde art movements in Paris in the nineteenth century was linked to the bohemian lifestyle of radical artists and writers, and as new art movements popularised, bohemian lifestyles became romantic and glamorous aspects of the new cultures. In the bohemian contexts of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, artists' models became considered as muses and lovers, singularly worshipped icons of the romantic passions of male artists. In England, artists sought a type of 'naturalism,' rejecting studio models as artificial, or staged, and seeking to recruit models based on their capacity to embody all of the artists' creative aspirations and dreams. Artists would select models based on their feminine glamour, approaching them in public settings of concerts and streets, and recruiting them by a process of wooing – itself often culminating in a sexual tryst.

The new naturalism was a response to the complex social configurations of nineteenth century modernity, and a means by which artists established their own social distinction in a flourishing consumer culture. Views of the life class as artificial were no doubt a reaction to the popularising of life models in stage productions and the increasingly down-market pose plastique. The creative appeal of daily life was no doubt drawn from the excitement derived from increasing social interchange in public spaces such as opera, theatres, open air markets, public gardens, and public transport. It was also, arguably, a means whereby artists fought to maintain cultural capital in a social milieu where technologies of photography, but also complex public theatres of social exchange, were eclipsing them. The nineteenth century architecture of Paris with the wide boulevards, Grande Magazins, and elaborate buildings such as the Eiffel Tower and Garnier's

Opera were not only spectacular in themselves but provided new landscapes for populated assemblages. The development of arcades, as semi-interiorised passages between such open streets, provided forms of intimate spectacle and facilitated the increasing fetishisation of consumer objects and products.

In the early modernist settings of shopping arcades and later department stores, the movement of living models, fashionably dressed women reflected in the large glass windows of the grand boutiques, were doubled by the posed mannequins within. While store dummies had been initially constructed as crude metal armatures, with exposed heads covered in horsehair and fabric, more lifelike plaster heads and bodies gradually replaced them. This lifelike turn was coupled with the development of fashion models, and maybe explained as a transfer of commodity fetish, from the clothes as discrete products to an embodied sartorial model of human form. In the mid-nineteenth century, mannequins came to represent models for human comportment in public; upright, elegant, and fusing into the latest fashion. The spectacle of store dummies was twinned with presented spectacles of living dressed models. In Australia, fashion parades were principally hosted by and housed within department stores. Combining elements of music hall, theatre, and striptease, fashion parades attracted thousands of spectators, and were a major form of public theatre. Models as the 'stars' of such parades became as reified as the fashionable clothes they wore. Modelling was increasingly regarded as a respectable and desirable career for middle and occasionally upper class women. Fashion models had in fact become genuine social models for affluent female consumers. Fusing personae and product, they were the embodiment of the fetishised power to transform clothing into a spectacular expression of modernity.

The strangest aspect of the new fashion models presented in such theatricised settings was their apparent lack of theatricality. While models were glamourised and respectable, they were still silent and nameless on stage, and in their choreographed routines resembled troupes of marionettes rather than individual women. The doubling of fashion model and mannequin as lifelike but profoundly uncanny human forms provided a public spectacle for the alternance of life and death, as mediated and managed by fashion. The necrophilial fetishising of the new female models was echoed in Pre-Raphaelite painters who painted their muses as dead, drowning, collapsing, or consumptive mythic heroines. However without the public outlet provided by department stores, allowing an audience to enter and merge with the spectacle, to purchase its raiments and imbue themselves with its mythic power, the fine arts were destined to occupy a more marginalised position in popular culture, and fine art models with it. While a number of upper class women did become celebrity art models at the turn of the twentieth century,

they were eclipsed by the saturation of visual culture with cinema stars and the fashion super models of the late twentieth century.

The late nineteenth century, with the intense confluence of fashion spectacles, the reified female nudes in art, and the proliferation of mannequins, anatomical models and other forms of automated or simulated figurines, fascinated many writers at the time, and many writers and artists since. Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* was developed in the 1930s as a patchwork of comments, quotations, and reflections on the emerging spectacle of modernity which centred on the new consumer arcades in Paris. The *Arcades Project*, as an incomplete bricolage of textual fragments, evokes contemporary writings of Benjamin's contemporaries such as the Surrealist Michel Leiris, and has been acknowledged as influencing much contemporary cultural theory. In heralding the (post) modern age of hyperreality as being dominated by the order of the mannequin, Jean Baudrillard mobilised many of Benjamin's earlier writings on fashion, models, seduction, and death. In "The Doll, the Automaton" Benjamin assembled various quotes from the history of fashion, to contemplation of literature, theatre reviews, and Marxist theory, juxtaposing them with comments of his own. The accumulation of such fragments, often contradictory and ambivalent about the seductive and repellent qualities of the new modernity, evokes the power of fashion as mobilising major cultural forces. Benjamin selected a review of Chinese Shadows in a puppet exhibition at the Palais Royal, describing a bizarre form of female parthenogenesis:

Another young woman started tossing her head vigorously, and in the twinkling of an eye a second demoiselle had stepped full clothed from out of her head. The latter at once began dancing but, the next minute was seized in turn with head shaking; these were labour pains, and a third demoiselle stepped out of her head. She too immediately began dancing but soon took to tossing her head like the others, and out of arose the fourth demoiselle. It continued in this manner until eight generations were there on the stage – all related to one another through spontaneous generation, like lice.

Juxtaposed between a paragraph on women in carriages looking like dressed display dummies and Paul Lindau's descriptions of automatons and dolls as repulsive, the excerpt evokes a phenomenon of inhuman reproduction spreading like a contagion across the stage, provoking identical copies of copies of copies. The compelling spectacle, at once mimicking life and arresting death, captures the gaze and mind of the viewer. As the organ of reproduction, the models' heads indicate the force of the imaginary code that directs the hall of mirrors of

mannequin culture in hyperreality; it is all in their heads. The *Arcades Project* elicits connections between modernity, fashion culture, and the distorted productions of humanity and monstrosity. Dolls, extrapolated and extruded sections of human forms, of heads, torsos, breasts, and legs, are twinned with the same bizarre mechanics of clockwork, inventing and circularising micro time into miniaturised mechanic circuits, referential to their own mechanistic logic.

At the time of Benjamin's research fashion mannequins had already moved past the lifelike representations that populated the arcades in the previous century. The macabre qualities of lifelike/lifeless store dummies were already publicly acknowledged, in art and fashion magazines:

The modern decorative artist has...sworn to annihilate the horrible simpering wax figures of the clothiers' shows of our youth... sometimes all naturalization is cast aside, decoratively cut features, cut out in plane, are gilt or silvered over, adding to its strangeness. Sometimes face and figure become a mere cubist chaos of intersecting surfaces; sometimes face and hands are reduced to a decorative hieroglyphic traced in space.

As fashion mannequins became increasingly referential to abstract art, Surrealists exhibited fashion mannequins in bizarre juxtapositions of objects. The permeation of avant-garde art and fashion mannequins was promoted as a modern and modernist stylistic shift, however it was also characterised by a disarming level of misogyny towards the female bodies depicted. Surrealists such as Hans Bellmer used fashion *poupées* in increasingly disturbing ways and this reflected Picasso's own hysterical violence toward the rearranged nudes of the 1930s. While effacement and evisceration of feminised figurines participated in the imperative of transgression and shock, they also consolidated a deeper displacement from the fetishised female body onto the fetishised objects of consumer culture. Tag Gronberg argues that this was a deliberate and conscious strategy, developed by retail advertisers in the 1920s. Citing the science of psychology, advertisers described and devised strategies for producing and promoting stylised images of women that would evoke fashionable models, and yet act as a lure to the inorganic objects they were selling.

The new mannequins, featured in the 1925 Paris Exhibition, were faceless, with stylised pinheads, 'Javanese' poses and peach-textured skin smothered in gold and silver paint. These abstracted and unreal figures helped articulate varying levels of cultural capital within consumer groups. The modern art mannequins were

targeted at sophisticated, affluent urban consumers, a distinction enhanced by cartoons, mocking the shock and inability of unsophisticated rural folk to comprehend or comport themselves around the new modern figures. With the logic of simulacra firmly established in the previous century, live fashion models started to imitate the increasingly abstract mannequins. Fashion parades increasingly featured 'sullen' models, straight mouthed and eyes looking into space. Models moved in unison, as spectres or automatons, with the stylised forms of comportment, 'sashaying,' turning, and posing, becoming increasingly stylised and artificial. The 'contemptuous' face of the models as inscrutable added to the mystique of the commodities they were promoting. Such models performing as mindless hypnotised zombies not only spectacularised a denaturalised living state, but also increased the power of the fashion spectacle to direct social order. The social power of such models was enhanced in the early twentieth century spaces where alternation of fashionable clothing, from fixed plaster mannequins to stylised zombie-like creatures, uncannily replaced socialised enactment of death and rebirth.

The modern spectral model increasingly became a feature of upmarket fashion parades, even in Australia in 1936. In Australia, the modernist fashion parade had the added caché of being part of a touring spectacle from Europe. However, the reception of sophisticated modernist conventions of fashion modelling was not extended to store mannequins, which remained relatively archaic until the 1960s. Up until the late 1940s miniature fashion dolls were distributed throughout Australia, and most store dummies were of naturalised plaster. This fissure between modernist sophistication and a more prosaic conservatism was a contradiction that has continued to circulate within the Australian visual culture. The 1920s saw an increasing cultural anxiety over a distinctive Australian identity. As argued by Juliette Peers, modernist figurative art became associated with a patriotic nationalism of the emerging 'new race' of white Australian, and nudity became linked to a neo-Hellenic ideal of sport, sunshine, and the new national identity. Peers describes the emergence of this 'natural type' in figurative art of the 1930s where female artists such as Freda Robertshaw and Ola Cohn depicted themselves as "athletic, lithe but uneroticised Amazons." Robertshaw's paintings of beach scenes feature bronzed, active, curvaceous women and men, almost androgynous in their swimwear. This national mythology of naturalised corporeality was an important means for legitimating the proliferation of life

modelling and life drawing in art and trade schools in the early twentieth century. Australians were influenced by English ideas of naturism, and nudity was promoted and linked to the outdoors, physical activity and strength, bronze skin, and a non-prurient, no-nonsense approach to self-presentation. Within fashion this national type manifested itself as a 'healthy,' fuller-figured, size 14 model. Emerging in the 1930s, the curvy model embodied the practical concerns of colonial womanhood and served to fuel myths of Australia as a largely rural society, when in fact it has and continues to be one of the most intensely urbanised populations in the world.

Counterposed with the increasingly thin mannequins presented by European fashion houses, the 'natural Aussie' has enabled another form of alternating play on the issue of cultural authenticity. This continues to the present day, where images of anorexic, wafer-thin models are juxtaposed with features on 'natural' or 'real women.' The "real sizes" centre-fold in *Cleo* was another form of this 'natural model' discourse. Despite the nomenclature, and despite the relatively relaxed requirements for admission as a natural model, this genre is as bounded by conventions of artifice and simulation as the most extremely unreal and distorted fashion models. Many of the critiques of fashion's extremes, deployed in texts around 'the natural model,' have a cultural genealogy firmly rooted within fashion writing. The quotation from Margaret Maynard's third wave feminist discussion of the 'natural Aussie' model of the 1990s, appears merely to repeat earlier discourses within fashion. Maynard hints at the historical roots of model as abject corpse in the 1960s:

Cadaver images are, in fact, merely a revival of a '60s fashion. In 1961, five years before Twiggy was named model of the year, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the "sick look as fashion craze" and the corpse-like appearances of wasted tubercular models with chartreuse complexions, sunken spines and smudgy eyes.

The tension between models as artificial and deathlike, and a desire for authenticity, however, was elucidated earlier, such as in this 1924 excerpt from a French arts writer:

Here is a new art, that of mannequins, we have finally become disgusted with those horrific wax cadavers, those disturbing counterfeits...

The writer articulates the abject figures with a kind of 'knowing' complicity, with the insouciance typical of fashion writing, dismissing the old figures as 'so yesterday.' This capacity to declare something 'dead' or 'over' resurfaces again and again in writing on fashion and highlights the self-referentiality and circularity of fashion discourses. In the 1920s this rejection of corpse-like mannequins was coupled with a precise turn in how artificial mannequins and later fashion models were denaturalised in the interests of consolidating the pathways of female fetishisation and consumer spending. At the start of the Twentieth century, the cultural response to the cadaver-like verisimilitude of early wax mannequins was to generate a more authentically 'modern' and yet increasingly abstracted, effaced mannequin. At the end of the century, the same tension was transposed onto photographic images of fashion models. The confrontational images of 1990s neo-realist 'heroin chic,' were complemented by increasing 'natural model' features, as well as increasingly distorted photographic images in specialist fashion magazines. This trifurcation has consolidated the cultural field of images of authenticity, artifice, life, death, and the post-human within the realms of fashion discourse. Thus the fashion model is not only an ideal against which female consumers may or may not deploy their own cultural agency, but one of the poles of artifice and nature, death and life, entirely constructed by fashion discourses, between which female consumers oscillate. In early millennial culture this oscillation has extended into surgical body modification, where light or heavy cosmetic surgery as a form of glamour makeover is counterposed against 'extreme' body makeover culture and voyeuristic forays into freakish or incompetent plastic surgery disasters. The closed circuit of references, between natural and artificial, deathlike and living, within fashion actually eliminates any credible reference to a 'natural' order. The parameters of authentic or artificial, natural or cadaver-like, attractive or abject are increasingly dictated by seasonal cycles of fashion, which extend far beyond neo and retro into real and unreal.

The conventions of appearing as a 'natural' model define themselves against other competing genres of physical presentation. This may be against the perceived artificiality of professional mannequins, or against the anachronism of the life class, the kitsch of soft porn, the obscenity of striptease, the elitism of celebrities. All of these perceptions are culturally specific and largely contested within the settings where models pose and are observed and imitated by others. While the arena for cultural contestation is largely saturated by consumer culture,

and mostly confined to the terms dictated by the temporal exigencies of fashion and consumer writing, there are still spaces where slippages can occur. Strange flights of fancy and culturally incompetent meanderings out of time, or out of space, provide points of escape from the hegemony of fashionised nature. Bodies continue to be as massy, messy, and strange as the looks, desires, and actions between them. Just don't expect to find them at your local newsagent.