

Just Act Natural: Models, Mannequins and Muses

Part I

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A few years ago I was working as a model. With full day bookings at an average of four days per week, I could even say that I was one of Sydney's 'top models.' There are a couple of images of me floating around in *The Women's Weekly* as well as a *Cleo* sealed section where I appear stark naked, cropped, shrunk and juxtaposed with photographic images of other naked models whom I have actually never seen outside the pages where our flesh appears to rub together. We look like a jolly, jostling lot, as a placard gaily proclaiming 'Size 16' nestles between my calves. (But I thought I was only a 14!) At the time my torso measurements were those of a dressmaker's fourteen – 36" 28" 36" – but I tried not to care. I only did it for the money: three hundred bucks for two hours, and double what the other models had accepted. Impressed by my own haggling chutzpah I was amazed that I could earn in two hours of standing in front of a camera more than what I earned (after tax) from three full days posing naked for life classes. *Cleo* was desperate, and willing to pay extra, for larger models. Trying to give a 'naturalistic' portrayal of 'real' women, they found that somehow most women prepared to bare all for the camera were the sizes, shapes, and colours of the rest of the bodies represented in the magazine: size 10, or 8, or 6.

'Real women' articles in 'women's' magazines emerged in the 1990s as a quasi-feminist response to charges of idealised thinness and stylised beauty of photographic mannequins. This intensified towards the end of the decade, when Australian fashion was described as 'in crisis' and increasing media and government attention focused on exploring links between media images of thinness and proliferation of body dysmorphia syndromes such as *Anorexia nervosa* in young female consumers. 'Real women' or 'real body' features continue to be attractive to magazines as an inexpensive way of generating copy; professional agency models usually charge a couple of thousand dollars per session, and more if naked. However, recruiting real women or non-photographic models, especially for naked photography, is a challenge, and most articles feature artists' models or

professional strippers. One artists' model said she'd posed in a group with some strippers and found them 'gross,' scratching their depilated vulvas in public, and adopting coy, slutty, 'lezzie' poses in front of the camera. Looking at the images in the size 14, 12, 10, 8, and 6 sections, I could guess, by shaved pubes and embellishments like tattoos and piercings, who was less likely to be working as an artists' model. Generally, artists' models present a type of unrefined natural classicism, without extensive depilation, cosmetic surgery, or makeup. The 'natural' appearance of artists' models is partly to distinguish the life class from less edifying genres, such as fashion magazines, but also from soft porn and strip shows. This appearance is also chosen to emphasise the artists' own imaginative capacities to produce the idealised nude from 'raw' nature.

While posing for the *Cleo* shoot I was perplexed by the photographer's banal mantra of "Just act natural, act like you're really happy with your body." It was eight o'clock in the morning, and I was standing on a cold curved concrete skating ramp, adopting habitual contrapposto poses from the life class, and trying to convince my brain that they weren't after a Rubens. They wanted me to be upright, curvy, smiley, and happy. Hell! What about my famous repertoire of Rodinesque contortions or anguished Romantic heroines? Life class posing is always limited by the time of each pose. The most interesting poses are the shortest and the drawings are often less illustrative or pictorial and more like a generalised scribble. My professional vanity was hoping for a pictorial record of my acrobatic expressivity, pulling my foot up behind my head, standing on one leg, cowering in expressive terror, or transforming myself into a Renaissance classic, with embellished versions of old ballet stances. Students at art schools usually went along with the 'expression' of each pose, and I knew how to structure poses to give an 'appealing' view from all sides. And yet, posing for the camera was more revealing, despite the single view of the fixed monocular lens. I realised that I sustained contrappostos by swaying backwards, and, that outside of posing, pretending, and playing, I wasn't 'happy in my body' and couldn't adopt a Colgate smile that early in the day. I couldn't act 'natural' because the situation was profoundly unnatural and alien, and I didn't know the pose for 'natural' or 'happy.' The final image shows me stepping forward awkwardly, a made-up face staring back with the smiling eyes of so many women in my family, a familiar smile, but not mine.

A year later, I had another gig at *The Women's Weekly*. This article featured five models, each representing a decade of women's ageing from women in their

twenties to those in their sixties. Apparently they'd had serious trouble finding older models that would pose for the low cash rates being offered. However, this was probably less of a reflection of the perceived shame attached to ageing bodies than the cultural and social capital of older, experienced models. There are three well known female artists' models in Sydney who are aged over sixty. All of them have worked in performance and two have posed in glamour photography in the past. One of them stated that the rates offered by *The Women's Weekly* were scandalously low, and refused to take the job on principal. However, I needed the cash, and so, posing as a metonymic thirty year-old, I bleached my hair in order to be less recognisable to my Mum's hairdresser or my old classmates in the country. *The Women's Weekly's* idea of natural was a little different from *Cleo's*. They wanted my eyebrows plucked, my legs and armpits shaved. They let me keep my pubes, but after a two-hour makeup session I was unrecognisable. Unlike *Cleo*, *The Women's Weekly* shot on film and didn't use any digital manipulation of the bodies or backgrounds. Assuring us they were after a 'classy, arty' look they also posed the models in ways that concealed our pubes, nipples, and even our shaved armpits. During the makeover session, the fashion and beauty editor proclaimed that I had "great bone structure" and that I "could really do this seriously if I put some effort in." I suspect she was trying to flatter me, make me feel included in a visual culture that seemed so alien. (Reform the butch dyke, make her behave, pretty her up.) I thought of Calamity Jane with mud on her frock, and smiled as I assured them I didn't have any political objections to shaving my legs or underarms, I just never saw the point of doing it. As a feature on ageing, the article was rather strange. My body looked larger and saggier than the forty year-old dancer on the following page, but this might have been part of its 'authenticity.' At least I wasn't asked to 'act natural.'

Say the word 'model' and the fashion mannequin is what springs to most people's minds. However, despite an enormous proliferation of catwalk and photographic models in visual and popular culture, there is not a lot of academic literature on fashion models or what fashion modelling entails as a profession. Karen De Perthuis' (as yet unpublished) doctoral thesis from 2003 notes that, apart from biographies of famous models such as Twiggy, "scholarly attention to the model is relatively unmapped landscape." Most descriptions consist of chapters in general books on dress or fashion, and some recent texts in social anthropology. Such writing is often based around extensive descriptions of models' appearances

and 'lifestyles,' without providing much scholarly analysis on the social relations and cultural practices being pursued. While a number of feminist texts in cultural studies have attempted a critical social analysis of the representations of and practices within fashion modelling, most writing on fashion models is either focused on exploring 'the model' as an abstract cultural projection, or 'models' as a group of celebrities, workers, or study subjects. In many ways this parallels the lacuna surrounding artists' models. Art history and theory has devoted considerable attention to discussing and debating 'the nude' and even 'the body,' but historical research on naked artists' models has only really emerged in the past decade. This lacuna could be described as the semantic difference between the 'model' as a noun and 'model' as a verb. There is a considerable textual focus in contemporary cultures on 'the model.' The model by definition is a type of cultural prototype. However, 'model' as a verb, an action or production of an individual outside of the nominal label of 'model,' is barely defined and rarely articulated. This is surprising in the context of the amount of abstract theorising on the body and fashion undertaken by prominent contemporary cultural theorists, such as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard. The mannequin (an ambiguous model) is a central figure in Baudrillard's description of the groundless, self-referential condition of hyperreality. The order of the mannequin is a seductive idea on which to model a discussion of contemporary visual culture. If the mannequin or model is the ubiquitous and dominant experience of how subjectivity is constituted, then it makes sense to explore and articulate what the processes of modelling actually are. Baudrillard's ideas on the precession of simulacra have been cited so often in so many contexts, that any discussion of the order of the mannequin or hyperreality necessitates a brief exegesis of how such ideas are being deployed.

In *Simulations*, and later *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Jean Baudrillard describes how the precession of simulacra has produced a contemporary embodiment that is entirely based on the mannequin. Baudrillard explicitly traces a historical narrative of the precession of simulacra from an imitation of bodies, to a complete phagocytosis of bodies into the realm of semiotic mirroring. He traces the order of simulacra as progressing through three stages. The first order is based on stucco, a highly malleable and quickly setting form of concrete associated with Renaissance Italy, which sought and found means to create images and objects imitating almost every element of the visible world. The development of plastic visual media such as stucco and oil painting was associated with the pursuit of

tactile verisimilitude, which sought to recreate the world in a singular, continuous medium. The Industrial Revolution is associated with the order of the automaton, the machine age compelling labour and social relations to be regulated and coupled with mechanical inventions. Social life and human experience became increasingly structured around mechanical objects; creating a labouring class of Fordist production elements, working as unskilled complements to specialized machinery, as well as an affluent consumer class, whose social relations were increasingly mediated by fetishised manufactured commodities.

The third order of simulacra, emerging after World War Two, is that of the mannequin. In this order, the mannequin has no function beyond that of representation, and no relation to any reality outside of itself – or to other mannequins. Collapsing the object into pure representation, the mannequin presents the body as pure sign, empty of any references to anything beyond its own citations of other mannequins. As a contemporary ideal of embodiment, this presents a compelling image of post humanist subjectivity, evacuated of interiority, the collapse of the subject into a maelstrom of gestures, statements, signs all iterative as reflections of other gestures, statements, and signs. Subjectivity becomes performance of citation, a repetition or mimetic exchange between inscribed sites of signification, but the signification is only that of the act of signification, and not of anything outside of the exchange.

As a linear narrative the precession of simulacra can easily accommodate a slippage into a totalising view of hyperreality as an inevitable and universal consequence of the development of capitalism. Indeed many writers since Baudrillard have cited the groundless qualities of hyperreality in order to inscribe a post-subjective social condition based on a superficial incantation of 'the body' as a singular 'mass grave of signs,' a site of surface exchange devoid of interiority beyond that of lack. This view proliferates in a number of contemporary studies of fashion, which conflate fashion and dress in articulating an ahistorical, abstracted, totalising, and arguably alienating, description of contemporary experience of corporeal and sartorial exchanges.

Such a schema does a disservice to Baudrillard's ideas on the mannequin, which are influenced by earlier writers of modernity and fashion, particularly Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's writings on fashion and the fashion mannequin prefigure the detemporalising qualities of hyperreality and they also articulate a profoundly temporal relation to the society that they seek to

describe. While Baudrillard's breathless manifesto style may convey a seamless totality of social relations, it does not preclude a closer examination of specific cultural practices, or of tracing finer historical circuits between people, objects, illusions, and aesthetic possibilities.

The word 'mannequin' has an ambiguous meaning; it represents both plastic lifeless 'dummies' used in fashion, medicine, and car crashes, and the living models working in the fashion industry, either as catwalk or photographic models. This semantic ambiguity is reflected in the history of fashion models, which have evolved as a specific mimetic doubling between live models and their plastic counterparts. While fashion modelling and art modelling circulate in two distinct cultural and social realms, the barriers between the two fields have always been quite porous. While artist modelling has been described as a precursor to fashion modelling, both practices developed from mimetic relations with inanimate objects, and have continued to circulate in shared cultural realms such as medicine, erotica, theatre, and labour relations.

Fashion mannequins, or shop dummies, emerged in nineteenth century Europe and were an amalgam of printed paper cut-out dolls, dressmaker's dummies, early forms of sex dolls (drolly referred to as *femmes dociles*), and exquisite porcelain-headed fashion dolls developed earlier in France. While illustrated fashion plates had existed since Albrecht Dürer's work, these *couriers de mode* emerging in the seventeenth century were developed by couturiers in order to distribute and promote the latest court fashions to potential clients in the European aristocracy. Exquisitely tailored and dressed dolls functioned as colourful sensual maquettes of increasingly fetishised costumed adult figures. Female figurines did not have legs, hinting at the seamless unity of dress and internal form, and ranged from 90 cm in length to life size. Couture dolls were themselves a development from the lay figures used by artists from the sixteenth century. Royal subjects, reluctant to spend weeks sitting for artists, would have their face and hands superimposed onto bodily images painted from jointed wooden torsos posed and dressed in the elaborate costumes of the monarch. The stiff, disembodied images of Queen Elizabeth I or King Henry VIII are reflections of the hollow assemblage of face and fabric on which such paintings were based. This bodily absence of the monarch is echoed in sculptural 'busts,' locating identity and power in the head, neck, and shoulders. While artists had used living models

(themselves, family, servants, or studio assistants) for parts of paintings, it is interesting that for a monarchic portrait, the replica models were inhuman.

The development of figurines in art and couture was also replicated in medicine. Anatomical figurines were made in clay and later in wax, and usually looked like hollow humanoid shells, stuffed with moulded objects resembling internal organs. As anatomical illustration developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, figurines and images oscillated between appearing as still corpses or as eviscerated living beings. The tension between depicting the verisimilitude of life or the verisimilitude of death was never resolved by medical figurines, which in the flesh-like exactness of wax maintained a deeply disturbing ambiguity. In the nineteenth century wax figurines entered the realm of entertainment, becoming features of sideshows and public museums, often with an 'educational' pretext of science and health. Even in the current century the elaborate displays of plastinated corpses by Gunther Von Hagens play on this tradition, with the alchemy of plastination (injecting corpses with a polymer resin to transform flesh into wax) enhancing the aura of lifelikeness in the figures. Dressed wax figurines were used in historical folk museums such as Madame Tussaud's and the amusingly named 'panoptika' that proliferated in northern Europe. The public spheres for arrangement and display of replicas of exhumed corpses developed as death itself was increasingly removed from the private social spheres of families, homes, and small church graveyards. The development of the hospital, public morgue, and urban graveyard institutionalised the processes of natural deaths, and the removal of criminal executions behind walls, banished death from visible public spectacle. It is arguable in such a context that death became spectacularised in an allegorical form, and this explains the nature of the proliferation of mannequins and modelling culture in modernist spaces of urban Europe.

Fashion dolls continued to be made and distributed to haute couture clients throughout northern Europe and North America well into the nineteenth century; Charles Dickens features a ladies' doll maker in *Our Mutual Friend*. In Paris, however, lifelike fashion dolls entered public spaces, being placed in windows of arcades as advertisements for clothing. The appearance of lifelike/lifeless figurines in urban spaces is inextricably linked with the development of couture as fashion, and for Benjamin is one of the key elements in fashion's own relationship with death.

The proliferation of lifelike dolls, dummies, marionettes, and mannequins in the nineteenth century in museums, shop windows, and theatres was mirrored by the development and proliferation of industries of 'living models' throughout art, fashion, and medicine. Artists' models have been documented since the sixteenth century, and mythologised since antiquity. In Raphael's studio, *garzoni* or junior studio apprentices would be asked to pose in compositions devised from memory and study of sculptures from antiquity. *Garzoni*, all male and young, posed as women and men, and were sketched into position, with features added separately. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European art academies promoted the life class as a distinctive feature of development of the fine arts from a guild-based trade to an intellectual profession. European academies studied almost exclusively male models up until the late nineteenth century. Female nudes were developed in the privacy of artists' studios or boudoirs. The gendered separation of male and female bodies was akin to the Hellenic practices of customary male nudity and female drapery, and was analogous to the gendered separation between private and public spheres. With the development of academies for art and design, as well as the proliferation of artist studios across continental Europe a small class of professional models developed. The upheavals produced under Napoleonic Europe encouraged the migration of entire communities of Italian families north and west. As itinerant immigrants, many Italians found work as artists' models, and, with their geographic links to the Italian Renaissance and to the Rome of classical antiquity, were an increasingly popular source of naked and clothed figures in European art. In the late nineteenth century many of these Italians were forced to leave Paris and flee to England, along with thousands of Jews escaping pogroms in Eastern Europe. This fuelled an artists' modelling boom in England, which didn't develop an art academy until the end of the eighteenth century, and was keen to imitate continental models of art education.

The Napoleonic wars produced a darker corollary to the history of human models. The French anatomist Jean Galbert, working at the military hospital in Paris, was permitted by Napoleon to use the corpses of prisoners of war for anatomical dissection. Cadavers were not only dissected, but also skinned and posed as models for detailed anatomical studies. Suspended by ropes, and propped on blocks, corpses were arranged in bizarre poses, often referencing Classical statuary or conventional poses of artist models. Anatomy studies were incorporated into the curricula of art academies. Galbert took a body cast of one

écorché posed in the ‘attitude of the Gladiator,’ and presented it to the École des Beaux Arts. *Écorché* figures became a regular feature of life classrooms, being compared to the live models beside them. Throughout the nineteenth century, anatomical studies in medicine required an increasing number of bodies. After fallen soldiers, the bodies of executed criminals were used, and later, those of paupers. One *Écorché* used in the British Royal Academy of Art, posed as ‘The Dying Gaul,’ was cast by William Hunter from an executed smuggler and was actually referred to as ‘Smugglerius.’

While most art academy models were male, female models had been utilised in artists’ studios since the seventeenth century. Artists such as Rubens, Rembrandt, and Boucher used their wives or mistresses, the latter changing his wife’s recognisable features to an anonymous idealised ‘type,’ while other artists transposed female curves onto male figures. In Paris, many artists worked in private studios and started to hire female models to complete commissions for clients. While most European academies used male models, private ‘atelier’ style art schools emerged, which featured female models, often working naked in rooms full of young affluent men. The atmosphere in atelier schools such as the École des Beaux Arts and even the Académie Julian has been compared to private boys’ schools. Characterised by minor bullying and taunting of new students, models were occasionally harassed, and were selected by what can only be imagined as the most humiliating manner possible; on Monday mornings a succession of models would stand on the podium and strip, in order to be approved or jeered by the crowd of male onlookers.

Part II of this article is forthcoming in the ‘Liminal’ issue, and will explore the development of modelling and mannequin culture in industrialised consumer culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.