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Nudity, Sexuality, Photography. Visual Redefinition of the Body

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Abstract The article examines the relations between photography, body, nudity, and sexuality. It presents changing relations of photography with a naked or semi-naked body and different forms and recording conventions. From the mid-19th century the naked body became the subject of scientifically grounded photographic explorations, an allegorical motif referring to painting traditions, an object of interest and excitement for the newly-developed “touristic” perspective. These three main ways in which photographs depicting nudity were being taken at that time shaped three visual modes: artistic-documentary, ethnographic-travelling, and scientific-medical. It has deep cultural consequences, including those in the ways of shaping the notions of the corporeal and the sexual. Collaterally, one more, probably prevalent in numbers, kind of photographic images arose: pornographic. In the middle of the 19th century, the repertoire of pornographic pictures was already very wide, and soon it became one of the photographic pillars of visual imagination of the modern society, appealing to private and professional use of photography, popular culture, advertisement, art. The number of erotic and pornographic pictures rose hand over fist with the development of digital photography. Access to pornographic data is easy, fast, and cheap, thanks to the Internet, as it never was before. Photography has fuelled pornography, laying foundations for a massive and lucrative business, employing a huge group of professional sex workers. How all those processes affected our imagination and real practices, what does the staggering number of erotic photography denote? One possible answer comes from Michel Foucault who suggests that our civilization does not have any *ars erotica*, but only *scientia sexualis*. Creating sexual discourse became an obsession of our civilization, and its main pleasure is the pleasure of analysis and a constant production of truth about sex. Maybe today the main pleasure is about watching technically registered images, and perhaps that is why we may consider visual redefinition of the body as the main social effect of the invention of the photography.

Keywords Body; Photography; Nudity; Sexuality; Amateur and Professional Pornography; Sex Workers; *Ars Erotica*; *Scientia Sexualis*

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*Photography, as a matter of fact,
is amoral and disobedient.*

William A. Ewing (1998:11)

In 1839 in Paris, Louis Daguerre presented his technique of producing pictures, later called daguerreotype, to the French Academy of Science. More or less at the same time in London, William Henry Fox Talbot demonstrated the negative-positive photographic process. At first, in the initial stages of universal admiration for the new invention, it was difficult to conceive its consequences, including those in the ways of shaping the notions of the corporeal and the sexual. Along with the evolving rules of nudity, habits pertaining to the ways of perception have changed as well. The camera, isolating momentary images of things, has done away with the idea of timelessness of pictures; it has shown like no other medium before that the visual is intrinsically associated with the notion of the passing time (Berger 1997:18). It has also influenced the body perception, as well as obsessions, fears, and fantasies connected with it. As Hans Belting (2007) aptly notes, throughout its century-and-a-half existence, photography has been constantly changing the enactment of the body and the human alike. No other art celebrates human body with such fervor and in such magnitude as photography does. The history of this discipline is, to a large degree, a visual chronicle of photographed bodies and the ways they are being presented, distributed, and displayed, as well as hidden and censored. The archive of photographic images reflects an entire array of cultural problems pertaining to the representation of physicality and nudity. The logic behind photographic documentation, which

was revealed promptly enough, shows a desire to record everything that possesses any sort of visual manifestation. Nudity became one of the popular and desirable topics early on, although at first its channels of distribution were limited. Photographers would record in all possible variants all feasible variants of nudity: entire and partial, voluntary and forced. Voluntary nudity, documented for instance by Diane Arbus visiting nudist centers in the USA, nowadays does not raise as many controversies as the forced one (which does not necessarily mean that it remains entirely neutral).^{1,2} Forced nudity can be dictated by medical, hygienic, or grooming proceedings (medical photography, pictures taken in psychiatric wards or prisons). Therefore, it can be entirely legitimate and justified. Still, forced nudity can be also a consequence of a violent act, aimed at humiliating, ridiculing, or subjugating the victim (i.e., photo-mobbing). This type of nudity can also be a consequence of systemic and legal actions, as cruelly evidenced by German pictures taken during the Holocaust (Struk 2007). Whether we speak of voluntary or forced nudity, each is accompanied by a specific set of rules and cultural contexts, changing with time. It is worth taking them under scrutiny, albeit a perfunctory one, to better understand the processes caused by the emergence and evolution of photography. The main part of this text, however, is going to pertain

¹ See: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/arbus-a-husband-and-wife-in-the-woods-at-a-nudist-camp-n-j-1963-ar00527>. Retrieved December 07, 2017.

² More information about Diane Arbus' nudist camp photographs can be found in the book *Diana Arbus Revelations*, published by Random House, New York, 2003. This important episode in her artistic work is also described by Patricia Bosworth in *Diana Arbus. A Biography*, published by W. W. Norton Company, New York, 2006.

to the relations between photography and body, nudity and sexuality, as well as cultural consequences of these relations.

Towards the Body and Photography: The Development of Their Mutual Relations in Western Culture

The relations of photography with a naked or semi-naked body can assume various forms and recording conventions. The invention of photography in the middle of the 19th century coincides with a strong rigor of customs, which manifested itself, among many others, in masking the body, avoiding nudity, and relegating sexuality to the taboo sphere. "To many Victorians no clear distinctions existed between studies of the nude made for artists, those done for personal expression, and those intended as titillating commercial images" (Rosenblum 1997:220). From the start, there has been a struggle to draw the line between artistic photographs with a potentially erotic charge and pornographic ones. The former were to be displayed at exhibition salons, the latter reached their audience through unofficial, hidden channels. Therefore, in the Victorian era, people were looking for a means to present nudity in a "legitimate way." Photographers had to work out distribution channels for pictures of that kind and a number of justifications for taking them. At least several of the paths they took are worth mentioning. The first one was the contemporary ethnographic photography, as cataloguing the Others in the times of thriving colonialism made it possible to perpetuate naked bodies for scientific reasons. Nudity of the "savages" was acceptable, as it belonged to the entourage of cultures perceived as

inferior, uncivilized. Such pictures were also taken by 19th century explorers who, under the guise of tourist photography, could depict nudity and eroticism of the Other. William A. Ewing (1999:20) wrote about pioneers of this sort of photography, "they loved travelling to exotic countries, where shameless savage women were parading topless and *showing* their own bodies with the master of the lens."³ A series of such oriental travel pictures were taken by Roger Fenton in 1858. His famous *Reclining Odalisque*, although not a nude, does have strong sexual connotations. Unbuttoned shirt, bare feet, dim light and above all the gaze of the woman must have had a strong impact on a Western viewer, well in line with the Victorian vision of the exotic and erotic.⁴ In the context of ethnographic pictures, interesting ones were provided by Bronisław Malinowski.⁵ Although his studies fall to a later period, his pictures taken in the Trobriands remain educational even today. One of them, taken probably in 1918, depicts the Polish researcher examining a necklace hanging freely on the bare breasts of a young black woman. Malinowski, dressed in white, stands sideways to the camera, whereas the woman is gazing directly into the lens. Nowadays, this presumably unintentional photograph can be read as a certain allegory of a white explorer's fieldwork among the "savages" at the beginning of the 20th century.

³ However, the same author stresses that even documentary ethnographic photographs caused an uproar and controversy in puritan England. Naked Zulu bodies caused as much alarm as study nudes aimed at artists.

⁴ See: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/282039>. Retrieved February 06, 2017.

⁵ The role of photography in B. Malinowski's field of practice is widely discussed by anthropologists. Synthesis of these discourses can be found in Jakub Dziewit's article "How to Break Oneself's Teeth? Photographs and Discourses" (see: http://www.laboratoriumkultury.us.edu.pl/pdf/LK-2013-4_dziewit.pdf). Retrieved December 06, 2017).

Picture 1. B. Malinowski in the Trobriands, examining a necklace, is showing the backstage of fieldwork.⁶



Another means of introducing nude photographs into official circulation was taking them under the pretence of real or make-belief commissions from painters. This was the case of the French photographer Julien Vallou de Villeneuve who in the years 1851-1854 took a series of female nude pictures and “legitimized” them as photographs depicting models, for the purposes of painters. His works were probably used by Gustave Courbet.⁷ This was quite a common practice in the 19th century. The third way to sneak nudity into mainstream and display such pictures legally was undertaking mythological, allegorical, and biblical themes. This method has been employed for centuries any-

way, allowing the artists to show naked bodies. By mimicking painterly compositions, photographers could depict nudity aimed at higher goals. This

is what Oscar Gustave Rejlander did, creating in 1857 his best-known allegorical picture, entitled *Two Ways of Life*. It shows two young men about to embark on their life paths. One of these paths denotes modesty, work, helping others, prayer, and study, the other—leads to debauchery, sexual gratification, and other sins. In the foreground,

right in the center, Rejlander placed a nude woman, turned with her back to the viewer; and slightly behind—a frontally depicted nude female chest. The photograph caused a scandal, but when the controversies died down, Queen Victoria bought a copy for Prince Albert.⁸ An even greater alarm was caused by pictures taken by Lewis Carroll (Rosenblum 1997:220). As a consequence, he decided to destroy the negatives of nude girls, but a large portion of pictures presenting Alice Liddell, his neighbors’ daughter, who was also the inspiration for *Alice in Wonderland*, has remained until the present day. These photographs are still under discussion, just like in the case of other, more contemporary photo series, dealing with

⁶ See: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bronis%C5%82aw_Malinowski_among_Trobriand_tribe.jpg. Retrieved April 17, 2018.

⁷ See: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/266980>. Retrieved February 06, 2017.

⁸ See: <http://e-magnifier.pl/oscar-gustave-rejlander-dwie-drogi-zycia-1856/>. Retrieved February 04, 2017.

children's nudity or even sexuality.⁹ However, it is a subject that requires a separate study, as also in this case we can observe a shift in the rules of nudity and perception. Another way of presenting nudity were the attempts to escape photographic realism through the aesthetics of impressionist paintings. Pictorialism, immensely popular in some circles of 19th century photographers, suggested depicting various themes, like "a dream, half-overcast by a mist; since the less possessed such things are, the more are they desired; the less visible, the more intriguing" (Sizeranne 1983:29). Robert de la Sizeranne promoted an idea of photography which by various optical and chemical processes could mimic painting and thus become proper art. In the nude realm, this concept was perpetuated by, among others, Robert Demachy. His nudes from the beginning of the 20th century were created by means of the so-called noble techniques, such as Arabic gum or bromoil, supposed to ensure uniqueness, softness, and painterly character of each print. In the actual fact it produced classicizing academic pictures that did enter artistic salons, but failed to bring anything new in the ways of presenting nudity. However, they made it possible to depict nudes in such a way as to be presentable in galleries or publications. Naked and semi-naked bodies soon made their way into medical photographs, both those studying the surface and the inner workings of the human form. In 1868, in the Paris Saint-Louis hospital, a well-equipped photographic atelier was opened. The first two publications illustrated with pictures tak-

en there concerned dermatology and various deformations of the human form. Describing contents of both books, André Rouillé (2007:128) notes that "the first works of photographer doctors bring to mind real museums of horrors." Brutal realism of these pictures showing malignancies, skin growths, advanced stages of sexually transmitted diseases, and other symptoms of pathologies aimed at pushing medical science forward and providing objective report. Soon, photography applied in medicine was about to influence the way the human body was perceived and presented. One of these consequences, persistent until the present day, is segmenting the body into pieces, linked to specific diseases, studied and treated by specialized doctors. The presence of bodies in pictures taken in psychiatric wards is similarly intriguing. In Salpêtrière hospital in Paris doctor Jean-Martin Charcot together with his team created a photographic archive of mental illnesses. As early as in 1889, the *Nouvelle iconographie de la Salpêtrière* periodical comprised, next to sketches and drawings, photographs of nude men and women, accompanied by descriptions of their illnesses. Employing photography for documenting patients in psychiatric hospitals heralded new modes of generating information, but also new systems of controlling and disciplining the body, as described by Michel Foucault. Thanks to pictures, visual representation of sick and healthy bodies could take on a modern form and achieve heretofore-unknown effectiveness.¹⁰

⁹ One of the examples here could be Robert Mapplethorpe's *Rosie* from 1976. The picture, presenting a 7-year-old girl in a see-through dress, was deemed obscene and often banned from exhibitions.

¹⁰ Another stage of the body-photography-medicine relations was Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen's invention (1895). Due to radiation, what is invisible can become subject of observation and treatment. Application of X-rays made "photography no longer a mere record, but an instrument and scientific tool" (Rouillé 2007:139).

Another interesting phenomenon is the presence and role of photography in popularizing medical science. It is described by Katarzyna K. Gorska in her study of Dr. Carl Heinrich Stratz's book, published in 1898. The book, entitled *The Beauty of the Female Body*, was dedicated to mothers, doctors, and artists. This lavishly illustrated work comprised both scientific photographs and nudes. "Photographed women are sometimes positioned properly next to a measuring tape, sometimes luxuriating stretched on an armchair or lying surrounded by decorative fabric or jewellery" (Gorska 2015:134). Titles of these photographs are a good testament to their nature: *15-year-old Viennese Girl with Thick Hair, Well-Developed Joints or Proper Eyebrow Line*. Each photograph is a classical nude, sat by young, attractive women within the canon of what Stratz considered normal and beautiful (Gorska 2015:136). The German doctor drew upon artistic tradition of depicting the female body to prove more effectively that health is synonymous with beauty and beauty with health. Moreover, as noted by Gorska, Stratz disapproved of artists who "pathologized" art by choosing the wrong models, that is, Jan van Eyck. According to his theory, science was connected to aesthetics and art, and evidenced the existence of beauty by images of young, healthy, proportional, real bodies, and not a mathematically derived classical canon. As a result, his work and other similar ones contributed to the "perpetuation of the idea of the female form persisting until today" (Gorska 2015:143). Currently predominant images showing "normal, healthy, and beautiful" female bodies are to some extent a consequence of educational guidebooks from the turn of the 20th century.

To sum it up, from the mid-19th century the naked body became the subject of scientifically grounded photographic explorations, an allegorical motif referring to painting traditions, an object of interest and excitement for the newly-developed "touristic" perspective. This short list allows us to specify three main ways in which photographs depicting nudity were being taken at that time; let us call them artistic-documentary, ethnographic-traveling, and scientific-medical. Those three modes of depicting the naked body in the 19th and beginning of 20th century were distinguished by analyzing photos and articles published in publications dedicated to the history of photography (e.g., Rosenblum 1997; Frizot 1998; Ewing 1999; Brauchitsch 2004; Hannavay 2008).¹¹ However, this list should be complemented by one more, probably prevalent in numbers, that is pornography. As Lynda Nead aptly notes, in Western visual culture, the artistic and the pornographic are polar opposites. "One of them is the female artistic nude, symbol of a pure, selfless gaze and transformation of the body, the other are pornographic images, the profane and mass culture sphere, titillating and satisfying the senses" (Nead 1998:145). Nead's remarks on the female nude can be extrapolated to any other image of that kind.

Towards Eros: Professional and Amateur Erotic Photographs

Nudity-depicting photography is usually classified into naturalist, erotic, and pornographic. Despite this simply division it is not always an easy task to

¹¹ This division is based not only on literature but also on author's experience resulting from visits to museums and galleries presenting historical photographs.

distinguish erotic and pornographic pictures. According to Gloria Steinem, feminist activist concepts of “erotica” and “pornography” are fundamentally different, but still very confusing. Both are about sexual behavior, but the “erotic” is based on free expression, sensuality, and acceptance, while the “pornographic” is about violence, dominance, and conquest.¹² Erotic art is usually described in terms of aesthetic, sometimes sophisticated forms and leaves lots of space for imagination of the viewer. At the same time, “erotic art turns into porn when it loses its aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual aspirations, or context.”¹³ Porn photography serves different goals than the erotic one and also has different channels of circulation.

Naturalist pictures often serve documentary purposes, do not contain sexual contexts and suggestions or minimize them. Authors of nudes, in turn, prefer to operate solely in the realm of art, therefore they utilize a different aesthetic and rely on other, oftentimes experimental, imagery conventions.¹⁴ Metaphorically speaking, in this case, we are deal-

ing with a “robe of art being draped over the body,” which gives the author a variety of artistic solutions, such as, among others: unreality, deformation, solarization, geometrization, edging towards abstraction or graphics, et cetera (Śnieciński 2013:210). Pornography, as an applied art that serves purely pragmatic goals, should lead to sexual titillation and excitement. This simple, non-exhaustive classification only suggests a possible approach towards that topic and interpretation of photography. In the end, the reception of a photograph is up to the viewer and *there is no such thing as an innocent eye*. The degree of impact and picture-sensitivity is individual to each observer, depending on factors such as “age, experience, libido, professed morals, and even fashion and different cultural traditions” (Ewing 1998:206). In other words, what is obscene and revolting for one, can be erotic and exciting for the other.

The number of erotic and pornographic pictures rose hand over fist with the development of digital photography. Erotic daguerreotypes were few and far between, due to their unique character and high prices. “The models were young, the clients rich, the creators anonymous, and the pictures were viewed mostly in the form of stereograms” (Ewing 1998:23). However, it was already in the 1850s, with the rise of more affordable and mass techniques, including the print, that erotica and pornography became more popular. “The overall number of erotic daguerreotypes was estimated at five thousand, but soon thereafter, in a matter of several decades, pictures were mass-produced” (Ewing 1999:269). Nowadays, it is difficult to ascertain the scale of this phenomenon, but there is no doubt that the invention and popularity of photography led to pornographiza-

¹² See: <https://masculinisation.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/erotica-and-pornography-a-clear-and-present-difference-by-gloria-steinem.pdf>. Retrieved December 07, 2017.

¹³ See: <https://www.widewalls.ch/when-does-erotic-art-turn-into-porn-feature/erotic-art-as-in-art/>. Retrieved December 07, 2017.

¹⁴ These conventions may vary, starting from the delicate, almost pictorial eroticism of David Hamilton, to black-and-white frames of Jeanloup Sieff, more hardcore and provocative ones of Helmut Newton, mannerist compositions of Erwin Olaf, advertisement-inspired pictures by David LaChapelle, ripe works of Jan Saudek, and brooding ones by Joel Peter Witkin, to Nobuyoshi Araki's ones, bordering on pornography. It is but the beginning of a list that could be very long. What links all the aforementioned authors is the fact that in their works “the body ceases to signify only itself—it becomes a carrier of a specific aesthetic, completely overshadowing its presence Here and Now, in a certain history that allows for its existence” (Pilichowski-Regno 2006:48). Another aspect connecting these photographers is their heterosexual field of interest, whereas others, for example, Robert Mapplethorpe, were far more pluralist and provocative in this regard.

tion of the body to an unprecedented degree. It were prostitutes who posed for early pornographic pictures, often hiding their faces, which is a testament to the stigmatizing power of photography. One of the most popular forms of imaging were stereoscopic photographs, producing a three-dimensional effect when viewed with special equipment. In Auguste Belloc's pictures, taken around 1860, the models would cover their faces while exposing their genitals in "gynaecological" poses. It is possible that their resemblance to Courbet's infamous painting, *The Origin of the World*, commissioned in 1866 by a Turkish diplomat, a collector of erotica, is far from random, since Belloc's pictures, requisitioned by the Paris police, are almost identical.

Picture 2. *The Origin of the World*, Gustave Courbet, 1866, Musée d'Orsay in Paris.



In the middle of the 19th century the repertoire of pornographic pictures was already very wide; it catered to a variety of preferences and variants of *ars erotica*. This type of picture rose in popularity

so fast that in the 1865 *Photographic Magazine* quoted by Marek Janczyn and Iwona Świąch (2006:3) it said that pornographic photography is available in every stationery store and photographer's atelier. "In France at the turn of the century there was an entire pornography-producing industry. On offer were nude pictures of men, women, and children in various poses, as well as close-ups of feet and hands" (Ewing 1998:62). It is worth noting that until the end of the 19th century the line between soft erotic images and pornography was not clear-cut, and each photograph depicting nudity could easily enter the pornography-sale circulation. It is beyond a doubt, however, that the gigantic porn business is deeply entrenched in the 19th century processes of capitalizing on erotic art. According to Steve Edwards (2014:99), pornography became "one of the pillars of photographic imagination of the Western society." The power of such images lies in their photographic realism, an alluring illusion of medium transparency, a belief that if something was photographed, it must have existed in front of the lens. A photograph has all the requirements to become a fetish simulating the presence of another person.¹⁵ In the case of pornography, which stimulates real impressions, this is especially important. The illusion of physical proximity, which no other imaging technique could provide, is to a large extent what made pornographic pictures so popular or even massive. Photography has redefined and

¹⁵ Christian Metz, examining the element of fetish in film and photography, came to the conclusion that the former utilizes fetish better, whereas the latter can more easily become one. In his essay on photography and fetish, he writes about employing psychoanalysis for art studies. What he finds still useful in the Freudian concept is an analysis of fetishist nature of male desire, the suspension of disbelief (which is the main factor in representative art) and fetishist pleasure derived from cropping and decropping (Metz 2006:253).

completely changed pornography, made it possible to create pornography-focused social worlds, comprising creators, actors, distributors, and, most importantly, viewers. Initially, creating such photographs was mainly a professional endeavor; professional models would sit for professional photographers, whose pictures were published via specialized channels. Next to professional production, there quickly emerged a phenomenon which could be described as amateur pornographic photography. The scale of this phenomenon was made visible by the rise of the Internet, which created a new means of distribution. Rafał Drozdowski describes amateur pornography as one of the examples of social resistance against dominant imagery. Where lies the “counter-culture” quality of these pictures? According to Drozdowski, there are several decisive factors, and I will present them briefly. Firstly, amateur pornographic photography breaks all formal and technical standards and imaging conventions. An amateur dismisses dominant trends, focusing on the image content. Secondly, these pictures prove that the doors to promiscuity are not open solely for bodies that are attractive and considered normal according to cultural canons. In amateur photography, there is no awkwardness, shame, and, most importantly, guilt about physical imperfection. Thus, stresses Drozdowski, it goes against cultural mainstream with its elaborate beauty propaganda. Thirdly, which is directly connected to the previous point, amateur photography does not link promiscuity with social attractiveness and prestige. Instead, it questions media-generated stereotypes that erotic success goes hand-in-hand with social ones. Another “subversive” aspect of this sort of photogra-

phy is the way it presents women and femininity. A traditional, professional photography is extremely male-centric. From a male perspective, a woman has to submit to specific requirements of body-presentation, surrender herself, and embody the role of an ever-ready sexual slave. Objectifying the woman, turning her into a workout machine has reached its zenith in professional pornography. According to Drozdowski, amateur pornography breaks this scheme and empowers women back. One-sided relations in professional productions of that kind turn into teamwork, where without a woman’s full consent nothing can happen. These characteristics of amateur pornography allow it to deconstruct the scheme and artificiality of professional pornography. Verism is its main advantage. It is supposed to be an answer to a growing need for authenticity in a world defined by media productions, which deviate further and further from the “real life.” To sum it up, Drozdowski points out that amateur pornography can be considered part of a larger trend: seeking authenticity, which stems from the desire to experience images unmediated by conventions and various ideologies. It is a desire to get an account from a direct, involved witness (Drozdowski 2009:63-68). However, the question remains to what extent the emancipatory and “counter-culture” role of amateur photography is a valid hypothesis. I do not mean the validity of the argument, as the argumentation seems convincing, but rather the faith in the power of social influence pornography of that kind may possess. Do “home-made” erotic pictures really shape the notions of sexuality, or is it rather due to other factors, with a larger field of fire and aptitude for influencing mass fantasy? On

the other side of the fence, there is the still-thriving porn-business, whose impact can be seen, for instance, in the pornographing of the advertising and eroticizing mass media (Berger 1997; Olechnicki 2005; Schroeder and McDonagh 2006; Mace 2012¹⁶). To say that the language of advertising is seeped in eroticism is an understatement. In turn, advertisement, which has a strong impact on modern iconosphere, influences the ways of defining the body and sexuality. It eagerly employs evidently pornographic stylistics. In their advertising work, photographers such as Steven Klein, Tony Kelly, Terry Richardson, or Mario Testino border on the pornographic production convention. Certainly, we could call it camp play, but images of that kind seem to influence mass imagination much stronger than private pornography. Take the

Dolce & Gabbana advertisement which aestheticized gang rape, caused much controversy, but, of course, failed to stop that trend. As a consequence of universal aestheticization described by Wolfgang Iser (1999:11), more and more elements of reality become an aesthetic construct. What pre-

vails in the so-called surface aestheticization is hedonism, as a new cultural matrix in which pleasure and entertainment have become guidelines for the society of consumerism and leisure. Dolce & Gabbana merely slightly pushed the borders, jumping on the dominant popular culture bandwagon, known as porno-chic.

Picture 3. The Dolce & Gabbana 2007 advertisement.¹⁷



Another testament to the dominant role of advertisement in contemporary culture is the autoerotic “selfie,” which abounds on the Internet. Photography theory of today studies the selfie phenomenon with increasing frequency. A “selfie” is a self-made single or group self-portrait, uploaded to social media. About a million pictures of that

¹⁶ See: https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/34423669/THESIS.doc.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYG-Z2Y53UL3A&Expires=1512676161&Signature=aUmbiMm3Nb%2F0ESZbWVSQqquxoh0%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DFASHION_OR_PORN_THE_HYPER-SEXUALIZATION.pdf. Retrieved December 07, 2017.

¹⁷ See: <https://lbottino.com/2017/11/27/sexism-outdoor-advertising/>. Retrieved April 18, 2018.

kind are estimated to be taken daily.¹⁸ About 30% of the pictures taken by people aged 18-24 are selfies.¹⁹ We can consider them one of the symptoms of the new global communication in which “the standard element of the daily life of millions—its starting point—...is producing and playing out one’s own ‘image’” (Mirzoeff 2016:83). According to Steven Edwards, the old paradigm of photography relied on documentalism (belief in reflection and representation of reality), whereas the mode prevalent today, which sets the tone and character, became advertisement. One need hardly elaborate what images are provided by this type of visual production, but its consequences cannot be overlooked. Even the selfie is to some extent a result of a purely advertising strategy: “broadcast yourself.” The way selfie authors style themselves aptly shows how much we absorbed from the language of contemporary advertisement, how thoroughly it has shaped our vision of beauty, attraction, and happiness. The role of photography in socializing processes cannot be underappreciated. In the world of offers and products, it is extremely easy to assume their own ways of distribution and promotion and use them as one’s own. Social media seem to corroborate that. And the selfie can be treated as a cultural syndrome, which shows how marketing strategy became an ever-present technique for creating one’s identity by presenting attractive physical appearance. It also shows a new trend in the process of visual redefining of the body, a new relation between sexuality and photography.

Picture 4 and 5.^{20, 21} Typical selfies with erotic connotations and mock-advertising stylistics.



¹⁸ See: <http://stylecaster.com/beauty/selfies-infographic/>. Retrieved February 10, 2017.

¹⁹ See: <http://all-that-is-interesting.com/selfie-deaths>. Retrieved April 18, 2018.

²⁰ See: <https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/x-f-sit7U5wsy3wW-cCriKqcWJOZ72eypjXCJUAPWCIRJahBr0b8u1kU8Q1VejwN-pllOuhw=s87>. Retrieved April 18, 2018.

²¹ See: <https://twitter.com/svetabiyy/status/808205588559581184>. Retrieved April 18, 2018.

The number of autoerotic selfies shows the power of this trend, attesting to the deep internalizing of visual codes of advertising. The Internet provides a staggering number of such images, copying the dominant trends to a varied extent. These pictures hark back to advertising aesthetics and fashion photography, which in turn succumbed to the aesthetics of erotic photography. It is worth mentioning that a selfie is a contemporary continuation of the long self-portrait tradition, including the erotic one. A great number of such pictures can be found in photographic archives. The one taken by Dávid Sándor comes from the Fortepan Internet archive.

Picture 6. Dávid Sándor, Hungary, 1967 (FORTEPAN©2010-2014) under Creative Commons CC-BY-SA-3.0 license.



Access to pornographic data is easy, fast, and cheap thanks to the Internet. Circulating freely in specific channels of distribution, it remains safely “hidden,” but raises eyebrows when it is extracted from its usual context. Probably that is why a series of works by Thomas Ruff, entitled *Nudes*, caused such a commotion, or rather kind of institutional resistance or even censorship, like in the case of the Center of Modern Art in Warsaw. The German artist digitally transformed pictures downloaded from pornographic sites. The idea for this cycle came during his research of Internet data concerning nudity in photography.

Googling it, what we get is Helmut Newton and Peter Lindbergh. Their 19th century-like, heterosexual pictures of pretty women by the lake to me seemed boring. Looking further, I chanced upon pornographic websites. The pictures there were far more honest than artistic nude photographs, because they were concrete. People have certain needs and need to fulfill them...My aim was to present a full range of sexual practices and desires in a most democratic way, that is from heterosexuality to homosexuality, to fetishism, et cetera.²²

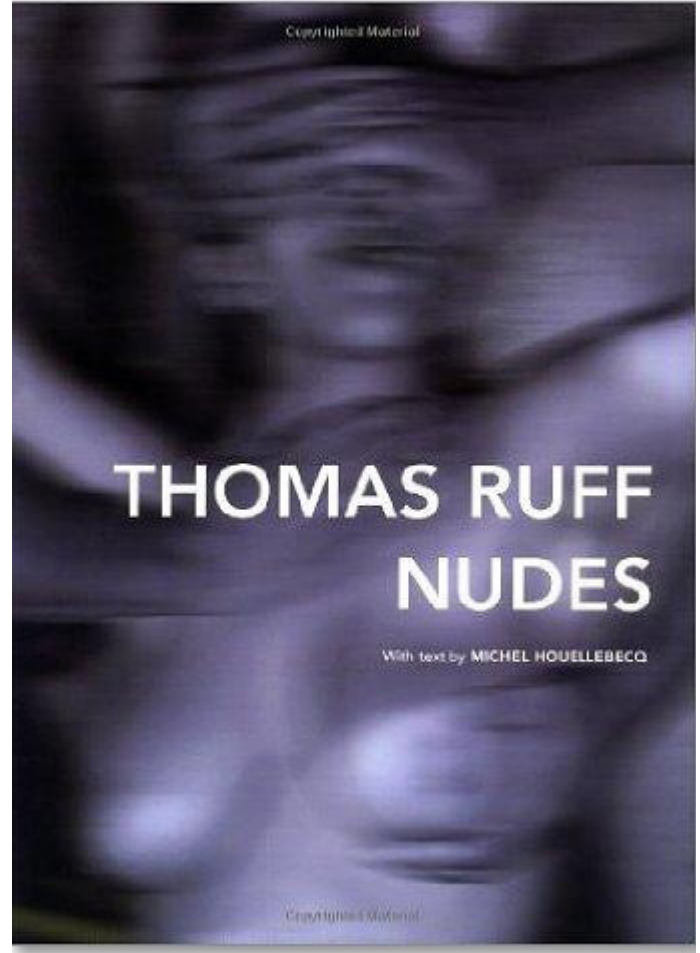
His creation is far more ambiguous and complicated than it might seem. It calls for a response and is certainly not a mere provocation. First of all, Ruff takes a stance in the debate on the nude, one of the greatest topoi in visual arts. The prevailing pictures taken by the “great masters” of the genre indeed present a mainly heterosexual

²² Interview with Thomas Ruff. See: <http://www.vice.com/pl/read/bez-usmiechu-prosze-fotografia-mnie-nie-interesuje-mowi-fotograf-thomas-ruff>. Retrieved January 20, 2017.

point of view, male fantasies, and ways of understanding the erotic. Simultaneously, emphasizes Ruff, they are profoundly conventionalized. They reflect a vision that has usually nothing to do with real sexual practices. On this understanding, the artist speaks of the “honesty” of photography. This cycle pertains to yet another issue. The Internet became an ideal meeting point for exhibitionism and voyeurism. Thanks to the network, these desires can be fulfilled with a heretofore-unknown ease. It is a mass phenomenon, which can no longer be marginalized. A spectacular exhibition and a concurrent album draw attention to this matter. Last but not least, Ruff’s project is also a perception experiment. Thanks to a number of digital processes, usually uninteresting and crude pornographic snapshots were transformed into highly aesthetic images, truly artistic and intriguing.²³ “Ruff shows more than the moment when something becomes art. He uncovers the mechanism in which the reception of a photograph as a work of art is forced upon a viewer” (Pustola 2004:203). His processed pornography was exhibited in many museums and galleries, but when the Warsaw Center of Modern Art presented a huge, retrospective exhibition of Ruff’s works at the break of 2003/2004, this cycle was missing.

²³ Perhaps the very intrigue that we feel when viewing them is what is so disconcerting about them; and perhaps this feeling speaks more about us, the viewers, than the characters in the pictures. Thomas Ruff’s project is undoubtedly provocative, subverting the order, playing with the conventions, and being very successful at that, as attested by exhibitions in the world’s most prestigious galleries, like Tate Modern in London, Museum of Modern Art in New York, Art Biennale in Venice, and numerous publications.

Picture 7. Cover of Thomas Ruff’s album with a text by Michel Houellebecq, Abrams Books, 2003.



Towards Documentary: Photographic Stories about Sex Workers

Photography has fuelled pornography, laying foundations for a massive and lucrative business. From the onset, photo sessions of that kind involved people related to the sex industry. These were usually prostitutes, unemployed actors, models, and other male and female sex industry workers. Such photographs are notorious for their downright industrial repetitiveness, formulaicity, and artifice, thus rendering Ruff’s argument about “honesty” of pho-

tography an overstatement. On the one hand, photography has propelled the pornographic industry, on the other—many artists expose its tragic nature. There have been many such projects in the history of photography. Some of them have been romantic and humanist in convention, others took the shape of intervention features. An example of the former could be *Paris de nuit* by Gyula Hálás, better known as Brassai, an album published first in 1933. In the 62 photographs depicting the city by night, next to landscapes, sleeping tramps, bicycle police patrols, we can also see kissing couples, prostitutes, and the entrance to “Chez Suzy” brothel. All this is still pretty vanilla, though. He uncovered much more in his second album, *Le Paris Secret des Années 30*, published in 1976. What he merely suggested before became fully uncovered. It is not just the silhouettes of Parisian prostitutes, standing in the archways and street corners; it is a bold reportage on the city’s sex life. He documented thriving jazz clubs, naked parties, portrayed semi-nude women waiting for their clients, visited by-the-hour hotels rented by lovers, immortalized ecstatic romps at Montparnasse, and opium dens. Still, his reportage remains humanist; it is a kind of homage the great photographer pays to his own city. Mary Ellen Mark shows different stylistics and an approach to the subject in her *Falkland Road* cycle. Pictures taken in Bombay between 1978 and 1979 show the life of prostitutes, the youngest of which were then 11 years old. The album, published three years later, contains an introduction describing, among others, strong personal relations the photographer forged with her subjects. “Like most countries, India has fancy brothels and expensive call girls. But the pictures in this book were taken on a street in Bombay

where the less expensive prostitutes live and work, an area famous for the cage-like houses in which some of the women live.”²⁴ Every photograph has a caption, which turns the series into a photo-essay. A juxtaposition of incredibly intense, colorful pictures with a short, often-laconic text magnifies the impact of these photographs. Many is the time Mark lets her heroines speak. They tell a story of their lives and how they found themselves in Falkland Road. Many were sold or kidnapped and forced to prostitution. Others, rejected by their communities or husbands, found a safe haven there. However, the price they have to pay is very high, and the safety is short lasting. All the women living there experience various forms of violence and rejection. Paradoxically though, they also enjoy a certain independence from the traditional, patriarchal caste system. It applies especially to transvestites, who find there a certain refuge. However, when 15 years later Mary Ellen Mark came back to Bombay with her husband, John Irving, she noticed that the living conditions of the Falkland Road prostitutes deteriorated, and it were pimps, drugs, and AIDS that reigned supreme.

A prostitute’s body has always fallen prey to stigmatization, but has also been constantly subjected to dangers such as disease and all forms of violence. There is a long history of stigmatization and social exclusion of prostitutes. In medieval France, prostitutes had their hair dyed yellow, in England it was shaved off, in Soviet Russia they were deported to gulags. A list of such examples could go on forever.

²⁴ Fragment of the *Falkland Road. Prostitutes of Bombay*, introduction published in 1981. All the pictures from this album are available at her website. See: http://www.maryellenmark.com/books/titles/falkland_road/300D-002-032_falkrd_520.html. Retrieved February 16, 2017.

A prostitute represents all the fears of a community: lawlessness, chaos, sickness, and uncleanness. Yet, it does not change the fact that the profession still exists and nothing suggests it could change. The figure of a prostitute is not without its ambiguity though, and it inspires extreme emotions: repulsion for some, fascination for others. In art, the figure of a courtesan, prostitute, and whore is present since times immemorial. 19th-century artistic Paris has discovered the exotic and the allure of brothels, and introduced its inhabitants to literature and painting. However, what in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's pictures looks innocent and alluring could be completely different in reality. Photography can divest prostitution of the aura of mystery and show its backstage, force a different perspective, not only more critical, but also reflective. One of such projects is *Ladies of Love* by Hubert Humka. The cycle of photos taken in brothels and so-called "love hotels" was conceived in 2015-2016.

Ladies of Love is a story about intertwined narratives of love, work, passion, solitude...Its heroines are nameless strippers, prostitutes, and porn stars, living day and night in the architecture of love. The background of their story comprises garish, darkness-devouring neon lights, gaudy interiors, and kitschy costumes. This world is not new; it's old and well-known. It's always somewhere out there, round a corner, in a neighboring district, next to the train station. It's attracting, hypnotizing, and deceiving us with colorful packaging, promising the world to us. Pictures in this story are both purely voyeuristic and portrait-like, depicting the way people captured in them appeared before the lens. The pictures are interspersed with text fragments, stories, and sentences that stuck in the

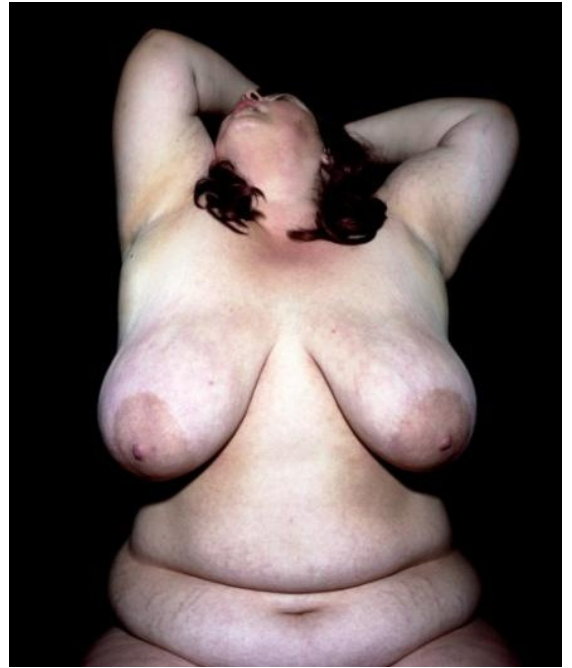
mind. This project is not a documentary presentation of specific people, places or times; rather it's a general story, which by means of image and text lets the viewer weave his or her own stories, generate individual emotions. Let this story fulfill the fantasy of being a spy in a house of love.²⁵

The author made use of documentary imaging convention, which, however, took the contemporary "glamour" shape. Humka's works formally resemble perfectly rendered pictures in lifestyle magazines. They are also much better quality than your average pornographic production, but above all it is difficult to view them through an evidently erotic lens. People photographed by him are presenting their bodies, which are their work tools, but that does not mean they present themselves. Window dressing is the essence of pornography, which is clearly visible in Humka's pictures, as they do not moralize, do not judge, and do not brutalize the message. Instead, they play with convention, leaving it up to the viewer to make up his/her mind.

There are also many other stories about sex workers, which use different stylistics and aim at different goals. The last project I would like to mention is *No Man's Land* by Mishka Henner. This cycle consists of pictures downloaded from Google Street View, showing European suburbs, where prostitutes work. Each picture includes a caption, stating the number of the road and town where the image comes from. Henner's project takes on a new trend of Internet photography and a completely different concept of being a photographer. The net becomes

²⁵ Text courtesy by the artist; written and made available for the purposes of this article.

Pictures 8, 9, 10, 11. Hubert Humka, pictures from the *Ladies of Love* cycle.



a search area; and for a photographer Google Street View can be as good a place as any. Yet, even more important is the theme itself. One of Henner's goals is exposing what has already been registered.²⁶

²⁶ See: <http://circulationexchange.org/articles/nomansland.html>. Retrieved December 15, 2017.

This very process of making things visible seems the key, connecting all the above-described, widely disparate projects. By actions such as these photography reclaims the ability to address the problem of pornography and sex business, even if only potential and hypothetical. These forays to the other

side of the mirror do not show us mysterious lands but rather a world of abuse, violence, loneliness, and empty glamour, as evidenced by the photographers I mentioned.

Conclusion

In spite of an easy access to erotic films and photographs, although our iconosphere is overflowing with such content, nude bodies continue to evoke ambivalent attitudes. Ambivalent attitudes towards representations of that sort reflect profound tensions in the body-culture relations. Photography and film are very interesting study subjects in this respect, as they touch upon the very core of this conflict, and even keep aggravating it, stirring controversy and provocation.

Photographers are fully aware that in their artistic endeavors they can find themselves in the heart of a battle anytime. Suffice it to mention stormy controversies brought about in the recent years by pictures of Robert Mapplethorpe, Sally Mann, Jock Sturges, or Andres Serrano—works transcending a conventional image of the body. Especially matters concerning sex cause a violent uproar of emotions. [Ewing 1998:10]

It is not a coincidence that Ewing enumerated names of several well-known artists, but failed to mention pornographic photography. The latter, until it stays in specifically designated channels of distribution, until it circulates underground and does not surface, until, in other words, it operates in its own domain, it remains outside the official discourse of visual arts. It is not until gestures such as the ones made by Thomas Ruff, Mishka Henner, Mary Ellen

Mark, or Hubert Humka that a signal for a discussion is given, often a very tumultuous one. For this obvious reason the artists have a vital social role—of not only pointing out a problem but also giving it shape that can be presented in official circulation. Analyzing the ways of photographing nudity and erotica is a necessary complement to the sociology of the body. Photographs not only illustrate changing rules of nudity but also provoke these changes. It is therefore crucial to watch closely mutual relations of bodies and their images. According to Erving Goffman's theory, we are all used to specific idioms of using the body in social interactions. These idioms function also when taking pictures. That is why Goffman (2012:297) writes, "a photograph doesn't show us then, how a model could pose in front of a camera but rather how she could 'pose' in public." Pictures, even the ones showing intimate situations, are highly conventionalized. It does not apply to all photographs but a great many. To see it, it is enough to take a look at an Internet portal for photography aficionados, *plfoto*,²⁷ or any other website of that type. Among its many galleries that users can upload their pictures to, one of them is devoted to the nude. Even a quick perusal allows one to spot these constantly repeated idioms of presenting the body, exhibited by both sides creating these pictures: models and photographers. It actually resembles a ritual recreation of set choreographies.

To conclude, it is worth posing a question what does the staggering number of erotic photography denote? Is it a testament to society's fixation? Does it reflect the intensity of sexual practices of a con-

²⁷ See: <http://plfoto.com/galeria,akt,0.html>. Retrieved February 19, 2017.

temporary Western society? Or, perhaps quite the opposite, does it expose a certain absence, loss, disparity between desire and real practices? According to Michel Foucault, our civilization does not have any *ars erotica*, but only *scientia sexualis*, whose task is to produce truth about sex, based on knowledge, power, and confession. For Foucault, religion is one of the most basic ways of efficient truth-production. "Western man has become a confessing animal" (Foucault 1978:59). Confession plays part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relationships. It has also become a matrix for a real sex discourse. Creating sexual discourse became an

obsession of our civilization, and its main pleasure is the pleasure of analysis and a constant production of truth about sex. Pictures showing naked bodies for the purposes of medical, anthropological, artistic, and popular-science discourse participate in this process. The number of constantly multiplied, never-ending, look-alike, photographic images seems to corroborate the theories of the French philosopher. Foucault does not negate, however, that the Western *scientia sexualis* can be a specific form of *ars erotica*, in which a technically registered image has been playing a vital role, from the middle of the 19th century until this day.

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