

Naked

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2009



Naaktgeboren -Born Naked- is a surname that exists in the Netherlands. But could any name be more of a commonplace? We are all born naked, after all. Staying naked, on the other hand, only happens very rarely. And that has everything to do with the repression caused by what we call culture. Young humans, like the young of many animals, are born vulnerable and in need of protection. Almost all the higher species of animals have nests for this purpose, but humans swaddle their young in their nests in a way that no other animal does. Why a baby really needs to wear clothes in our permanently heated houses has always been a mystery to me. The benefit to the economy (baby clothes, cradles, prams) and the corresponding ecological disaster (tons of nappies) do indeed speak for themselves... So where does this nonsense come from? As if babies couldn't live, crawl around and sleep on the floor, protected but naked. One thing is certain: they would no longer be able to fall. I

suspect that cot death would be less likely too, although I am certainly not in a position to discuss this with any authority. In Japan, at any rate, there are schools which children only attend naked and where the classrooms are never heated. I have never heard of it causing any harm whatsoever.

The Greeks had a culture in which physicality played an important role. It is well known that sports were only practiced naked. Let's not forget that the word gymnastics is derived from the Greek 'gymnos,' meaning naked, something no one would ever have dared point out to us at secondary school.¹ Dancing was done naked as well, although it is common knowledge that this was mainly a male affair in ancient Greece.

The taboo on nakedness in western civilization is an odd thing, after all, which is rooted in the Jewish Old Testament, where Adam and Eve (created in the year 4004 before the birth of Christ...) ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge and suddenly came to the startling conclusion that they were naked. Why they then felt ashamed of this nakedness is not given any further explanation in the Old Testament itself. Neither is there any explanation of where they found the covering for their nakedness, later called clothing. (And where on earth did Tarzan get his underpants, for that matter?). In the earthly paradise, Adam and Eve evidently lived as completely sexless beings. In any case, they had no children and their existence in paradise was most certainly sexless. Otherwise Eve would surely have given birth painlessly to a large number of children.² It is only after they are banished from the earthly paradise that Eve has to suffer pain in childbirth. This is a punishment from God for the Fall: the human instinct to seek knowledge. Clearly, therefore, this shame was an essential component of explaining the attraction between men and women and the resulting sexual intercourse required to become pregnant and give birth in pain. In fact the foundations of pornography – the revealing of shame with the intention to cause sexual stimulation³ – are thus part of the fabric of the Torah itself and a direct invention of the Jewish god of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the old testament). God clearly punishes humanity with sex. Yahweh did not create humanity, but he did create pornography. Even if Yahweh himself is clearly an arrogant human invention, the creation of the Jewish people at that time.

The human body and its sexual organs in particular became sinful and hence loaded with taboo. The depth to which this is rooted in our culture is made abundantly clear by the ritual in which many men wash their hands after peeing. Actually – from a strictly medical perspective – it should be the other way round. Our hands touch far more 'dirtiness' than our penises. The chance of getting a penis infection from dirty hands is surely far greater than the other way round. After all, you do not just go round sticking your penis into anything, but you do touch all sorts of things with your fingers. The only meaning of the ritual of washing your hands after peeing, then, is to confront us constantly with the dirtiness and sinfulness of our physicality. The German writer Charlotte Roche has presented us with satisfyingly norm-breaking work in this area with her controversial novel 'Feuchtgebiete' (translated into English as 'Wetlands'), despite her tendency towards a certain exaggeration.

When we try to track down condemnations of nakedness in the New Testament, they are in fact – except for references to Genesis – nowhere to be found. Not even from Paul, who is otherwise vehement in his condemnation of physical lusts and of women, and who is incidentally at the root of the obligation for women to cover their heads, later generalised in Islam. (In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul orders women to cover their heads and keep their mouths shut in church). Where nakedness is mentioned in the New Testament, it is always a question of lacking protection against the elements. Clothing the naked, as an act of

charity, has nothing to do with covering shame and everything to do with an obligation to care for and protect one's fellow humans. Jos Van Ussel explicitly pointed out to us, among other things, that throughout the 'Christian' Middle Ages and certainly into the sixteenth century, nakedness was not taboo anyway. Bathing was always done naked, sometimes in a group, and even using the toilet was not something one did in concealed solitude. Van Ussel has more to say on this matter in his 'Geschiedenis van het seksuele probleem.'^{4, 5}

In the Koran, however, the taboos were pushed to the limit, at least for women. The latter were enjoined to conceal their beauty (that we may well understand as nakedness) from anyone except their family members, including parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, children and relatives within the household. The insanity of the taboo reaches its peak in the image presented of heaven, where bodies are draped in costly robes and seated on thrones. Who could wish for a paradise like that, for heaven's sake, even with a constant supply of new virgin houris available to the men... We have collected the suras of the Koran that deal with this in a previous essay, 'The Koran, critically and correctly.' ([dutch text](#))

In any case, with respect to our subject here, the Enlightenment did not so much serve to put an end to the taboos surrounding nakedness – since they only arose in the nineteenth century – but rather to deal with the threats made against libertines, many of whom were also radical atheists. The emergence of critical reason had indeed undermined the foundations of the social order, and primarily the sacrament of marriage. It was a sacrament of the Catholic Church, conceived to repress the free experience of desires and the formation of relationships. It was better to marry than to burn eternally, if you could not free yourself from lust. The shackles of marriage were the price that had to be paid. The foundations of 'virtue' began to slide.⁶ And yet that virtue had little to do with nakedness: it was all about sexuality and sexual promiscuity. This is the light in which we should understand the liberating literature of the Marquis De Sade.

Even when we read Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau with this in mind, we hardly encounter a single taboo. On the contrary: their writings radiate more of a glorification of the natural – i.e. naked and liberated – life, even if we see a trend in the course of the eighteenth century towards increasing prudishness on the moral high ground of the upper middle classes.

It is only with Romanticism – the period of concealment and the religion of history – that the taboo surrounding nakedness really takes hold. In the nineteenth century, the basis was laid for banishing the sexual to the entirely private sphere along with everything that had to do with physicality and nakedness. In certain Victorian salons even the legs of grand pianos were covered with skirts just to be perfectly sure not to arouse any erotic associations. Likewise in England, laws were made to make certain sexual acts illegal (anal sex, for example) as well as 'unnatural' behaviour such as homosexuality. Double moral standards and hypocrisy blew up to a size never seen before. However this was also the golden age of Jewish pornography. The Old Testament took revenge in its turn and, superficially, returned to power. Capitalism emerged. The forbidden turned out to be a prime example of profitable merchandise. The discovery of hygiene, somewhat later in the nineteenth century, was exploited with great eagerness to provide 'scientific' support for the idea of the physical and particularly the sexual as infected and dirty.

Long into the twentieth century, nakedness was condemned from the pulpit as 'as shameless as the devil himself,' or more strongly still, as the 'summit of human rebellion

against god.’⁷

Unhealthy paradigmatic dualism (body-mind) lay at the root of the ‘discovery’ by psychoanalysts (Freud & co.) by which the facts of humanity and nature were suddenly brought back to the surface after a century of artificial repression. It could have happened no other way than by means of several highly dubious intellectual constructs such as the ‘subconscious,’ through which taboos could after all be given a certain level of social acceptance. Porn became art again. Egon Schiele became acceptable. Courbet’s *L’origine du monde* – fitted with a curtain – was hailed quite simply as a work of genius. Founded on a ‘scientific’ theory of dream and fantasy, Surrealism could flirt freely with nakedness and – preferably repressed – sexuality. We cannot avoid the fact that the very act of making nakedness taboo increased its erotic thrill, or even made it erotic in the first place. Prudishness gave birth to the striptease.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, nonetheless, there was a change for the better: the naturism movement emerged from an idea of closeness to nature and physical health through sport, movement and exposure to light and air. The cult of the healthy body – the Monboddobund, a naturist organisation, was founded in Berlin in 1913 – was taken over much later by the new regime and contaminated naturism with the same poison as that which turned the idea of eugenics, in itself absolutely positive, into an absolute taboo. (Onfray⁸). A ‘verboten’ sign hangs over Leni Riefenstahl’s head, although in all objectivity she was one of the very best photographers of the twentieth century. Anyone who cannot consider her photo series on Africa as reaching the heights of beauty has simply been blighted by the rot of the old testament or the koran. The silent film *‘Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit’*, produced by the UFA-Kulturfilmabteilung, documented the rise of the Freikörperkultur (FKK) in the first decades of the twentieth century. Under the dualistic motto *‘Mens sana in corpore sano’* a genuine hype blew up around the pure, perfect and, in particular, naked body in its return to nature. Naked gymnastics, wrestling and bathing in the open air according to ancient tradition was supposed to inspire healthy competitiveness and discipline in a socially accepted context. And what in heaven’s name was wrong with that? We have already mentioned that the word ‘gymnastics’ is derived from the Greek word *gymnos*, meaning naked. Although it was originally intended as educational material, *‘Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit’* as the first feature-length film with full frontal nudity became immensely popular with a wider public. Nowadays the imposing FKK iconography is completely unfairly associated with fascist ideology, partly thanks to the probable (but never officially confirmed) appearance of Leni Riefenstahl in the film. She sparkles in a parade of sculpted gods and goddesses (most of whom are borrowed from Greek antiquity) along with dancers from choreographer Mary Wigman’s company and ‘king of the jungle’ Johnny Weissmüller.⁹

The extremely profitable dogma of the holocaust¹⁰ has succeeded in compromising nudism, if not rendering it taboo far into the twentieth century. The link might not be immediately clear to the reader, but is immediately apparent upon reading the thousands of testimonies by holocaust victims: they consistently speak of nakedness as the ultimate humiliation that can be inflicted on a human being. Very recently I got extremely annoyed by *‘Omega Minor,’* (an otherwise particularly well-written novel, ornamented with very beautiful erotic passages) by Paul Verhaeghen – a man younger than myself, please note, and so certainly not an eyewitness – in which precisely this naked inspection of the victims is seen as the ultimate humiliation. The mistake here is that the humiliation is not in the nakedness itself, but in the fact of being forced. Being forced into something is always humiliating, whether it be nudity or eating pork or young carrots... Seeing the humiliation in

the nudity itself is totally inconsistent, because if you want to check a group of people for weapons, disrobing them completely is the only adequate solution. Which is why I have already pleaded for the scrapping of all security checks at airports and instead only accepting naked passengers. Naked Air, the only safe airline...

One of the best antidotes to this type of vicious reasoning that assumes that human honour is infringed upon by nakedness are the many magnificent series of photos by Spencer Tunick, in which large groups of people are staged naked in public places.¹¹ This is as liberating as Judeo-Christianity, and Islam of course, are frustrating and repressive.





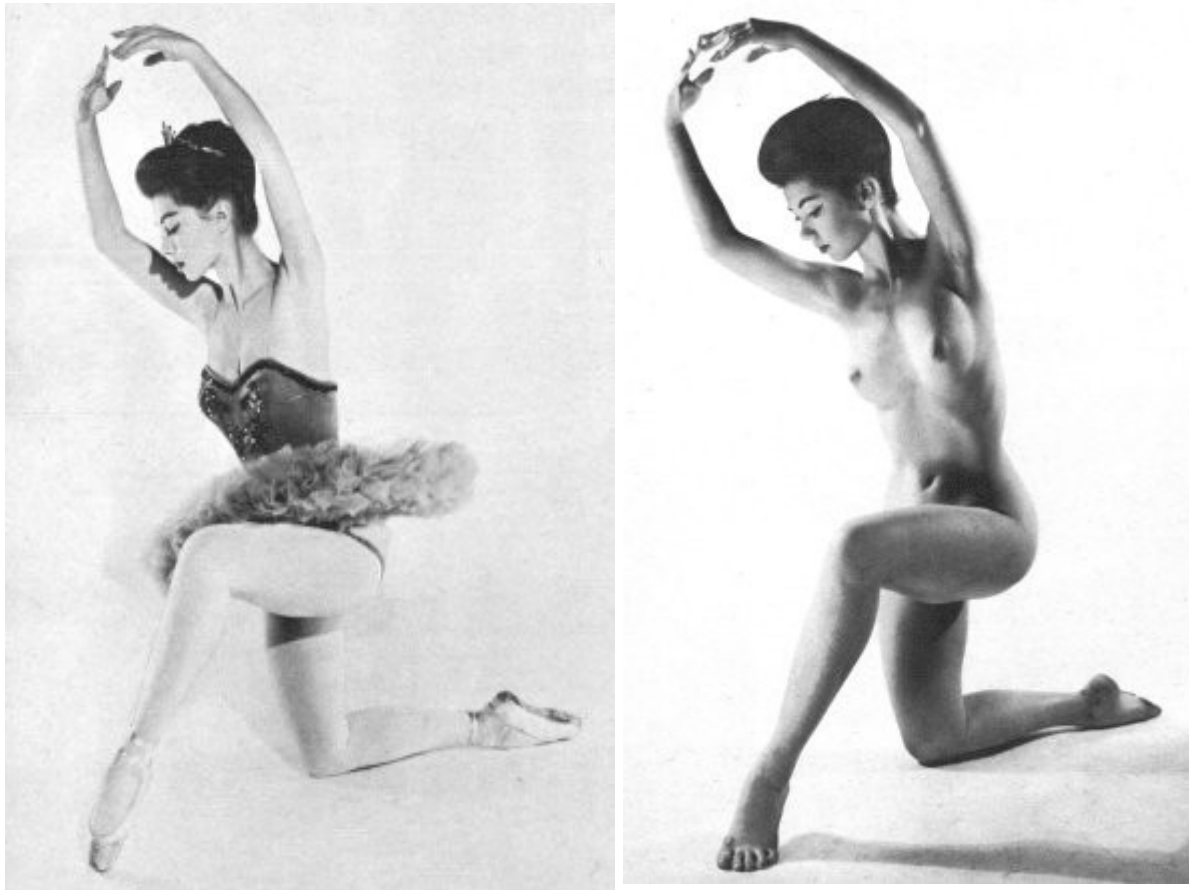


The emancipation of nakedness and sexuality – and the link between them is absolutely not an obvious one, since the FKK and naturism movement tends to take the attitude of ignoring sexuality somewhat – gained considerable impetus in the 1960s: the flower power movement, hippies, the kabouters, dolle mina, Woodstock, the NVSH, ideologically partly supported by the work of Margaret Mead, Jos Van Ussel, Van Emde, Boas etc. It was no longer limited to the relatively closed and discreetly active naturist clubs or the saunas that were springing up everywhere like mushrooms.

In theatres, the introduction of nudity was initially met with hard-line repression, in Belgium mainly initiated by socialist ministers supported by a heavily Catholic-inspired legal apparatus: we still clearly remember the trial of Hugo Claus' 'Masscheroen' production, which presented the holy trinity as three naked men. Yet the tide could no longer be turned, and by the beginning of the 1970s there was no longer any difficulty with presenting nakedness on stage. The obviousness of nakedness in dance is no longer opposed against all odds: the body's motor system is after all the subject of all dance as an art form. All clothed dance is concealment and, in fact, striptease in disguise. Clothed dance, including ballet, actually belongs in the opera, cabaret and bordello, different faces of the same coin. 'Artistic' stage nudity today does not always have an equally emancipatory intent, however. On the contrary, it can also serve to bring old values sharply to the fore and put them in the spotlight. Nakedness in the work of Jan Fabre, for example, does seem to be rooted in baroque patterns of thought. The emphasis on the transformation of the body through pain has much in common with baroque exultation. We believe that the same indication applies to the work of Abramovic where it is paired with self-mutilation. This is blatantly clear with Hermann Nitsch as well. But let us not forget that in these performances and theatre plays, the image – the nude – carries a clear semantic and symbolic meaning. The body is used as a reference.

It is only when we step into the world of dance that the body gains a more abstract meaning. The expression of the moving body does not arise out of any semantic reference, but is based on the mimetic interpretation of form and the course of energy over time. In this sense dance is far more closely related to music-making than to theatre or visual art.

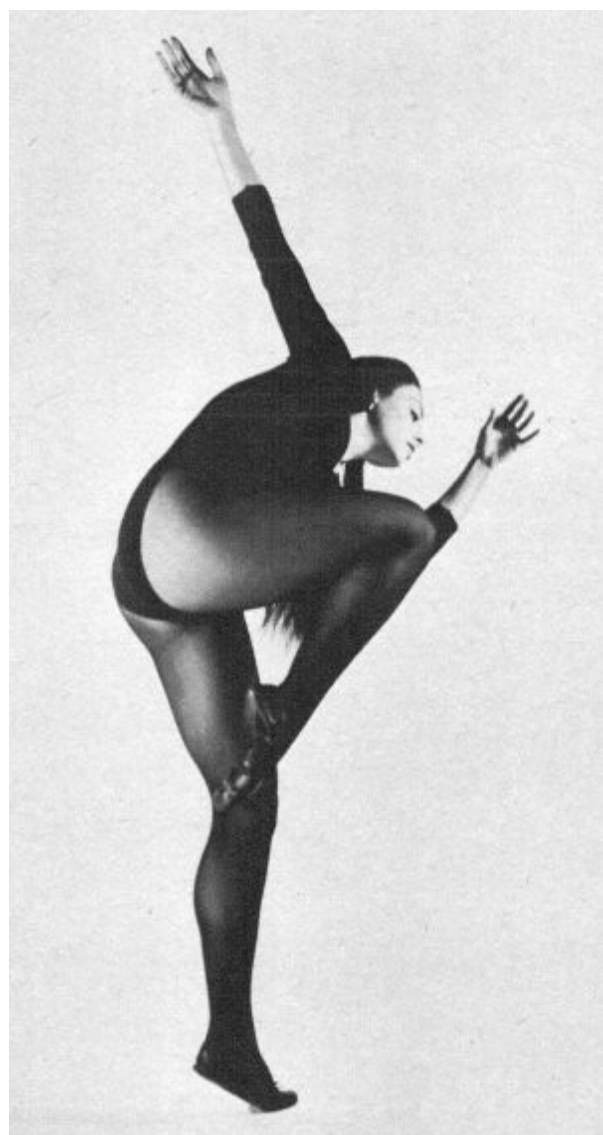
One of the first publications we found in which persuasive visual material is presented to support the standpoint – which is all but self-evident today – that dance is greatly improved by being practiced entirely naked, was 'Salon Photography,' a photo book from 1962 with an article by Peter Basch.¹²



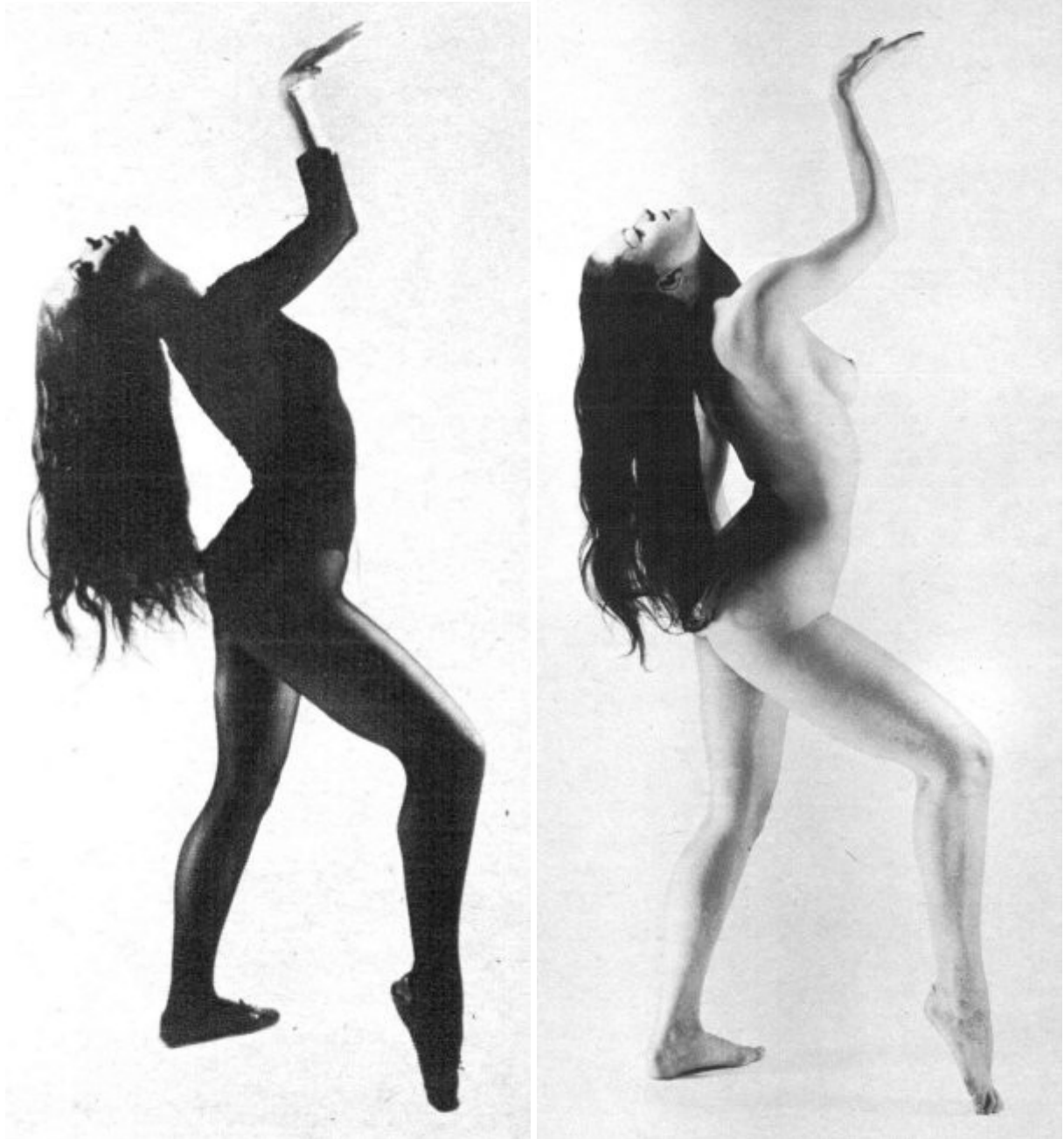
The same dancer is photographed twice each time, in the same dance position. Once in a kitsch nineteenth-century style costume and once simply naked.



But even without the tutus, when a normal tight leotard is worn, the expressive superiority of the completely naked body is clear.







In these confrontations, the clothed photos come across not as merely prudish and hypocritical (i.e. pornographic...) but downright ridiculous. Only the naked photos allow the expressive locomotion of the body to show through.

Of all the artistic dance forms I know well, the originally Japanese form *butoh* is probably the one that corresponds best to a very direct, non-narrative, physically expressive movement. *Butoh* uses the whole body, including mimicry, and is essentially performed naked. As this dance form began to gain a following in Europe and North America, it did become somewhat polluted and bowdlerised by the addition of props and pointless pieces of fabric.¹³



Butoh almost always has a somewhat cruel, twisted side. The choice of hard locations – very often in the open air – where a sharp contrast with the environment can be used contributes to this. However this twistedness is not rooted in baroque and deeply Christian symbolism, because given its Japanese origins it is not affected by the same unhealthy obsession with shame and sinfulness. Japanese culture is far less anti-physical than ours.

But the trend towards a more open and tolerant attitude towards nakedness could of course not remain limited to the performing arts and the artists who operate within that sphere. Gradually the taboos began to crumble among the wider public as well. After many campaigns by progressives who lacked the taboos surrounding original sin, public nudist beaches and parks were founded all across the civilised world. We have participated ourselves in countless campaigns and happenings in Flanders and the Netherlands to bring this about. What is more, we ended up with our own criminal record and a conviction for public indecency in the presence of minors for this very reason. We consider it an honorary title and are proud of it. Incidentally, nobody after us was ever convicted on the basis of similar actions – or even far more extreme ones. Even the cases brought by the police against people for having sex in public have since all been dropped. A turn for the better.



What are we supposed to think, though, about a culture where fighting in public is not only tolerated but even ritually, institutionally and financially encouraged (as is the case in sports such as football, wrestling, boxing etc.) whereas making love in public could result in prosecution?

The enormous successes enjoyed by Spencer Tunick, particularly in Europe, to judge by the absolutely massive turnout of volunteers for all his collective nude photos, are evidence of a general change for the better. The United States of America are limping hopelessly behind us: there are hardly even any nude beaches there and puritanism is ubiquitous. There is a reason why America the only civilized nation in the world that prints religious propaganda on all its banknotes: In God We Trust...

Physicality in music.

All musical instruments are played using the motor capacities of the body. Their acoustic sound production is a result of pressure, force and speed exercised on the instruments and playthings by our muscles within a clearly defined space and position. Musical instruments are extensions of our physicality and in this sense they are also directly a type of prosthesis.

The physical and motor aspect of music-making, and the expressive gesture derived from it, are inherent to making music.

Recent discoveries in systematic musicology have demonstrated that listening to music also implies a high level of physical involvement, or 'embodiment'. We believe that this is based on an ability to imagine making movements similar to those that may have led to the production of the music one is listening to. Of course the physical behaviour of listening and that of producing music are absolutely not the same. However it is so that listening induces movements which, hypothetically and on the basis of experience, could be behind the production of the sounds. The embodied listening experience becomes a mimetic metaphor in the imagination, but one where a clear link to physical expression is apparent.¹⁴

Since the mid-nineteen-seventies, we ourselves have carried out a large amount of research into the possibility of using the expressive characteristics of human movement aimed at producing music – i.e. without the use of music instruments in the physical sense – to effectively produce music. This research has led to a whole series of 'invisible' instruments. They are based either on sonar or radar technology and work completely without wires. They are non-impact instruments because they do not include any other physical object besides one's own body, which must be used to make music. We have provided detailed descriptions of how they work in other articles.¹⁵ At this point we only wish to explain in somewhat greater depth the need for nakedness that such an approach turns out to require.

Unmediated nakedness

A non-impact musical instrument exposes the performing musician. In normal musical practice, of course, the instrument as an object functions primarily as an aid to playing music, a medium through which musical expression can occur. It works entirely by means of motor interaction. On the other hand, it can also function as a type of psychological screen, creating a certain distance between musician and audience. The presence of the instrument as an object introduces a certain level of objectification into the musician's expression. The screen raised between the immediacy of the musician's expression, the directness of his or her motor impulses and hence his or her physicality, clothes the musician in this sense. Without the instrument, the musician would be standing there figuratively naked. That this idea corresponds to an experienced psychological reality is clear from countless displays of behaviour by stage artists that are not dictated by technical, instrumental necessity but precisely by a certain fear of appearing naked – that is, unmediated – before the audience. Hence the necessity for many instrument-less public performers and speakers to have a microphone, almost always generated by the fear of standing 'naked' in front of an audience. The microphone is a support, something to hold on to. The almost invisible 'contact' microphones and the like, certainly those that work without wires, are seldom or never successful with those who do not genuinely love being on stage. The latter, not musicians but actors, are characterised though by a form of psychological 'exhibitionism' that is no less than a condition of being an actor: the willingness to appear fully unmediated, with no 'screen' between themselves and the audience. Although this is 'completely unscientific' in the sense that we have not carried out any empirical research into this question, we believe that in the course of our considerable experience of working with musicians and trainee musicians, we have seen a certain connection between character and psychological attitudes to this issue and the choice of musical instrument. Our experience has been shaped by some

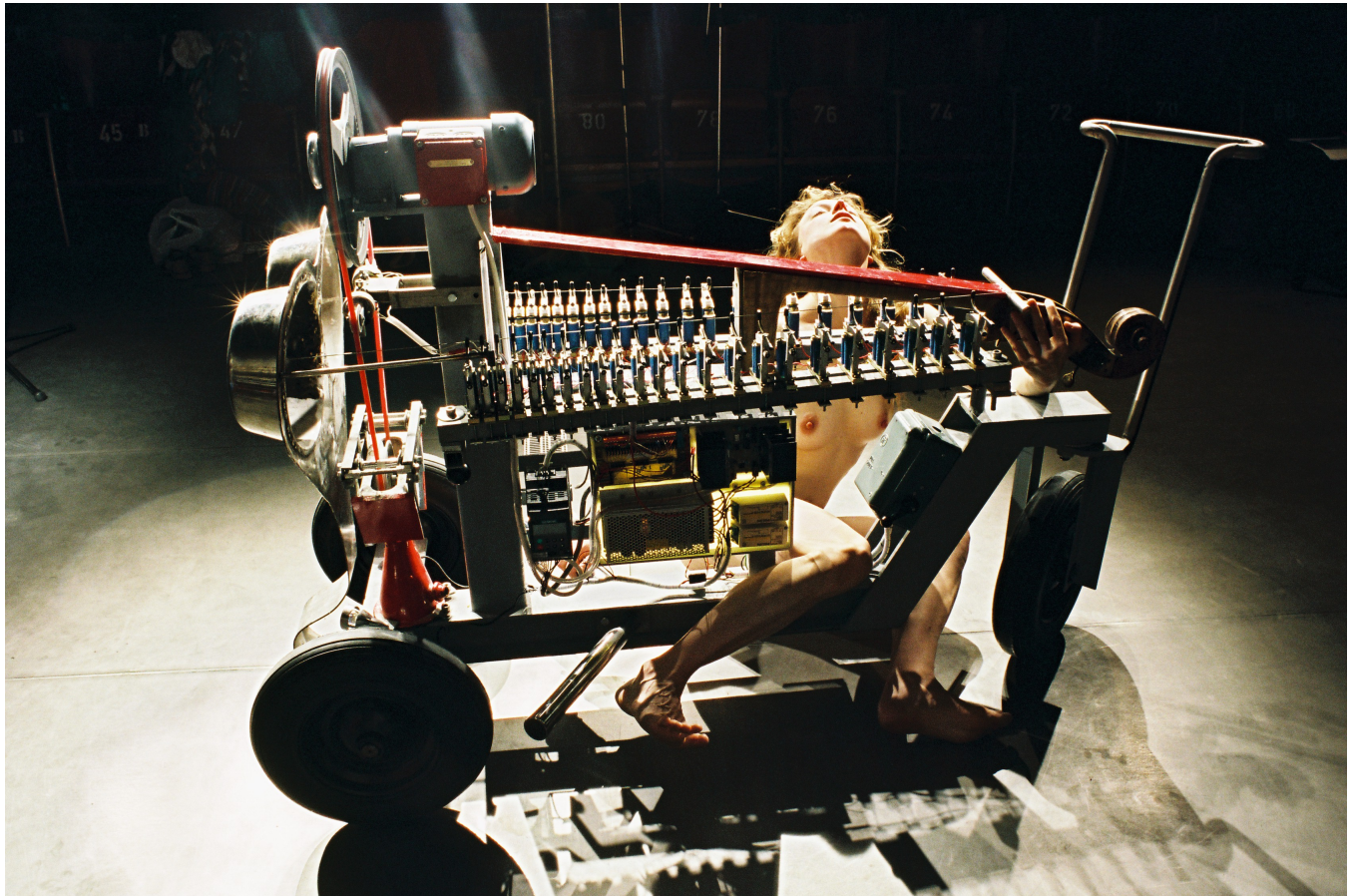
thirty years in musical higher education. We have noticed time and again that ‘typical’ (church) organists (i.e. organists who do not want to diversify into the harpsichord etc.) have the most ‘clothed’ characters. Of all the traditional western instruments, the organ is indeed the most indirect and most highly mediated. Almost none of the player’s physical input is audible in the musical results. The space of the sound is also completely separate from the place where the organist is playing. Music created in this way is also marked by a high degree of detachment, whose success is clear in church. Singers, right at the other end of this spectrum, demonstrate the highest degree of nakedness. They are extravert and tend to be capricious, egocentric and theatrical. But even singers often need a screen, and here it is instinctively the caricature of a handkerchief belonging to the fat and unappealing Luciano Pavarotti that springs to mind... This handkerchief functions as a minimal loin cloth and even if it is a caricature in Pavarotti’s case, we can find parallels with many singers in the form of the frequently over-the-top costumes in which they appear on stage. If this analysis contains a certain degree of truth, it has significant implications for the design of an invisible musical instrument and for the chances of such a design penetrating the music community in practice. After all, the idea will only attract the most ‘exhibitionist’ musicians among us. On the other hand, it can also have a liberating effect and render music-making more ‘honest’ and less mediated. This is because it can open opportunities for people who are neither gifted with what we might describe as a good voice nor with the technical skills and craftsmanship of a solo instrumentalist to perform on stage with fully-fledged musical expressiveness. This is because the invisible instrument works technically in such a way as to map gestures directly to the resulting sounds.

Physical nakedness

If the invisible instrument hides nothing and figuratively denudes the musician, it has been shown by analyses of how the instrument functions technically that it works best when the musician literally plays it naked. It did not take us much research to realise this on the basis of comparative measurements and auditory evaluations. The reasons are incidentally fairly obvious. The better the moving body can reflect sound waves, the better the echo signal can be received by the equipment and the greater the resolution of the parametric movement data generated. Using naked skin is the simplest way of making the body as reflective as possible. Only wet or smoothly oiled naked skin performs even better ... and this is exactly why the performer in the music theatre version of ‘Holosound’ appears on stage naked. Only the legs were covered at that time with a special pair of trousers made from particularly smooth fabric. The transducer system based on Doppler sonar is – given that it is placed in an imaginary, geometrically regular tetrahedron – most sensitive at the centre of gravity of the spatial figure formed by the transducer points. This centre of gravity is more or less where the performer’s upper body is located, in other words that part of the body where motor expression can display the greatest differentiation. For the artistic creation of ‘A Book of Moves,’ however – and this primarily has to do with socio-cultural factors on the basis of which nakedness is just not always experienced as nakedness (visual ‘silence,’ maximum theatrical honesty) – we used costumes made of smooth metallic fabric. They look like some kind of space suits out of a science fiction film, but in fact they really were a despicable form of self-censure. In the designs for gesture-controlled instruments by colleagues such as Michel Waisvisz and Joel Ryan, this problem never even arose precisely because they did not start from a position of musical nakedness in their design for ‘The Hands’. Their instrument is, after all, like its commercial counterpart the ‘Power Glove,’ a

physical object: it IS an 'item of clothing.' It is worn and played in the form of 'gloves.' Moreover, it is connected to the equipment by an umbilical cord of cables, and thick ones at that. In all my more recent pieces that feature some version of the invisible instrument (sonar and radar versions), i.e. Slow Sham Rising, Gestrobo Studies, Quadrada Studies, Picrada Studies and last but not least, my opus magnum, the opera TechnoFaustus, the score demands total nakedness. All concessions to prudishness are thus done away with, with both technological superiority (maximum sensitivity and sensor precision) and a radical consistency in artistic honesty as the result.

The nakedness of the robot



The robot orchestra I have been working on since 1990 and that by now consists of 76 musical robots, replaces the ensemble of musicians working together with programmable acoustic automatons. They are instruments which can bring forth music despite having no player. They are no longer operated by the direct impact of human bodies, but indirectly, with structured digital commands. Each robot, each automated instrument, has a large number of its own microprocessors for this purpose, which operate and control the electromechanical components that provide sources of vibration. These replace the musician's micro-movements and, in many cases, can far surpass the human musician's limitations. Each of these robots is built naked on the basis of the design itself. For that reason alone they differ on principle from earlier primitive orchestrions and musical automatons whose concealing but decorative (and incidentally often eroticising) front hides the entire machinery. My designs incorporate a systematic attempt to make it as clear as possible how the automaton works. They are 'legible' machines. The motors are not built in, and neither are the thousands of

electromagnets or all the mechanical components connected to them. Even the electrical cables and the electronics that operate the machines are completely naked and legible. A reasonably technically skilled audience will find all these robots completely legible and comprehensible. They are entirely naked. This does of course give them a certain degree of vulnerability, but this characteristic in itself lends them something peculiarly human. With these aesthetics, how could it be otherwise? When it comes to it, robots and machines are about the most human thing there is.

If these robots conceal nothing, it is fairly self-evident that when their functioning is made dependent on human input and interaction, this human input is also provided naked. The naked human in confrontation with the naked machine reveals the simple fact that humans, too, are actually machines, albeit fundamentally more refined and efficient machines than our musical robots. The insights formulated by Julien Offray de La Mettrie in his historic 'L'Homme Machine'¹⁶ may be somewhat simplistic and naïve, but their basis makes more sense than ever. It is only in naked confrontation with a machine, itself made by humans, that humans show themselves as – for now – superior machines. Nothing teaches us so much about humans as our attempts to build something similar.



In any case, a human is still the kybernos, the steersman or woman, when s/he uses interfaces such as the invisible instrument, but even when imposing human will purely by means of computer control and programming.

Cyborgs: Human-Machine

The distinction between human and machine is becoming less clear by the day. There are countless examples of converted bodies (breast enlargements / reductions, changes to the shape of the inner labia, false teeth and dental implants, transsexuals, sterilizations, hearing aids, pacemakers, right through to heart valves transplanted from pigs and even fully artificial hearts with pumps and batteries, artificial limbs controlled with one's own nerves etc.). This evolution is continuing apace and machine construction is unmistakeably advancing right into the details of the human body and the way it works. The science fiction idea of the cyborg no longer appears so completely fantastic.

Restraints and inhibitions

With all these considerations in mind, we cannot avoid pausing for a moment at what might hold back humans today – even if they are free from physical defects experienced as distracting – from presenting themselves naked in public. There are indeed still many people who claim that they don't 'dare' do this. The reasons for this psychological block can differ. The most frequently heard argument is that of shame, an argument that can only be traced back to the heritage of the Old Testament and the myth of the Fall. For practising Jews, Christians and Muslims, this is understandable. For them it is forbidden and shame is given to us by God. A completely different argument that is often heard has to do with sexuality. Men often tend to be afraid of their body's reaction to stimuli: the fear of suddenly getting an erection that cannot be concealed. For women, whose sexual organs are naturally hidden from sight, there is of course no such fear. However there is the fear of arousing lust in men, which contains a threat: the fear of rape. The perception of an erect penis as a weapon, something for which there are indeed sound biological arguments.¹⁷ This is why there is also a huge difference between, for example, being prepared to pose naked for photos etc. and being willing to participate in public naked events or even naturist activities. In the later case after all, you are theoretically vulnerable. The counterargument is of course that there is no reason whatsoever that nakedness should be an excuse for disrespectful, undesired, let alone aggressive, behaviour.

A completely different reason for shame has to do with the idealisation of the perfect body. It is a ridiculous – be it politically correct – assertion to say that all bodies are equally beautiful. That is in blatant contradiction of the fact that we judge almost everything by its 'beauty.' This is how we judge fruit and vegetables, houses and cars, so why would we not judge each other's bodies the same way? There is nothing wrong with this in itself. An entirely different question is whether there are standards of beauty: quite simply, there are not. Ideals of beauty are extremely dependent on time and culture. One person might love big bottoms, another prefers particularly large or particularly small breasts. One person is turned off by body hair, another finds it attractive... The problem that some people have, which means they do not dare show themselves naked, often has to do with a lack of self-confidence or the tension between the ideal they ascribe to and the reality of their body. However people have far more power over the appearance of their own body than they are prepared to admit. It is precisely the fact of showing oneself naked that often leads to a greater awareness of that power and consequently better care of one's body. In our opinion, obesity is nothing other than the symptom of a person who has given up on his or her own body. Yet even a completely healthy body, which in that sense is balanced and beautiful, is naturally subject to the effects of time. But why shouldn't an old body be beautiful? It does indeed lose some of its original sexual radiance, but that does not really have anything to do with the beauty of the body. We would be the first to start cheering if old nakedness were more visible. In that sense we found the poster for the Gentse Feesten a few years back quite simply a spectacular

success.

One final argument is that of vulnerability: after all, clothing does not only protect us against unpleasant temperatures (both too hot and too cold) but also against all sorts of impact that could lead to injuries. This is a fully valid argument. It is quite simply dangerous and painful to cook in the nude: every splash of fat from a frying pan hurts. Most construction work (welding, sawing, hammering, electrical work etc.) also requires sufficient protective clothing. Indeed working conditions (chipping flint, hunting, running, cooking) were what led primitive humans to use minimal penis protection and breast support, later extended to the soft and fleshy area of the belly. Clothing itself is not absurd; what is absurd is the shame that can prevent us from showing ourselves as we really are. This is where we probably find an explanation for the curse in Genesis: 'in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.' What it means is that labour, too, is a punishment from God, and since labour can make clothing necessary...

(Translated by Helen White, 2009)

Notes:

The Adoration of the Lamb altarpiece by Van Eyck in Saint Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent portrays a beautiful, pregnant Eve. We are puzzled by how this fits into Genesis. The photograph at the top of this article was taken by Bart Gabriel according to my directions. The pregnant woman is butoh dancer Emilie De Vlam.

Strictly speaking, pornography is defined on the basis of its etymology as the revelation in writing or image (i.e. graphically) of shame with the intention of causing sexual stimulation. In this sense there can be no question of pornography in theatre, dance or music, not even if sexual stimulation is the apparent intention. These media present a reality, after all, not an image of it.

Jos Van Ussel, 'Geschiedenis van het Seksueel Probleem' (History of the Sexual Problem), Boom-Meppel, 1968. The passage about nakedness begins on page 90. Van Ussel also points out that functional nakedness, including nakedness in processions, parades and theatre was not unusual at all, but on the contrary greatly appreciated. Incidentally Erasmus describes a procession in which the shrine of Genoveva was carried by four entirely naked clerics!

Danny Lamarcq, 'Het latrinaire gebeuren', ed. Stichting mens en kultuur, Ghent, 1993

In his history of the sexual problem, Jos Van Ussel argues among other things that the quadrinity that used to exist between reproduction, sex, love and marriage has lost its stability over time. Each of the entities stated here can, after all, occur in complete isolation from the others: sex without reproduction (contraception), sex without love (pleasure, paid sex and lust in itself), reproduction without sex (artificial insemination), reproduction without marriage (illegitimate children), marriage without sex (marriage of convenience, marriage to protect wealth), sex without marriage (ubiquitously), love without reproduction (gay marriage) etc. The meaning of these terms has also changed considerably: love does not necessarily mean

exclusivity (polyamori movement) and neither does marriage (communes).

Desmond Morris. 'The Naked Woman' p.218

Michel Onfray 'Het lichaam, het leven en het lijden', ed. Lemniscaat, 2005. Specifically chapter 33.

Citius, Altius, Fortius Wilhelm Prager/Nicholas Kaufmann, Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit - Ein Film über moderne Körperkultur, Germany, 1924-25, black and white, 100', 16mm, silent.

When it is forbidden by law to have doubts about something, legally imposed belief occurs. We certainly do not count ourselves among those who deny that the holocaust happened, but the fact that holocaust denial can be prosecuted has reduced the holocaust to the status of religious truth. This was made clear by Norman G. Finkelstein, a Jew himself in his revealing book 'The holocaust industry: reflections on the exploitation of Jewish suffering'.

Spencer Tunick, ref.

Peter Basch (1921-2004). The article 'Dancing Nudes' appeared in Salon Photography, p.28 - 59. It was published by Fawcett Books, (no. 512), Greenwich, Connecticut, USA, 1962.

In the photo: Emilie De Vlam in a dance performance in a crumbling chapel. Photo: Benn Deceuninck. More information on butoh: Jacques Van Schoor (ed.), "Images of Corporeality, traces of Butoh in Flanders", Antwerp, 2002. Substantial texts in this publication are by Emilie De Vlam.

Marc Leman, 'Embodied music cognition and mediation technology', (MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2008)

Godfried-Willem Raes, 'An Invisible Instrument'

Julien Offray de La Mettrie, 'L'Homme Machine,' included in 'Oeuvres Completes', (2 dl), ed. Fayard. An English translation has also appeared under the title 'Machine Man and other writings,' 1996, Cambridge.

Moniek Darge, 'Lijf tegen Lijf, Kritak,...

Further references:

Jean-Paul van Bendegem, 'Over wat ik nog wil schrijven', (Garant, Antwerp and Appeldoorn, 2008)

Charlotte Roche, 'Feuchtgebiete'

(15) Bo Coolsaet

(10) Paul Cliteur

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