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Posing Skill: The Art Model as Creative Agent

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ABSTRACT. I explore the act of posing as a skill in this paper. Employed by the expert model, the pose functions as a tool for artistic invention that renders that expert model a creative agent. It is through an aesthetic investigation of posing that the model's status in certain contexts of art making can be revised to that of an artistic collaborator. Instead of passively following conditions set by the artist, she engages in a mutually influenced creative process. To formulate an account of creative agency through the act of posing, I look into whether we can differentiate types of poses, as well as how and why some of these are creatively more valuable.

1. Introduction: What is a Pose?

When we speak of poses, we tend to consider them predominantly through their final representation: the artwork. Resulting discussions are mainly art historical accounts presenting archival evidence of models in a particular period and location, focussing on the customs that steer the usage of models in art practice and education, while also tracing the iconographic traditions that inform many classical poses, such as the *contrapposto* for example. (Berk-Jimenez 2001, Bignamini and Postle 1991, Borzello 1982, Desmarais, Postle and Vaughan 1999, Mileaf 2002, Waller 2006) There is also more sociological and anthropological research predominantly about fashion

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models and the fashion industry, but while these do regularly gather interviews with models and agencies, they often (of course rightfully) tend to focus on exploitation and body politics. (Basberg Neumann 2017, Colaiacomo 2011, Entwistle 2004, 2009, Philips 2006², Soley-Beltran 2006) Missing in these narratives is a philosophical investigation into the process of posing itself as a body practice. My argument in this art philosophical paper fits in a wider endeavour to construct an aesthetics of posing, which opens up the way to new considerations about the dynamics surrounding posing – one of these is the reflection that posing can constitute a skilful, performative practice in its own right. I focus on the ‘living’ pose as the model holds it, which manifests earlier in the creative process. Rather than the model purely functioning as a passive artist’s instrument, I aim to unpick the key differences in poses to demonstrate qualities that render certain models skilful, creative agents who actively contribute to the art making process.

My working definition of a pose should clarify how I view them: when one holds a pose, one takes on *an intentional physical configuration that communicates something to a spectator, with the aim of being registered*. The pose therefore highlights and emphasises aspects of an integrated body-subject, the model, regarding her form, movement,

² Sarah Philips is a small exception here; she conducted a series of interviews with life models in Portland. So far, she is the only sociologist I encountered who focussed on life models, rather than the fashion or more general commercial photography.

presence, etc. within a restricted temporal sequence of art making. The pose in such an artistic context is the conscious performance and magnification of particular features *of* and *by* the model's body to a spectator. This consists of an immediate spectator (the artist in the studio), as well as a delayed spectator (the later audience of the created artwork), and by extension an imaginary spectator: it is entirely possible to pose for oneself or with an audience in mind. Despite the perceived stillness of the pose, take the case of long life model poses, I regard posing to be a very active and physically intense action that the model endures and maintains. Others may disagree here; Spinicci states that the pose is a moment of "temporary inaction", and while he does allow posing to be intentional, he considers it 'sitting still' with a suspension of daily activity as its core quality. (Spinicci 2009, p. 47-48) I argue instead that when we think about the hour-long pose of the life model, or the portrait-sitter, considering that she poses the same bodily form throughout that hour, the pose becomes increasingly physically demanding of her body. She must actively maintain the same physical form in order to avoid dropping any muscles and as such collapsing the pose. A pose therefore is not a moment of inaction, but can be considered more like a peculiar active stillness, or (I suspect the best way to look at it) a *magnification* since it draws attention to qualities of a particular bodily form which is actively held by the model.

So I speak of posing in terms of artistic creation, the contexts I think

about are those poses in visual art media such as painting, drawing, sculpting, photography, and even fashion runways. I'm less interested in 'conventional poses' that we maintain in public, as we engage with others in accepted roles; from the adolescent who poses in the mirror, to presenting yourself in a particular way in a meeting with your boss. There is no necessary intention to create art, though the way in which we present ourselves can of course be creative, or transgress what is commonly accepted within a social setting.

2. Types of Poses

Before delving into a typology, it's worth clarifying three types of models to cover the main contexts of visual art making: these are the life model, the photographic model, and the portrait-sitter. The life model context is bound to traditional arts, in which she poses for life drawing, painting, and sculpting alike. The duration of posing can range from very brief two minute, five minute poses all the way to twenty minutes, one hour, or longer. These poses are quite different compared to photography as a medium. There is a temporal difference, the camera allows for a quick succession of poses with its much faster shutter speed, and therefore engages in a different mode of inventing and selecting suitable poses. The sitter always sits for a portrait, made in any visual arts medium. The reason I

do include a sitter is because the practice of portrait-making, and portrait-sitting, stands out from the contexts of the life and photographic models, regardless of the medium used to create the portrait. The sitter's pose is highly dependent on the limits and expectations of this art genre in particular, since portrait poses function to support portraiture's focus on revealing something about its sitter – such as appearance, or character, etc. Portrait sitters tend to be the portrait's commissioner as well, and are therefore likely not professional models.

Proposing a core typology of poses forms the next step in pinpointing the creative dynamics in which some models as body-experts bring their own ideas to the posing session, and recognise that they employ a range of skills to accomplish this.

I distinguish between three different types of poses based on who determines the invention of the pose. I call these *the guided pose*, *the self-improvised pose*, and *the collaborative pose*. These distinctions depend on the immediate relationship between creative agency and who influences the making of the pose. These categories don't necessarily rely on the models that I differentiated. Any of these models can potentially dip into one of the three different types of poses depending on circumstance, but I will show that in certain contexts it is more likely that a model is for example more on the guided or collaborative end. The model, the artist, or both of them, can be creative agents in different capacities. It's also important to highlight that

the pose is constructed in and for a process of looking. The artist looks at the posing body and projects it into an artwork, in which it enters a further dynamic of looking that incorporates the (delayed) spectator's gaze. The subsequent aesthetic engagement of viewers with the final product, the artwork, is very much rooted in the spectators' sense of sight. This interplay can be anticipated and thus incorporated by the posing model.

First comes the 'guided pose', in which the artist imposes a particular bodily configuration on the model. This more passive, guided subject has a particular bodily configuration imposed on them. It is important to note, however, that such a passive arrangement of the pose exists while still being actively executed by the sitter. Take for example the posing context of a portrait sitter. She feels uncertain about how to hold herself, as she is not used to posing, and possibly lacks the confidence or insight to come up with a successful posing strategy - which is usually something the artist helpfully directs. The resulting pose is directly related to the artist's own creative vision and ability to direct the subject, but the subject of course still actively holds the pose. Other situations where the pose is guided are those where a professional model is subjected to a tight format and artist's vision, and not allowed to give any personal input. Oftentimes in the case of catalogue models, they must act as a true 'mannequin', a doll who understands the required kinds of poses for that particular brand, while having little say over dress, or how the brand's vision is communicated. However, this does not

mean that she is incapable of generating poses of her own. Another example is a life model in an art academy's anatomy class: if the class tutor requires her lower body to be posed in a particular form to enhance the students' understanding of human legs, then she doesn't get to bring much input and is therefore guided.

Second is the 'self-improvised pose', which rather than guided by the artist, is instead wholly generated by the model. Think for example of those supermodels who achieved a celebrity status. They represent themselves as a brand, and are in charge of their own creative process during shoots. The self-improvised pose is an instance of posing expertise in an environment that welcomes its creative input. Some famous names are Twiggy, Naomi Campbell, Cindy Crawford, Kate Moss, as well as many others who are hired precisely for the posing expertise they bring to the scene. This arrangement is present in life drawing groups too: the life model usually retains full control over the poses she takes on for the group, unless there may be any special requests, and only needs to consider offering a good variety of poses within the given timings for each pose.³

³ This is a general set of indications to exemplify how one can think about a good variety of life model poses for drawing groups: for a start, the model ensures that throughout the session there is a balance between standing, sitting, and lying down poses. Shorter timings allow for very dynamic poses that are physically intensely demanding, while longer timings require poses that the model is able to hold for that longer period and so often end up being gentler on the body. It is also helpful for her to alternate displaying her front, back, and sides, bearing in mind that people may sit in a circle around her (or

Lastly, I introduce the ‘collaborative pose’, which is the most common type of pose among posing expert models. The model injects her own creativity into the session, in addition to the artist’s creative goals. She conceives of *what* she projects into the space, and *how*. A mutual contribution to the artwork is achieved when the artist relies on the model for her own creative contribution and invention, through which she becomes a collaborator of the artist. This collaborative posing functions as a middle ground between the input of the model, which in this collaborative case is always met by the artist’s own vision, and the shared focus on their collaboration and mutual searching for the artistic approach that will ultimately result in the artwork they work towards.

3. The Skilled Pose

The creatively more interesting types are the self-improvised and collaborative poses. I will argue that they are more valuable precisely because they reserve greater creative contributions from the model.

Gaut offers a convincing framework of creativity and its connection to skill in his essay “Creativity and Skill”. Different in his approach is the idea that that which adds something special to otherwise ordinary instances of

another arrangement depending on the space) – people might move around, though it’s helpful if the model rotates to present different views.

making a thing, is the presence of ‘flair’ in this process. His key claim is that flair also involves a kind of skill. He voices these initial premises to avoid including those cases where something might be produced by a totally mechanical search procedure, or cases that are wholly accidentally made. He does note however, that there is a role for serendipity as “the skillful exploitation of chance, rather than chance alone producing something.” (Gaut, 2009, p. 86) This role of chance clicks with his notion of flair: to go back to posing, the model achieves something very different and creatively stronger when she poses with flair, compared to when she would simply execute a standard set of poses. Furthermore, creativity is compatible with goal-directedness. Namely, one can further refine the set goal and be creative in this way, or one can figure out particularly suited means to achieve the goal. His concept of creativity also allows for a more passive welling-up of inspiration, for example, and indeed the aforementioned role of chance: creativity isn’t necessarily bound to a rigid teleological origin, or any necessary condition of goal-directedness. Most crucially of interest to understanding the pose as a creative act is this inclusion of skill, which helps justify how some poses are more creatively interesting than others.

He lists four markers of skill; it firstly is a special capacity in some area or activity that isn’t universally shared or possessed by everyone who engages in this activity. Second, skills are considered an accomplishment, which the close relation of meaning between the word ‘skilled’ and

‘accomplished’ also reveals. Third, one can practice skills, which leads us to the fourth and last marker: skills are learned, rather than purely natural, abilities. Creative abilities fit in these markers of skill, not only because being creative is rooted in a domain that is special and considered an accomplishment, but also because being creative can be practised; “When one practices an activity in which one is creative, one can thereby practice the skills of creativity.” (Gaut 2009, p. 95)

This, too, works for posing. It is clear that not everyone has an innate ability to pose when confronted with a camera. We tend to admire those people who are able to pose successfully, such as recognising the accomplishments of famous supermodels, or social media figures. Poses can be practised; there exist special model schools to train one to become a fashion model specifically, but also for those different kinds of poses – and anyone who didn’t attend such a school – models practice in front of the mirror or a video recorder to get a sense of how they are appearing, and the ways in which they can enhance their posing. Not to forget that the sheer act of posing itself in various posing sessions will also lead to further honing the model’s own sense of posing, and dealing with artistic or bodily challenges. This also comprises the fourth marker, namely that one can learn to pose and present oneself, it’s not a natural ability – but some people may indeed be naturally more at ease with posing. This isn’t to say that it remains something that can be improved simply by engaging with the

creative act and becoming better acquainted with the relevant skills.

In addition to linking creativity to skill and subsequent learning, he also involves the importance of particular attitudes and values. Gaut gives the example that a person can have creative ability, but be terrible at exercising this skill because they don't dare to take the risks involved in being creative if they feel too shy. Creativity is intertwined with an attitude of courage, and a form of play as well. Interestingly, the reason we value creative skills is firstly because "creative persons exhibit a kind of freedom, they are not bound by routines, but they can stand back from them, consider whether they are for the good, and act in a way that is goal-directed but not routinized", and secondly, because such a non-routinized activity results in taking a risk. Creative acts aren't governed by routine, and therefore lack a pre-determined outcome or reliability in this sense, and so become inherently risky. A key virtue of being creative then is the person's courage which manifests throughout their creative activity, as they aim to achieve something valuable and are "knowingly prepared to take risks to achieve it". It is this freedom that is also connected to the mentioned play: free play can transform one procedure governed by particular routines into a different procedure - it allows for creativity to be exercised. (Gaut 2009, p. 101-102)

The difficulty of posing, and a key point for creative recognition, is the model's ability to adapt. She takes into account the artist, the artwork that doesn't yet exist, later spectators, and any other factors to which she

continuously adapts. Posing comprises an intriguing combination of ongoing, spontaneous series of movements that are controlled by the skilled model with very purposeful body-knowledge in order to explore the best posing approach for that particular session. Much like Gaut's creativity, posing is often a goal-directed experimenting through which the model searches for the suitable poses. However, even if there is no clear goal, the session provides a moment to experiment and take risks because this search is unstable due to the unknown desired outcome she is working towards. The sense of play that Gaut described is present, and a key component of posing. Much like letting your mind wander and seeing which ideas bubble up, posing provides a bodily reflection of a similar process. It is a conscious, courageous act of creativity that aims to find the best approach by going through the (literal) motions. This level of outstanding creative insight and execution, is reflected in cases like the British supermodel Twiggy who helped shape the model industry with her androgynous physique and innovative poses. It also exists further in the past; the early 19th century celebrity male model Cadamour dominated Parisian academies and studios with his expertise. He was highly sought-after for his physique and posing skill, and unlike other impoverished models, he had the financial stability to turn down artists that were not of interest to him to work with. (Waller 2006, p. 29-32) Models who are such intensive collaborators not just be physically, but also emotionally involved in the creative process, they take

risks, and embed the creative moment with their own artistic input – which can be collaborative with the artist, or entirely self-improvised.

4. Effortlessness as a Marker of Success

I want to finalise very briefly on the notion of ‘effortlessness’ as a consequence of skilful posing. Closely connected to the model’s display of a particular form – as if she were always like that appearance and only that – is indeed this importance of effortlessness or *sprezzatura* (Castiglione, [1588] 1974). The guise of ease is crucial in appreciating a standard of posing expertise that is then often perceived as a more innate natural flair. This perception of ‘unposed’ poses can be the result of the model’s actual ease in posing, it could be literally effortless, or rather appear effortless due to the skilful display put up by the model. These two forms of effortlessness can of course be further facilitated by the artist’s efforts in representing the model, though I insist that in many cases (especially for self-improvised and collaborative poses) I consider it a testimony of the model’s posing expertise. A badly, or otherwise visually uncomfortably posed model, will much less likely result in an effortless appearance regardless of the artist’s own approach to representing her.

Effortlessness is closely connected to skill. A skilled action displays the agent’s knowledge, and is guided by knowledge that manifests

possession of skill during the relevant activity. It is however still possible to manifest skill by deciding not to display it in a typical way. For example, only a skilled sportsman can lose deliberately without it being apparent that he is doing this on purpose. (Stanley and Williamson, p.) Applied to posing, we encounter an intriguing marker of successful posing when that posing looks effortless: giving the impression that it is not the result of skill, but instead natural ability. The model in this way sustains a disposition to the act of posing, which exhibits their knowledge of the things required to pose well.

Montero argues that effortlessness relates to three aspects of a work: the medium, representation, and process. This can also constitute bodily movement. Rather than thinking that only smooth, flowing, and predictable actions could result in an effortless action, she thinks along the lines of *efficient movement*. She gives the example that effortlessness in dance is about the lack of superfluous muscle tensions. Effortlessness then pinpoints how something difficult is accomplished with ease. She identifies an objective, apparent, and intentional ease as three forms of effortlessness. One difficulty is that in many art forms supposedly objective effortlessness is actually not appreciated, and may negatively impact one's impression of the piece as being too easy, or even uncared for. What is key, is really the "guise of ease", a deliberate creation of supposed ease. Relevant to the perception of effortlessness is a "proprioceptive sympathy" as Montero

coins it, as well as feeling in awe upon witnessing such a reveal of the performer's superfluity of fitness. Effortless movements are therefore pleasurable and beautiful to watch. (Montero 2016, p. 182-190)

I am sympathetic to Montero's insights about effortless in various forms, as well as spectators' appreciation of the guise of ease. What looks to be more difficult is that she specifies a certain kind of beauty as pleasurable, and the focus on the performer's bodily fitness as sufficient to be in awe and consider the performance pleasurable to watch. I suspect that there are different kinds of beauty, but equally importantly, different kinds of effortless that don't need to result in feeling in awe at the performer's physique, or feeling particularly sympathetic on a proprioceptive level. Applying this to posing, a fashion model can look effortlessly 'heroin-chic' in photographs due to her posing skill, she likely displays a very thin frame, and the work by a make-up artist to apply the right cosmetics for that look. This isn't about a superfluity of fitness, nor is it about a conventional beauty, or a proprioceptive sympathising with her pose. Her pose is interesting much like a dance performance might be, though of course it is static in the photograph. It doesn't seem necessary to identify the physicality we witness as spectators with our very own. Crucial is indeed the guise of ease, which conceals the skill and effort required to pose – a marker of the model's success. She is likely not an actual heroin addict, and is instead a skilled fashion model who displays a much darker, less fitness or health-

based kind of beauty. Poses that look like they require a lot of effort might be perceived as painful, uncomfortable, perhaps not a good choice – and this is also why portraitists are keen to guide their sitters to achieve a pose that works for them. Crucial about posing as a skill is the ability to creatively anticipate all these external factors into the posing session, with the bodily effort that brings forth the pose, to figure out the suitable pose that works for both the model and that particular process of art making.

I proposed three categories of posing, the guided, self-improvised, and collaborative poses, to make better sense of posing as a skill with far-reaching potential for creative contribution. The model participates with integrated posing expertise: an all-round insight in the artistic concepts and directions the project takes, but crucially, she draws on profound, physical posing skill. The model experiments with her poses, she anticipates the way the artist beholds her, as well as any potential resulting representations and their audiences. As a creative agent, she steers the art making process through her own skilled posing expertise.

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