

Over 50 and doing what? Reflections on being a mature model

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Introduction

In the past five to six years we have witnessed greater awareness of the presence of older models, often described as 'mature' models, in both fashion and advertising, as part of a broader discourse of diversity¹. The media have discussed the phenomenon intermittently but the older model has not yet begun to receive the attention of academics, particularly those involved in research related to ageing². She is seen, but not noticed.

A recent international conference in London held at the London College of Fashion, exploring issues of ageing in fashion and beauty, saw older supermodels and media personalities rub shoulders with academics, taking on the role of speakers³. Enabling that particular mix was a smart decision on the part of the conference organizers: ageing and the ageing model, as a result, became a 'hot topic' in the aftermath of the conference, with blog posts and magazine/newspaper articles ranging from the likes of - here I am parodying - "I was there too" and "Did she not look radiant?" to more content-rich accounts of the discussions that took place over the two days, altogether bringing further exposure to a growing research area, that of ageing studies.

The 'older model' is a particularly refractory topic of discussion. Until now when models have come under academic scrutiny it has been with reference almost exclusively to fashion modeling, using it as a case study to improve literatures on gender, sexuality, culture, and fashion marketing. Thus a recent collection of essays edited by Entwistle and Wissinger (2012) explores "how models have been integral to modern consumer culture and ... have become a barometer of the current state of attitudes towards women, race and consumerism" (Entwistle and Wissinger 2012,1). But as is the case in parallel studies (Quick 1997; Evans 2000, 2005; Mears 2008; 2011), there is no mention in this book of the older fashion model or even the older commercial model⁴.

Yet fashion modeling is only one specialism within modeling and one which by and large remains the purview of the young⁵. There are other types of modeling for which there is a growing presence, fractional though it may seem, of older women, and also older men. Commercial modeling (print and online advertising and TV/YouTube commercials) is a case in point as also art modeling, which ranges from posing for photographic work to posing for traditional visual artists and/or performing in live installations.⁶ Models tend to occupy a very grey area, in terms of who they are and what they do to complement their modeling - many double up as actors and leave modeling for acting, many more do not model full time or model only for a few years, moving on to other professions. It is even unclear whether modeling should be regarded as a 'performance art', though models are increasingly being given performer status by unions, whether they work in fashion, in commercial advertising and/or live art⁷.

The above remarks are merely introductory. This paper will not attempt to discuss modeling qua modeling and thus it does not purport to be an addition to any nascent 'modeling studies' disciplinary field. Its aims are much more modest. It attempts to understand the specificity of being an older woman engaging in modeling⁸ as a *métier* and how this discussion can advance frameworks to make sense of age and ageing. Thus the paper presents an opportunity to reflect about age and culture and gender/sexuality, working on the assumption that in our society, by and large, older women are invisible and regarded as asexual beings devoid of beauty (Woodward 1995), thus modeling is a way for

them be seen and to subvert such a normative. Various lines of argument have explained older women's invisibility as due to sexism, ageism, capitalism, but the main point is that when non-normative bodies appear as sexual and make a claim to be viewed as beautiful, they are perceived as tokens, perversions, exceptions – categories that indicate themselves oppression. The older model is all of the above.

Through this paper I position myself as one of those people who have issued a challenge to the normative by embracing modeling at an age when I am meant to be thinking about my retirement plan and conform to stereotypical expectations of what middle aged women should do.

In framing this discussion I am mindful of Butler's most recent work, in which she theorizes ecstasy and its performativity as social embodiment: "our bodies are beyond themselves... cast out by normative powers that arrange the uneven distribution of freedoms, racism, misogyny, homophobia, violence." (Butler and Athanasiou 2013,55), to which list I would add ageism. Butler talks about the performative as an embodied and somatic authorship of the self, and as always ecstatic, an *ek-stasis* that is an act of stepping out, making our bodies our own by disowning the gendered and heteronormative certainties of patriarchy and capitalism. For Butler, somatic *ekstasis* involves moments of self-recognition and self-determination away from norms (2013,69).

Modeling in my mature years has allowed me to accomplish this act of stepping out, making my body my own, disowning the 'subject formation' through a somatic reflexivity.

Autoethnography: between modeling and academia

Throughout this paper I will be using the autoethnographic analytic method discussed by Anderson (2006), through use of self-observation and my participant status. I will be providing a self-reflexive narrative, presented in each section as a vignette, in italics, with a theoretical counterpoint in a commentary following the vignette, to help the reader focus on the issues I raise. The style of writing subverts the subject/object binary of ethnographic scholarship, allowing me to write myself into my research, thus bringing to the fore my interrelatedness with social others, as in the writings of Bartleet 2009, Ellis 2004,2007; Ellis and Bochner 2001.

Anderson has discussed the history of autoethnography as a methodology, charting its protohistory in the leanings to self-reflexivity of some realist ethnographers and looking at more current developments. He has critiqued its more emotional/evocative strands, the performative writing that for many exemplifies autoethnography (2006, 375-378), described by Peggy Phelan as that which "enacts the death of the 'we' that we think we are before we begin to write. A statement of allegiance to the radicality of unknowing who we are becoming, this writing pushes against the ideology of knowledge as a progressive movement forever approaching a completed end-point." (Phelan 1997,17).

Anderson proposes five key features of a method he calls 'analytic autoethnography' which requires:

(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson 2006, 378). I believe that all five of these key features of analytic autoethnography are applicable to the scrutiny I conduct of my experience of modeling.

However, Anderson imputes some limitations to analytical autoethnography, believing that "Most of us, most of the time, do not find our research interests as deeply intertwined with our personal lives as autoethnography requires. The bulk of analytic autoethnography will always be based in some variation of the "professional stranger" role elaborated by Michael Agar (1980) and others" (Anderson 2006, 309).

This is not true of my modeling, in relation to which I was never a “professional stranger”. I did not take up modeling to research it, I was and am a model who has received academic training.

My first task therefore is to locate myself and provide a perception of my own self as subject in relation to the web of relationships to be foregrounded in the narrative.

Throughout, I will be “situating my socio-politically inscribed body as a central site of meaning making” (Spry 2001,710) aware that my autoethnographic self-reflexive critique on my positionality can inspire others “to reflect critically upon their own life experience, their constructions of self, and their interactions with others within socio historical contexts” (Spry 2001, 711).

My academic specialization is the study of visual culture and dance performance, and I have held university posts over a career spanning twenty-five years. I found myself developing a second parallel career as a model in my late forties, going into my fifties. Being a model and an academic, perceived to be largely incompatible professional choices, often caused some tension and a severe sense of displacement leading, eventually, to my quitting my academic post⁹.

Modeling as an activity is mired in stereotypes, including a perception of it as an unreal and vacuous job, often styled in these negative terms by some of the models themselves (Boshoff 2001). Yet modeling has also given me scope for reflexivity on the nature of the body, my body, and self-identity¹⁰. Being an older model is not easy: the sense of discomfort and fragmentation that has accompanied me throughout this journey underpins my narrative, yet my discovery of the subversive, seditious and irreverent quality inherent in modeling as an older woman, has given me hope. To quote Spry: “However ...heretical this performance of selves may be, I have learned that heresy is greatly maligned...[but] when put to good use, can begin a robust dance of agency in one’s personal/political/professional life” (Spry 2001,708)

Life and art modeling

I enter the room. It is an Adult Education Institute evening class. I am on time, despite the problems with the overground service – that’s London for you. E., the tutor, smiles, obviously relieved. She always worries that the model will not turn up. I go behind the screen that designates the changing area and remove all my clothes. I rub some body lotion on my entire body to hydrate it – soon the fan heaters will be blowing their hot air on me to warm me up and that always makes my skin very dry. I put on my dressing gown, grab my water bottle and walk to the centre of the room where some cushions have been spread out on a foam mattress on the floor. I rearrange the cushions and bring the fan heaters closer to me and begin to gather my hair in a bun, they always want to see the neck. Meanwhile E. speaks to the students, asking them to take their position behind the easels. “We are going to start with some warm up drawings, the model tonight is ...” she gestures towards me and I smile. “She will pose for three minutes only, then five, then ten. We will do a few of these short poses, then we will move on to longer 20 minute poses and a final long pose after the break. Just try to capture the whole shape. A.” she says to me “are you warm enough?” (rhetorical question, it is freezing despite the fan heaters). I nod. “Is this OK with you?” (another rhetorical question, I was instructed on what to prepare through email exchanges.) “All right, let’s start. Can you do a standing pose please?” I remove my dressing gown, take a deep breath, then stand with the weight on my left leg, my right foot drawn next to my left and on toes, a hand behind my left hip. I stand, purposely enhancing the curve at the waist by raising my right shoulder slightly. I make sure I am balanced. As everyone begins to draw in deep concentration I hear E. pacing up the room and telling the students not to waste time with details. “Don’t worry about the face or hands. Let

your hand move on the paper, look at the model and move your hand" I am already thinking of what to do next. I never look at anyone when posing, always glance past them, my eyes fixing on some detail of the wall – it helps to still myself. I hear E. say "Thank you A.". The pose is over and I shift into the next one and then the next, making sure I alternate between standing and sitting. I drink plenty of water, the fan heaters always make me thirsty.

Life modeling is one of the worst paid forms of modeling, but is part of the overall modeling landscape, and it often transmutes into photographic art modeling. It involves the display of nudity on the part of the model for others to express their creativity and make art, either through drawing or painting or sculpture work¹¹. To me life modeling is a performance in which I can wear my nudity as a garment enhancing the pose and which allows me to enter a liminal space, marked by the sound of pencils/charcoal on paper, in which deep thinking and fantasy alternate with moments of great body awareness, getting to know the rhythm of my own breath. Complete stillness is impossible to achieve, the body is always in motion, at a micro-level.

Life modeling also allows one to see and be seen, stepping out of the ordinary act of seeing: "The model is there to be seen, and the painter has his own creative task...[The model] must consider not only what she is doing to be seen, but what she is seen to be doing" (Hollander 1991, 8)

Life models have different backgrounds. The majority tends to be art students, some are dancers and actors in between jobs, mostly young and looking for some extra cash - this is strictly a cash economy. There was no photography ever involved in life modeling when I began¹², and for many years afterwards, but with the advent of digital cameras the boundaries between life modeling and photographic art nude have been blurred and life models metamorphose into photographic art models. This has been facilitated by the explosion, over the past decade, of model/photographers sites and online galleries. Some of these sites act as portfolio hosting, others as photo galleries, all of them carry notices or castings for jobs. They have increased the opportunities for life models whose staple work now includes posing for fine art classes as well as paid photographic art modeling in shoots mostly for amateur/semi-pro photographers, but sometimes for professional photographers wanting to do personal work involving the nude figure, aimed at exhibitions¹³. It should be noted however that not all life models make this transition to photographic art modeling: received notions of the 'body beautiful', self consciousness before the camera, the fear that one's image may end up advertising porn sites and, of course, the fear of age, play a part. Phillips claims that the models she interviewed for her study of life modeling invariably expressed a mistrust of photography, but Phillips' fieldwork is a little dated, as it seems to relate mainly to the 1990s. Current practices, as can be gleaned from internet sites, such as Art Mod¹⁴, show otherwise and the issue of time related pay, mentioned by the models interviewed by Phillips, has been superseded by establishing different standard fees payable for art and photographic work, with photographic work slightly better paid (Phillips 2006, 21-22). But a life model friend, a 'plus size' only a few years younger than me, echoing some of the sentiments expressed by the models interviewed by Phillips, told me she could not bear to see herself in photographs, whereas she loved the thrill of seeing herself in a painting, transformed by the artist. Other models too, in conversation with me, have expressed the fear that their nude pictures might be seen by people who would disapprove. This raises some interesting questions on who sees what and the fact that nudity is inevitably conflated with pornographic sexual display.¹⁵

One would not normally regard life and art modeling as an option easily available to women older than twenty-five, yet as I look around, I see that it is not as uncommon as believed. There is quite a number of older women and men who take up art modeling, and in more

recent years, retired women in their sixties or even seventies have taken the plunge and set themselves up as art models - I have met and worked with some of them. There are, as mentioned, online networks and forums where art models can exchange views and give each other tips and there are mailing lists through which jobs are advertised. Art colleges maintain their own registers of available models.

In a recent paper entitled "How (not) to shoot old people : changing the paradigms of portrait photography"¹⁶, Margaret Gullette discusses how older people are represented in photos. She used as an example, among many, Jeff Wall's 'The Giant' (1992), a photograph modeled by a statuesque older woman, shown naked while reading a scrap of paper on a library staircase, her body magnified through digital manipulation as to dominate the whole scene. Gullette remarks that most photography diminishes older people and that we need portrayals of ageing bodies that can help us challenge the current paradigms. Looking at the same image Cristofovici suggests that this photograph of an older woman's body can be read as a "transcendence of age... its syncopated visual rhythms echo the conflicts between internal and external perceptions of age" (Cristofovici, 2009,25)¹⁷.

It is worth pointing out that the photograph in question manages to make a statement not only through the photographer's artistry but also through the model's performance and active collaboration, something that tends to be overlooked in most discussions, where the photographer alone is praised. Yet the model in this work, is of great importance: this is an older woman with a commanding presence who through her stance and demeanor posits herself as beautiful, despite the 'imperfection' bestowed by age and succeeds in being perceived as beautiful, even regal, by the viewer.

Older women taking up life modeling and/or photographic art modeling represent a powerful challenge to current views of older bodies as ugly and decrepit, a challenge that needs to be noted – and in the next section this will be further elaborated. It is also worth pointing out that life models often work in schools, and are drawn by young teenage pupils – I have had this experience. This is a great opportunity for young women to look at an older body and find beauty in it, without being judgmental. Life modeling can indeed be very empowering for older women. Older art models can subvert the discourse of decline in which the body, especially the female body, is inscribed. As Gullette says "If we can succeed in exposing the effects of decline ideology and creating a sense of urgency, we might be able to assure the terrible peak of malevolent ageism is behind us, rather than, as now appears, looming ahead" (2011,17)

The older female naked body

We are at Starbucks at the Angel, Islington, sitting outside. He insisted on paying for the latte and a pastry. I am very anxious, this is the first photographer that has contacted me since I put up a model profile on a portfolio hosting site, with only just five photos. He is doing a project on 'real women' and is looking for models 'of all ages, shapes, and sizes'. He wanted to book me but insisted on seeing me first "to make sure". Of what? "Oh, that you really look like the photos on display" he says. I have betrayed my inexperience. Apparently this is a common practice, some models cheat and put up photos of themselves taken some years earlier or heavily photoshopped. I am trying to sound blasée, but the truth is that this is – if it goes ahead - my second nude shoot. I find him intimidating. Every time he looks at me it is as if he is trying to take a picture. I see him checking the light, squinting his eyes. He asks me to look this and that way. He is in his forties, with longish hair, well built. "How long have you been taking photographs for?" I ask. I am not too good at small talk, it is obvious when I attempt to find out about him that he does not like talking about himself and I do not want to hear his life story, anyway, I am just trying to be polite. Is he reliable? He should be, I checked. He has good references from other models, whom I contacted before agreeing

to do the job. "So what have you in mind for the shoot?" I ask. "We can go to Fairlight Glen, near Hastings. There is a naturist beach and we can shoot without fear of being interrupted. I will pick you up at 9 am sharp and we will be back in the evening, probably by 11 pm. I will give you £250 cash, but I need an invoice from you. You must also sign a model release". Not so much money when you think that it will be a very hard day's work, I can guess he will want to shoot every minute once we get there. And yes, model release. I am never offered co-ownership of the photo, why? But I agree. "What is the concept?" I venture again. "I know you are photographing different women, but what is it that you really want to achieve?" I now fear he might think my question was a bit silly. But I have asked, anyway, there is no going back. "I do not work with a fully developed concept" he says, a little sneeringly. "Just an idea. Basically, I am interested in exploring my relationship to women through photography. I know what I want but I let things Develop of their own accord. I mainly wait for the Moment". Pause. "And try to capture the Truth of the Subject." Another pause. "I only use natural light". I am a little disconcerted, I am not sure I fully grasp the practicalities involved and he does sound a little pompous. He senses my anxiety and adds "Don't wear any make up on the day and forget about posing, I want you to be natural. Very natural" he says, with an emphasis. Natural. But what is natural, I wonder? Should I just get up and not shower? Should I forget about shaving my legs? After all not shaving is very natural. I shall have to ponder on all this. He offers to drive me home, that's nice of him. "Look up the photography of Renoux, the way he uses the light" he tells me as he drives through Upper Street. "He is one of my favourite photographers and I am after a similar effect." At last, a clue. "And Sally Mann. You must look at Sally Mann's work". Another clue. I get out of the car. Now I have some homework to do.

When I became a photographic art model I had to learn to check out photographers' credentials and references – it is fairly common to do a location shoot somewhere quite remote and safety is a major concern, though I am told some older models do not bother to check¹⁸. I also had to develop a new relationship with my body and the way I think I look - something that led me later to take up photography to explore self-portraiture - and a real rapport with the camera. I acquired a thick skin to cope with rejection, a constant feature of a model's life, and learned to keep away from those photographers who would only shoot young models – this can be checked by looking at their online portfolios - as they would not as a rule, use me, thus approaching them for work or answering their casting calls would be a waste of time. Occasionally, I have modeled for such photographers, usually because their chosen model has flaked on them and having hired the studio they desperately need a substitute (and anyone will do). During such sessions I was made aware that I was not their first choice, and they would need to work hard, as one of them told me, on photoshopping the signs of my age or hide my imperfections with lighting. Whenever I found myself in such a situation I did not argue with the photographer, but did the job, and took the cash, making a mental note of never working with that person again. These encounters are underpinned by the capitalistic logic of monetary exchange for bodily display, something that is part of modeling qua modeling (and modeling for me is, when all is said and done, a job through which I earn a living) and by a sense of condemnation of the female older body as relayed by the photographers, who were after taking shots of a youthful body and settled for an older one for contingent reasons. But there would be little gain in passing judgment on either photographer or model who find themselves entangled in such a situation.

For the model – in this instance myself - there is still a sense of being able to turn the tables by becoming the focus, literally so, of the photographer's activity, presenting my older body to the camera and working out ways of highlighting its creative potential, even though the photographer might have been somewhat disappointed. On the positive side, there are

those who book me because I am an older model and photographically my older body is more, or at least equally, interesting to them than that of a younger woman. These are the photographers who are after realistic images, rather than conventionally pretty ones, the ones who will always ask you before you shoot with them to look up Sally Mann, or even, Helmut Newton, whose style has been dubbed as 'brutal realism' (Craik,1993:108) and whom they quote as their major influences¹⁹. Through their images they hope to capture individuality in a quest for 'perfect imperfection' which is part of their aesthetics (perfect because the photographs are perfectly composed and processed). They are also the ones who always insist, in pre-shoot communications, that the look should be 'natural' – no make up, no styling, "just be yourself". A tall order. Through such modeling experiences, positive and negative alike, I have learnt much about uncontrived and contrived images, about the camera, about presence and about not feeling self conscious about my ageing body and projecting it as beautiful and dignified. Most of all I learnt about acceptance and about countering the ideology of decline. Here I turn again to Gullette, who affirms that decline can "be fought legally and politically" (2011,223) but in creative terms it can be fought by displaying one's body and insisting on a different aesthetics, no longer predicated on the 'youth' and 'old age' binary.

Chivers recounts how Canadian photographer Donigan Cumming in 1991 photographed a seventy-six year old female model, Nettie Harris, in various states of undress: "Harris has an unavoidable visibility that unsettles imaginative stereotypes. Her shocking naked image confronts viewers with unveiled aged flesh so that they can no longer avoid the stark physical reality of aging...Harris's images suggest a "decrepit" sexuality that threatens popular images of what and which bodies are supposed to be sexy" (Chivers 2003,xxvi). The idea of a decrepit sexuality may seem extreme (and in photographic terms it has a correlation with a fascination with derelict buildings, a popular topic in photographic essays) nevertheless it has an 'in-your-face' quality that is salutary and helps to question deep rooted notions of what is acceptably beautiful. Although the camera seems to promote "the normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish... establish[ing] over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates and judges them" (Foucault 1977, 25) it need not be controlling (Lutz and Collins 1994,365 in Chandler 2000) and the gaze can be subverted.

By and large our society makes it difficult to regard an older female body as beautiful. A body such as that of Nettie Harris will shock the viewer and is likely to elicit disgust. The older female body is regarded as ugly and as far removed as possible from any classical beauty ideal, akin to a dying body. It is a perception that is held in many a culture - Margaret Lock in her study of Japanese women and the menopause, does point out that the prevalent attitude to their body is one that sees them as disembodied and sexually invisible (Lock 1993). But the older female body is most dramatically berated in western societies, where it is constantly compared to young bodies.

As older women we censor our appearance, internalizing a societal scornful attitude towards the older body. Butler argued that bodies unable to reproduce are to be placed in the abject category (1993) but it was Russo (1995) who first explicitly situated the older female body in the position of the abject and as belonging to the grotesque, followed by Holland 2004 and Garde-Hansen 2008.

The notion of abject is Kristeva's and it relates to "what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982,4). Thus the abject older female body is charged with ambivalence and evokes fascination, something that its artistic representation brings out fully, subverting and renegotiating received ideas of beauty. The work of photographer Melanie Manchot exemplifies this, especially the series *Look At You Loving Me* (2000) which grew over a period of four years, forty silver gelatin prints on canvas, in which Manchot photographed herself and her mother, whose older body, complete with sags and all the transformations effected by time has such a powerful

beauty as to make people question whether there is after all such a thing as a standardised “proper nude” (Hopkinson 1999,45).

Chivers argues that the ageing body is similar to the disabled body in that it has to counter norms, and invokes disability scholar Garland Thomson’s concept of the ‘normate’, defined as the “constructed identity of those who by way of their body and cultural capital can be in a position of authority and wield power” (Chivers 2003,xxvii). The social construction of old age, says Chivers, does not deny the materiality “of hot flushes and wrinkles”, it simply points to an intervening social manipulation of the ageing process (Chivers 2003, xxvii).

I personally do not know many women of my age and older who would be happy to pose nude for a photograph, even though they may know it is for an artistic purpose – the fear of being perceived as obscenely ugly and thus being ‘othered’ is too overwhelming. An older fashion model with whom I shared a fashion shoot for a budding female photographer, later awarded one of the Diversity Now prizes in 2013, said I was ‘really brave’ when I told her that I also did artistic nude, as she would not ‘dare’ do it.

For me doing photographic art nude has always been an extension of my life modeling and a continuation of my engagement with dance. I do it alongside my other modeling, I have not disowned it, even though I have at times felt under pressure to do so, in view of general negative attitudes to the naked body, especially the older female naked body and the often made conflation of nudity with pornography . I never felt a lack of dignity or indeed shame, while posing nude. Art modeling has allowed me an exploration of space, movement and stillness and in terms of my creative output it remains the form of modeling I like best ²⁰.

The ‘ageing gracefully’ imperative

We are in an old hotel in High Street Kensington. “Look at this wall paper” says the film director “it’s perfect, just perfect. I have been after a 1960s feel for ages and finally found this gem two days ago”. That’s why the shoot was arranged in such a rush... But I am happy to be here and excited too. I look at the lingerie neatly folded on the sofa and the clothes hanging from a rack. There is so much stuff. The clothes are all beautiful. My heart sinks when I look at the labels, they are definitely dresses I could never afford to buy. And then I begin to feel shaky. They are all a size that might be too small for me, I am one of those always in between sizes. The make up artist has just finished with me and I need to change into my first outfit, before having my hair done. The stylist hands me a skirt. I really struggle with it, it gets stuck at the hips. The stylist looks at me. “Sample clothing only comes in small sizes” she says, shrugging her shoulders. I hold my breath and try to pull the skirt, I fear it might tear and say so. “No, this will not do, take it off”. She checks it, worried I might have damaged it. She gives me another one. It is latex. I can just about squeeze in it, but I need to be helped in. “There” she says “it’s fine, it might stretch too much though”. She is slightly worried. “Try not to sit in it for long periods of time”. I have managed to get into it, but it feels really really tight, I can hardly breathe and I can’t move. I doubt I will eat anything for the rest of the day, not until this whole thing is over, anyway, drinking water will do. I look around, They are all waiting for me. I begin to walk, feeling absolutely huge. As the hair stylist rearranges my hair, I am standing, mindful of the skirt. A thought crosses my mind: should I start losing some weight? Just a little, I only want to drop one size. Would that make it easier on future jobs?

Fashion films began to gain currency in 2009, thanks to ShowStudio and its founder, photographer Nick Knight. ShowStudio has now become established as the ‘home of fashion film’, with productions that are sleek numbers and regarded to be art even though they are made, ultimately, for a commercial purpose – a reminder that the production of art is tied to

a capitalist economic structure. This should not be taken as meaning that the commercial purpose invalidates the art, for the two can coexist (Velthuis 2006)

A fashion film involves dance and music but is firmly located within fashion, which it showcases: the auteur of the fashion film is the fashion house/designer, the interpreter a model. The relationship to the clothes is central to the creation of movement responses by the model and the clothes seem to define the characters the model interprets.

Because of my very long grey /white hair I was chosen to be in a fashion film made by Marie Schuller for ShowStudio 'Fashion Fetish' season, *Visiting Hour* (2012). It marked a turning point in my work as a model. The series of films which included Schuller's was about fetish fashion and fashion as fetish. As Steele has noted, for over thirty years fashion has playfully made use of fetishistic themes and fashion is the ultimate fetish (1996,12), where 'fetish' has Baudrillard's meaning of "fabrication, an artifact, a labour of appearances and signs" (Baudrillard 1981, 92). In the 1980s female eroticism and the possibility of female fetishism were entertained in feminist writings, such as Schor's (1986). For Schor, fetishism offers women "the paradigm of undecidability...by appropriating the fetishist's oscillation between denial and recognition of castration, women can effectively counter any move to reduce their bisexuality to a single one of its poles...Female fetishism is not so much, if at all, a perversion rather a strategy designed to turn the so-called riddle of femininity to women's account" (Schor 1986, 368-369). Erotic desire and constructions of femininity become interwoven in fashion.

The use of an older model to wear fetish fashion turned a stereotype onto its head: fetishism is an expression of aggressive sexuality and in this film it is an older woman's sexuality that is celebrated. There was nudity involved and a final hard-core fetish wear scene, in which I danced wearing a hood. Caryn Franklin wrote a review essay for it, in which she asked: "When the film leads us into a room of fragmented mirrors... questions emerge and answers elude us. Why is adult female sexuality threatening? Why does the mind and spirit of a full-grown woman need restraining? Why does our media condemn women to appear as sexualised girls? And why, the one I ask most frequently...Why does the fashion industry prioritise the infantilised form?" (Franklin 2012)

Working with Schuller was refreshing. We both agreed on the agenda of challenging views of older women as asexual beings. Schuller chose me because she felt that with my long and wild white hair I could convincingly perform an older woman, in her narrative, who positions herself outside the norm, "answering deviously", as de Lauretis suggests: "The only way to position oneself outside of [dominant] discourse has been to displace oneself within it - to refuse the question as formulated, or to answer deviously (though in its words), even to quote (against the grain)" (1984,7)²¹

After working with Schuller I did more fashion and ended up in *The Guardian*, doing 'Fashion for All Ages', a weekly fashion feature that began in 2009 as an attempt to promote the idea of diversity in fashion: models of all ages and different ethnic groups pose for a fashion spread in which they all wear the same type of clothing (eg denims, floral skirts etc), styled to suit their age group. It is a very popular feature for which models, some of whom real 'old hands', with faces that have graced many magazines, are hired from premier agencies. 'Fashion for All Ages' is inscribed in a normative logic. It still tells women what they should (or should not) wear according to their age, but it does so by having greater diversity in the choice of models and more imaginative styling. It is an improvement: one step forward, two steps back, as the saying goes. This is not a glib assessment, but a realistic one, from my point of view, which is that of an older model considering work opportunities. To date *The Guardian* is the only periodical that carries a regular fashion feature which gives older models a chance to be photographed. By seeing more older models, older women may begin to feel that they actually have a presence and a say, slowly dispelling that sense of complete invisibility that affects them. As an older woman, I would

support 'Fashion for All Ages' even if I had never been involved in it as a model, the aesthetics of 'taste regulation' notwithstanding.²²

Since transitioning to fashion modeling, I have become even more aware of the 'ageing gracefully' imperative. I have indicated earlier that older models are more frequently seen, certainly more now than, say, ten years ago. But there is an attempt to uphold a false ideal of beauty for the older woman, based on a semblance of eternal youth. It would seem that it is all right to grow old only if the very signs of old age are obliterated or 'transcended'. There is, in our society, a whole culture of disciplining the body and making it docile, in a Foucauldian sense: "Women discipline their bodies through an elaborate system of self-surveillance; rituals of cosmetics, fashion, hair and skin care, diet, and exercise furnish innumerable examples of how women internalize panoptic relations of power and regulate themselves before an anonymous male gazer (Westlund 1999: 1045) and older models, as representatives of older women, are under pressure to embrace the 'ageing gracefully' dictum to be aspirational.

As a model, I can't help feeling obliged to maintain my distinctiveness, looking after my hair which is my selling point.²³ Am I to blame for wanting to be in work as a model? Having long white hair is what makes me temporarily in demand. Nevertheless, I am able to recognise the contradictions and the tensions this brings, like the occasional thoughts I have had about losing weight whenever I could not get into sample clothing²⁴.

Modeling has made me more aware of the need to 'keep my body in check', as a drastic change in my looks would cause my modeling work to halt. Being a model, even an older one, makes one a co-participant in the 'looks of envy' which characterise the construction of glamour according to Gundle (2008) and this can lead to alienation from one's own image (Soley-Beltran 2012,114).

The danger of age denial and age resistance is serious. Twigg has addressed such issues in her work on clothing and age. Reviewing the literature, Twigg quotes Andrews: "Oblivious to the sources of our strength in old age and to the possibility of self renewal, we blindly create and sustain the conditions of our own self censorship, and ultimately our own defeat... the dignity of the self is replaced by a secret self loathing" (Andrews 1999 in Twigg 2007, 307) reminding us that: "Far from integrating older people into the mainstream, consumer culture may be imposing new and more subtle forms of age-ordering" (Twigg 2007, 303).

Conclusions

As an older model I am aware of being part of a well meaning attempt, by more progressive sections of society, at making older women more visible, specifically addressing older female consumers and their 'grey pound'. At the same time I have found myself having to resist age denial strategies. I have done so partly by allowing my hair to go completely grey and having it very long (as opposed to the bob I was initially asked to wear in order to conform – to be an Anna Wintour²⁵ type, as my booker said). This has turned to my advantage, allowing me to assert individuality and facilitating a reappraisal of physical features associated with older age, such as grey hair.

Older models in fashion and advertising are an expression of consumer culture: "modeling is a form of labour where the models and other cultural brokers transform subjective aspects of modern selfhood – gesture, appearance, presence – into immaterial commodities, adding surplus value to manufactured goods that are then purchased by wholesale buyers or retail consumers...As one commercial photographer bluntly noted 'she sells the stuff by making it desirable' " (Brown 2012,37)

This is not quite the case for either photographic art models or life models. Undoubtedly, market relations are constitutive of the production of art; however the model is not called upon for the explicit purpose of selling in the way a fashion model does with the clothing

she is given to wear. Art modeling is also freer, to a greater extent, from age-ordering, in fact it can effectively counter it. It is for this reason that I hold on to it as something that can powerfully valorize the female older body.

Modeling as an older woman is ultimately about structure/agency and the subject/object divide and how one as a woman/intellectual/body performer can attempt to transcend those binaries and work towards integration and constant transformation, which does not stop with age but, on the contrary, is part of ourselves as 'ageing process' rather than ourselves as 'finished products' that work to combat the effects of time.

"It is the time for many of us to invent ourselves consciously and critically as older women making the place we want for ourselves to the best of our abilities" (Woodward 1995,88): modeling for me has been a way of doing so, an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of appearance and its space, on the performativity of age and on the ambiguity of recognition (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 82). Modeling in my mature years has allowed me to displace fixity encouraging me "to think in terms of multiple perspectives and mobile subjectivities, of forging collaborations and alliances and juxtaposing different viewpoints". (Wolf 1996, 14-15) Or, a way of stepping out, a truly *ek-static* endeavor, as suggested by Butler (2013).

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¹ In Britain in particular this has been to a great extent the result of the work initiated by [All Walks Beyond the Catwalk](#) founded in 2009 by fashion commentators and educators Caryn Franklin and Debra Bourne and supermodel Erin O'Connor. All Walks has been very active in campaigning for diversity and inclusivity, endeavoring to change perceptions of beauty in the creative industries and working at grassroots level.

² For example Twigg in her otherwise excellent *Fashion and Age* (2013) interviews fashion editors but completely disregards models.

³ This was the 'Mirror, Mirror' conference, 29th-30th October 2013. The conference had panels with 85 year old supermodel Daphne Selfe and the Fabulous Fashionistas, all with an average age of 75, earlier featured in a Channel 4 programme (Bridget Soujourna, Sue Kreitzman, Jean Woods) as well as New Yorker Ari Seth Cohen, celebrated author of the [Advanced Style](#) blog featuring stylish older women.

⁴ Older models are a minority but do exist. They are often women who have been working as models for some decades, starting at a young age. But some of them also start modeling late, as a second career. Very few achieve the status of supermodels. The already mentioned British Daphne Selfe and American born Carmen dell'Orefice, now almost 85, are regarded as older supermodels. But there are also others who do not share the supermodel status, and still make a living from modeling. The very fact that there are model agencies, in the US, in the UK and in continental Europe - and now in Singapore - who have older models on their books is indicative of this newer development in modeling. It is also the case that older models may be doing both editorial and commercial work, the separation one finds among the younger ones, predicated on number of models and specific looks, does not

apply to older models. See Mears 2008 for the distinction between editorial and commercial model.

⁵ Most fashion models work for a few years between the ages of 15 and 23, sometimes longer. A few lucky ones achieve supermodel status and can count on a long lasting career.

⁶ Art modeling has been discussed in art historical accounts, although it remains a rather marginal topic. Art modeling is also often conflated with live art performance because some artists model for their own work through self-portraiture eg. Cindy Sherman and/or perform in their own live art installations. For an account of art modeling see Dawkins 2002; Waller 2006 whose work focuses on the *fin de siècle* Parisian art model and Phillips 2006 who conducts interviews among art (life) models in Oregon, US.

⁷ Equity, the British union of performers has a Model Network. Generally, it is acknowledged that a catwalk show is a performance and many models see themselves as performers. Supermodel Erin O'Connor recently emphasized that what she does is performance "What I do with all that sensitivity is to get out on stage and be a performer. I'm addicted to that, completely liberated by it. I have no fear. I come off stage and think, 'What just happened out there?'" (O'Connor in Strudwick 2013, online). The stage O'Connor refers to is the catwalk.

⁸ My modeling encompasses fashion, commercial and art modeling. Modeling is currently my main job.

⁹ My reasons for quitting are very complex but it would be wholly inappropriate to discuss such a choice in the context of this paper. I have done so elsewhere offering my critique of the university as I perceive it (Lopez y Royo 2013)

¹⁰ An anonymous commentator said, in connection with these reflections on modeling, that I am taking "the easy self-interested road out" and my participation in the world of modeling might be just right for me but it reproduces ageist and sexist tropes - what about the implications for a collective feminist politics and for cultural or structural sources of inequality? I mention this because it is yet another example of the misunderstandings that modeling as a profession seems to cause. All I will say is that to give me the burden of elaborating a collective feminist politics is rather excessive.

¹¹ As this is not a paper about modeling I will not give a historical context to art/life modeling. Phillips has dealt with an overview of the history of the profession in her 2006 work, especially chapter 1.

¹² I first started life modeling when I was just twenty and though I sometimes took very long breaks from it, running into years, I have always returned to it for fun, for spare cash, to challenge myself and see how I could use my knowledge of the moving body, acquired through my dance practice, and how I could turn it into active stillness. I transitioned to photographic art modeling in my mid forties.

¹³ There is no question that conducting business through the internet as a freelance model is a new phenomenon that has come to stay and needs to be taken into account when discussing the shifts of the modeling industry. Internet models tend to be regarded as amateurish and agencies claim they have a golden standard and privileged access to castings. However, the success in the US of a model such as Christie Gabriel, who has set herself up without agency representation, commanding several thousand dollars per booking, doing fashion and advertising – she is also author of a popular guide to self-made modeling (2012) - cannot be dismissed. Nor can that, in the UK, of Anita de Bausch, a fetish, alternative model who has diversified into fashion. To discuss such newer developments in full would require a separate paper, it is important, however, to acknowledge such changes, as the role of the model agency is increasingly being questioned. It is this shift that has made modeling more easily available to older women and men.

¹⁴ [Art Mod](#) is one of the many internet sites where art models can be hired by visual artists and photographers. Anyone can become a member and Art Mod has a global remit. Other

sites are more selective, for example the [Register of Artists Models](#), which only operates in UK and, as many models complain, mostly London, requires that models wishing to join should do an audition, consisting of a free life modeling session for which a range of poses has to be prepared

¹⁵ Phillips has a whole chapter on this, 'Sexual work versus sex work' (Phillips 2006, 35-47) which examines what is effectively a double bind for life models. Here I would like to add that I use a different name for modeling and the reason why I adopted a pseudonym, was that I did not want my work as a nude model to be seen by students and colleagues. However, I also write a [blog](#) which I use, as other blogging models do, to showcase my modeling work and at some point promoting my own work as a model became more important to me than worrying about what other people might think of me. As for the fear that photos might be used by porn sites I have had to suffer that ignominy, and ironically it was not photos of me nude but one of me fully clothed, probably stolen from a picture library, which ended up as a pop up ad for an explicit sex dating site. I could do nothing to stop it, so I simply shrugged it off.

¹⁶ This was presented at the Mirror, Mirror conference on 30th October 2013

¹⁷ I find it interesting that Cristofovici should invoke 'age transcendence' and perhaps unwittingly align herself with the discourse of 'agelessness' which I discuss in a further section of this paper.

¹⁸ The golden rules of safety always given to models doing one to one nude work are: check out references, get a full address and phone number (landline rather than mobile), and get someone to phone you while doing the shoot, to check you are OK. Some models take chaperones but this can be a drag and many photographers do not want a third party during the shoot. Some older models believe that this applies to young girls only and are more lackadaisical about checking, convinced that they are immune to sexual predators - the result of having internalized the idea that older women are no longer sexual. I am not so confident in this 'immunity', thus I always take such precautions.

¹⁹ I have heard this said so many times, I now take it with a grain of salt. It seems that all contemporary photographers have been influenced by Mann and/or Newton, somehow.

²⁰ An article about my art nude work appeared in the Guardian (Bruni 6/10/2013). I mention it here because it gave me the opportunity to say publicly why I felt that posing nude as an older model was nothing to be ashamed of even though my work as an art model was viewed, by some, as violating academic norms of professors' behavior.

²¹ The same anonymous commentator I mentioned in an earlier note felt at this point that "freeing the aged body from one set of constraining discourses (ie old age is not sexually desirable) still reproduces another set (women's value is tied to sexual submission)". I am not sure this is a fair comment on Schuller's film, for I see no submission in it. I feel that the film has something positive to say about older women, showing them as sexually active and will leave it at that.

²² It should be noted here that 'Fashion for All Ages' despite its progressive stance rarely uses older models of colour, another reminder of how important it is to challenge the blanket term older woman and indeed older model, as it needs further nuancing, considering the way it intersects with race, for example. I wrote about this in my blog.

²³ I recently fronted a campaign for a hair care range aimed at grey haired women. The founder of the range has built a whole community around the product, through social media, aware of newer discourses on 'ageing authentically', that is, embracing one's grey to counter the negative influence of much contemporary advertising aimed at older women, which encourages them to colour their hair to hide their real age. Yet there is a kind of 'holier than thou' attitude in the going grey movement which I find disconcerting. Even though I personally like having grey hair, I do not believe that women should stop colouring to be 'authentic'. Somehow it seems to me to be another coercion, when in fact one's hair

colour should be a choice. See the discussion on Penny Kocher's [blog](#) on whether one should or should not go grey.

²⁴ I am reminded here of when Sophie Dahl, granddaughter of the famous writer, took up modelling in her teens. She was a statuesque UK size 14 on a 5'10 frame. She subsequently lost a lot of weight and dropped a few sizes, feeling she could not cope with being referred to as 'fat' by stylists and designers. This was before the 'plus size' debate began to shake the industry. There is pressure, in the fashion and beauty industry, to conform to an impossible ideal of slenderness and it is often very difficult not to be affected by it.

²⁵ Sixty four year old Anna Wintour is the formidable editor of American Vogue and artistic director of Condé Nast. Known as a power broker in the fashion industry, her dark blonde bob has been her trademark for many years. In a *roman à cléf*, later turned into a film, *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003), the author, Lauren Weisberger, a former Wintour's assistant, is believed to have modeled the unsavoury main character of the novel, Miranda Priestley, on Wintour herself.