



Alys X. George. *The Naked Truth: Viennese Modernism and the Body.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. Illustrations. 328 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-66998-4.



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Published on H-Material-Culture (September, 2020)

Commissioned by Colin Fanning (Bard Graduate Center)

Hanging prominently above the writing desk of Hermann Bahr (the famous “prophet” of the Vienna moderns) in his Hietzing villa was Gustav Klimt’s *Nuda Veritas* (1899), an allegory for the idea of art as a mirror of truth. Unflinchingly depicting a red-headed female nude, the work set out an iconographic agenda for Bahr’s residence, standing “front and center, at once an invitation and a provocation” for verity (p. 3). Proceeding from the centrality of the body in the works of Bahr, Klimt, and others, Alys X. George’s *The Naked Truth* unearths the neglect of the body in Viennese modernism to reveal an understudied fascination and preoccupation with the physical body. *The Naked Truth* takes cues from Carl Schorske’s compelling series of essays on Viennese modernism weaving together developments in politics, art, and culture—but with an important corrective, and indeed alternative explanatory model. In his landmark *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (1979), Schorske attributed an efflorescence of modern art, culture, and literature to the disillusioned sons of liberalism who, in a collective Oedi-

pal revolt, abandoned political engagement for an aesthetic culture of feeling. For Schorske and his followers, an inward-turning *homo psychologicus* remained the “emblematic manifestation of Viennese culture,” a theoretical framework proving compelling in light of the centrality of the cerebral in psychology, the visual arts, and literature (p. 4). But George maintains that this undue focus on psychological man has obscured the centrality of physiological man in the long arc of Viennese modernism she traces from the nineteenth century into the First Republic—a scholarly elision particularly jarring in light of nineteenth-century Viennese advances in physiology and infectious diseases. As George convincingly argues, “from its very origins, Viennese modernism was as attuned to *homo physiologicus*, the physiological human being, with all its attendant naked truths, as it was to psychological man” (p. 4). But while the body was surely a central trope in modern literature, art, and popular culture, the reader wonders whether the body was truly *the* central thrust of Vi-

ennese cultural production, as the narrative sometimes seems to imply.

The Naked Truth stands out for its pathbreaking interdisciplinarity unifying developments in the “high” arts and culture (spanning literature and visual arts) with developments in popular culture, including film, photography, mass media, and exhibitions, reflecting a preoccupation with the physical body. The book tethers a reexamination of canonical figures in Viennese modernism—a familiar cast of characters, including Arthur Schnitzler, Egon Schiele, Peter Altenberg, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and others—to relative “unknowns,” including writer and physician Marie Pappenheim, painter Carry Hauser, and modern dancers like Grete Wiesenthal and Gertrud Bodenwieser, disparate figures bound together thematically through the tropes of medicine, the body, and postmortem examination. The book impresses due to its true interdisciplinary breadth and innovative chronology stressing cultural continuity between the fin-de-siècle and interwar periods. George locates the prehistory of the modernist fascination with the body in nineteenth-century medical advances: a genealogy that has been elided by the centrality of psychology in Viennese modernism’s creation myth. But shaping Sigmund Freud’s discovery of psychoanalysis, Vienna was the nineteenth-century “mecca of medicine” and anatomical empirical study. Leaders of the Second Viennese School of Medicine privileged dissection, postmortem examination, and close analysis of symptoms to bolster the imperial capital’s reputation as the international center of pathological disease. The author makes the astute observation that Viennese medicine tended to be characterized by a propensity to understand and diagnose illness rather than to treat it: an absence of a therapeutic impulse carried throughout much of Viennese cultural production. It is precisely this tendency for body-centered analysis that George successfully carries through to unite diverse figures and moments in Viennese modernism, from Schiele’s fixation with the bodies of working-class mothers, to

the centrality of autopsies, corpses, and a pervasive vivisection metaphor running through the works of Schnitzler and lesser-known contemporaries, and the centrality of the body of the “primitive” cultural “Other” in the works of poet Altenberg.

The chapters variously cover bodily display in staging of popular ethnographic and public hygiene exhibitions; the metaphorical and real prominence of dissection and postmortem examination in Viennese modernist literature, incorporating canonical figures like Schnitzler (whose training as an anatomist has received increasing attention in recent years) with lesser-known figures like Pappenheim (framed as Schnitzler’s *doppelgänger* who ultimately chose medicine over writing, the opposite of her more famous male contemporary who privileged writing over his medical practice); the prominence of pregnant bodies in the visual arts, literature, and interwar public enlightenment films; and the interconnections between pantomime, dance, and silent film in the turn to bodily gesture as an idealized form of communication supposedly more immediate and truthful than the word. First surfacing in the famous January 14, 1908, performance of the Wiesenthal sisters at Vienna’s Cabaret Fledermaus, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Viennese art, architecture, and design, Viennese modern dance first materialized in the “free dance” pioneered by Grete Wiesenthal, a new type of dance breaking the rigid bodily strictures of classical ballet to seek truth through graceful, supposedly natural movements achieving unity between movement and music, and finally in more radical types of *Ausdruckstanz* developed by Bodenwieser and others turning on a de-familiarization of the natural that staged the body in abstracted, grotesque movements.

The Naked Truth is most stunning in the chapters hinging on thematic, chronological, and disciplinary juxtaposition. Chapter 1, “The Body on Display: Shaping the Other, Shaping the Self,” counter-

points the body of the “self” as examined through interwar hygiene exhibitions with the body of the primitive “Other” as encountered through ethnographic exhibitions blurring the boundary between popular culture, entertainment, and science. Linking both types of bodily display was a nostalgic search for natural, authentic, and idealized bodies, which, by the interwar period, shifted from an emphasis on individual betterment to improving the health of the *Volkskörper* at large: an issue of great sociopolitical importance to the First Austrian Republic, widely likened to a decapitated, impotent body sapped of its physical strength (in other words, the industrial and agricultural might of the provinces). George’s first chapter offers sophisticated analysis of interwar public hygiene exhibitions alongside earlier “spectacular reality” ethnographic shows centering on bodily display, most notably the famed 1896 Ashanti village, a quasi-scientific anthropological exhibition erected in Vienna’s Prater as “very literally a human zoo inside a zoo” (p. 25). Integrating mass press accounts, chapter 1 centers on Altenberg’s fictionalized *Ashantee* (1897) while connecting the Ashanti village to a broader trend for human display manifested in wax museums, dioramas, and panoramas that harnessed science and anatomical knowledge to disguise and legitimize commercial aims. While Altenberg’s series of vignettes on the Prater exhibition has received growing attention from literary scholars, it has rarely been considered in wider narratives and thus George’s nuanced analysis is most welcome. Contextualized against the Viennese’s very palpable fascination with the West African natives—made to act and live in a “primitive” way at odds with actual living conditions at home—Altenberg assumes an outsider position in the text, identifying with the natives as fonts of unspoiled naturalness and purportedly turning the mirror on the hypocrisy of bourgeois Viennese audiences. In one exchange, Altenberg recounts with compassion the mental and physical humiliation suffered by the Ashanti at the hands of the exhibition’s opportunistic orga-

nizers, who denied the Ashantis’ requests for warmer clothing during a cold snap. Ultimately it was the exhibition’s organizers who expected the Ashanti to behave as “exotic” and “primitive”; the natives themselves revealed that, in their homeland, only dogs would live in the sort of huts organizers provided. But even Altenberg’s sympathy had its limits for, despite his attraction to the West African body “as a vaccine of sorts” for the over-civilized, unhealthy Viennese, Altenberg ultimately succumbs to the same objectifying colonialist lens he purports to critique (p. 4). What is most unique about George’s analysis is how this prewar fixation on the body of the exotic “Other” is connected to efforts to improve the health of the interwar body politic. Not only politicians like Julius Tandler, the famed anatomist who headed Red Vienna’s Office for Welfare, but also cultural figures like Adolf Loos are revisited for their writings on public health. Few scholars have emphasized how Loos’s seminal text “Guidelines for a Ministry of Culture” (1919) stressed physical health and fitness as foundational to the new culture of the republic, a program he believed should encompass free meals for schoolchildren and physical education.

As excellent and wide ranging George’s analysis is, her interdisciplinarity sometimes has its limits. In discussing Altenberg’s fascination with the Ashanti, George connects his affinity with the West African natives to his fascination with the bodies of prepubescent girls: both of which served as screens for his projected desire of a “lost, romanticized natural *Heimat*” (p. 44). But here the author seems to be unaware of a wider literature on primitivism in the context of Viennese modernism whereby members of the Klimt Group and associated networks were attracted to folk art, tribal art, and children’s drawings as similar fonts of unspoiled naturalness. The reader expects at least a brief nod to the conflation of folk cultures, tribes, and/or “primitive” peoples given the author’s discussion of Altenberg’s projection of his idea of the “Other” onto European peoples (wherein he compares female Ashanti to Slavic women). Likewise

George's impressive interdisciplinary scope omits architecture, the applied arts, and design. George's discussion of gesture in the origins of Viennese modern dance would have, for instance, benefited from analysis of applied graphic art (such as the Wiener Werkstätte postcard series) depicting pantomimes and other theatrical performances, much of which was executed in an angular, jagged style depicting the body in jerky, marionette-like movements, a fascinating moment in early Viennese expressionism.

How familiar artists, writers, and cultural figures are brought into dialogue with relative "unknowns" constitutes one of *The Naked Truth's* strong suits. The reader revisits familiar classics like Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* (1925-26) with an accent on Fridolin's confrontation with the corpse of his would-be-lover from the previous night's orgy in the space of the Anatomical Institute's morgue, while encountering similar tropes of the body, autopsy, and dissection in haunting poems that Pappenheim published as a young medical student. The theme of botched backstreet abortions is uncovered in the works of Schnitzler and lesser-known contemporaries. Chapter 3 ("The Patient's Body: Working-Class Women in the Clinic") likewise positions the canonical heroes of Viennese modernism in novel ways. Scholarship on Klimt's and Schiele's fascination with the bodies of expectant mothers is hardly new. Yet George brings Schiele's scathing sketches of working-class women from Vienna's Women's Clinic into dialogue with lesser-known literary figures like Else Feldmann (who penned novels identifying with the plight of working-class mothers) and public enlightenment films and literature dealing with prenatal care, public hygiene, and abortion. Through Feldmann and others, the anonymous subjects of Schiele's gynecological clinic sketches (an opportunity provided by Viennese physician Erwin von Graff via collector and critic Arthur Roefßler) are left to speak through the guise of Feldmann's characters, revealing the humiliation and indeed dread facing working-class mothers treated at the clinic

(where, for lack of payment, they were objectified as teaching subjects). One wishes for a somewhat more nuanced discussion of Schiele's early work (under the spell of Klimtian ornamentation) toward an expressionistic idiom in line with recent scholarship emphasizing the expressive possibilities of the decorative surface. While rightly highlighting the stark sterility of the white clinical setting, George's analysis of Schiele's *Portrait of Erwin Graff* (1910) might have noted the expressive contours of Graff's ruddy skin and how bodily surfaces and inward expression were not always in contradiction.

As laudable as it is that such lesser-known figures like Pappenheim, Feldmann, and others are recovered, the book sometimes succumbs to a thematic tunnel vision obscuring broader context. The author's consideration of visual art incorporates well-known artists like Schiele alongside lesser-known contemporaries like painter, set designer, and graphic artist Carry Hauser. Hauser is perhaps best known as president of the Hagenbund, an artist league that surpassed the importance of the Secession in the interwar years for its continued contacts to the international art scene and successor states: information that is critical if the reader is to move beyond the spell of Vienna 1900, as the author wishes. But the author unhelpfully introduces the Hagenbund as "an important artists' organization founded in 1900" and omits such context (p. 102). George introduces the reader to Hauser's graphic art (including the cover art for Feldmann's important 1931 novel, *Der Leib der Mutter*, which ends in its protagonist's demise after failed treatment for a late-term abortion in the same gynecological clinic where Schiele worked) and handles formal analysis deftly. Images do not just serve as mere illustrations but are integrated as pieces of evidence to be analyzed with the rigor of textual sources. George's analysis centers on the predominance of images of "murder, urban overcrowding, illness and returned war wounded" and the stylistic shattering and dissection of the body through futurist, Dadaist, and expressionist forms

of expression (p. 102). While the reader generally finds the author's analysis convincing, one wishes for more attention to homegrown Viennese developments and the broader context of Hauser's work (that is, positioning depictions of bodily dismemberment quantitatively and qualitatively with regard to his broader output). The author points to foreign influences from Neue Sachlichkeit (German colleagues like Otto Dix and George Grosz) and the incorporation of multiple perspectives à la Italian futurist Umberto Boccioni. Not discounting Grosz, Dix, and Boccioni's possible influence, the author should have attended to Viennese sources of influence—the teachings of Rudolf von Larisch on the artistic possibilities of writing, and Viennese kineticism (a movement synthesizing developments in expressionism, cubism, and futurism to visualize the experience of movements and abstract sensations and feelings) and other Austrian practitioners of the New Objectivity similarly focused on healthy and diseased bodies.

Altogether *The Naked Truth* constitutes a most original contribution to the Schorske dialogue on Vienna 1900 and the broader literature on modernist body culture, impressive for its interdisciplinary scope and chronological breadth. Taking on a project of true interdisciplinarity is a most formidable task for which George deserves acclaim, and it is to be hoped that George's work will inspire more studies in this vein.

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Citation: Megan Brandow-Faller. Review of George, Alys X. *The Naked Truth: Viennese Modernism and the Body*. H-Material-Culture, H-Net Reviews. September, 2020.

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