

THE STORY OF THE EYE

Emma Talbot thinks about vaginas and visits Egon Schiele: *The Radical Nude* at The Courtauld Gallery

'Foucault's idea that the pleasures of the body are subject to historically changing social constructions has been influential, especially the idea that pleasures of the body do not exist in immutable opposition to a controlling and repressive power but instead are produced within configurations of power that put pleasures to particular use.'¹

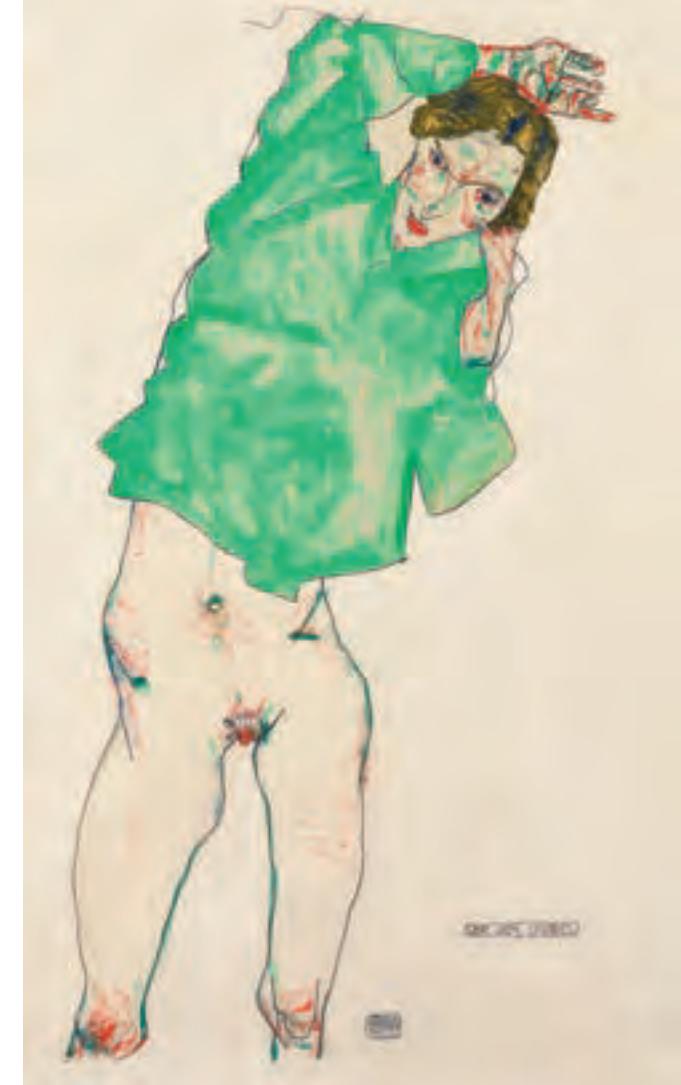
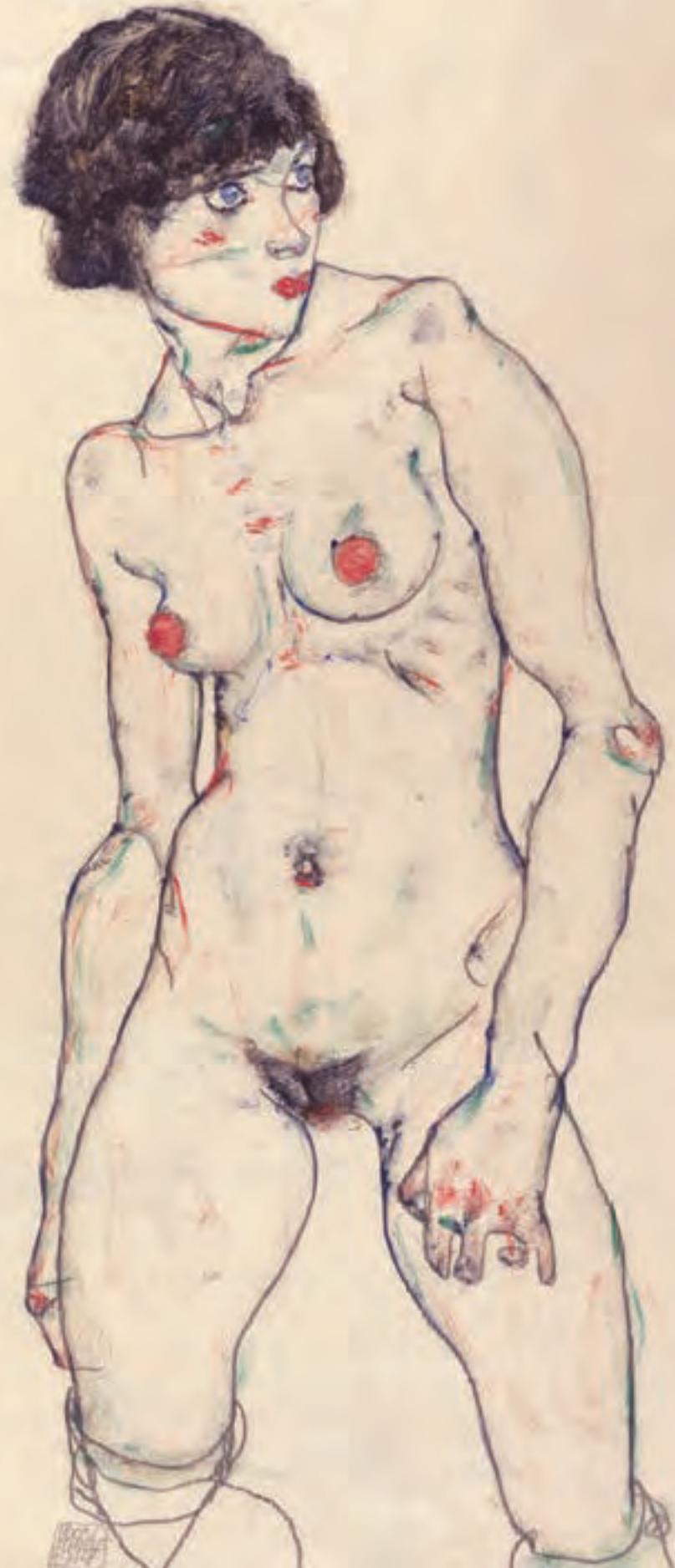
I've been trying to write a text about vaginas. I've been thinking about it since I saw the Egon Schiele prints at The Drawing Room, encased in a vitrine within the soft pink painted walls of *The Naked*s exhibition. The prints were a small collection of Egon Schiele's immediately recognisable figures, lifting their legs to show their genitalia. They were on (from memory) slightly scuffed, dog eared sheets (used, worn and therefore imbued with an intimacy of touch) and what sticks in my mind is one beautifully drawn patchwork of bright pinks that described a vagina.

Probably this is imprinted on my mind as a charged image because I was looking at it at an opening, simultaneously having a polite but stilted conversation with a curator. We were standing over the vitrine of prints and I found myself saying how wonderful this image of a vagina is, which, although truthful, instantly

¹Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*

Left: Egon Schiele, *Standing Nude with Stockings*, 1914, black chalk and gouache, 49x32cm, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg

Right: Egon Schiele, *Before the Mirror*, 1913, pencil and gouache, 48x32cm, The Leopold Museum, Vienna



seemed an absurd route for our already awkward conversation, and frankly, a little embarrassing. Especially as she gave a tight smile and made her excuses to go and speak to someone else.

In ruminating on this, and thinking about the image of the vagina in general, it seems obvious to say that a level of shock is still attached to its visibility. Is it because it can't be seen? It's hidden, under clothes, but also anatomically hidden between legs, underneath the torso. Not sticking out in front like a penis. Not available to be seen except when it is being shown.

What about the images, circulating in the pulp fiction of celebrity press, of actors and singers such as Anne Hathaway, Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears who have been papped showing their vaginas as they get out of limos? These stunts scream 'attention-seeking desperation', and the first issue here is that a vagina on display represents a staggering loss of control (it would be

... one of the most embarrassing things for a woman to accidentally show everyone).

Hathaway managed to stay calm and appeared completely unfazed by the incident before joining her co-stars Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe and Amanda Seyfried on the red carpet before the screening. However, she was later overheard telling *Vanity Fair* writer Ingrid Sischy that she was mortified by the incident and blames her dress for being so tight, according to the *New York Daily News*. She told Sischy, 'I was getting out of the car and my dress was so tight that I didn't realise it until I saw all the photographers' flashes. It was devastating. They saw everything. I might as well have lifted up my skirt for them.'²

Instantaneously, the media-savvy public recognise that this level of revealing is no more than a media stunt, kicking other deliberate wardrobe malfunctions into touch. The incidents seem stage-managed and suggest they

were either driven by a manager's proposal that showing their vaginas would be a good career-move for these celebrities, to garner press coverage, or a weird vanity on the part of the celebrity. Or perhaps they are driven by a fear of death (of fame, notoriety) that prompts a kind of abject risk taking. Once you have been snapped falling over drunk, your private selfies and sex tapes have gone viral, you probably think you have little to lose by sending a self-controlled, even if self-destructive, 'fuck you' to the press.

'Dancing a frenzied Charleston by herself, (she) showed everyone her legs up to her cunt, and when the other girls were asked to dance a solo in the same way, they were in too good a mood to require coaxing. They did have panties on, but the panties bound the cunt laxly without hiding much.'³

Looking at the images, I'm struck by their lack of sensuality. Both Lindsay and Britney's shorn vaginas suggest the delinquent availability of a slutty juvenile. Britney's c-section scar, smudged makeup, bitten nails and visible hair extensions and Lindsay's orange fake tan only enhance this trailer-park aesthetic. Lindsay and Britney play the dirty girls (mistaking attention for love), while Anne Hathaway's flashing is more demure. Anne's little landing strip of pubes is only just visible, reminding us that she can be lusted after in a sexual way, but that she is quite wholesome (in case you saw her as Fantin in *Les Miserables* and were unsure).

I keep thinking of Anaïs Nin's letter to the collector of erotic literature who commissioned Henry Miller and a group of writers to produce pornographic stories:

'Dear Collector: We hate you. Sex loses all its power and magic when it becomes explicit, mechanical, overdone, when it becomes a mechanistic obsession. It becomes a bore. You have taught us more than anyone I know how wrong it is not to mix it with emotion, hunger, desire, lust, whims, caprices, personal ties, deeper relationships that change its color, flavor, rhythms, intensities.'⁴

²As reported in *The Observer*, 12 December 2012

³Bataille, *The Story Of The Eye*

⁴Anaïs Nin, *The Delta of Venus*

Egon Schiele, *Woman with Black Stockings*, 1913, gouache, watercolour and pencil, 48x32cm, private collection, courtesy of Richard Nagy, London

What is my attitude to porn? I find myself torn between fascination (with how other people have sex, the types of women portrayed, what is deemed sexy at it most raw and the size and shape of penises) and a kind of analytical detection. I can't switch off an academic approach to looking. I find myself wondering about the exploitation of the women – which I find irritating on one hand because I think it indicates a puritanical streak in myself that I don't like, but on the other hand I suppose it should be reassuring that my feminist sensibilities are so ingrained. Thanks to the internet, porn is probably more widely available and easy to find than ever and the strategies of the mainstream media often mimic the signs and symbols of the pornographic image (albeit with often glossier results). The traditional anonymity of porn is counterbalanced by the proliferation of contemporary celebrity sex tapes and selfies. By revealing more are we moving towards intimacy or away from it? Do explicit but widely available images of the vaginas of celebrities reduce the power of the image?

Ben Dover holds the video camera and his disembodied estuary voice chats amicably to a single woman, filling in some story that explains her desire to get fucked by a couple of men. Ben's likeable manner, verbal intimacy and obvious delight at the women he films ('Oh my God! You're gorgeous! You're beautiful!') are totally disarming, as he zooms in and spreads open their vaginas with his fingers. One woman goofily gasps 'I've never done this before!' but Ben reassures her 'this is normal!'

The open display of female genitalia suggests an invite to penetrate. Seeing a vagina requires a kind of displaying to be happening (legs open) and that type of open displaying suggests an offering, an availability.

For the sake of a schematic narrative rationale, two blokes with moustaches and mullets (like the Chuckle Brothers breaking bad), pretend to fix a leaky pipe in a woman's kitchen. As they kneel looking under the sink, they ask the woman to pass them a wrench.

Egon Schiele, *Woman in Boots with Raised Skirt*, 1918, black crayon, 43.5x28cm, Private collection, courtesy of Richard Nagy, London

The next shot is a cropped close up of the woman's totally bare cunt, as she crouches over the tools, with her skirt up and no knickers on.

This image provides a spectacular disjunction. Not only because of the sudden and improbable rupture in the supposed narrative by the surreal implantation of the up-close body part, but also because the low-quality camera equipment loses a great deal of detail, lending a stark roughness to the image.

The vagina operates as a motif. It is not about what we are actually seeing, but what it's display suggests. The story was stupid, the figures unattractive, but the motif operated as a short hand note about breaking through codes of behaviour. In the film, the display of female genitalia to strangers provides an anticipated shock, based on the understanding that it is an open invitation and this is what porn makes available. This bald offer punctuates the pretence set up by the banal narrative of plumbing. Shock incites a physically reactive response.

The pretence of decency is active in our society, but at the same time, our society's images are laced with the signs of sexuality. The testing and breaking of barriers around the explicit seems to be a game that is continually being played.



.... 'To feel eroticism is to be fascinated like a child that wants to take part in a forbidden game.'⁵

The exhibition at the Courtauld is called *Egon Schiele: The Radical Nude*. It's a group of Schiele's figurative drawings, either self-portraits or eroticised portraits of friends, lovers and wives (and did I read that right, his sister? Should I mention Leigh Ledare's pornographic photographs of his mother?).

What is it that makes these drawings radical? Is it to do with the kind of looking that is going on?

The caress of the eye over the skin is so utterly, so extraordinarily gentle and the sensation is so bizarre that it has something of a rooster's horrible crowing.⁶

The drawings are the antithesis of the classical life-room artist/model set-up. For the most part, they seem to capture a one-on-one experience that is charged. Often drawn on what looks like brown wrapping paper, or a paper that is unevenly cut — hasty and to hand, these drawings hold a palpable frisson of immediacy. Were the often semi-clothed figures drawn whilst undressing?

Often, the female figures are looking back, holding the gaze of the viewer. Sometimes they look knowingly, as in the drawing *Woman in Boots with Raised Skirt* (1918), one eye obscured by curls of bed-head hair, lifting her legs and tilting her hips to show a view up her skirt of her vagina.

What is apparent about this Schiele exhibition is how much death looms present over the group of works, especially in the self-portraits. The mottled purpling bodies look almost at a point of entropy, rot setting in. Their colours like the greens and blues that become visible when meat goes bad.

The proximity of death is echoed in the drawing *The Sick Child* (1910). I made a note: 'The pallid face of the ill child with her pudenda haloed... the intact innocence of one who never got an opportunity to fully explore the uses of her body. Her hands raised to her mouth in a fearful gesture. Fear of something that can't be seen...'

The drawing at first suggests a curious kind of opportunistic looking but also reveals a painful truth about the figure—the limited life of the body before it's expiry- whilst reminding us, with the radiating white marks around it, of the vagina's potential to give birth to life. The drawing also reminds us of the complex morality that wraps the living body, and the analytical, anatomical looking that seizes the body after death. Schiele was imprisoned and charged for displaying erotic images where children could see them, and numbers of his drawings were publicly destroyed. His studio in Neulengbach had become a place for 'delinquent' children to hang out.

'A man fascinated by eroticism is like a child before his parents. He's afraid of what might happen to him and he never stops until he has a reason to be afraid... afraid of being scolded and even punished in an unbearable way'.⁷

I guess the radical nature of these drawings is to do with the display of the genitalia, which is linked to a puerile curiosity about the body and sexuality. It seems that testing these boundaries is a thrill attached to both delinquency and sex. It strikes me that in addition to availability, the images of the celebrity's vagina are meant to suggest youthfulness. The image of the vagina is a youthful image; the sexual image is a living image.



⁵Georges Bataille, interview on 'Literature and Evil'

⁶Georges Bataille, *The Story Of The Eye*

⁷Georges Bataille, interview on 'Literature and Evil'

Emma Talbot, *The Story of The Eye*, 2015, watercolour on paper