

# Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



*Special Issue – Models and Sitters: the Art and Aesthetics of Posing*

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‘Used and Amused’: On Having Been a Real-Life Model, Muse, Performer, Poseur, and Sitter

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**Abstract:** On the occasion of this special issue focused on Models and Sitters, I am presenting what Dawn Kanter (in this issue) terms a ‘textual account of the sitter’. With this in mind, I revisit a particular era in my life (primarily 1993-1999) when I regularly served as a model, muse, performer, poseur, and sitter. In fact, there was sufficient material to organise ‘Used and Amused’ (2000), an exhibition focused on ten collaborations, for which I typically self-improvised. Rather than simply detail these events, I’ve woven various ideas developed by each of this special issue’s contributors into this article, so that my narrative here augments their papers.

## I. 'USED AND AMUSED' (2000) AT JAN BAUM GALLERY, LOS ANGELES, US

A daughter who was distributing her deceased mother's things recently wrote me to ask whether I'd like to have *Sue Spaid Portrait in a Pink Dress* (1999), which she had found in her mom's storage. Angie Bray was a conceptual artist, not a figurative painter, so I was initially a bit nonplussed about what this could be, but of course I welcomed its addition to my art collection. When it arrived, I realised straight away that this drawing was in response to *Cloud Princess* (1999), an actual portrait of me by Caitlin Mitchell-Dayton. Both were exhibited the following year in 'Used and Amused', an exhibition of artworks by ten artists for whom I had served as the subject of their art, at Jan Baum Gallery in Los Angeles.

To distinguish models, muses, performers, poseurs, and sitters, I revisit artworks included in that exhibition plus several collaborative projects from that era. Initially, I couldn't figure out why so many artists sought me out; only that collaborating might be great fun, and it was. In perusing photos of the resulting artworks, I can see that I personified what Aurélie Debaene terms 'the model as performer' in all but one case, the case when I was simply a sitter, and a pretty unhappy one at that.<sup>1</sup> Back then, my curatorial focus was participatory art, which could explain why artists invited me into the mix.



a. 'Used and Amused' installation shot (left to right: Dave Muller, Don Bachardy, Robbie Cavolina, Ole Jørgen Ness, and Antonio Gómez-Bueno), 2000, Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles, US

b. Caitlin Mitchell-Dayton, *Cloud Princess*, 1999, Paint on paper and Angie Bray, Sue Spaid Portrait in a Pink Dress, 1999, Pigment on cotton

Figure 1: Portraits of Sue Spaid

I begin with sitters, since this role has historically been associated with portraits, either of royalty (Titian's *Charles V at Mühlberg*), scholars (Hans Holbein the Younger's *Erasmus*), business leaders (Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors*), or religious leaders (Diego Velázquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X). Although a gallant Charles V straddling a galloping horse hardly counts as a 'sitter', Titian painted this commanding portrait while also completing a seated portrait, so he had plenty of face time. Painters who earn their keep from commissions must make their clients happy. As we shall soon see, artists who lure volunteer sitters readily sidestep reciprocal agreements. This paper offers what Dawn Kanter terms a 'textual account of a sitter', whereby I provide meaningful details related to the event of modelling, as well as the eventual artwork.<sup>2</sup> After focusing on sitters, I explore three types of muses that have inspired artists' oeuvres, one of which is a poseur. I next discuss performers who literally activate artworks on behalf of artists. And finally, I turn to the model as performer.

## II. SITTERS

For me, the distinction between sitters and models is not that models are attractive or that sitters lack agency, but that models actively strike poses, whereas sitters remain composed. The model who takes a seat to steady the pose becomes a sitter. Both models and sitters confront their portraitists and thus contribute content. This is especially the case for portraits painted from life, but as we shall see, it is even the case for portraits painted from photographs, whose subjects appear freeze-framed. Don Bachardy (b. 1934), a Los Angeles portraitist who was Christopher Isherwood's partner of 33 years, occasionally solicits people to visit his Santa Monica home so that he can paint them. In 1998, he invited me over, as he had heard I had plans to depart Los Angeles. He recommended I wear something attractive, but comfortable, since I would be seated awhile, probably more than an hour. I remember that I had just started a strict diet and travelled for an hour cross town via two buses from my Hollywood apartment in the early afternoon and then returned via two buses in the dark. He kept telling me that he was nearly finished, which gave me hope since I was getting hungrier and hungrier. When he finally finished a handful of watercolours, he offered me several 'celebratory' drams of Cointreau and cast me out onto the street feeling quite tipsy. Since I had spent at least five unpaid hours staring out a window for him, I was surprised that he did not offer to drive me back home. Perhaps he too felt tipsy. I despised the ensuing portraits, though experts tell me that Bachardy is renowned for painting people's future selves. Quite frankly, this only makes it worse. I have no clue where these watercolours are or whether any were ever reproduced in books, but that whole ordeal suddenly became worthwhile when the idea to organise the exhibition 'Used and Amused' galvanised two years later.

I must admit, however, that this was not my first seated portrait, though it was my first painted from life. In 1973, my parents commissioned portraits of their three daughters, ages 11, 8, and 4, from a painter based in Rome. Of course, I expected that he would paint us from life and was disappointed that we had flown there simply to be photographed. Perhaps meeting us in person inspired him a little. When the paintings arrived, I was surprised to see each of us sporting a different coloured blouse, since we were wearing identical white blouses that day. That was my first experience with artistic license. And like Bachardy 25 years later, his painting of me accentuates my undergarments, making it my first experience with artistic licentiousness. This trio still hangs in my dad's living room.

For another modelling session, I spent far more time reposing than sitting. For whatever reason, Robert Cavolina, who at the time made his living teaching life-drawing, was keen to paint a portrait of me reclining in a two-piece swimsuit on my striped living-room couch. Not only did he opt for photoshoots over life drawing, but he positioned my back to him, while I gazed into a hand mirror, as if to emulate Simone de Beauvoir's stereotypical female who in 'making herself an object, believes she really sees herself in the glass', while the male feels and wishes himself an 'active subject'.<sup>3</sup>

Cavolina's painting resurfaced when I decided to close my modest, though influential gallery Sue Spaid Fine Art three years later. Since I was the gallery receptionist, anyone who came to the gallery could chat with me, which inspired several artists to propose collaborations, which I unquestionably accepted. Not only had I forgotten about his painting, but since I didn't imagine that it came to fruition, I was quite surprised when he suggested we premiere it at the closing. Presented during a special closing ceremony, lovingly branded 'Last Day for Art' (1995), the painting remained under wraps until the moment of reveal, upon which the audience audibly gasped. Minutes later, there was a bit of a performance, as Dr. Dick Baum, the husband of aforementioned gallerist Jan Baum, marked up the painting to show how he would reshape my curves were he a cosmetic surgeon rather than an internist. Apparently, he knew his subject well, since his marks were both agile and decisive, much to my consternation. Given the circumstances of this cheeky painting's unveiling, it appears to exemplify a 'presentation painting'.<sup>4</sup> Despite Cavolina's efforts to engage Dr. Baum in a bit of cosmetic surgery, I never considered Cavolina's antic nor Dr. Baum's trimming 'fat shaming'.<sup>5</sup> It was as much a critique of 'Hollywood' ideals of beauty as it was a spoof of cosmetic surgery. Incidentally, Dr. Baum still stores this painting, which the artist gifted me years later.

Tzachi Zamir remarks how the artwork's being created 'is the excuse that enables two people to be locked into a live encounter, whereby looking at another, at someone who will not move, overcomes the ephemeral manifestation of all embodied interactions. It is only at that point that art is made'.<sup>6</sup> Does the fact that I was a child sitter or that both adult portraitists were

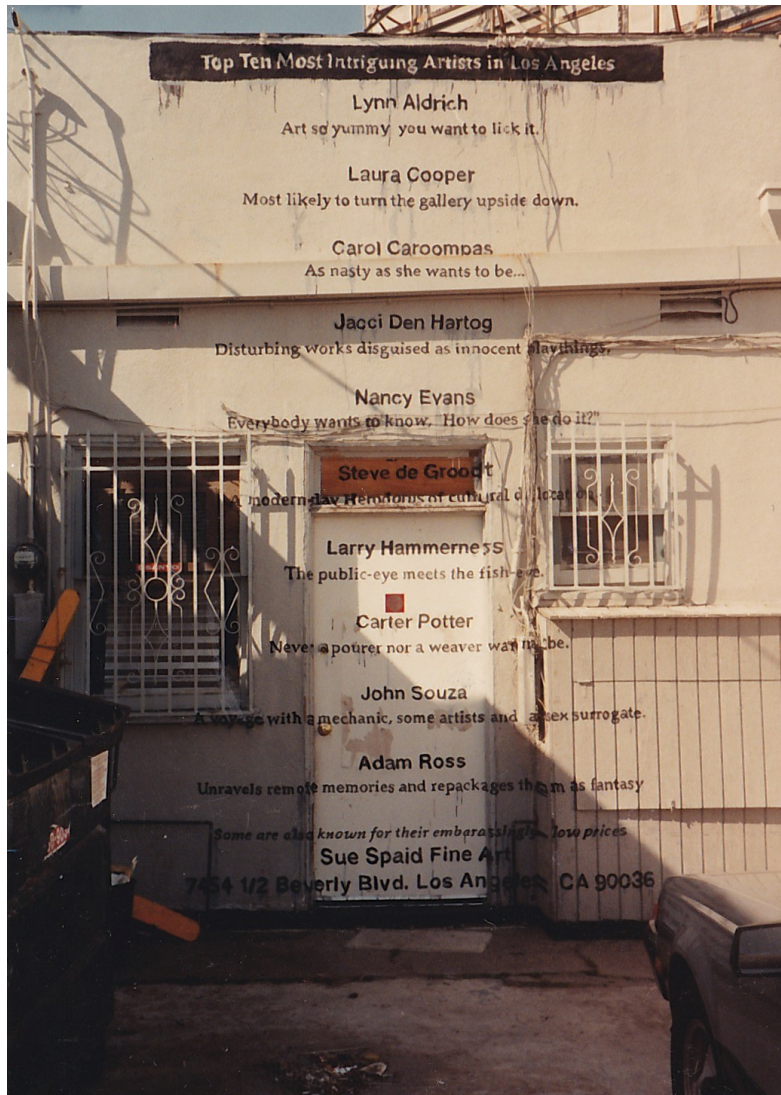
gay men who avoided eye contact render what Zamir terms the 'erotic bonds' that spark the 'moment art is made' null and void? Unable to muster 'an erotic bond', these portraitists ad-libbed the 'look of intimacy': a tween's undergarments, a provocative odalisque in repose, and female lingerie peering through the sitter's navy-blue blouse.

### III. MUSES

A muse can be a person, place, or thing whose physical appearance so fascinates the artist that they regularly revisit the subject. Classic examples include Marie-Hortense Fiquet Cézanne whom Paul Cézanne painted 27 times between 1869 and the late 1890s and Georgia O'Keefe whom Alfred Stieglitz photographed 300 times between 1917 and 1937. Similarly, Cézanne painted dozens of Mont Sainte-Victoire paintings and watercolours, while Claude Monet created 250 water lily paintings over three decades. A third kind of muse is an object or idea that motivates artists to produce, such as Sherrie Levine's appropriating artworks by Karl Blossfeldt, Gustav Courbet, Walker Evans, Man Ray, and Stieglitz among others or Joseph Kosuth's quoting Ludwig Wittgenstein. Unlike models and sitters, muses are not always aware of the artist's gaze. And on that level, muses need not manipulate nor guide. They unwittingly share (or simply lay bare).

In 1992, Steve Hurd painted *Top Ten Most Intriguing Artists* in Los Angeles, an outdoor 2.5-metre high mural that covered my gallery's entire rear. Its text appropriated a wry advertisement that I had placed in that era's ever-popular art-rag *Coagula*. Each artist's name was followed by a catchy sales pitch that captured their oeuvre. The tag line was 'Some are also known for their embarrassingly low prices', a self-deprecating dig inspired by *Coagula*'s having complained in their pages that my gallery's prices for Carter Potter's artworks were too low. Nearly a decade later, Hurd made a 130cm x 130cm painting that mimicked my gallery's post-it notes, which bore the motto, 'Enrich Your Mind. Treat Your Body'. Even though I had consented to the mural, I considered it exemplary of institutional critique, whereas the painting, which didn't bear my consent, seemed such a generous gift that it nearly led me to tears.

A few months after my gallery closed, I curated 'Postmarked L.A.', an exhibition of nine Los Angeles artists, for P.P.O.W. (named for gallery founders Penny Pilkington and Wendy Olsoff) in New York City. Its two-sided invitation printed in purple featured an image of a meter stamp postmarked 'Los Angeles June 1, 1995' across the front and exhibition details across its back. Soon after, Dave Muller painted *LA in NY in SF in LA in SM in NY in LA* (1995), a one-sided painting that perfectly mimicked both sides of the card. His painting featured a colourful US postage stamp plus his name, mailing address and postmark in fuchsia overriding the exhibition details painted in mint green instead of purple. Incidentally, that exhibition's accompanying



**Figure 2:** Steve Hurd, *Top Ten Most Intriguing Artists in Los Angeles*, 1992, Paint, Sue Spaid Fine Art, Los Angeles, US

essay was titled ‘Mint Green’. Since I handwrote Muller’s name and address on his invitation, this painting, which was last seen in 2002 when Eileen and Peter Norton purchased it, serves as a double portrait of that invitation and my handwriting.

In 1998, I crafted an unusual opening outfit by combining a tunic top that my grandmother had sewn from pink Indian sari silk with a skirt that I envisioned being a white satin sphere. A metal hoop helped to keep the whole thing puffed up (more or less). Even though my outfit didn’t quite work out as planned, my wearing it must have inspired Mitchell-Dayton, since she painted a 275cm x 122cm portrait in oil on linen that is apparently now lost or painted over (she can’t recall which). While the photos taken of me for the portrait indicate short hair, the resulting portrait suggests longer hair held back with a

clip; once again artistic license. According to Kanter, John Berger considered portraits post-1940 artist-centric, rather than collaborative, which definitely applies to portraits by Pablo Picasso, Alice Neel, Lucien Freud, Willem de Kooning, Alex Katz, and Georg Baselitz.<sup>7</sup> I imagine he would find Mitchell-Dayton's portraits just as 'important a portrait' as those on view in London's National Portrait Gallery.<sup>8</sup> Similar in effect to the modernists Berger identified, her portraits confound expectations, yet they're totally collaborative, since she gains inspiration from poseurs' projected identities, especially her students' Instagram posts (confided in a private communication). For me, poseurs are agential muses who actively create and distribute images that inspire artists to fold said images into their artistic practices.

This brings me back to Bray's 'conceptual portrait', a 4-metre long piece of white string folded in half and lightly-painted pink on the top half to evoke my tunic, while the rest is left as is to convey 'cloud', except for two orangish ends indicative of ankles/sandals. In light of Hans Maes' definition of a portrait, as quoted below, I worried that Bray's portrait might fail as a portrait, despite her title's explicit effort to demarcate her intention.

Some object *x* counts as a portrait only if *x* is the product of a largely successful intention to create a portrait. The maker of the object intends that *x* is a portrait only if (a) they have a substantive concept of the nature of portraits that largely matches the substantive concept held by a group of prior portrait makers, if there are any, and (b) the maker intends to realise that substantive concept by imposing portrait-relevant features on the object.<sup>9</sup>

Given the clarity of Bray's intention, (b) succeeds. By contrast, (a) succeeds only if there is some 'group of prior portrait makers' known for producing barely visible, abstract portraits. More recently, Maes added, 'If it's intended as a portrait, and has "portrait" in the title, it will almost always count as a portrait on my account' (confided in private communication). He further clarifies, only those who 'have no idea what a portrait actually is' or 'made no serious or genuine effort to make a portrait' fail to produce a portrait, so Bray is safe for now.

Had Bray's daughter not found this titled object carefully preserved in an oversized tube, I'm sure she would have tossed it. Typical of conceptual art, it's barely visible in its installation shot. These days, *Sue Spaid Portrait in Pink Dress* hangs in our 'feminist bedroom' to the right of *Another Party Dress* (1994), Mitchell-Dayton's portrait of Courtney Love sporting a fluffy hot-pink mini.

#### IV. PERFORMERS

As briefly mentioned above, my curatorial practice in the late nineties addressed participatory art, though my primary focus was open systems, as

opposed to closed systems. This led to two exhibitions ‘Action Station: Exploring Open Systems’ (1995) at the then Santa Monica Museum of Art in Santa Monica, US and ‘An Active Life’ at the Contemporary Arts Center (2000) in Cincinnati, US, which included Carsten Höller’s *Flying Machine* (1996). There thus seem to be two kinds of performers, those who bring artworks to life and those who engender outcomes the artist didn’t necessarily envision. Either way, the artist must envision which visitor type (or muse) is likely to physically engage a particular artwork. For example, Höller’s artworks are closed systems, yet the experiences they proffer, attract participants differently. While thousands of museum visitors have enjoyed his many slides (since 1998), only the hardest zealots waited hours for a ten-minute ‘naked float’ in a public space (New Museum, 2011), though far fewer paid to sleep over in a museum (Guggenheim, 2008), yet many more suddenly fell in love upon entering a room (Carnegie Museum, 2001). Potted plants served as his muse when he tested whether they preferred riding slides alone or accompanied by human beings (Pallazzo Strozzi, 2018).

During this period, wearable art was also in vogue, which meant models were needed to activate sculptures for live audiences. To this end, I was asked to perform outfits in ‘The Gómez-Bueno Spiritual Fashion Show’ (1993), the ‘Food House Fashion Show’ (1994), and Lun\*na Menoh’s ‘He(ad)dress’ (1997).

While I was working for Special K in Los Angeles, Lynne Berman and Kahty Chenoweth presented a four-year survey (1993-1997) of their open-ended projects. Having transformed the gallery into a modu-port for interaction and learning, they performed work-actions during gallery hours, which included panel discussions. This led to my spontaneous ‘Brown and Yellow Make Green’ talk, which they videotaped and added to their exhibition.

Numerous artists invite passersby to participate in elaborate photo-ops, much like old-timey photo boards with spaces for faces, or Peg Brand Weiser’s series ‘Picture Yourself Here’ (2006-2009), which consists of ten Feminist Visual Parodies, which guide viewers to ‘understand feminist art and intentionality’.<sup>10</sup> In 1999, I attended the opening of a group show at the Swiss Institute, where Teri Hackett and I posed for a ‘Chan/Schatz’ photo op that I later exhibited in ‘Used and Amused’. Höller’s flying machines, carousels and slides all provide spectators wonderful photo-ops. Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger’s 2002 exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center featured a hanging bed, suspended amidst all sorts of flowers and ponds feeding coloured crystals growing everywhere, which provided an even more elaborate photo-op. When Erwin Wurm exhibited at the CAC in 2005, he provided visitors with numerous photo-ops as they engaged his ginormous objects. Since he was still in town, I asked him to sign a Polaroid of me drowning in one of his over-sized red pullovers.

The one opportunity that I noticeably passed up was the chance to engage Marina Abramović during *The Artist is Present* (2010) at MoMA. I thought



long and hard about whether I could bear to stare at Abramović for hours on end. In the end, I couldn't bring myself to do it, partly because I had already been under her spell in 1996 when I watched her video at the Groninger Museum, Groningen, Netherlands. During this video, she militantly demanded spectators to sit at attention, take off their shoes, do this, do that... and that was enough, really Marinough!

## V. MODEL (AS PERFORMER)

The first artist who approached me was Antonio Gómez-Bueno, who told me that he wanted to role-play the character of an evangelical priest whose religious slogans were sewn onto people's outfits in order to broadcast his message far and wide. Either he or we (I can't recall who exactly) found an amazing zip-front Pucci dress from the 70s at a thrift store. Inspired by the zipper, I think it was me who came up with the slogan 'Gómez-Bueno Detours Lust', which he had sewn onto the dress in giant pink letters. In 1992, we did a photo shoot at the Getty Villa (the museum was not yet open) and he took some very hilarious photos of me posing with fountains, sculptures, and paintings, including James Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels*. In some cases, I posed like a serious art historian with my arms crossed in front, while at other times I was downright silly, kissing statues, and acting risqué. Strangely, people totally ignored our antics.

While Ole Jørgen Ness was in Los Angeles to build up his exhibition at Gallery 207, he mentioned that he had always wanted to paint a tattoo on a human being. And I jumped at the chance to be his canvas. He painted an elaborate black tattoo that started around my right temple, trailed down my cheek bone to my chin and behind my ear, down my neck and all over my back, spilling out across my right shoulder. I was wearing my black Maison Martin Margiela maxi dress, that I bought on sale at Maxfield for \$99, which made the dozens of resulting photos quite glamorous. The sensation was so great that I hated to wash it away. He presented the resultant photos as a mini-sprawling during 'Used and Amused'.

In 1998, I was invited to play a cameo role as a museum board member (clad in 'all black') in Martin Durazo's MFA film that featured several porn stars. My role in his film was minimal and uneventful. However, Durazo had invited the award-winning photographer Anna Summa to create film stills. Despite the film's predictability, we had a lot of unpredictable fun off-set. Not only did Summa capture me in action: jumping, hopping, and posing à la Philippe Halsman's *Jump Book* (1959), but I spent about ten minutes posing with one of the female adult actors. She was fearless and adventuresome and we created several amazing images together, of which I own prints, though Summa kept the negatives.

While living in New York City in 1999, Alysse Stepanian recruited me to be her performance art partner. In 1999, we performed *scourge.org*, which



**Figure 3:** Antonio Gómez-Bueno, *Gómez-Bueno Detours Lust*, 1992, Pucci dress, Photographs

inspired the video *Field* (1999), which features me in my black Maison Martin Margiela maxi dress. During that spring, photographer Robin Michals asked to shadow me for a day, while she snapped photographs for her portfolio. The two photos she sent me to exhibit in ‘Used and Amused’ capture me trying on clothes and gesturing madly, so she clearly wanted an active body to give shape to her dynamic imagery.

To explain why it matters who poses, Debaene distinguishes three types of model poses: ‘the guided, self-improvised and collaborative’, each of which I experienced.<sup>11</sup> With Gómez-Bueno, my poses were self-improvised for sure, though it was clearly his artwork. The same holds true for Ness. By contrast, my role in Durazo’s film was entirely guided, yet the film stills made with the adult actor and photographer were totally collaborative, though Summa holds all rights to the images. The project with Stepanian was definitely collaborative. I wholeheartedly agree with Debaene, who considers the tendency to overlook the model’s role as underestimating the model’s role in informing the artist’s intentions. Aili Whalen makes a similar claim regarding the dancer’s influence on the choreographer. No doubt, ‘Identifying and understanding model contributions can change and enrich our appreciation of

artworks'.<sup>12</sup> Debaene offers the example of the exhibition 'Posing Modernity' (2019), which made a point to delve into archival material in order to identify previously unknown Black models.<sup>13</sup>

## VI. REVELATIONS

Although I've never really stopped being the 'artist's assistant', including being called upon to install artworks all over the place, my role as 'model as performer' was comparatively short-lived, primarily 1993-1999. It ended abruptly with the millennium, perhaps because I became a museum curator in a new city, which put me in a professional position that seemed less approachable than when I was a gallerist or art critic in places where I was friends with most of the artists. In retrospect, 'Used and Amused' capped an end to an era. I now realise that the curator's role resembles that of the model, only the curator aids the artist's presentation of their artwork, which influences its public reception; whereas the model influences its actual creation. Both roles are significant, under-estimated, and underpaid.

One thing is for sure, artists depend on the world for stimulation and the model as performer is hugely stimulating. Already 30 years ago, the Rhode Island School of Design had an article in its Bulletin praising the artistic role of studio models. The author notes, 'One might assume that the artistic process begins as the pencils hit the page but in actuality the model has already begun the creative process. Rather than simply taking or assuming a position, a good model designs a pose with a knowledge of negative space, foreshortening and intention intact. In essence, modelling is an art form in itself'.<sup>14</sup>

Not only did I take Life Drawing at the School of Visual Arts in New York City when I was in my early 20s, but I modelled briefly in my 30s for Cavolina's life-drawing class, though he wouldn't permit me to undress. While at SVA, I remember a woman's body changing dramatically every time she breathed. I could never have imagined anything so dynamic as her breathing body. I was constantly drawing, erasing, redrawing, erasing... I had real difficulties capturing in two dimension what I was experiencing in four dimensions.<sup>15</sup> I owe this invaluable (and memorable) experience to the fact that she was 'naked, fat, and fabulous'.<sup>16</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

1. Debaene 2021, 7.
2. Kanter 2023, 117.
3. Weiser 2023, 197.

4. Kanter 2023, 119.
5. Eaton 2023, 180-181.
6. Zamir 2023, 146.
7. Kanter 2023, 113.

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|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 8. Berger 2018, 165.                  | 13. Debaene 2021, 8; 2023, 137. |
| 9. Maes 2015, 315.                    | 14. RV [ca. 1992?].             |
| 10. Weiser 2023, 202.                 | 15. Zamir 2023, 154.            |
| 11. Debaene 2019, 214–231; 2023, 123. | 16. Eaton 2023.                 |
| 12. Debaene 2023, 137.                |                                 |

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