

## Other Criteria. Problematic Nudes

### Thwarting Formalism

As soon as attention began to be paid to the content of the *Demoiselles*, and no longer merely to its form, some of Picasso's comments, to which little heed had been given, began to be relevant. For instance, he was supposed to have said the following about the title of the work:

*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. This title exasperates me so much! It was Salmon's idea. As you know, at the start it was called *The Brothel in Avignon*. Do you know why? Avignon has always been a name that sounded familiar, that had something to do with my life. I lived a stone's throw away from *Calle d'Avignon* (spelt thus in the original). That was where I bought paper and my watercolours. And, as you know, Max (Jacob)'s grandfather was from Avignon. We made so many jokes about the painting like what if one of the women were Max's grandmother, another Fernande, a third were Marie Laurencin, all together in a brothel in Avignon. (Bernadac and Michael 1998, 60).

In this respect we must remember that there were various different versions of the title. This was a normal occurrence as, until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was not usual for paintings to have a fixed title. Or, more precisely, the author did not give it a special title until it was purchased or exhibited when it would acquire a merely descriptive title and thus be recognised as a commodity or merchandise. The title of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* was not really established until the work was to be shown publicly for the first time in the Salon d'Antin in Paris in July of 1916 in the exhibition "L'Art moderne en France." This appears to have

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been a compromise invented for this exhibition because until this moment the work invariably appears with the uncomfortable designation of brothel. In fact, André Salmon in *Propos d'Atelier* in 1922, observes that the canvas had been spontaneously baptised earlier as “The Philosophical Brothel” an intimate joke between close friends; Picasso, Apollinaire who was probably the author and Salmon himself (1922, 16). Other sources mention the title as *Les Filles d'Avignon* (The Girls of Avignon) or *Les Femmes d'Avignon* (The Women of Avignon), which, according to Hélène Seckel, were in all probability the names normally used by Picasso when presenting the work to his visitors (Seckel 1994, 250, note 4). In certain books and articles the reference to Avignon appears in Catalan, *Avinyó* and the title is sometimes referred to as *Las señoritas del Carrer Aviñyó* (that is, of Avinyó Street). This designation originated not only from Picasso's reference to the street where he used to bought his painting materials when he lived in Barcelona. It also referred to a quote published by Christian Zervos (1942, 10) where he also said that before World War II, Picasso explained to him “that he painted a memory of a brothel in Barcelona in the *Carrer Aviñyó* that was close to his parents' home.” However, in another declaration to Zervos, he denied the canvas was related to the brothel in *Carrer Aviñyó* in Barcelona: “Would I be so pathetic as to search for inspiration in such a reality [...] as literal as a specific brothel, in a specific street of a specific city?”<sup>1</sup>

Let us digress for a moment and explain that all these references have produced the confusing babel of names in various languages that naming the work still causes today. As we have mentioned earlier, Kahnweiler mentions Picasso's art supplies shop and the brothel which he had probably visited on more than one occasion in the street in Barcelona in a mixture of French and Spanish, *Calle Avignon*, and at other times in Catalan, *Carrer Avinyó*. However, the most common title in any language, leaves off the word “calle” (street), even in Spanish bibliography and keeps the French spelling of Avignon, as we have done for this book. English bibliography tends almost always to keep the original French title of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* as does the Spanish although less frequently. In any case, it has also been pointed out that the title, only for use by close friends, was probably the name of the French city for its historical links with prostitution. Once upon a time the discontent with the Avignon schism associated the city with the Popes of New Babylon, or with the kingdom of whores, in reference to the dissolute life of the Pope of that See.

In any event, these alternative titles are what inspired Leo Steinberg to entitle his famous article on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* “The Philosophical Brothel”

<sup>1</sup> Avowal to Zervos in the 1930s, cit. In Bohm-Duchen 2001, 200. The quote continues thus: “The worst thing is that when I am asked about this and I say that it is not true, people still think that the girls are in a brothel in the carrer d'Aviñyó. In fact and everybody knows, this was a story invented by Max Jacob, André Salmon and other friends of our group—it does not matter who—and referred to Max's grandmother who was in Avignon, where his mother had also lived [...] We joked that she ran a *maison de passe* (brothel) there. It was all just made up, like so many others”.

in 1972 in which he severed all ties of the painting with the evolution of Cubism and its consideration as the first link in the avant-garde movement. Moreover this text represented an authentic interpretative revolution of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* by giving much more importance, even all the importance, to the content and not the form. As a result of this, and as we shall see below, he dealt a final blow at the critical formalist discourse on the work. It was not coincidental that it happened at a historic moment, just when an interpretative climate, doubting authority, legitimacy and even the pertinence of formalist analysis of modern art was beginning to prevail.

The Copernican revolution in the history of the interpretations of the work, subject of Leo Steinberg's text, very probably happened because for decades a series of questions that nobody had formulated openly, floated in the atmosphere. Sooner or later these questions on the formalist studies would have to be asked. They could have been asked in the following way. Is it possible that, when faced with a painting full of naked women who were not pretending to be anything other than the prostitutes they really were, the content should be disregarded? Is it possible that this might be a secondary motive and not given the least importance, as formalism had done with it? If all, or mostly all, that interested Picasso was tackling the formal problems of the painting, why then had he chosen a subject as sensitive as prostitutes? A subject, undertaken here in such a way, attacked the established convention on female nudity, one of the most recorded subjects in the history of western art. This was because it was tantamount to admitting that the naked women who appeared on the canvas this time were not representing goddesses, nor mythological beings, nor allegories... No, they were literally what people were seeing: naked women and, specifically, prostitutes. In 1907, the one place where one could be sure of seeing naked women quite clearly was in a brothel. The operation to desublimize female nudity, that had in fact begun at the start of Modernism and to which some painters like Manet had contributed significantly, went much further in *Les Demoiselles*.

Strange as it may seem, given the pertinence of these questions today, they were not explicitly asked until 1972. This was when doubts about the formalist focus were considered invalid or insufficient to explain the roots of *Les Demoiselles*—and thus the origin and initial evolution of modern art—gave way to “other criteria” of analysis. The new criteria would be charged with converting the “naked problems” that up till then had monopolised the attention of the critics into something that could well be described as “problematic nudes” as we shall see further on.

Before we broach the question of the revolution in the critical discourse on Modernism that Leo Steinberg's “Philosophical Brothel” signified we must pay tribute to an earlier incident of prime importance. On the 24 June, 1970 on BBC Radio 3 John Nash presented a programme about *Les Demoiselles*<sup>2</sup> in an interpre-

<sup>2</sup> The written version was published in Nash 2004: 61–6. There are five versions of the text published between 1970 y 1988.

tation that moved away from the hackneyed formalist clichés. He established a connection with the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of female nudity, centred in the harem; with the myths of Pygmalion and Medusa that, according to Freud, were closely linked to connotations of castration and petrification. In short, these and other matters posed a novel challenge to the idea that *Les Demoiselles* as a painting aimed at solving purely pictorial problems. The critics ignored this text for decades, until first William Rubin and later Hal Foster (1993) and Yves-Alain Bois recovered it (2001, 31–54). It contains the added interest of overtaking some of the most original interpretations of the work hitherto presented, as well as setting a clear precedent for Leo Steinberg's ideas.

In his lecture for the BBC Nash proposed for the first time that the shock *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* provoked in the spectator was not a response exclusively to challenge the formal conventions that it presented but because the women shown are “terrible.” He acknowledged the place of honour given to the work but calls attention to the absence of texts about its disturbing violence, as though its intrinsic ugliness and barbarity were only a product of a formal, artistic rupture. Nash is the first to say something that later critics repeated tirelessly: “I have never liked this notion of modern art as a great experiment and the artist as a pseudo-scientist; and Picasso didn't either [...] So to suggest that the *Demoiselles* is ugly and difficult because Picasso was moving toward a revolutionary investigation of form and space begs so many questions” (Nash 2004, 61).

Nash wondered what exactly Picasso wanted to say and why had to be said in such a violent and primitive mode. Beyond whether this work was the source of Cubism, Nash placed it in the context of his production, and in the first place as a replica of 19<sup>th</sup> century nudes. Here he establishes a very interesting distinction between the tradition of nudity before and after that century. He explained that the earlier nudes normally evoked an action while those of that century referred to a frame of mind, a mood (take for example, the difference between Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* and *The Turkish Bath* by Ingres). It is as if we were to say that previously the nude had always catered to the “demands of the script,” until the nakedness of the 19<sup>th</sup> century dispensed with this pretext. *Les Demoiselles* would be thus both a response and a challenge to the normal 19<sup>th</sup> century nude genre. Nevertheless, at the same time, it was the authentic successor of *The Turkish Bath*, because of the display of bodies more than its dramatic composition. An exhibition of bodies alludes to the Harem and is responsible for nude genre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century being characterised by its emphasis on the erotic aspect. We, like Nash, understand that Picasso would have managed this state of 19<sup>th</sup> century nudity as a window of nude women to a degree of exacerbation that ended by revealing its authentic essence. We might say it forced him to reveal all its flaws.

In Nash's opinion, and those of other commentators of the work, the key figure of the composition is the young woman on the lower right because she is the most extravagant, grotesque, primitive and unhuman. And if the formalism, from Kahnweiler to Golding, had found in her the very origin of Cubism, from Nash's

iconological viewpoint, this young lady played a fundamental role because if, in the sketches, she is gazing and offering herself to the sailor who fills the centre of the scene, when he disappears in the final canvas, “Picasso turned the dramatic focus of the picture on the relation between the *Demoiselles* and the spectator” (Nash 2004, 63). This idea, crucial at the present time for shedding light on the meaning of the work, was revealed two years later by Leo Steinberg, but as we can see, it had been pronounced for the first time by Nash in the article commented on above. It was also Nash who pointed out for the first time the ambiguity of this figure: it is up to the spectator to decide if what he or she is seeing is her back or her navel. In this case the girl would be sprawling with legs apart, showing her genitals to the spectator, posture obviously inadmissible according to the moral and artistic conventions of that time and even of those today. In summary, for Nash, this young lady of the gorgoneion head is an “aesthetic indecency” that metaphorically transports the spectator, frankly and directly to the obscene performance offered initially to the sailor.

Nash is suggesting the possibility of linking the young women to the Pygmalion myths, the sculptor who fell in love with the marble statue of Galatea he had carved and whom Aphrodite, in a pious gesture, brought to life. Or with Medusa, the monstrous figure capable of petrifying with a glance any who dared meet her gaze, unless of course they looked only at her reflection, as did Perseus in order to murder her. In conclusion, Picasso would have been “a Pygmalion who set out to create not a Galatea but a Medusa (in such a way that) the erotic ideal of the nineteenth century was metamorphosed into a threatening monster whose nakedness can be seen only indirectly” (Nash 2004, 64). Nash adds some very interesting conclusions on the content of the painting. With *Les Demoiselles*, art itself became a metaphor for prostitution. The *madame* draws the curtain and the spectator sees a table laid for a hungry man. But he himself is in danger, threatened by ferocious sexual predators whose appetency is too terrible to be seen in the nude. In the painting woman is destroyed, converted into something horrible and reconstructed in a controllable fashion. Medusa may only be seen in her reflection. Nash’s ideas persuade us to see it in this way: the women are the beginning of something terrible that must be reflected upon, just as beauty was for Rilke.

Lastly, Nash analyses each figure in the scene as well as the role of the curtain and the mask. The curtain, associated since ancient times with pictorial skill, is also the way to protect a masterpiece, a constant in western art collections. But this painting speaks to us of revelations. Thus, the young woman on the left is charged with drawing back the curtain, with revealing, and because of this it is a surrogate of the painter himself. The two nudes—at centre left—that are a parody of the ancient western tradition of Beauty with a capital B, are docile, inert and pathetic. They are merely creatures of art from whom we appropriate their aesthetic contemplation. One of them has pushed aside the draperies to show her crotch but her genitals, as in any well-mannered art exhibition, are not functional. The two on the right are wearing masks, a powerful metaphor for the genitals, a more revealing fig-leaf than any direct representa-

tion of the female sex organs. It is clear, Nash (2004, 65) assures us that “these women are not, specifically could not be, objects for disinterested aesthetic contemplation—but neither are they mere objects of desire.” And in this allusion to Kantian aesthetics, Nash deals the deathblow on the short-sighted formalist view that had seen none of this in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. He concludes with a statement that would be proverbial for later feminist critique: “The masks signify that they too have appetites, possibly..., no, certainly, more powerful, more dangerous than the appetite of the male.” Woman as the *praying mantis*. *Les Demoiselles* does not reflect. It articulates, it exemplifies. But it does not articulate the author’s personal pathologies, rather something that is in itself pathological and crucial in Western culture.

#### Stories of Sex and Fatal Seduction. The Inescapable Version of Leo Steinberg

As we have mentioned, after John Nash’s preparation of the terrain, the honour of having redirected the discourse on *Les Demoiselles* fell on Leo Steinberg in his famous article of 1972, re-edited in 1988, entitled “The Philosophical Brothel.” The title alone was an indication of the radical transformation in the interpretation of the work impending. And with the article, published in two parts, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* was converted in a painting about the force of the sexual encounter, a work centred on the relation between the naked prostitutes and the client-spectators of the brothel to such an extent that all its formal characteristics were sexualised too. Their previous status of being the solution to the fundamental pictorial problems would now be considered almost an irrelevant matter. Green said that Steinberg envisaged a Picasso who beckoned to a spectator who was unlike the others, who calibrated the amount of Cubism or Pre-Cubism implicit in the work. Steinberg suggested we tend to perceive what our eyes are trained to see. So, if for the last thirty years we have trained our eyes to jump from *Les Demoiselles* to Cubism, perhaps a different perspective will accustom us to seeing “the naked problems” of Picasso as human figures again” (Steinberg 1972a, 25), as naked women. As Christopher Green (2001, 9) pointed out, after Steinberg *Les Demoiselles* is not so much the inaugural moment of Cubism as a new form of confronting sexuality in an artistic environment, a form whose immediacy had no precedents in the history of painting.

We must bear in mind the prevailing climate when the turning point came in the interpretation of *Les Demoiselles*. Steinberg’s appraisal did not happen in a vacuum. On the contrary, it could be considered truly “epochal” as long as we take into account that it was Steinberg himself who was charged with introducing these crucial changes in the articulation of the discourse on Modernism that would put an end to the formalist narrative on it. In the field of historiography of modern art, Steinberg is the equivalent of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg in the 50s and 60s for their artistic evolution. If the creative attitude cultivated by both neo-Dadaist artists would mark the passage of modern art to contemporary art, Steinberg’s position as critic would mean

abandoning the “orthodox narrative of Modernism” that still prevailed in favour of a type of discourse that, when all is said and done, would be qualified as postmodern. The need to set aside the importance of the *how* and begin to appraise the *what* weighed heavily. It is, therefore, not in the least surprising that the turning point implicit in Steinberg’s way of seeing things was intimately linked with the positive valuation that he himself would make on the first steps of Neo-Dada movement. It was precisely a paper by Steinberg about Rauschenberg’s work that raised the alarm on the pressing need to begin to use new criteria to interpret Modernism.

Steinberg had formulated the pressing need for this change in the critical consideration of the artistic phenomena in another article famous among specialists of 20<sup>th</sup> century art: the lecture of 1968 known as “Other Criteria” that would be also published in 1972 under the title of “Reflections on the State of Criticism.”<sup>3</sup> It contained an audacious and perfectly founded criticism of the idea of Modernism articulated by Clement Greenberg, whose doctrine at that moment had become a true dogma both for the critics and for artistic practice itself. In fact, it had played a fundamental role in the prestige and development of artistic trends such as Abstract Expressionism and Post-painterly Abstraction in the United States. Steinberg’s analysis is perhaps the first blow dealt to the hegemony of “the orthodox narrative of Modernism,” written mainly, but not exclusively, by Greenberg. It would also be the final blow. Steinberg had detected, furthermore, that for more than a decade there were artists who did not fit in the path drawn by this narrative that contemplated almost exclusively formalist criteria: one of these was Robert Rauschenberg, the subject of study in the article. Both he and Jasper Johns signified the return of a content and meaning in works of art which took them beyond the self-absorption that formalism had imposed on them. This was as liberating for the Neo-Dadas as for the critics of modern art.

Steinberg’s article “Other Criteria” opens with the following consideration (2002, 7): “I don’t mind the positive work done by the formalist critics but I dislike their interdictory stance—the attitude that tells the artist what he ought not do, and the spectator what he ought not see. Preventive aesthetics I call it.” After Steinberg these “preventive aesthetics” were thwarted and with them the authority and legitimacy of the formal discourse. The consequences of the new criteria naturally went beyond the transformation of the meaning of *Les Femmes d’Alger*. The whole of modern art and its interpretations would be affected by this standpoint that, furthermore as we have mentioned, had not established its strengths exclusively here.

We must bear in mind that in the 70s for example, Peter Bürger (1977) published his “Theory of the Avant-Garde” which, from Marxist presumptions dispatched the validity of the formalist understanding of the essence and evolution

<sup>3</sup> First published in *Artforum* 10, 7, March 1972. We use here the edition published in *Robert Rauschenberg. October Files*, n. 4, The MIT Press, Cambridge-London, 2002.

of avant-garde art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And if Steinberg warned about the need to pay attention to the content, Bürger dismantled the idea, so dear to formalism, of avant-garde being equivalent to the autonomy of art, arguing that, on the contrary, any definition of avant-garde would have to be considered for its efforts in merging art and vital praxis and for subverting the foundations of the art-institution. He defined the “art-institution,” that avant-garde either denied or criticised, as the “apparatus of production and distribution of art and also of the ideas about art that dominate at a particular time and that essentially determine the reception of the works” (Bürger 1977, 63). This meant that not only did avant-garde artists engage themselves in matters more serious than the mere formal renovation of painting, but that the receptor of the art consequently saw himself conditioned by the ruling ideology. In other words, formalism emerges here as an ideology despite Modernism surrendering itself to its aesthetic deliberations on formal aspects as if there were no room for any ideological constraints in this task that appeared to be simply a question of pure artistic technicism. This was a death blow to the formalism personified by Greenberg, as decisive as that delivered by the American critics themselves. Later we shall examine its repercussions. Now let us focus on the iconological discourse on *Les Demoiselles* that Steinberg had just introduced.

Steinberg considered it pertinent to disobey the unwritten rule of examining *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* with questions that only dealt with formal matters. Thus his departure point rests on the approach and attempts to answer a series of questions concerning key matters on the content of this painting: prostitution in the first place. For example, would the decomposition of volumes in planes and the means of flattening the pictorial space have had the same effect had subject been some men playing cards? The possible significance of the Baroque or the extraordinary theatricality of the scene, in second place, for a canvas that could just as well have settled for being the expression of the flat character of the pictorial surface. Consider other matters: the anatomies of the women as possible metaphors of the states of human existence; the intensity with which the painting appeals to the spectator (the largest in history, except for *Las Meninas*); and the significance of two styles clearly recognisable in the canvas. And lastly, Steinberg searched for answers to three more questions. Was the first painting of the 20<sup>th</sup> century merely a coarse repetition of the hackneyed theme on the contrast of vice and virtue and death as a result of sin? Is it true that faced with Picasso's own motivation, only objectivity and indifference intervened? What does the series of drawings that lead to the final state of the painting reveal exactly? Obviously Steinberg considered that if something merited investigation, this should not be limited just to the final version of a work, according to the mandate of the formalist critics.

We do not intend to summarise all Steinberg's answers to these questions. The density of his text cautions against trying to recapitulate in a way that would do it justice. Furthermore, what interests us here is to point out those that were more decisive or had greater repercussions in the subsequent evolution of Modernism discourse.



If for formalism the idea that *Les Demoiselles* demolished pictorial types of secular deceit was crucial, now from the iconological perspective, it is a work that explores frankly other, more human and even more carnal, types of truth. It was Steinberg who realised and put forward for the first time the idea that “to wear the face of of truth, Picasso’s return to nature in the *Demoiselles* must be ironic—not to Arcadia, but to city stews” (Steinberg 1972b, 43). In this type of critical appreciation, the savageness of the young women begins to reveal itself as a brutal response to the Arcadian idyll that Matisse presented at the Salon des Indépendants in 1906 under the title of *Bonheur de vivre*.

Steinberg emphasises, above all, and this seems to me to be the main idea and one with more future in his proposals, the great immediacy of the work in that the spectator is forced to become conscious of himself as he gazes on it. He ventures to say “The unity of the work, famous for its formal, external interruptions, internal stylistic disruptions, resides above all in the startled, consists basically in the astonishing consciousness of a spectator viewer who sees himself seen” (Steinberg 1972a, 21), feels himself observed (by the young women in the painting) in his action of observing. The young women are situated in independent spaces, they do not look at each other nor is there any interaction between them. They simply turn abruptly towards the spectator who is scrutinising them. The naked women have become prostitutes in pursuit of the male client. When we realise this, we are also aware that the spectator has been transformed. He has gone from being the cold reflexive analyst of the painting’s problems to being a sexual and implicitly masculine spectator.

Acknowledging the foregoing, the considerable evolution of the sketches will really show the passage of the representation of a sexual subject seen from a distance to a sexual subject that demands the direct implication of the spectator. Contrary to Barr, Steinberg is of the opinion that the sketches are indispensable because, only by following their sequence, is it possible to appreciate that a sailor and a student have disappeared to make way for the spectator, now converted in a client of the brothel: the table, shaped like the prow of a boat, is thrust into the brothel from the spectator’s position, sharing the penetrating phallic energy of the client-spectator.

For Steinberg, therefore, the work was never a mere *memento mori*, nor a warning about the punishment of sins but contained the idea of “cold, distant apprenticeship facing the demands of sex.” The pivot of the content is the gaze, or if you prefer, the meeting of the gazes.

In the preparatory sketches the personages on the scene (a man and various women) react to the arrival of one of them, the student. And under these circumstances the spectator simply looks on at the scene from outside (as has always been done throughout the history of painting). However, and this is the crucial point, in the final work there is a transformation. The two male figures have disappeared and only the women remain looking not at any figure on the stage but having turned 90° to stare at someone who is directly in front of them, with no attempt to look elsewhere, offering them no way out:

In the *Demaiselles* this rule of traditional narrative art yields to an anti-narrative counter-principle: neighboring figures share neither a common space nor a common action, do not communicate or interact, but relate singly, directly, to the spectator. A determined dissociation of each from each is the means of throwing responsibility for the unity of the action upon the viewer's subjective response. The event, the epiphany, the sudden entrance, is still the theme—but rotated through 90 degrees towards a viewer conceived as the picture's opposite role. (Steinberg 1972a, 21).

This is somewhat akin to what happened in *Las Meninas* or the portraits by the Dutch group but the painted women who stare at their observer are naked and professional sex workers. I would add that they are, without doubt, related to Manet's *Olympia*. The discrepancies, the absence of stylistic and scenic unity do, in fact, converge in the spectator who bestows unity on the painting: "the crux of the work is the terrible gaze of the *Demaiselles*, especially the monstrous figure on the right." From Steinberg's point of view the figure of the medical student,<sup>4</sup> in some of the sketches entering from the left and causing a reaction in the gazes of the young women on the scene, acquires a fundamental role. Steinberg allowed himself to doubt whether the skull carried in some sketches was an allegory of death as a result of the deadly sin of lust. Consider, however, that a medical student represents the only member of human society capable of gazing on a skull with thoughts other than death. In any event, entering a brothel whether carrying a book or a skull would seem inappropriate for the time and place. The medical student should be considered, therefore, as a symbol of knowledge or, better still, of theoretical and nonparticipating analysis. And the skull therefore, the lethal effect of the analysis, against the pitcher (*porrón* in Spanish), an ithyphallic and vital element that accompanies the sailor, the other male figure on the scene. Steinberg also points out that in some of the earlier sketches the medical student, on the left, who appeared to be opening a curtain, could in fact be closing it, indicating the end of a session. Be that as it may, his disappearance from the final version of the painting implies, as we have said, that the scene is given a 90° turn and the role previously played by the medical student is now taken on by the spectator. Finally the spectator is invited to be part of the experience of the scene: "The change seems drastic; from an allegory of man meeting woman, to the adventure of a collision with art. As if the whole had been shunted from the subject of sex to that of painting itself—which is, in a sense, what has always

<sup>4</sup> William Rubin specified that Picasso did not identify the figure as a medical student until 1972 in a private communication to Rubin and which Rubin then passed on by letter to Steinberg (Elderfield 1994: 44 note 154). At the same time Picasso would have revealed the unpublished *carnet* in which the student is holding the skull, something that the artist had mentioned in 1939 to Barr but that had never been seen until that moment. And although the number of preparatory drawings in which the student appears with a skull is relatively paltry compared to the number of times he is represented with a book, Rubin considers it significant that later on, Picasso would particularly remember the presence of the skull in both his comment to Barr and to Rubin himself.

been said, that the picture has become ‘significant’ as painting only” (Steinberg 1972b, 40) as long as the spectator is seen not as an intruder but as a participant.

It is curious that the reasoning about the sexual content of *Les Demoiselles* should lead Steinberg to a conclusion not so far removed from that of the formalist historians who saw zero degree of painting in the work. It is, however, this last condition of the spectator as participant and part of the spectacle or action that strictly speaking, differentiates from the previous critic’s discourse. We must remember that he had even compared the pictorial space of the painting with an unmade bed: “Although symbolically proposed for the sense of sight, the space implied by Picasso is a total initiation, like getting into an unmade bed” (Steinberg 1988, 65). Was this like Rauschenberg’s *The Bed* or Tracey Emin’s famous work?

After reading Steinberg’s essay we conclude that we, the spectator, become clients; the prostitutes gaze outwards from the painting and come to rest on us. We stand before a work that involves the contemplator in a more direct and perturbing way than we could ever have imagined. The work seems ready to demonstrate that this place that the spectator had always occupied, outside the canvas, where he/she had felt comfortable and safe, was beginning to suffer turbulences. In other words, it was no longer a safe place. And “the whole picture, form and subject together, strives against educated detachment” (Steinberg 1972b, 41) searching for concurrence between the act of painting and the act of loving. The act of loving is confronted, in its most turbulent, Dionysiac phase, states Steinberg who, at one moment in his essay, defines the painting as “the vision of five bedevilled viragos whose sexual offering, visually inescapable, is decivilizing, disfiguring and demoniacal” (1972b, 43). The encounter with the whores (and now we must begin to use this term openly) in the work is, thus a traumatic encounter that cancels out the grotesque fiction of the emotional distancing of the painter before five naked women. Contrast, continues Steinberg, the painting by Pietro Michis entitled *Zeuxis choosing a model for his Helena from the young women of Croton* where the cold professionalism of the painter, by virtue of his proficiency and aesthetic distancing from the nakedness of the female flesh of the five beautiful girls, can be seen (Steinberg 1988, 74).

Seen thus, we appear to be destined to relinquish for ever the sobriety of the art critic who coldly uses his formal tools from that distance to which Ortega referred in his *Deshumanizacion del arte*, to offer us a very different attitude, intended to measure all human, far too human, matters. In the end, the distant analyst is succeeded by someone who tangles himself in the subject of the canvas as if he were climbing into an unmade bed..., another’s bed to be sure.

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