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Changes in Gender Approaches—The Phenomenon of Neo-Prudery

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Abstract

In everyday perception, there is a growing sense that feminism and the #MeToo movement are "going too far," while sexual "deviations" appear overly prominent. Women's rights have undeniably expanded, moving from the confines of academic discourse into the wider public arena. At the same time, however, the acceptance of non-heteronormative identities—though framed as a progressive development—is increasingly contested, in some cases even facing legislative backlash. Judith Butler's latest book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024) also addresses this phenomenon. Our relationship with the naked body has, in recent years, taken on paradoxical dimensions. Bodily and personal boundaries are no longer limited to physical functions and touch but have come to encompass visual representation itself. Since the 1990s, significant regression is evident: while pornography attracts an ever-expanding audience, the public display or artistic representation of the body faces increasing restriction. Society seems to have swung to the opposite extreme, adopting a markedly rigid stance on nudity. This development is encapsulated in the rise of "neo-prudery." Social media policies banning nudity exemplify this trend, with repercussions not only for contemporary art but also for the canon of art history—and at times, even for museum programming. This study analyzes neo-prudery through the works of Valie Export and Marina Abramović, as well as cases of banned artworks.

Keywords: gender, neo-prudery, LGBTQ, feminism, social media, art

A New Prudery—or the Re-tabooization of the Body

Questions raised in the context of the works of Valie Export and Marina Abramović[1]

We often assume social change is increasingly positive: the world appears more liberal, the situation of women has improved, and diverse sexual orientations seem to enjoy greater acceptance. LGBTQ communities, in particular, are more able than before to express their identities. Nevertheless, this narrative of progress is far from linear.

Consider the case of Iran, for example: in the 1960s and 1970s, women could wear mini-skirts and shorts in public without difficulty, their hair was loose, neither hijab nor chador was imposed (Fülöp, 2025). Following the 1979 revolution, however, compulsory veiling was introduced. The Iranian-born American artist, Shirin Neshat, who had left Iran in 1975, was profoundly shocked by these transformations when she returned in the 1990s (Zomorodi, 2023). This confrontation with a radically altered society inspired her photos of the *Women of Allah* series and several video works created around 1999–2000, including *Turbulent*, *Rapture*, *Tooba*, and *Zarin*.

At the same time, compared to the 1990s, a significant backlash can be observed in the so-called "Western" world. For example, in 2023, Pride marches were absent from 92 countries around the world, and in 62 countries, homosexuality remains criminalized. In March 2025, Hungary also amended its assembly law to effectively ban Pride; however, the mayor of Budapest later granted it local approval. Within Europe, apart from Hungary, Pride is currently banned only in Belarus, and more broadly, in Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

Recently, in the United States, during the Trump presidency, support for LGBTQ rights has been curtailed through the withdrawal of federal funding from organizations advocating such freedoms.

As noted in the abstract, Judith Butler addresses this phenomenon in her recent book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (2024). Building on this discussion, the article investigates the emergence of neo-prudery through the work of two feminist artists, the Austrian Valie Export and the Serbian Marina Abramović, both of whom have been the subject of major retrospective exhibitions in recent years. Notably, many of their earlier projects could scarcely have been realized under present conditions, which underscores a paradox: in the interim, pornography consumption has become normalized.

[1] Valie Export—Krakow, MOCAK (Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow) permanent exhibition from 29.06.2023, Vienna, Albertina, until 01.10.2023. Marina Abramović—Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, 14.03.2024–07.14.2024/Zürich, 25.10. 2024–16.02.2025.

> Nowadays, I'd be arrested… Our society has become very restrictive, and it is becoming even more restrictive, it is a step backwards compared to the 1970s. … You are no longer allowed to do anything in the public space other than walking, standing, looking. (AFP, 2023)

commented the Austrian performance artist Valie Export to the French *AFP* before the opening of her 2023 exhibition in Vienna.

In Europe, attitudes towards the body began to shift in the late 16th century. Previously, the body was conceived as "open"—where the microcosm of the body was seen as part of the macrocosm of the world, and bodily activities were performed in the presence of others without the notion of privacy. However, this conception gradually gave way to a more "closed" view. This transformation first appeared among the elite and, by the eighteenth century, had permeated all levels of society. The emergence of privacy, as we understand it today, was closely tied to the rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Bahtyin, 1982). Furthermore, as privacy gained importance, various bodily functions and manifestations came to be regarded as undesirable or hidden from view. At the same time, visible practices were regulated by new norms of dining, cutlery use, hygiene routines, and evolving codes of dress (Lafferton, 1997). Through this process, the body's boundary increasingly came to signify the boundary of the self.

Over the past four centuries, significant changes have occurred in how individuals perceive both their own bodies and those of others, particularly in relation to hygiene, clothing, sexuality, and, more recently, human rights. Today, the principle of bodily self-determination is widely affirmed, at least in official discourse. The 1990s marked a high point of freedom regarding the body, accompanied by significant progress in both theoretical reflection and the legal recognition of bodily rights.

This period also saw increased attention to abuses and acts of violence, which had long remained concealed since these had not even been considered crimes. These abuses are not the result of freedom; on the contrary, freedom has made it easier to expose them. Yet, the exposure of violations, especially those involving women and children, has also produced new caution and restraint. As a result, the body has once again become taboo in many contexts, even as sexuality and sexual references permeate public discourse. This paradox is underscored by sociological research. A recent survey conducted by *AddictionHelp.com* indicates that pornography consumption is steadily rising: in the United States, 67% of men and 41% of women (according to self-reported data) watch pornography online (Miller, 2025).

There are an estimated four million pornographic websites worldwide. For example, one of the largest platforms alone registered 42 billion visits in 2023. The influence of such widespread availability is reflected in research showing children are exposed to pornography at early ages, typically between 9 and 13. In Hungary, surveys indicate that children first encounter pornographic films at an average age of 11. Similarly, according to an EU study, pornography-related terms rank as the third most common online search category among children aged 7 to 10 (Séllei, 2019).

This widespread exposure contributes to what can be described as a hyper-sexualization of culture, the tendency to interpret virtually all phenomena through a sexual lens. As a result, every representation or bodily image acquires sexual connotations. Paradoxically, however, this hyper-sexualization seems to underlie the increasingly rigid rejection of public nudity, even when the naked body or a body part is not associated with sexuality.

Breastfeeding provides a striking example: once considered natural, even in highly conservative eras, it is now often treated as indecent or inappropriate, despite recent campaigns to normalize breastfeeding in public places. For instance, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, one of the most popular devotional images was the Nursing Madonna. Today, however, such a depiction of the Virgin would likely provoke scandal. This shift demonstrates how breastfeeding now stands at the intersection of nutrition, health, and sexuality. The maternal breast, once an emblem of nurture and motherhood, appears to be viewed almost exclusively as a sexual object (Bordács, 2024). Further highlighting this changing cultural attitude, outrage has even been directed toward images of naked newborn babies: the umbilical cord may still be attached, yet people demand that the infant be clothed.

This new prudery is not simply a continuation of traditional Protestant ethics. Instead, it could be the subject of a separate study examining how American culture, once profoundly shaped by Protestant values and Puritan restraint, has evolved into a hedonistic, consumer-driven society in which the original moral framework has been largely eroded.

Art history provides a further lens for this paradox. The nude, one of its central genres, was especially prevalent in Venetian painting, where mythological or biblical pretexts, such as Venus, Susanna, or nymphs, conventionally veiled it. In the 20th century, however, artists increasingly dispensed with such "alibis," choosing to represent the nude without disguise. This shift maintained the idealization of the attractive female body. A more significant change emerged in the 1960s, when a new wave of women artists began to reclaim the representation of the female body, seeking to express women's lived bodily experiences in contrast to the long-dominant male gaze.

The emblematic figures of this first generation of women artists are Valie Export (b. 1940, Linz) and Marina Abramović (b. 1946, Belgrade). Their work is characterized by radical transgression, probing the relationship between the artist and the audience, while simultaneously exploring the physical limits of the body and the potential of the mind through performance.

Their practices consistently challenged social conventions, particularly those related to gender roles, while their perspectives were also shaped by their Central European contexts. The Albertina's 2023 retrospective, devoted to Valie Export, emphasized the female body as a cultural construct and the staging of female roles, presented through her art-historical references, films, photographs, videos, and performance documentation. By contrast, MOCAK in Krakow did not attempt such a comprehensive overview; instead, it mounted a focused "mini-exhibition" of ten video works (Export, 2023) from Export's twenty-nine-part *Metanoia* series, which the museum's permanent collection had acquired in June 2023.

Although Export's oeuvre encompasses film and photography, two performances most powerfully crystallize her critical practice. Her critical stance was directed partly against Austrian society's failure to reflect on its complicity with Nazism, and partly against post-war Austrian art. Like her male contemporaries among the Viennese Actionists, she subjected her body to pain and danger. However, her work diverged sharply from theirs: she was concerned with the ways power relations embedded in media representations shape the female body and female consciousness. Examining society and art from an explicitly feminist perspective, she consistently deployed her own body as a medium—a bearer of signs and symbols.

One of Export's most defining projects, also represented in the Krakow collection, is *Tapp and Tastkino* (1968). For this work, she attached a miniature "cinema" to her bare chest, first constructed from Styrofoam and later from aluminum. Encouraged by her collaborator, Peter Weibel, she invited passersby to "visit the cinema" by reaching into the small "theatre" structure and touching her bare breasts (Kennedy, 2016/2023). Performed in several European cities, the action inverted conventional roles: rather than offering her body to spectators' gaze, Export replaced visual consumption of the female body with direct physical contact. The public thus became active participants, encountering the artist's body within a public sphere.

The media response was mixed, ranging from fascination to panic and fear (Indiana, 1982). As a result, Export received threats and was reportedly taken to court on charges of indecency. Despite these challenges, she was able to continue staging the work,

the documentation of which is still regularly exhibited in museums. In contrast, today she argues that such an action would be impossible to realize: she believes the police would intervene immediately, and the artist herself would likely be treated not as a provocateur but as an aggressor, accused of harassing or abusing her audience. This shift illustrates the transformation of social boundaries around the body.

Another emblematic work, *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), raises similar issues. In the famous photograph, Export sits with her legs spread in a wide, masculine stance. She wears trousers cut open at the crotch. Her visible pubic hair contrasts sharply with the machine gun's phallic shape and the masculine pose. Her assertive pose inverts conventional gender roles. Here, the demonstratively female figure assumes a dominant, masculine position. She does not display fear; instead, she instils it in others. Yet, this work was not primarily a staged photograph. It was a live-action piece in which Export entered a Munich cinema dressed in this outfit, confronting and intimidating the audience. Repeating such an action today would be virtually impossible. Beyond charges of indecency, she could face accusations of harassment, intimidation, or endangering public safety. As long as an artist's actions remain confined to their own body, society tends to tolerate them. However, when the audience is directly implicated, the work crosses into territory now defined as harassment.

Not only would several of Valie Export's works be considered more scandalous today than in the 1970s, but the participatory performances of Marina Abramović would likewise be reinterpreted under current sensibilities. Abramović repeatedly tested the limits of her own physical and psychological endurance, often creating situations in which the audience became active participants. In particular, performances in which visitors were invited to use objects on her body—actions that clearly constituted abuse or mistreatment—were nonetheless framed as the artist's conscious decision to explore the dynamics of power, vulnerability, and responsibility. Today, however, replicating such works with other participants is no longer conceivable. Instead, these performances have been re-enacted in museum contexts by different performers, as seen at MoMA in 2010 and, more recently, at the Stedelijk Museum and Kunsthaus Zurich[2] in 2024, accompanied by documentation of the original performances in photographs and films.

Her most notorious early work, *Rhythm 0* (1974), staged in a Belgrade gallery, epitomizes this approach. Abramović arranged 72 objects on a table—ranging from innocuous items to dangerous implements such as a knife and a loaded revolver—and invited the audience

[2] Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, March 16–July 14, 2024; Zürich, Kunsthaus Zürich, October 25, 2024–February 16, 2025; Vienna, Albertina, October 10, 2025–March 1, 2026.

to use them on her body in any way they wished. Over the course of six hours, the performance escalated into a disturbing study of human behavior and aggression. When she finally ended the piece, she was left bleeding and in tears. The action has often been compared to the Stanford Prison Experiment; however, in this case, the participants' actions targeted the artist directly.[3]

In the recent Stedelijk and Zürich exhibitions, only the objects were displayed on the table, recalling the set-up of the original performance. However, now 79 years old, Abramović no longer subjects herself to such physically extreme actions, and her performances survive primarily through photographs, films, and carefully staged re-performances.

The ethical dilemma of Abramović's endurance-based works becomes particularly acute when others re-enact them. While Abramović's own decision to risk pain and abuse was a deliberate artistic choice, the question arises: can artist-assistants or volunteers be expected to subject themselves to similar harm in the name of art? Because of the risks and ethical concerns, such self-harming performances are rarely, if ever, staged by others.

A well-known example from her collaborations with Ulay is *Imponderabilia* (1977). In this work, the two artists stood entirely nude on either side of a narrow doorway, compelling visitors to squeeze through them to access the gallery. Each attendee had to choose whom to face, making their physical and psychological responses essential to the performance. The audience's reaction to the exposed bodies was integral to the piece. The work explored not only the artists' vulnerability but also the confrontation between the public and nudity in a shared space.

In recent years, Abramović's trained assistants have re-enacted the performance, with security guards closely monitoring the situation to prevent incidents of abuse—something that has occurred in the past. The risk of misconduct became particularly visible during the 2010 MoMA retrospective, where the piece was re-enacted with volunteer participants. To safeguard the performers, MoMA implemented a preliminary code of conduct even though participants volunteered for the re-staging of the work and were aware of the risks. Nevertheless, controversy ensued.

In 2024, John Bonafede, who participated in the 2010 MoMA exhibition, filed a lawsuit against the museum. He alleged that his naked body was groped on seven separate occasions by older male visitors who turned to face him before touching his genitals (Jonze, 2024).

[3] She repeated this project later in 2010 at MoMA and at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2014.

Although John Bonafede reported the incidents to MoMA security at the time, he brought the case 14 years later under New York's revised Adult Survivors Act, which extended the statute of limitations for such claims.

In light of these events, European institutions currently presenting re-enactments of Abramović's work have heightened precautions: security guards now closely supervise the performances, and visitors are prohibited from taking photographs. These measures demonstrate both the enduring relevance and the persistent controversy surrounding the participatory dimensions of Abramović's practice.

At the same time, new manifestations of prudery continue to emerge, and they are by no means confined to representations of the female body. The celebrated masterpieces of Venetian painting that shaped the history of the nude—long accessible in the Accademia in Venice—could be viewed without restriction well into the 20th century, provided one paid the entrance fee. By 2025, however, a blurred plexiglass screen had been installed in front of works depicting nudity, preventing unauthorized viewers from directly seeing the bodies. Access is now only possible by deliberately circumventing the barrier.

Other absurd cases illustrate the same trend. In spring 2023, a Florida school principal was dismissed after a parental complaint. The complaint followed the presentation of canonical Renaissance artworks—Michelangelo's David, *Creation of Adam*, and Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*—to 11- and 12-year-old students during an art history class (Kim, 2023).

Public opinion data highlight the recurrence of such incidents. A recent survey revealed that 14 percent of Americans consider the depiction of nudity in classical art problematic, while 28 percent object to such works being shown to children. When compared to the statistics on pornography consumption discussed earlier, this rejection of artistic nudity appears symptomatic of a profound cultural contradiction and reveals the hypocrisy of society's moral standards.

A similar phenomenon appears in the censorship of nudity on social media platforms, where artworks depicting the naked body are routinely deleted. Viennese museums have been frequent targets: for example, in 2018, Facebook removed an image of the *Venus of Willendorf*; in 2019, Instagram censored a Rubens painting, and in 2021, TikTok blocked the Albertina's account while Facebook and Instagram deleted a short video from the Leopold Museum, all on the grounds of potential pornographic content (Körösvölgyi, 2023).

As these examples demonstrate, censorship on social media is not confined to contemporary art. Nevertheless, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have become

indispensable for artists and art institutions. On the one hand, they are celebrated as digital spaces that democratize access, enabling individual artists to share and sell their work directly, while also compelling galleries and museums to maintain an online presence. On the other hand, artists working with themes of the body—whether in body art, abject art, or transgressive practices—are subject to severe censorship.

Platform algorithms consistently fail to distinguish between gratuitous pornography and artistic representations of the body. As a direct result, artworks are unjustly removed, even when doing so contradicts the platforms' explicit community guidelines, which permit nudity in an artistic context. These repeated bans damage artists' careers and livelihoods.

Numerous cases could be cited (Di Liscia, 2021). One striking example occurred in 2019, when the death of American feminist performance artist Carolee Schneemann was announced. Social media was soon flooded with her works, including performance documentation and photographs of the female body and sexuality. The algorithms quickly deleted many of these images. The irony of the situation was not lost on observers: throughout her life, Schneemann herself had been both a frequent target and a vocal critic of censorship.

Even the sociographic series of Brazilian documentary filmmaker and photographer Sebastião Salgado has been flagged as "sexual content." The strength of Salgado's work lies in his humble, observant, and documentary approach to nature and humanity, through which he sensitively portrays diverse social groups. In his *Awá* series, created as part of a campaign to defend the rights of one of Brazil's last nomadic tribes, Salgado photographed community members, who, as part of their way of life, often appear unclothed. As a result, Salgado's black-and-white images depicting subjects partially or fully naked were also removed from social media.

This inability to distinguish between pornography and artistic or documentary nudity is not unique to Salgado's work. In 2012, the Centre Pompidou faced a similar case when it shared Gerhard Richter's painting *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)* on Facebook to promote his retrospective. The post was immediately censored, only to be reinstated after widespread complaints.

These examples reveal a paradox of our oversexualized world: sexuality is perceived everywhere, even where it is absent. Our relationship with the naked body has reached an absurd point, where bodily and personal boundaries are thought to extend not only to physical contact but even to the mere act of looking. While countless efforts are made

to regulate pornography—despite its persistent visibility across media—the artistic representation of the body is increasingly restricted. It is, of course, essential that harassment and abuse be prevented and punished. However, society seems to have swung to the opposite extreme, adopting a rigid and dismissive stance toward the naked body.

In any case, the work of both Valie Export and Marina Abramović is considered a benchmark in art, even if various social media systems, contrary to their own policies, struggle to distinguish between art and non-art. Today, despite the dominance of hypersexualized media and pornography, even classical paintings, ethnographic images, and documentaries are censored. The naked body remains interesting and continues to be, or rather, taboo. This whole paradoxical situation raises further questions about artistic freedom, social norms, and our cultural fears—and how our assessment of these issues changes over time. The article also discusses the historical cyclicality of the depiction of the body (when it is taboo, when it is not, where it is celebrated, where it is (almost) forbidden) and what these constantly shifting boundaries reveal about the societies in question.

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