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The feminine awkward: graceless bodies and the performance of femininity in fashion photographs
Eugenie Shinkle

The past decade or so has seen fashion photography embracing a catalogue of uncomfortable attitudes. Anxious, embarrassed gazes. Knotted hands. Knees and elbows, necks and torsos, bent and folded at uncomfortable angles. Mottled skin and disembodied limbs. Grating, uneasy relationships between bodies and garments. This idiom, particularly prevalent within the alternative fashion press and increasingly within photographic art as well, is one that I've come to think of as the 'feminine awkward'.[1]

Awkwardness, as I understand it here, is a negative or "agonistic" affect, organised by "trajectories of repulsion;" (Ngai 2005, 11) a feeling that tends to repel rather than to attract. It involves a combination of emotional and bodily unease – gawky, bumbling embarrassment and physical discomfort; a mild torment of body and mind. Like most phenomena linked to fashion, it's tempting to dismiss the fascination with awkwardness as a trend – albeit by now a fairly enduring one. But awkwardness is part of the history of fashion photography. In what follows, I examine some of the ways that it has made its way into fashion images over the years, in a rough and by no means comprehensive chronology.

The feminine awkward, as I will show, is more than simply a formal conceit: it involves a complex play of internal and external forces that shape both the creation and the experience of the fashion image. Internally, awkwardness is produced (or contained) in the relations between the model, the photographic frame, and the camera. Externally, awkwardness is linked to the way that the image is perceived by the viewer. As a critical idiom, awkwardness is a way of understanding both how the image looks, and how it *feels*. As well as communicating meaning directly, through various signifying practices, fashion photographs also address the viewer on a deeper bodily level – a more visceral form of communion that works alongside signification to shape the meaning and experience of an image.

In *Ugly Feelings,* Sianne Ngai argues that negative affects are useful for showing how "sociohistorical and ideological dilemmas … produce formal or representational ones." (Ngai 2005, 12) The feminine awkward emerges most openly into fashion images during those periods when gender norms are most forcefully contested, interfering with the trajectories of desire to which fashion images typically give rise. Culturally, it is aligned with paradigm shifts in social attitudes: with changing expectations of how a feminine body should look and how a feminine subject should behave. Looking at fashion photographs through the optic of the feminine awkward opens up new ways of thinking about the way that fashion photography simultaneously participates in, and unsettles, the production of gendered bodies.

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The training of "mannequins", as they were then called, to model dresses for couture houses, began in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Carefully schooled in walking, posing, and gesturing, mannequins were required to perform according to strict protocols designed to

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[1] The photographers who originally inspired my interest in awkwardness and discomfort include Juergen Teller, Viviane Sassen, Ren Hang, Blommers & Schumm, Synchrodogs, and Lasse Dearman, but there are many more now working in this idiom.

suppress emotion and individual personality. Forbidden from speaking, except to utter the name of the dress she was wearing, the mannequin's role was to draw attention to the garment that she wore, rather than to herself. By the early years of the twentieth century, as photographs began to appear more and more frequently in the fashion press, a new kind of model emerged. Initially, at least, the "print model" required a different set of skills from the mannequin. (Wissinger 2015, 72) In both cases, however, the streamlining and standardisation of the model's body was closely aligned with the artistic language of modernism. The 'rationalisation of the body' by the fashion trade was closely associated with the machine aesthetic of early modernism: 'the mechanical, synchronised and occasionally robotic body of modernism, a body which was rationalised across the cultural and commercial fields of art, work, and leisure.' (Evans 2013, 55)

The relationship between the model's body and photographic space was carefully orchestrated. Early fashion photographs were nearly always shot in a studio on a large-format camera – a slow process that required the model to remain still for long periods of time. Modelling for photographs was a physically demanding craft: as one model remarked in 1930, "color photography requires so much care with light and slow exposure that it's a terrible strain on the model." (in Wissinger 2015, 88) Femininity was linked to a notion of composure that was both physical and social: the ability to pose undisturbed for the extended interval required to take the photograph, and the social standing of the models themselves, who were either society women or professional models carefully schooled in dress and deportment. The two groups may have moved in very different circles in real life, but the decorum that they maintained in front of the camera was designed to erase class distinctions.

The Modernist language of photography played a key role in the rationalisation of the feminine body. The search for photography's essential elements – those unique qualities that distinguished photography from other art forms – had begun with Pictorialist photographers in the nineteenth century. By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, the Modernist cause was being championed by so-called 'straight' photographers. Rather than attempting to imitate painting, as the Pictorialists had done, straight photography valued the camera's objectivity, and its ability to render form, tone, texture and line in a way that the human hand could not. Writing in 1923, photographer Paul Strand identified these "strictly photographic" instruments as ones that the photographer "must learn to understand and control, harmonize." Every object in front of the lens "must take its proper but no less important place as a shape and a texture." (Strand in Lyon 1966, 146) Only by these means could simple objects be transformed into an expressive picture.

Edward Steichen's photograph of Broadway actress Peggy Fish modelling an Evelyn McHorter gown was published in *Vogue* in the same year that Strand's essay appeared.[2] Fish's averted gaze, bored expression, and raised chin give her an air of studied hauteur, and her fashionable *contrapposto* slouch was notably modern. A sliver of ankle – scandalous only a few years earlier – peeps out from beneath the hem of her dress. Steichen's photograph contains no superfluous painterly effects to distract the eye from Fish's smooth, fluid outline. The image, sharply focused from corner to corner, is composed of scrupulously arranged tonal blocks. Fish's gown is divided into two large masses of white, bisected by the near-black of her sash. The bustle bow at the back of the gown is balanced by the dark form of her fan, held close to her body to emphasise its curve. Behind her head, the rectangular frame of the picture accentuates the

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[2] 'Bustle Bows are back and the forefront of chic." *Vogue* (US) June 1, 1923, 63.

graceful line of her neck; this line continues down her arms all the way to her gently angled wrists. The gown's embroidered detail is offset by the delicate form of the sconce in the upper left of the image. Each element of the picture plays a vital part in the integrity of the whole, the model's body incorporated smoothly and seamlessly into the composition.

From the late 1920s onwards, athleticism and graceful, controlled bodily expression came to be seen as an essential component of fashionable femininity. The mobile, toned body – epitomised in the work of photographers such as Martin Munkacsi, Jean Moral, and Toni Frissell – became an increasingly important feature in fashion photography. Alongside the growing popularity of American ready-to-wear designs – which did away with stiff undergarments in favour of more forgiving cuts, and fabrics that encouraged freedom of movement – both photography and cinema espoused a feminine ideal that was centered around the image of the streamlined, active woman. The management of the body took on a new dimension as women's magazines began to feature diet and exercise advice along with tips on how to achieve the ideal body shape. (see Arnold 2008) As new ways of walking and posing entered the vocabulary of fashion modelling, static studio poses gave way to images of models running and jumping, capering on the beach in the summer and laughing on the ski slopes in the winter. But this exuberance was always carefully contained: the taut bodies and tanned limbs on display in these images were governed, in many important respects, by the same formal constraints seen inof earlier studio work of photographers such as Horst P. Horst, George Hoyningen-Heune, and Edward Steichen. Both assumed a body that was fully controlled by the boundaries of the photographic frame and the confines of white upper middle-class femininity.

Though the disdain and indifference that distinguished the couture mannequin were less pronounced in print models, the "staged performance of impassivity" (Evans 2013, 243) was still a conspicuous aspect of the fashion photograph and of a fashionable image more generally. In a 1938 *Vogue* feature titled "Don't Ever Do-o-o that … it Spoils your Face", Frissell photographed a range of taboos such as pursing the mouth whilst sewing, chewing on hangnails, squinting into the sun or looking too animated. The studied affectlessness of the mannequin – what Evans has called the "public staging of hauteur" (Evans 2013, 243) persisted in the fashion press well into the 1950s. Richard Avedon's images of models looking bored, amused, and at times, anxious, were considered radical for their time. The published version of his 1949 photograph of Dorian Leigh in a Piguet evening dress shows Leigh appraising herself confidently, if somewhat stoically, in a mirror. In the version that Avedon chose to print and exhibit, however, Leigh's expression is less assured. This sustained self-preoccupation and self-doubt in his female subjects was something that fascinated Avedon: 'That anxiety was a very important thing that I tried to work into the magazines. And very often [the photographs] were rejected.' (Squiers 2009, 165)

Even fashion photography's most contrived and unnatural poses could be accommodated effortlessly within a well-ordered Modernist image. The pose known as the 'couture hunch' – elbows akimbo, shoulders pushed forward, stomach drawn in and back gracefully arched (see Matsubara 2011) – is ostensibly intended to flatter the arms, to make the breasts look smaller and the chest narrower. In the hands of a skilful photographer, the couture hunch redefines the body's outline, opening it out to fill pictorial space more assertively, replacing the familiar lines and curves of the female form with an entirely different set of shapes and angles. In Avedon's photograph, the elegant curve of Leigh's back is offset by the sharp angle of her elbow above, and the outward thrust of the dress's peplum below. Silhouetted against the light from the window, Leigh's outline forms an angular counterpoint to the vase of flowers behind her and

the clutter of objects on the basin in front of her. As well as implying a fleeting, unscripted moment – this is not a stance that one imagines would be held for long – the pose gives Leigh a more prominent presence as a formal element in the photograph, the complex shape of her body smoothly integrated into Avedon's precise composition. Each component of Avedon's picture is carefully considered, with an attention to balance and detail that is not profoundly different from Steichen's monumental studio photographs taken three decades earlier.

Feminine composure in front of the camera was the subject of William Mortensen's 1956 book *How to Pose the Model*. Mortensen's goal was to eliminate errors that produced what he called "unpleasant disturbances" in the picture:

> The model … must be adjusted in the flesh; her body and limbs must be shaped to the image that the photographer has in his mind. … In making adjustments, he must learn to recognize and to eliminate from the pose a considerable number of plastic "errors" which interfere with the well-ordered presentation of the pose. (Mortensen 1956, 9)

For Mortensen, the relationship between the feminine body and camera was not just determined by an imperative to remain still, but by an imperative to conform in advance to the demands of the image – to organise oneself for the lens in order to create a coherent, orderly body, and a harmonious, well-proportioned picture. The most egregious errors in posing were those that violated the correct "plastic relationships" (12) between the various parts of the body, giving it a distorted – or worse, a masculine – appearance. Right angles and bulges, hyper-extension of the elbows or knees, excessive twisting or bending of the wrist, collapsing the torso, extreme foreshortening of the arms and legs – anything that truncated the body or made it look disproportionate was to be avoided. Mortensen also counselled against what he called 'zizzy' smiles – over-animated expressions that worked against the sense of "restraint and control … necessary to pictorial representation." (30) Left unaddressed, plastic errors would spoil a picture by compromising the relationship of parts to the whole. Excessive affect, or expression that failed to match up with the actions of the body, threatened the picture's meaning. Femininity, for Mortensen, was a closed loop – controlled by the gaze of the camera and contained, like the body itself, by the boundaries of the photograph. To pose for the camera was to conceive of oneself in two dimensions. [Figure 1: Mortensen]

In the same decade in which Mortensen's book appeared, however, photographers like William Klein (a reluctant fashion photographer who brought an irreverent, experimental approach to the pages of *Vogue*) were deliberately inviting plastic errors into the image. Klein's exaggerated attitudes – which Martin Harrison has described as an "extreme geometry of limbs" (1994, 251) – parodied fashion photography's existing repertoire of poses and its narrow ideas of femininity. Along with his highly experimental style, it was Klein's talent for using the body as a graphic element that made his work so radical. His 'Paris Fashion Report' of September 1st 1958 opens with four pages of bold double exposures. In one of these images, the model's doubled outline fills the frame almost from corner to corner, her voluminous coat extending the contours of her figure, changing the shape of her body from slender and sinuous to angular and blockish. At the bottom of the image, her four feet pick out a bassline, while above her head, the reflection of lights in the water behind her acts as a jittery counterpoint. Klein's photograph hums with nervous energy, barely able to contain the model's exuberant form. Here, the model's body is a more assertive presence, resisting the strict formal control that typified the fashion photographs of previous decades.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s took place alongside a shift away from large format studio cameras towards smaller, lighter cameras that allowed fashion photographers to work faster and more spontaneously. The 'new realism' in fashion photography (epitomized by the work of photographers like Arthur Elgort, Frank Horvat, Jeanloup Sieff, Mike Reinhardt, David Bailey, Brian Duffy, and Terence Donovan) did away with icy hauteur and emotional distance. A new breed of models (such as Twiggy, Veruschka, Jean Shrimpton, and Donyale Luna) replaced the snow queens of the 1950s. These were real women with real emotions: active, assertive, and boldly sexual. The era's newly permissive attitudes were embodied in a language of posing that pushed the angularity of Klein's postures to its extreme: ankles cocked at painful angles, torsos leaning and legs akimbo, heads thrust forwards, backwards and sideways in images that transformed the model into a gawky adolescent or a mechanical doll. As Cecil Beaton wrote in 1967,

> [If] character is emerging in the model's face it is becoming even more apparent in her figure, stance, and the way she moves. We like our models to place their legs in the natural way of a gangling child ... It is not the baby stare that makes Twiggy a success, rather it is her concave droop, as of a punctured marionette, the almost 'triumph over the spastic' appeal that sends her to the top of the class. The fact that [Donyale] Luna … can thrust her head forward like a champion ice-skater while turning her arms back to front, is her important individual contribution to the history of fashion modelling. (Beaton 1967)

Beaton's references to "punctured marionettes", spasticity ? is this a word you want to repeat? It's pretty offensive, and back-to-front arms all point to a change in posing styles that saw models not just acting exuberant, emotional, and emancipated, but wrenching their bodies into postures that suggested real physical discomfort. Alongside more permissive social attitudes, changes in ideal body image, and a relaxation of the rules of pictorial composition, the awkward body – disjointed, often childlike and increasingly graceless – began to make its way openly into fashion photography. Images like these marked a radical shift in the affective economy of the fashion photograph.

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The classical fashion picture can be understood in Lacanian terms, as an almost textbook enactment of the role of desire and lack in the shaping of the human subject. In the Lacanian account, desire is said to arise out of a sense of lack that is instilled in the subject early in its life. In the 'mirror stage', which occurs between the ages of about six to eighteen months, the infant human learns to recognise its own image in the mirror, and to confer on that image a sense of bodily control and coherence that the infant itself still lacks. The resulting tension between the subject and its image, Lacan tells us, goes on to govern the formation of the self. The ego is the product of this original misidentification with an ideal 'I' that the subject can never hope to become. Lack, and its corollary, desire, are said to arise out of this original misidentification. (see Silverman 1983)

The mirror stage marks the beginning of an ongoing process in which visual ideals, most often given in the form of images, act to shape the construction of subjectivity. Presenting the body as composed, contained, and fully coherent – both in stillness and in movement – the classic fashion picture is an agent of desire and lack, the model acting as a screen onto which the viewer projects an ideal image of herself, an unattainable standard against which she is constantly judged. In the fashion photograph, as in real life, coherence as a subject is measured

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against the ability to perform under the gaze of others, acting out and conforming to a conventional image of femininity.

What then, to make of fashion images that deliberately work against this coherence? On the one hand, awkwardness signals a refusal of norms; it marks the performance of a different kind of femininity. The popularity of the feminine awkward is surely due, in part, to the pleasure to be had in transgressing conventions. But certain images push the idea of awkwardness towards something more complex and disquieting. Juergen Teller's spread with model Kristen McMenamy, shot for *Suddeutsche Zeitung* in 1996, caused a minor scandal when it emerged. (see Brubach 1997) The best-known image from the series shows McMenamy standing naked, in elegant *contrapposto*, scars and bruises on conspicuous display, with a heart and a Versace slogan scrawled across her torso. The rest of the photographs are even less becoming. They show McMenamy smeared with lipstick, crawling along the floor, bent over at uncomfortable, unflattering angles. Many of the images present her in fragments – a dramatically foreshortened leg here, an arm or a torso there, sliced up by the photographic frame and reduced to single, misshapen body parts. Teller's camera treats her most unkindly. Here, as if in deliberate defiance of Mortensen's instructions, the relationship between the model's body and the photograph is one of violent disjunction.

The spread unsettled the fashion industry – it was a full frontal assault on notions of beauty and glamour, shot with a raw spontaneity that drew heavily on the work of photographers like Larry Clark and Nan Goldin. And like the work of Clark and Goldin, which pictured subjects in the grip of drug abuse, it suggested a lack of restraint that wasn't in keeping with the norms of femininity or those of photography. Sloppy, uncouth, and confrontational, McMenamy lacked the grace and poise that the fashion world expected from the model. She often seemed unaware of the camera, captured accidentally in moments that should have remained private. And Teller's images, shot in his signature snapshot style – loosely framed, out of focus, carelessly lit – failed to conform to the conventions of fashion photography. The impression was of a photographer who wasn't in control of his camera, and a model who wasn't in control of her body, their performances unsynchronized, governed by little more than chance. The whole ensemble – the model, the photographer, and the photographs themselves – seemed incoherent and disorderly: dangerously out of control. Images such as Teller's turn the affective economy of the fashion photograph on its head. They appear to work quite specifically against the generation of desire, or, at least, to approach the notion of desire from an unexpected direction.

The idea that gender is produced by a ritualised acting-out of norms is a familiar one. In *Bodies that Matter,* Judith Butler goes further, arguing that the material body itself – the biologically sexed body – is also "constructed through a problematic gendered matrix." (Butler 1993, 29) Gender, she claims, is more than just a category imposed on a biological body that stands outside of discourse: sex itself, she argues, is a normative category for making the subject visible and culturally intelligible, a "regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs." (1) Butler's aim is not to deny that the material body exists, but to challenge the idea that materiality is somehow beyond the reach of discursive shaping. The material body, she claims, is "bound up with signification from the start;" (30) visual representation is one of the signifying practices through which it is sexed.

Beyond acknowledging its existence, however, Butler has surprisingly little to say about the material body. Teller's spread engendered a discomfort that is clearly linked to the way it transgresses cultural expectations and normative ideas of femininity. But as his photographs

also demonstrate, images of awkwardness also have the potential to channel the fruitless striving of desire into a more immediate kind of discomfort – one that is *felt* in the body of the viewer rather than given directly to the eye and the intellect. Butler claims that it is only because it is given form in discourse that the material body is made intelligible: "To posit by way of language a materiality outside of language is still to post that materiality, and the materiality so posited will retain that positing as its constitutive condition." (30) But in images of awkwardness, the body is contoured and constituted in other ways.

In his chapter on photographing the nude, Mortensen remarked on the problems of empathy – a feeling that the picture was "all wrong" (1956, 118) – that arose when the unclothed body was photographed without careful attention to detail. "We are particularly sensitive to faults of empathy in nude pictures," he wrote, "and are quick to identify ourselves with any strain or discomfort that is depicted or implied. A sensitive and imaginative person may feel actual physical discomfort in contemplating a nude of faulty empathy." (118) Mortensen lists no less than twenty instances of "faulty empathy" and the unpleasant affects that they produce in the viewer. A saggy posture suggests impending nausea, contorted limbs signal injury or pain, a poor choice of setting – cold or uncomfortable surroundings – can evoke physical discomfort. (119-124) He also warned against the presentation of isolated body parts: "There is not enough substance in them to constitute plastic fragments: they are simply cuts of meat." (124) Mortensen's message is clear: viewers will share in the emotions and even the physical sensations that the model appears to be experiencing, and the photographer's job is to ensure that these sensations are agreeable ones.

The ability of visual images to evoke physical and emotional discomfort has been studied by philosophers and art historians since at least the nineteenth century. Philosophers such as Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps understood empathy as the experience of feeling oneself 'inside' the body of another: feeling with, or in, one's own body something that is happening in, or to, the body of another person. (see D'Aloia 2012, 93) Although we can never fully inhabit the body of another, when we experience bodily empathy, we feel sensations (of pain, movement, etc.) 'as if' we were in the other's body. Art historians Heinrich Wölfflin, Aby Warburg, and Bernard Berenson all explored the relationship between aesthetic appreciation and empathy: the feelings of movement, touch, and physical involvement that we experience in front of an artwork. (see Freedberg and Gallese 2007)

More recently, the grounds for bodily or kinaesthetic empathy have been given theoretical expression within the emerging field of cognitive neuroscience. Among its more exciting and widely accepted claims is that which states that the human ability to empathise with the actions, emotions, and sensations of others is enabled by a class of functional motor neurons in the brain called 'mirror neurons.' Mirror neurons, so the argument goes, discharge not only when we carry out a particular action ourselves, but also when we observe someone else carrying out the action. The mirror neuron system plays a key role in our ability to understand the gestures, actions and facial expressions of others, as well as the underlying intentions that motivate them. (see Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2015; Freedberg and Gallese 2007) Other research has focused on the sharing of emotion: neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2006) has shown how representations of strong emotional responses can bypass the intellect, provoking the same somatic responses that we would feel if we were bodily present at the scene. Empathy is a complex process involving both cognitive acts and physiological reactions: "it is a feeling composed of different levels, namely perceptual, emotional and cognitive, grounded in the lived-in body." (D'Aloia 2012, 101) The idea that physical and emotional states are shared

experientially by the viewer of an artwork has important implications for the way that we understand the perception of fashion photographs.

In her study of trauma art, Jill Bennett distinguishes works of art that seek to represent or communicate emotional states from those that operate through the body, "registering … pain … as it is directly experienced, and communicating a level of bodily affect." (Bennett 2005, 26) Awkwardness may be a minor trauma, but its contours are as complex as those of other, more potent affects. And while it's clear that not every awkward fashion photograph will engender empathy or bodily affect in all viewers, it's their *potential* for doing so that is important here, because it suggests, *pace* Butler, that there is a dimension of materiality that stands outside the frame of discourse, running parallel to the cultural framings of sex and gender. "What is material never fully escapes the process by which it is signified," argues Butler (1993, 68). But affects are not signifying processes, representations etched on the surface of the body. They are *effects* that emerge from its depths, and their relationship to discourse and cognition is a reflexive one. Rather than a "raw domain of primitive experiential richness", as Brian Massumi remarks, the realm of affect "*includes* social elements but mixes them with elements belonging to other levels of functioning and combines them according to a different logic." (Massumi 2002, 30) Mind and body function together but apart, "recapitulating the same image/expression event in different but parallel ways, ascending by degrees from the concrete to the incorporeal…" (32) Acting alongside more easily 'readable' expressions of meaning, affect plays a vital role in the perception, experience, and meaning of images.

Negative affects such as irritation are located in an 'uneasy zone between psychic and bodily experience'. (Ngai 2005, 201) Awkwardness inhabits the same terrain, oscillating disconcertingly between the internal and the external, between cognition and the body. This plays out in complex ways in images of the feminine awkward. On the one hand, the awkward image invites visual identification and alienation from the reality of one's own body. As an object of desire, the model is "both idealised and other;" (Evans 2013, 176) simultaneously objectified and held up as an unattainable ideal. This "doubled gaze" has an outward orientation, and it presupposes a degree of distancing of the subject from her own body. When empathy is conjoined to this doubled gaze, however, emotional and physical identification with the model's discomfort returns the viewer to her own materiality – an *inward* orientation that overlays culturally conditioned ways of seeing with the subject's own unique bodily experience.

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The change in the posing body from poise to awkwardness, from graceful to graceless, can be seen in the recent transformation of the couture hunch*.* With just a bit of over-working and a change in camera angle, it crosses the fine line so carefully patrolled by Mortensen and Avedon, going from the graceful and orderly to the distorted and uncomfortable – or, in the case of one memorable image from Inez and Vinoodh's 2003 Helmut Lang campaign, into something mannered and vaguely menacing. Model Elise Crombez is photographed from the front rather than the side so that her torso appears shrunken or deformed rather than gently rounded. Her shoulders are thrown forward, her arms hang by her sides, twisted around so the palms of her hands face backwards, and her chin is dropped. She greets the viewer with a blank stare from under hooded eyes. Her lifeless, impassive demeanour – that of a zombie or an android – is belied by the subtle tension of her pose: it requires a certain amount of muscular effort to look

this enervated. The image, shot against a plain white background, has no other focus but Crombez's slumped figure and her disquieting expression. Inez and Vinoodh's photograph intensifies and parodies the most striking feature of the couture hunch: the way that it overlays poise with physical discomfort.

Much of the debate around the couture hunch is centered around the very discomfort that is foregrounded in Inez and Vinoodh's image. ~~Much of the debate around the couture hunch is centered around the obvious strain that the pose entails.~~ The obvious tension that the pose entails~~is inconsistency~~ is a frequent topic of discussion in the blogosphere: "Arms akimbo, you hunch until you're basically doubling over and sucking in everything while splaying your legs out at awkward angles." (Brathwaite 2011) One blogger describes it as "a genius positioning of the body that guarantees to shift the focus away from the size of someone's arms to their visible discomfort," (Chung 2012) while another launched a tongue-in-cheek campaign to ban the pose, which she describes as "creepy and awkward." (http://frog-and-toad-are-friends.tumblr.com/post/37839404424/campaign-to-ban-the-creepy-awkward-couture-hunch) Ngai's claim that negative affects can be "conducive to producing ironic distance in a way that the grander and more prestigious passions … do not" (2005, 10) is borne out in "meta-responses" such as these, as the consumers of fashion photographs turn their attention away from the aspirational content of these images and towards a more critical engagement with the ways that such content is communicated. ~~Somewhere in this para link directly to I&V image discussed directly above, just to consolidate and smooth link between paras..~~

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Artists such as Valie Export, Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneeman, Eleanor Antin, and others are part of a rich legacy of feminist art practitioners who have used physical discomfort and awkwardness to critique normative ideals of femininity. I'd like to conclude by looking at the work of two contemporary female photographic artists who continue this critical lineage by conjoining awkwardness with the visual language of fashion photography. Rita Lino and Isabelle Wenzel both play the dual roles of photographer and subject: Wenzel's use of the camera's self-timer function, and Lino's reliance on a cable release, incorporate the camera itself as a technological agent in the construction of femininity. Both draw specifically on awkwardness as an affective idiom through which to consider the nature of the female body and feminine identity as these are played out through the subject's relationship with the camera. Both deal, in different ways, with the notion of posing as an extended and often uncomfortable process of making oneself into a gendered subject. The poise and self-containment that marks conventional fashion photography is mostly absent in their work, and the effect is often startling.

Rita Lino is a Portuguese photographer whose work explores ideas of self and persona, using the body 'as primer Correct? Not prime? matter to be re-created and beautifully exorcised.' (ritalino.com) *10 Seconds*, a project commissioned in 2014 by *Vein* magazine, consists of still images and a short video showing Lino posing in a selection of different outfits. The setting – an empty white studio – is a simple one, the photographic act pared back to a basic schema of model and clothing. Each of these elements is subjected to a kind of sabotage. Lino's own physical attractiveness is at variance with her evident unease. When her face appears in the photographs, which it does frequently, her expression is troubling: strained, agitated, worried, exhausted. Most of her poses – bending or toppling over backwards, balancing on one leg or on the backs of her heels – look uncomfortable and precarious. Physically and emotionally, she

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seems unbalanced; even the ostensibly straightforward condition of being clothed is presented as a constant battle. Lino struggles with her garments – wobbling in high heels, swamped in a too-large coat and jeans, wrestling to extricate herself from a red jumper. Her outfits oscillate between the aggressively sexual – tight skirt, cutaway bra and high heels – and the baggily androgynous. The three-minute video on the website (an extract from a longer version that Lino exhibited in Paris in 2014) shows Lino getting into position for the photographs. The only sounds are ~~that~~ those of her heavy breathing, the cable release dragging across the floor, and the click of the shutter as she forces her body into one awkward position after another. Her performance is sweaty and uncomfortable, a parody of femininity and a deliberate staging of 'faulty empathy'. To borrow Mortensen's words, *10 Seconds* presents a feminine ideal that is 'all wrong'. Here, it is not the pose – the visible inscription of meaning on the body – that is put under scrutiny, but the act of posing itself. *10 Seconds* stages the performance of femininity as physically unsettling and emotionally distressing. [Figure 2: Lino]

Wenzel's work comments on the camera's construction of gender roles by turning the female body into a kind of living sculpture. 'Building Images' (2010) is staged in a set that minimally suggests an office environment. Institutional carpet and scattered paper form a backdrop for what looks like a series of disarticulated, headless dolls dressed in the archetypal female office worker's uniform of skirt, tights, and heeled shoes. In 'Figures' (2012), the body – this time reduced to a set of nylon-clad legs – balances on plinths or poses in front of studio backdrops. 'Positions' (2013) turns the body, clad in the same anodyne office wear, into a table or plinth on which are balanced stacks of china. All three series present the female form as a collection of fragmented erogenous zones – legs, thighs, and buttocks, with the odd glimpse of an arm or shoulder. Femininity is reduced to a cluster of highly conventional signifiers – skirts, tights, heels, undergarments – and stereotypical roles – housewife, secretary, pin–up. Occasionally, a sliver of the model's head is visible, but we never see her face.

The body in these images is Wenzel's own. Trained as an acrobat, she has a contortionist's ability to twist and fold herself into poses that most people are incapable of copying. Her consistent focus on legs, hips, and buttocks parodies the fetishization of these body parts in fashion and advertising imagery, but it's not just the foregrounding of visible stereotypes that makes this work so arresting. In Wenzel's work, these grotesque distortions are enacted on a body that is emphatically, unbelievably real: here, the performance of femininity is a kind of bloodless mutilation, a process suffused with backbreaking tension and macabre humour.

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Inevitably, awkwardness ends up being absorbed into the vocabulary of fashion. The punctured marionettes of the 1960s no longer appear radical, and poses that were confined to the alternative fashion press five years ago are now making their way into the mainstream. However, it is the initial failure of awkwardness to sit within fashion's lexicon that is key to its transformative power. The feminine awkward disrupts, even if only temporarily, the standard trajectory of desire – the constant striving towards a state of perfection that is destined never to be reached – and grounds subjectivity in the here and now, in the materiality of bodies that may or may not conform to normative ideals of sex and gender.

Butler argues that these non-conforming bodies are fated to remain invisible and abject, outside the domain of subjectivity. But the bodily address of awkwardness is a way of giving aesthetic and political presence to subjects that challenge heteronormative ideals of femininity (and increasingly, of masculinity as well). Genderqueer and trans models like Casey Legler, Rain Dove, Erika Linder and Andrej Pejic are increasingly present and meaningful in the world of fashion and beyond. Opening up the closed loop of the fashion photograph, the feminine awkward signals a growing openness to alternative accounts of the way that subjects are formed.

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