

# Sloganising Bodies

by *Maëlle Bazin*

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**Why do people strip naked in the public space? Under French law, public nudity is considered a form of indecent exposure, however more often than not it is in fact about the pleasure of a lifestyle or about conveying a message.**

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Reviewed: Hubert Prolongeau, '*Couvrez ce sein...*' *La nudité dans tous ses états* (Paris: Robert Laffont), 128 p., 12 €.

How is it that nudity can still be subversive, when naked bodies are now so commonplace in advertising and on television? This book was written by writer and journalist Hubert Prolongeau following the success of his article about naked hiking in *Le Nouvel Observateur*.<sup>1</sup> It begins with his surprise at this contradiction. The text is peppered with neologisms – *nudiens*, *solidarnue*, *non-textiles* [nudians, naked solidarity, non-textiles] – introducing the reader to a wide range of vocabulary specific to naturism and activist nudism, the first of which is a lifestyle and the second, a means of protest. This lexicon is reminiscent of the neologism '*manifestation*' [from '*manifestation*', the French word for protest, and '*nu*' which means naked] that spread around the 2012 Quebec protests against rising university fees, where students demonstrated partially naked. These events are illustrative of a more global trend: for several decades now, protests using nudity have become internationally widespread. To what extent can posing or demonstrating in the nude be considered a new form of activism? What legal and social norms regulate such practices? What can they tell us about the evolution of society's relationship to the body?

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<sup>1</sup> Hubert Prolongeau, 'Ma première randonue', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 24 July 2008.

## The right to nudity

The author examines the right to nudity in the public space, building out from his own experience as a naturist hiker to produce the portrait of his fellow rambblers, illustrating their diverse profiles and trajectories. From reclaiming sick bodies to reconnecting with a certain form of freedom, the reasons behind their commitment to the naturist cause and the extent of that engagement differ greatly. However, whether it is a life choice or simply a hobby, naturism goes hand-in-hand with frequent brushes with the law. Naturist hikes can end in participants being taken in by police, as with other practices framed as activist – e.g. women’s rights movements such as the Tumultueuses or Free the Nipple claiming the right to swim bare-chested. The protestors temporarily display themselves naked or semi-naked in the hope of changing the rules of communal life that regulate the public space.

These actions are sometimes denounced by the public, who claims to be disturbed by what they consider as immodesty. The controversy derives from the supposed link between nudity and sexuality, a correlation rejected by activists. In a case reported by the author, the Association pour le Naturisme en Liberté (APNEL, Association for free naturism) mobilised to defend a hiker placed in police custody for having walked naked in a forest. The Association contested article 222.32 of the French Penal Code, which is subject to diverging interpretations. While nudists campaign for the desexualisation of public nudity, the law considers it to be indecent exposure [*exhibition sexuelle*]. It was the old Penal code that introduced the notion of public decency and its 1992 reform simply modernised the language, replacing the notion of decency with that of sex. However, the law does not define the conditions for *exhibition sexuelle*, stipulating only that there must be a material aspect and a moral aspect, i.e. that a body part of a sexual nature must be exhibited and with a sexual intention. But what parts of the body are considered sexually explicit? And can nudity used as a means of protest be considered sexualised? The key issue of constitutionality raised by the lawyer for the defence was rejected.

Although France is one of the main naturist destinations in Europe, thanks in particular to its beaches and coastal areas with municipal by-laws allowing the practice, naturism remains prohibited everywhere else and especially in towns and cities. However, in August 2017, an experimental free naturist area was opened in the Vincennes wood in Paris. The initiative sparked a host of reactions and there was a general outcry. The French capital remains behind its European counterparts in this regard, particularly Germany where naturism is more readily accepted.

However, naturists are not alone in being brought before the law. Activists who use nudity as part of their protests, e.g. Femen, may not be part of the naturist cause but they nonetheless face similar legal consequences.

## Nudity as a register of collective action

Hubert Prolongeau also focuses on the naked body as an adjuvant, in other words as a means through which you can catch attention from the media and public authorities. It is no longer about claiming the right to nudity but instead about using the naked body as a space from/on which to make an appeal. The body becomes a communicational tool rather than the subject of the protest itself. Generally carefully prepared and staged, these sorts of actions are about garnering attention so as to gain visibility in a highly competitive media environment.

Using nudity to convey a message of protest is a relatively recent practice in the West. Claude Guillon (2008) has noted that subversive nudity developed at the end of the 1960s in pacifist and anarchist demonstrations and became widespread in international summits from the 2000s onwards. In this book, the author draws a historical link between this contemporary practice and 'streaking', the humorous and festive nudity that emerged in the 1970s in collective gatherings in England. However, he locates the true starting point of nude protest with a demonstration by Senegalese women in 1980. According to Françoise Héritier this event, noted by Francine Barthe-Deloizy in *Géographie de la nudité*, can be linked to old practices of baring breasts on the African continent used in particular in the anti-colonial struggle.

Environmental activists also often use nudity. As Barthe-Deloizy notes: 'The analogy between nudity and nature is more explicit here. This form of naked protest conveys the message of returning to a lost harmony, reconciling the human race and nature' (2003, p. 133). Environmental activists communicate around the symbolism of nature and a shared belonging to the same Earth. In this approach, nudity is a means through which to illustrate the fragility of the environment. North American artist Spencer Turner makes notable use of this tactic, creating huge performances involving several hundred naked participants (Bazin, 2016). Furthermore, certain movements linked to the environment have also made naked activism the hallmark of their organisation, for example animal rights groups, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

Finally, nudity offers a way to stage power struggles, sometimes anticipated by the protestors and thereby heightening the symbolic weight of their action. In the face of police officers, naked individuals – harmless, innocent, and unarmed – can use their bodies as a shield both defending and embodying their demands. This was particularly striking at Notre-Dame-des-Landes in 2012, when entirely naked activists demonstrating against the planned airport were confronted with heavily armed police officers.

## **Bodies as banners**

Very often, the body is also used as a space on which to display a group's demands in writing. During a 'happening', the body is there to be read. Flat surfaces are mainly used to enable legibility, particularly torsos, but also backs, stomachs, and bottoms. The limited space available sparks concise expressions, striking slogans, which are easily memorised and easily immortalised by journalists' cameras in the usually short timeframe of the performance. In some cases, bodies themselves form the message by shaping letters on the ground.

The language at work is dual: on the one hand, through its incongruity, the naked body in itself acts as a sign of protest; on the other, it also spells out or displays a message. This nudity is not sexualised. It conveys a story; it is part of a narrative in which it assigns itself the role of the weak. It becomes a placard of sorts (p. 83).

In France, this use of bodies as banners has been strongly marked for several years now by the Femen, a feminist movement of Ukrainian origin. Its members forewarn journalists of their actions and engage in staged photogenic performances, in which they bare their breasts, make use of bodily postures, and present readable slogans.

## **Power, norms, and visibility**

Activist nudism is part of a media strategy at the heart of current issues surrounding the 'making visible' of actions (Voiron, 2005). Hubert Prolongeau reports the case of a German woman campaigning to improve refugees' living conditions in Berlin who, exasperated by the lack of interest shown by the journalists present, suggested that she could undress. One journalist, enticed by this proposition, brought his photographer along. The woman used the occasion to denounce the sensationalism of the media by wearing a t-shirt on which the words 'Human rights not tits' were written. This example illustrates the seductive power that the naked body wields over the media, which takes an almost voyeuristic stance. In the same denunciatory vein, a shopkeeper in Limoges protesting against shops opening on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> December dropped his trousers and brandished a banner: 'How far do we have to go?!'. Nudity has become established as a possible, although not necessarily always efficient, strategy for capturing media attention. As Serge Tisseron has explained (2002): 'When you want to get a message across in the media, there aren't that many ways to do it: you can sequester your boss, blow up a building, commit suicide... or appear naked'.

In the face of media interest in naked bodies, Hubert Prolongeau questions whether such action will wane in the years to come as its increased popularity diminishes its subversive impact. However, this response to the persistent dictat of body as spectacle may also derive from what we see on a daily basis in the public space. If naked activists attract attention, it is

also because their bodies are ordinary; they perspire, they have imperfections, folds, and hair. They stand apart from the overwhelmingly homogeneous representations of smooth bodies present on television and in advertising. Certain bodies, deviant bodies, at the margins of social norms, are absent from the public space. Building out from this opposition between the visible and the invisible, and with a view to a ‘resignifying’ process (Paveau, 2014), individuals bearing the marks of a stigma occupy the urban space from which they are excluded in order to reassert their identities. This is the case, for example, of queer activists who reoccupy the street with their ‘different’ naked bodies, subverting the dominant order that oppresses ‘Other’ voices and non-codified identities by playing on the symbols and codes of heterosexuality’ (Hubert Prolongeau, quoting Rachele Borghi, p. 79).

Somewhere between an essay and a journalistic report, this book offers a detailed overview of the practices of activist nudism, illustrated by a wealth of examples and rich interview excerpts. It also sheds legal and philosophical light on the social norms weighing upon bodies in the public space. However, as a journalist, it would have been interesting to see the author’s reflection upon his profession: in terms of media coverage of activist nudism and more broadly of bodies engaged in struggles, with all the concomitant deontological issues, but also in terms of the role the media plays in the circulation of norms.

### Further reading

- Arnaud Baubérot, *Histoire du naturisme, Le mythe du retour à la nature* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2004.)
- Christine Bard, “‘Mon corps est une arme’. Des suffragettes aux Femen’, *Les Temps Modernes* 678 (2014): 213-240.
- Christophe Colera, *La Nudité. Pratiques et significations* (Paris: Éditions du Cygne, 2008).
- Claude Guillon, *Je chante le corps critique. Les usages politiques du corps* (Saint-Martin-de-Londres: Éditions H&O, 2008).
- Emmanuel Soutenon, ‘Le corps manifestant. La manifestation entre expression et représentation’, *Sociétés contemporaines* 31:1 (1998): 37-58.
- Francine Barthe-Deloizy, *Géographie de la nudité. Être nu quelque part* (Levallois-Perret: Bréal, 2003).
- Françoise Héritier, ‘Les Femen reproduisent la malédiction du nu’, *lepoint.fr*, 18 June 2013.
- Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

- Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Corps de femmes, regards d'hommes. Sociologie des seins nus* (Paris: Nathan, 2010).
- Maëlle Bazin, 'Art (du nu) et mobilisation citoyenne : les performances de Spencer Tunick', *Communication & langages* 190 (2017): 73-84.
- Marcela Iacub, *Par le trou de la serrure. Une histoire de la pudeur publique (XIX-XXIe siècle)* (Paris: Fayard, 2008).
- Marie-Anne Paveau, 'Quand les corps s'écrivent. Discours de femmes à l'ère du numérique', in Éric Bidaud (ed.), *Recherches de visages. Une approche psychanalytique* (Paris: Hermann, 2014).
- Olivier Voirol, 'Les luttes pour la visibilité. Esquisse d'une problématique', *Réseaux* 129-130 (2005): 89-121.
- Philippe Artières, *La banderole, histoire d'un objet politique* (Paris: Autrement, 2013).
- Serge Tisseron, *L'Intimité surexposée* (Paris: Hachette, 2002).

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