

## DISPATCHES

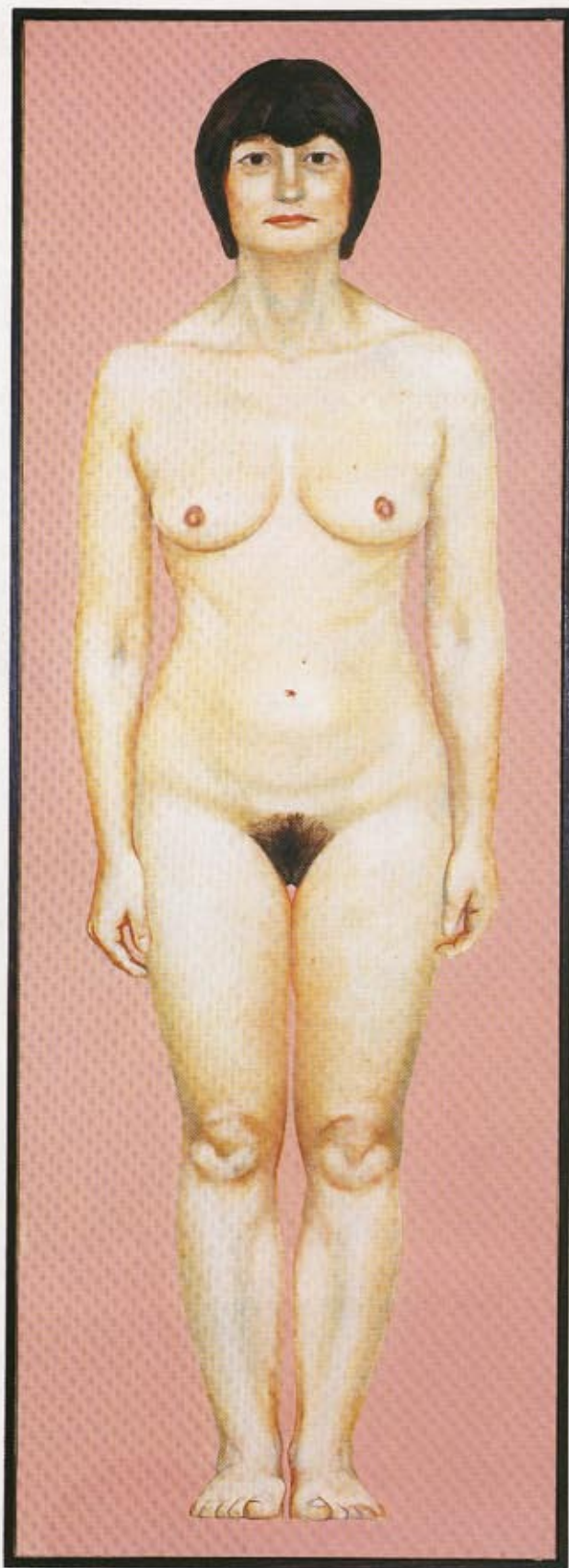
Vincent Corpet, *Catherine Millet*, 1995;  
oil on canvas, 170 x 60 cm.  
Text translated from the French by Charles Penwarden.

### PHOTOFIT NUDE

It was in the spirit of inquiry that the French art critic Catherine Millet agreed to pose naked for a life-size portrait by the artist Vincent Corpet. There was no narcissistic satisfaction to be had, she reports, but it turned out to be a strangely out-of-body experience

Of the current generation of French painters in their forties, there's no doubt that Vincent Corpet has the strongest personality. His work, like that of many of his contemporaries, is protean: some of his paintings, for example, are made by piling up images of all kinds – objects, animals and bits of bodies that come to him by a kind of visual free association. Another series, by contrast, consists of extremely realistic portraits, executed according to a guiding principle: the models pose naked, frontally, arms by their sides. These portraits are full-scale and the dimensions of the canvas are determined by the subject's size, with a rectangle of monochrome colour around the body.

I myself posed for Corpet in 1995. My husband, the writer Jacques Henric, had his portrait painted before I did, and I agreed to pose for the ten or so long sessions at his urging. In revisiting the art of the portrait, Corpet is reactivating what is one of its most ancient functions: to give material form to the



CORPET STUDIES HIS MODEL WITH HIS EYES ONLY A FEW CENTIMETRES AWAY FROM THE BODY, ANALYSING IT SECTION BY SECTION, LIKE A SCANNER. THE RESULT IS THE FLATTEST IMAGE OF YOURSELF YOU COULD EVER SEE

symbolic bond between two individuals. Why is it that a husband or a lover is not happy with photographs of the woman he loves – photographs that would be more 'accurate', and certainly easier to make? It is because photography does not have the same power to refract his desire through the gaze of a third person, a 'connoisseur' who – by virtue of his rigorous practice – appreciates a body down to its tiniest details, and because this gaze excites his own desire. As for the woman who agrees to pose and, above all, to expose herself (especially when this means overcoming her modesty), is she not thereby giving him proof of her love?

With modern painting, which cast aside the ideal of beauty long ago now, this proof of love is compounded by a renunciation of narcissistic satisfaction – and especially so with Corpet. The pose itself is hardly flattering, and his particular approach produces a result that engenders something more like unease than admiration in the beholder of the painting. Corpet studies his model with his eyes only a few centimetres away from the body, analysing it section by section, like a scanner. By the end the model is standing on a tall pedestal like a statue so that the artist's eyes are exactly level with the toes. The result is a representation completely devoid of perspective – the flattest image of yourself you could ever see.

What do you do while the painter is 'executing' you (in every sense of the word: the position of the body and the format of the painting inevitably bring to mind a body laid out in a coffin)? Well, first of all you chat, and then you try to snatch a glimpse of the work in progress. It's a strange situation, in which you have access to this intimate image of yourself by breaking into another person's privacy. For what could be more intimate than the hesitant gestures and the absent gaze of a person who is absorbed in their work? This particular person is busy examining you and at the same time seems to be forgetting that you are there. I must admit at this point that I also accepted my husband's suggestion out of curiosity – the art critic's desire to enter into the most intimate realities of the studio.

Corpet, who treats the nudity you reveal to him with as much respect as a radiologist, begins by standing you up against the blank canvas and pencilling around the outline of your body. This gave me a chance to see roughly what space I would take up on a flat surface, in the event of my life coming to an end on the public highway and the police needing to mark the position of the body. After that he adds in his colours, starting with the brightest. This phase allowed me to appreciate the sight of >



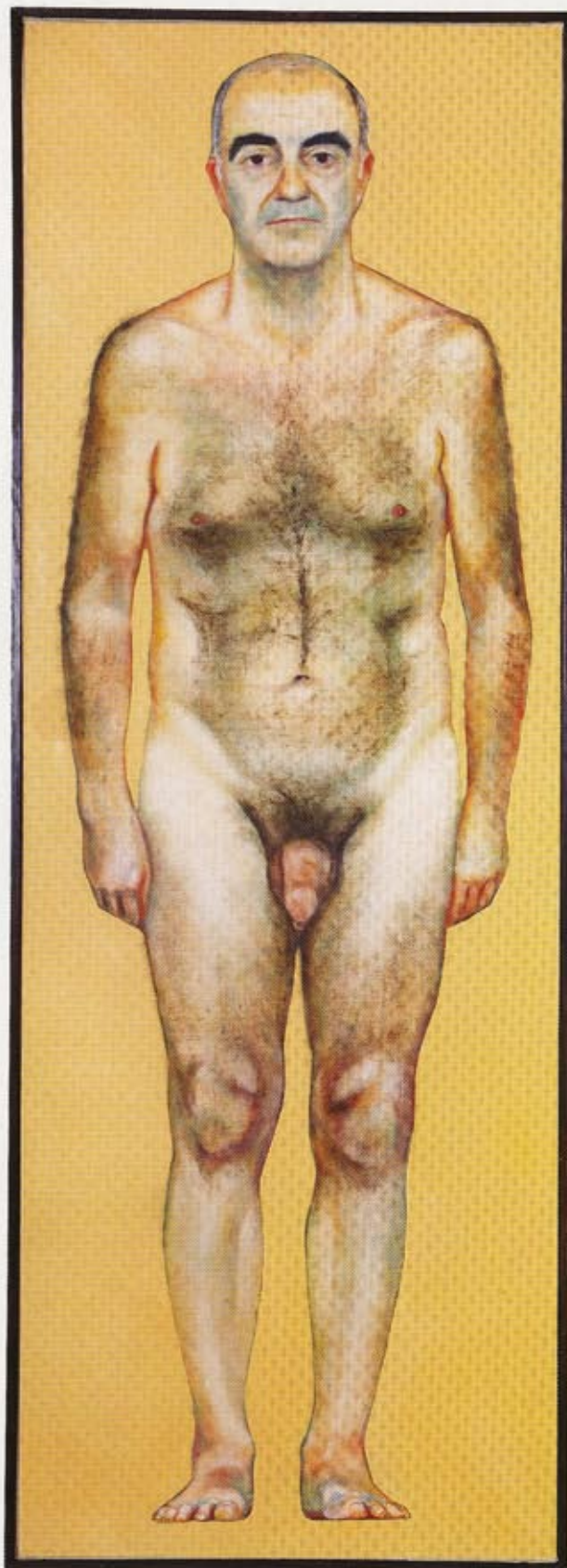
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Vincent Corpet, Jacques Henric, 1995,  
oil on canvas, 170 x 60 cm.

> myself 'made up' as if for the role of Matisse's *Woman with a Hat*.

The most troubling metamorphosis does not take place on the canvas, however, but in the cubicle where he has you stand beside a radiator when the heat starts ebbing out of the studio. There you are completely cut in two. Or rather, all you are is a head that sees, speaks and listens. You no longer have a body, only a hypothetical body: a planet moving out of the orbit of your consciousness. Corpet keeps up the conversation rather like a pickpocket distracting you while he filches something. I finally understood how a model can hold a pose for hours without becoming tired or stiff. It's not just that you forget your body (after all, we forget it enough to abuse it without thinking), more that you unload it on to someone else. Young or old, fat or thin, and always afflicted by the loss of grace every body has suffered since God expelled Man from Paradise, one is now no longer responsible for it; it is an artwork. In many portraits the shoulders push forward slightly, as if the body were itself coming to meet its observer. For my part, I immediately put my body into the conventional position of presentation that you might find in an anthropology textbook: woman, western Europe, age 40-50.

In contrast to the ideal of Frenhofer, the hero in Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, Corpet makes no attempt to bring his portraits to life. On the contrary, he has invented a form of realism strictly devoid of naturalism. It is strange to observe that the image I have of my own body, a scappily assembled patchwork of glimpses from photographs and mirrors, finally has less substance than this 'abstraction' painted by Corpet, which in fact can be seen as a synthesis of the images that I and others have of me. A photofit image, in other words. ▀



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## STEP INTO EMOTION

To her legion of fans, Pina Bausch is the queen of contemporary dance, distilling the avant-garde styles of the 20th century with elements of cabaret to create a highly charged dramatic spectacle. Dominic Palfreyman salutes the choreographer as her company makes a rare London appearance

What is it about Pina Bausch and her dance-theatre that draws such a devoted audience? Pedro Almodóvar was struck by 'unexpected images of painful beauty which made me cry from pure pleasure'; in homage to Bausch, he uses two of her pieces to frame the beginning and end of his latest film, *Talk to Her*. The sculptor Antony Gormley is equally reverential, praising her work as 'the most physical and psychological use of spectacle that I have experienced'. Having created in Tanztheater a new performance genre which opens up broad avenues of dramatic potential, Bausch's innovations go well beyond the dance world.

Until this year Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch had visited London only twice in its 29-year history, a circumstance which had led her most dedicated enthusiasts to follow her around the world like a highbrow version of rock-star groupies. In January her *Masurca Fogo* (Fiery Mazurka) thrilled a sold-out Sadler's Wells, and celebrity fans like the photographer Mario Testino, singer Brian Ferry and actor Fiona Shaw were all in the first-night audience. This month Bausch returns to London for the second time this year, bringing a special production of *Kontakthof* (Contact Courtyard) to the Barbican Theatre.

It is rare for Bausch to work with dancers who are not in her company, and this production is a radical departure which allows a piece made in 1978 to be seen in a new light. *Kontakthof* concerns a Pyrrhic battle of the sexes set in a faded dance hall long after the party has ended; Bausch had always imagined performing it with her company once they had all grown old, each dancer performing the role which their younger self had created. Intrigued by the possibilities of this idea, she used typical Bauschian logic and simply recast it with ordinary elderly men and >



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Dancehall divas – the cast of *Kontakthof*.  
Photograph by Ursula Kaufman.

> women. She advertised in the company's home town of Wuppertal in Germany for people aged over 65 who had no dance experience but had the willingness to 'go somewhere further' that she always demands from performers.

Twenty-five brave volunteers each assumed a role and trained exactly for 18 months. They premiered in Wuppertal in February 2000, and this same cast will perform in London. Bausch has always said that she is more interested in what moves a person than in how they move, so, while this cast may lack the virtuosity of her company's dancers, their age brings a special poignancy to a piece driven by the rituals of desire.

Pina Bausch was born in Germany in 1940 and came to dance at an early age, attending lessons and showing off to the patrons of her parents' restaurant.

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She trained and performed in Germany and New York, and when she started to make her own choreography, she amalgamated the European expressionist and the American post-modernist traditions with her love of cabaret.

Her partnership with designer Rolf Borzik was an inspiration and their collaboration on a now legendary 1975 staging of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, a darkly sexual sacrifice on a stage of damp earth, was an artistic and critical breakthrough. Together they created the stark look of this period, and Borzik's untimely death in 1980 was a personal tragedy for her. Since then Bausch has worked with Peter Pabst (sets) and Marion Cito (costumes), who together have created the extravagant designs for which the company is now known.

The drama in a Bausch piece is a montage of rapid scene changes, bizarre juxtapositions and surreal repetitions performed to a musical collage on breathtakingly elaborate sets. In *Masurca Fogo*, the stage is a rocky seashore complete with a walrus, in *Viktor* it is a giant open grave and in *Nelken*, a carpet of flowers which is patrolled by guard dogs. The world Bausch creates can be frenzied and disturbing, but the most powerful elements are always small gestures and intimate encounters – a look,

a smile, an embrace, even a drag on a cigarette. Her rigorous control of the whole drama from an anarchic rush across a monumental set down to the slightest shrug of the shoulders is extraordinary; it is this mastery which marks Bausch out from her copyists.

Her creative method is highly collaborative; she initiates a process of improvisation with question-and-answer sessions, and eventually edits this material into a coherent whole. A typical session might begin with Bausch asking, 'What would you do with a corpse?' Her company is small and dedicated; some of the dancers have been working with her for many years. Indeed, they are so deeply devoted that they have been maligned as cultish. The collaborative approach creates highly confessional and self-aware roles. Bausch has her dancers question the pretence within their own identities by acting in roles created from their own experiences. In this performance of *Kontakthof* these questions are taken a stage further: since the piece is staged exactly as when first made, the cast of amateurs each has to play two roles, their own and also that of the dancer who created it. ▀

*Kontakthof* is at the Barbican Theatre, London, 28–30 November. All tickets are sold.

