

Negotiating the Nude (Munich, 15–16 Sep 26)

Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, München, Sep 15–16, 2026

Deadline: Feb 22, 2026

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Negotiating the Nude: Unclothed Bodies in Art and its Historiographies (1860s–2026).

The human body occupies a prominent position in highly controversial social debates. Especially unclothed, its various appearances in art and everyday life, public and private spheres as well as – more recently – digital environments induce and materialize conflicts at the same time. Yet the outrage provoked by Édouard Manet's Luncheon on the Grass in 1863, and Olympia two years later indicates a different quality than current debates in post-industrial societies, whether allegations of indecency directed at Michelangelo's David in Florida in 2023 or public responses on Florentine Holzinger's opera-performance *Sancta* in Vienna in 2025 were concerned. Although notable instances permeate a Western artistic canon, the phenomenon itself goes well beyond such a framework.

In global popular cultures, emancipatory efforts continue to compete with endeavors for regulation. Today, supporters of body positivity respond to mediations of the human figure governed by capitalist commodification, the MeToo-movement and various other social initiatives exposed enduring power relations based on gendered and racializing frameworks which, in a visually driven culture, are inseparable from dynamics of the gaze, as feminist writers like bell hooks have pointed out. Gaining momentum in the 1970s, diverse alliances advocating for sexual liberation and self-determination have expanded the cultural vocabulary with regard to articulations of gender, intimacy, and desire, challenging restrictive norms of binary and essentializing belief systems.

All this has changed the way in which 'the body' is understood and discussed in discourses of modern art and beyond. As a concept, the term assumes reality in its grammatical singular only on a symbolic level. Its lived multiplicity and fragmentations, however, materialize in the aesthetic instance of the nude. Here, divided politics and affective economies are both negotiated and contested. This becomes evident in renewed attempts of interference in museums and galleries; simultaneously, artistic practices emphatically reclaim the genre from its hegemonic entanglements.

From early historical surveys of the nude in art to contemporary perspectives informed by Queer and Disability Studies, scholars have repeatedly engaged with presentations of the unclothed body, connecting aesthetic, gendered, erotic, and sexual imaginaries with cultural, political, social, and anthropological concerns, in which they are inevitably entangled. Against this backdrop, the symposium seeks to explore how art, art history, and related areas of study have participated and keep responding to such decentralized developments that progress in non-linear and sometimes

contradictory ways since the 19th century to the present.

Explorations of the nude as a deliberate act of exposition rather than mere representation may include, but are not limited to the following questions: How is nudity negotiated in different cultural and historical contexts, and how has it been conceptualized by art history and visual culture studies, especially with respect to modern art—from Kenneth Clark to Margaret Walters, Griselda Pollock to David Getsy, etc.—with what blind spots? Which curatorial approaches have been pursued in exhibitions and museum presentations, and how was art historical research translated to broader audiences? Which canonizations and exclusions continue to shape the discipline, such as privileging Western classical traditions, or marginalizing questions of gender and ‘race’? How do techniques of reproduction affect the popularization of public nudity, from small black-and-white photographs to large-scale views evoking visual analogies between flesh, incarnate, and the materiality of the arts (oil paint on canvas, marble, paper, etc.)? And how are latent structures of desire embedded in scholarly accounts, e. g. Clark’s normative aestheticization of the “beautiful”? Discourses on anatomy, humanism, and religion may further illuminate the situatedness and historicity of art historical inquiry.

The colloquium invites case studies, disciplinary debates, or methodological reflections that reconsider the challenges and potentials of engaging with the unclothed body on display. In dialogue with ongoing debates in art history, visual culture studies, and aesthetic theory, the project aims to scrutinize the topic in Western Art since the 1860s and encourages contributions from a global, de-centered perspective.

Practical Information:

Please submit an abstract of max. 250 words in English or German and a short academic biography (100 words) by 22.02.2026 to negotiatingthenude@zkg.eu. Proposals addressing related topics not listed above are also welcome. If you would like to suggest an alternative approach, please contact the organizers directly.

Concept & Organization: Dominik Brabant (Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte), Susanne Huber (Universität Bremen), Henry Kaap (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

Reference:

CFP: Negotiating the Nude (Munich, 15-16 Sep 26). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 9, 2026 (accessed Feb 15, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/51434>.