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The Monstrous Model: Shape-Shifting in the Life-Drawing Space

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## The Monstrous Model: Shape-Shifting in the Life-Drawing Space.

Paper presented at the HEA Arts & Humanities Annual Conference 2014: 'Heroes and Monsters- extra-ordinary tales of teaching and learning in the Arts and Humanities', The Lowry, Salford Quays, UK, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

Dr Nina Kane - Cast-Off Drama / University of Huddersfield



© Cast-Off Drama, 'Foil and Feathers', Leeds Art Gallery, 2008.

I open this discussion of the monstrous model with a brief extract from Barbara Comyns' novel *Our Spoons Came From Woolworths* (1950). In it, the narrator, Sophie, describes her experience of life-modelling for art schools thus:

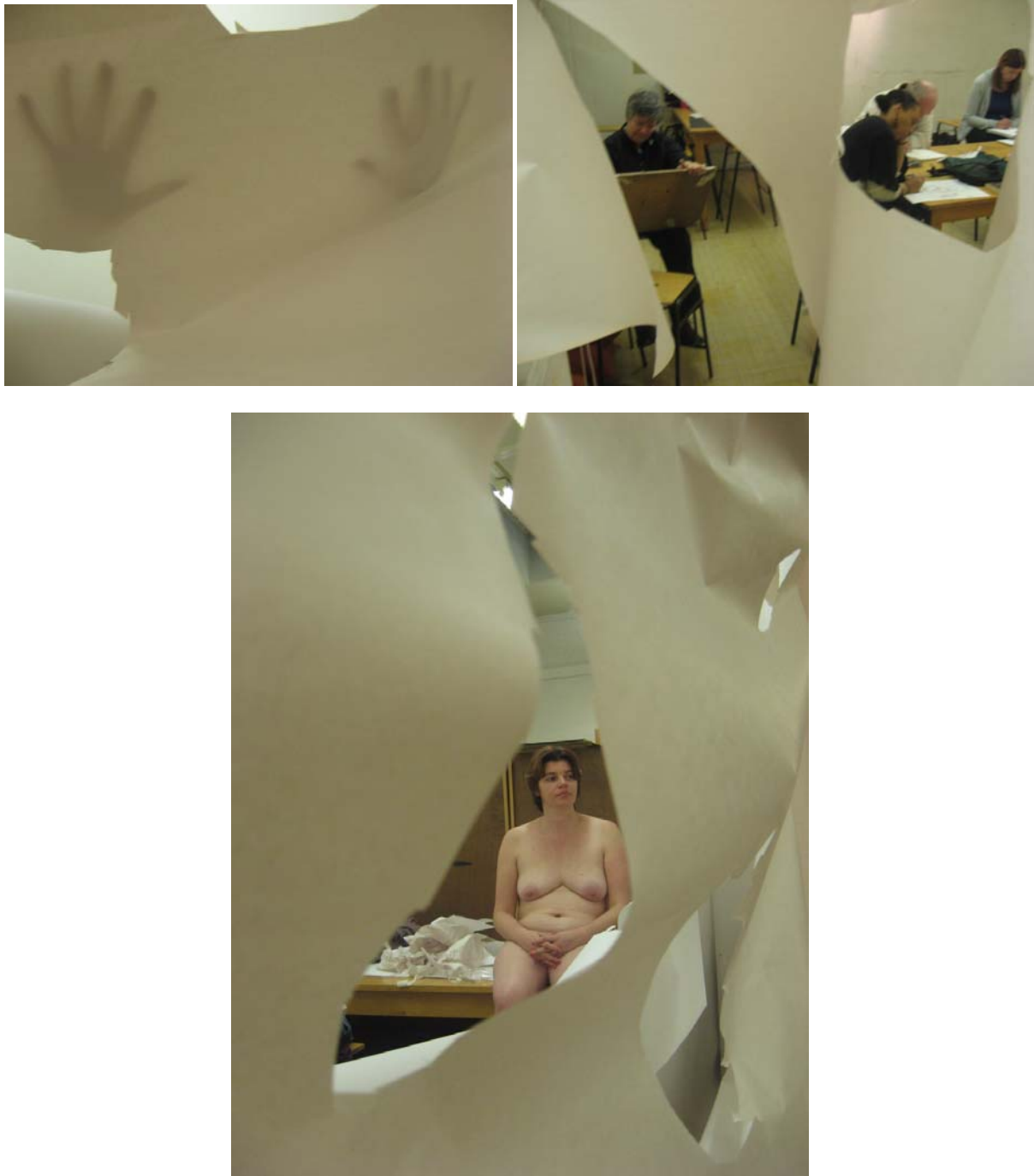
I only got seven-and-six a morning for being an artist's model. One school that gave me a lot of work was chiefly patronised by very well-to-do girls. In the rest-times the model was expected to sit in a tiny cell, smaller than a lavatory, so that she could not contaminate the young ladies. The walls of the cell were covered in rude remarks the models had written in pencil about the students and the school.<sup>1</sup>

This fictional account of a life-model's containment conveys truths about the historical treatment of models employed to sit for art schools, and the ongoing perception of life-models as a potentially disruptive - or contaminating - presence in the life-drawing space. It

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<sup>1</sup> B. Comyns, *Our Spoons Came From Woolworths*, Great Britain, Virago Press Limited Edition, 1983, p. 88.

also conveys something of model rage - or outrage. In Comyns' text, the 'tiny cell' of the model's changing room becomes a lacuna in and through which marginalised beings are remembered, and alternative stories are told of the life-drawing arena, its hierarchies, function and practices. The act of writing on the wall marks a response to exclusion; the rude comments forming a shared text of resistance, creativity, observation and humour passed from one model to another. A space of authorship, the wall marks a history of occupation; it acts as a mirror to the model's present condition and invites participation for its future transformation or becoming / becoming other.



©Cast-Off Drama, 'Peep-Show Performance', 2009

Frequently regarded as an abject and monstrous figure whose body and presence is regulated by the tutor and life-drawers, the art school life-model is a naked, roving, chattering shape-shifter. Taming and containing the monstrous model is a key function of the tutor. But what happens when the life-model teaches the class? This paper discusses findings from The Art of the Life-Model course at Leeds Art Gallery, noting the shape-shifting benefits of model-led pedagogy.<sup>2</sup> It discusses the development and experience of model-led teaching, noting the monstrous implications of moving between the conventionally discrete positions of 'model' and 'tutor' and the effects of combining these roles; with some reflection on how nudity can be managed and negotiated with learners in this context. The paper also illustrates how gallery spaces and collections can be used to extend the outrageous authoring of monstrous model testimony through embodied and instinctive engagement with figurative art history. It asks why some art colleges are choosing to drop life-drawing from its curriculums despite widespread interest in this, and reports on a recent decision to ban all forms of nude-working in the public spaces of Leeds Museums and Galleries. It asks how art-makers can continue to work flexibly and creatively with the body in institutions marked by an excessively corporate and risk-averse climate. It notes that this climate is at odds with a widespread tolerance of nudity in arts spaces from the general public. The paper suggests that life-modelling should form a major component of contemporary visual arts and life-drawing studies in the C21st.



©Nina Kane, The Art of the Life-Model – workshop on The Lady of Shalott, 2002

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<sup>2</sup> N. Kane, 'Embodying the Other: Pedagogic and Performative Strategies Used in *The Art of the Life-Model* course, 2002-2007', Leeds College of Art Research Series, 2007. Hard copies of this document are available to reference at Leeds College of Art Libraries and at Leeds Art Gallery Education. The document can be downloaded in full at the University of Huddersfield Repository on the following link: <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/20204/>

The Art of the Life-Model project ran from 2002-2012. It underwent a number of structural reincarnations in its ten-year history; and a change of funding and administrative partners. From 2002-2008 it was funded by Leeds City Council as a partnership between Leeds College of Art Community Education and Leeds Art Gallery Education; then from 2008-2012, run by Cast-Off Drama with the support of Leeds Art Gallery Education and community donations.<sup>3</sup> Within this the structuring of the project's activities and remits also changed, as shown here organised here into four key phases. This paper will concentrate on phases 1-3 only.

Four phases of The Art of the Life-Model at Leeds Art Gallery, 2002 – 2012
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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Oct 2002 – June 2006: Community arts 'drop-in'.</li> <li>2. Oct 2006 – July 2008: Modular course of three 10-week terms; continuous attendance req'd.</li> <li>3. August 2008 – July 2010: Fortnightly model-led performance exchanges with life-drawers and general public in Leeds Art Gallery spaces.</li> <li>4. August 2010–Dec 2012: Renamed Modelworks. Model-led performances and workshops, artist-led sessions and community exhibitions</li> </ol> |
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The changes reflect the different demands of its partners and the shape-shifting required for its survival as a project that at times posed challenges to the institutions and funding bodies that sought to both develop and contain it. As its artistic director and key facilitator, I have been required to change my role in response to the needs of its partners, and this journey has raised interesting questions about the shifting status and perception of life-modelling within Leeds-based art institutions during that time.

The Art of the Life-Model was launched in October 2002 as part of The Campaign for Drawing.<sup>4</sup> It was delivered by myself as an Associate Lecturer of the art college's Community Education department and ran as a community arts 'drop-in' offered free-of-charge to the general public, but directed at life-drawers, and anyone with an interest in performance art, theatre and feminism. By 2004-5 it was running as a 30-week course in line with other community education programmes at the college. There were no age restrictions on attendance until 2006. The programme offered a mixed-arts approach to exploring the history and function of the life-model using drama, discussion of gallery works and model-led life-drawing in each session. Anyone attending was automatically enrolled at the Leeds College of Art as a student and had access to its facilities and libraries.

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<sup>3</sup> N. Kane, 'Cast-Off Drama', 2004, [www.castoffdrama.blogspot.com](http://www.castoffdrama.blogspot.com), (accessed 2 June 2014); Leeds City Council, ND, <http://www.leeds.gov.uk/Pages/Default.aspx>, (accessed 2 June 2014); Leeds College of Art, ND, <http://www.leeds-art.ac.uk/>, (accessed 2 June 2014); Leeds Art Gallery, ND, <http://www.leeds.gov.uk/museumsandgalleries/Pages/Leeds-Art-Gallery.aspx>, (accessed 2 June 2014).

<sup>4</sup> 'The Campaign for Drawing', ND, <http://www.campaignfordrawing.org/about/index.aspx>, (accessed 2 June 2014)

The blueprint and philosophies for The Art of the Life-Model developed from work I had undertaken through a project called WILMA - Women Into Life-Modelling Arts, which addressed professional experiences and perceptions of life-modelling. WILMA took a rigorous and feminist approach, bringing female life-models and drawers together to discuss imbalances of autonomy in practice.<sup>5</sup> The project recognised the need to increase the status of the life-model as a way of progressing conventions and practice into the C21st. The creative development programme offered by WILMA gave space for models to try practical ideas out. Discussions noted that life-modelling is learnt 'on-the-job' and whilst there is no written 'handbook of modelling', the unwritten rules, codes and conventions of life-drawing sessions are unilaterally applied and are reinscribed through practice and tradition alone. WILMA models also noted that there are a variety of ways in which poses are negotiated, and this process offers opportunity for expression or containment of a model's creativity and agency.

Something I was formulating through Cast-Off Drama at this time was the idea that the life-drawing space was a space for theatre, and I was also working with philosopher Luce Irigaray's notions of irreducible difference and looking to find a relational model for practice. My central premise was that the working relationship between artist and model is one of dynamic, creative, exchange. Life-drawing and life-modelling are interdependent activities: simply put, you can't model without a life-drawer, you can't life-draw with a model. It's a creative partnership. Where the artist is concerned primarily with materials and surfaces, the model is inherently concerned with maintaining a conscious bodily presence in the space. The model's role is inherently performative and psychophysical. Model and artist have differing functions and use different tools. The exchange is a time-durational activity located in shared space, but the occupation and experience of time and space is different - time can go very slowly for the model, and very quickly for the life-drawer, and each maintains their own sphere. We do not always share the same horizon. Recognition that there is more to life-modelling than just 'sitting around naked' and that that there is a dialogue between artist and model in the act of life-drawing/life-modelling underlined the theme of 'creative exchange' and irreducible difference at the heart of The Art of the Life-Model. Exploration of the conventions of stillness, silence, nudity, the screen, terminology, fixed positions, looking and distance, became a central focus of workshop activities in the early years as did exploration of pose-negotiation through different approaches. Please see appendix 3 for Teaching Aids exploring 'Attitudes of the Life-Drawing Group' and appendices

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<sup>5</sup> Specifically the 'Will You, Won't You...?' pilot project which I self-funded in partnership with Leeds Art Gallery and the Swarthmore Education Centre, Leeds, 2001 – 2002. Swarthmore Education Centre, ND, <http://www.swarthmore.org.uk/>, (accessed 2 June 2014). See this and the WILMA programme of works under 'Community and Education' on the Cast-Off Drama blog - <http://castoffdrama.blogspot.co.uk/#/2013/11/community-and-education-projects-2002.html>, (accessed 2 June 2014).

4-6 for Teaching Aids exploring Conventions, Pose-Negotiation and Histories of the Life-Model.

A key component of my teaching strategy was to life-model for part of each session, using my anatomically female body as a 'laboratory' for practical, performative, investigation. This allowed me to register the immediate effects of the workshop's interventions through emotion, instinct and physical response; and crucially to discuss these with the students. I worked to particular codes of robe use, and clearly established a context for nudity in the sessions, communicating the purposes of this to students. Uses of nudity did not always follow the parameters of nude-working as defined by conventional life-classes and this brought a range of responses. The fact that I was not a life-drawing teacher or visual artist, was clearly aligning myself as a 'model-tutor', and worked from a theatre base was a further challenge to expectations.<sup>6</sup> In occupying simultaneously the conventionally high status role of 'tutor' and conventionally low status role of 'model', I was able to redefine the rules of engagement for the class, intervening actively in the dynamics occurring between myself and the life-drawers; challenging, questioning, informing, offering reflection and response.

A huge resource for the course was the fine art collections and exhibitions of Leeds Art Gallery and I planned sessions week-by-week from a point of contemplation using a dual approach of life-model / theatrical reading and art-historical analysis. The process - which I named 'stepping into the picture' - involved practical reconstruction of the pose in a figurative painting or sculpture to investigate its aura, to contemplate its totemic significance and to intuit the conditions under which it had been produced. The art-historical research gave substance to my instinctive and embodied readings of the work and led to an uncovering of model biographies and a variety of shifting histories of the model.

This in turn led to a recognition that when we engage in life-modelling / life-drawing exchange, we encounter, often intuitively, aspects of different traditions and histories. The emotional tenor or dynamic of a session can be informed by participants' instinctive engagement with the shifting histories of the model, but also with the different histories of people in the room. Others are conjured into the space involuntarily. There is a degree of fusion - as a model I note that figures drawn of me commonly represent a combination of my features, the artists' own and something else. It is not uncommon for me to look at a painting and see a spit-image of a relative or somebody I had been thinking of looking back. Similarly, it is not uncommon for models to drift off into a reverie only to find when they look at a drawing that something of where their mind wandered to is captured on an artist's sketch - often incidentally. A splash of colour, a mountain range - and in the case of very

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<sup>6</sup> I worked primarily with interventionist community theatre methods, and with the Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre techniques of Augusto Boal. See A. Boal and A. Jackson, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, London, Routledge, 2002. As the course progressed I developed specific 'Drama-into-Drawing' exercises. For further details of my methodology and the thinking behind it, see, Kane, op. cit., 'Embodying the Other'.

strong encounter, a line from an Edith Sitwell poem I had had on the brain earlier that day to which no reference at all had been made. The exchange between life-model and artists is one of flux - a constant shift of fleeting references, a host of shifting marks. We translate more than we can see between us, and shape-shift visibly and invisibly in space and on canvas. A visit from Canadian performance artist Raphaëlle de Groot underscored this.<sup>7</sup>

Speaking of her work processes in 2012, de Groot said:

The invisible suddenly becomes tangible, the small detail becomes immense and reveals its infinite character and what seems impersonal exposes a shared proximity. This dynamic depicts a world hidden from sight, somehow unrepresentable, a behind the scenes universe, suspended or pending between the conscious and the unconscious.<sup>8</sup>

In her 2005 work for *Situation Leeds*, she conjured this world through a focus on the life-model.<sup>9</sup> Prior to her performance for the course, Raphaëlle and I collaborated in the public spaces of the gallery negotiating seeing and non-seeing, movement, mask, guiding and risk to support her inner engagement with the model's body as both 'spectated object' and 'performative subject'. Working between languages, we developed translation exercises that we subsequently explored with students on the course. In her visit to *The Art of the Life-Model*, Raphaëlle performed the role of the life-model and combined it with the activity of the artist, presenting a subject matter that continuously transformed itself to become pure process - a process that faced those drawing her with the unknown. Through this she probed the act of seeing - witnessing, revealing, interpreting and inventing the other through the creative response of participants. The result was a performance of relentless shape-shifting - a manifestation of an image monstrous, humorous, gentle, uncertain, bold and beautiful.

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<sup>7</sup> Raphaëlle de Groot, ND, <http://www.raphaelledegroot.net/>, (accessed 2 June 2014). For photographs of Raphaëlle's collaboration with *Cast-Off Drama* and her work at Leeds Art Gallery see the collection entitled 'Essais Performatifs'.

<sup>8</sup> Graff Galerie, 'Raphaëlle de Groot', ND, [http://www.graff.ca/galerie/eng/artists/degroot\\_eng.html](http://www.graff.ca/galerie/eng/artists/degroot_eng.html), (accessed 2 June 2014).

<sup>9</sup> K. Harker, *Situation Leeds: Contemporary Artists and the Public Realm 05*, Vitrine Publishing, UK, 2005-2001.





© Raphaele de Groot / Cast-Off Drama, *Essais Performatifs* / *Negotiating Us Here and Now* / *The Art of the Life-Model*, Leeds Art Gallery, 2005.

In 2006, The Art of the Life-Model changed from a 'drop-in project' and developed as a modular course with a set curriculum of termly projects and continuous attendance required by students over the age of 18. Whilst unaccredited, it included informal assessment of student work. The college changed the course's remit and insisted that I no longer model as part of the teaching, so I introduced a 'model co-facilitation' aspect where I gave a part of the session over to another life-model to lead on having collaborated with them beforehand, and supported the development of their facilitative and creative ideas. In the same year, I was commissioned to produce research on the project, and my report, entitled *Embodying the Other: Pedagogic and Performative Strategies Used in 'The Art of the Life-Model' Course 2002-2007*, can be found at the Leeds College of Art Libraries and on the University of Huddersfield Repository.<sup>10</sup>

In the Spring of 2008, the college decided, for reasons never clarified, to withdraw all life-drawing activities from their curriculums, and the pool of life-models were given notice. I returned to modelling as part of the sessions. The Art of the Life-Model lost its funding from Leeds City Council in July 2008, and the project reverted to Cast-Off Drama under my full artistic direction. It now offered fortnightly drop-in workshops on a Saturday afternoon focused on performative life-model-drawer exchanges in the public galleries. This extended the negotiation of nudity beyond the conventional structure, moving the frame of working towards the performative and the roving, working with doors open rather than closed, albeit with signs to explain to the public what was happening. This movement raised questions about the performance of the grotesque, the marginalised, the visceral and the abject in the gallery space - its possibilities and its limits. It raised questions about the architecture of gallery rooms, their thresholds, containers and boundaries, also the perception of the public to the role of nudity in figurative and performance art. The questions raised by this were in line with educational and curatorial policies which sought to encourage doing and making in the gallery space and the Saturday sessions received a very positive and engaged response from members of the public of all ages and cultural backgrounds. However the activity brought conflict with the expectations of the site management team who from April 2009 banned all nude-working in the public spaces of the lower galleries, confining life-drawing activities to the closed education studio. There was some concession offered for life-drawing in upper galleries with the doors closed but only with prior consent and arrangement for each occasion. Cast-Off Drama moved its nude-work activities back into the education studio, and combined the life-drawing programme for adults with a series of 'Family Afternoons' using costumed modelling in the public spaces. In the Summer of 2010, The Art of the Life-Model changed its name to Modelworks and was supported by Gallery Education and developed by a team of community volunteers until December 2012.

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<sup>10</sup> Kane, op. cit., 'Embodying the Other'.

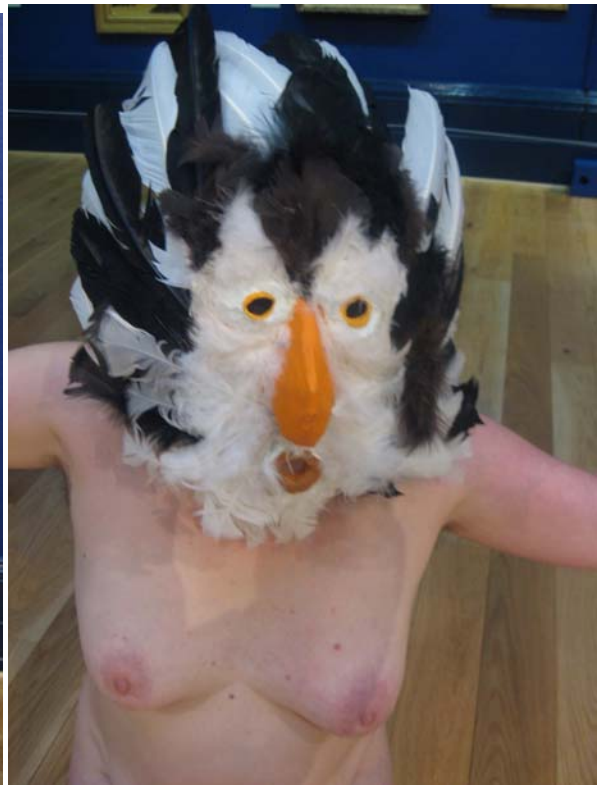


© Cast-Off Drama, 2008 – 2009.





© Cast-Off Drama, 2008-2009



© Cast-Off Drama, 'Foil and Feathers', 2008-2009





© Cast-Off Drama, 'Foil and Feathers', 2008-2009.

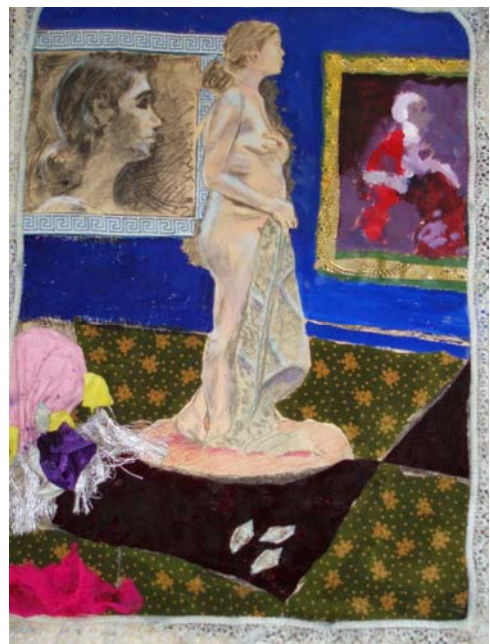
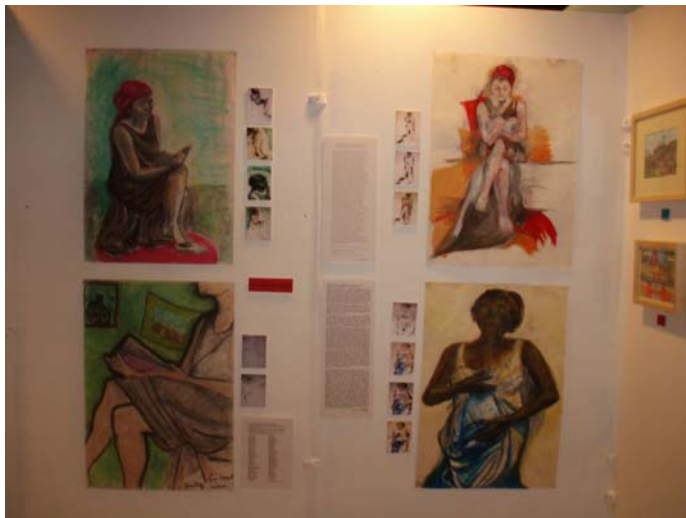
Cast-Off Drama continues to work on projects with both the Education and the Community teams at Leeds Art Gallery. In Spring 2013, we applied to hold a life-drawing performance involving nudity in one of the upper galleries as part of audience development research commissioned by the Arts Council. The event was given the go-ahead but was later pulled by the site manager who said that there was now a policy of no nude working at all in any Leeds public gallery or museum spaces. There have been requests from performance artists and life-drawers since, all of which received a similar response. This policy remains unchanged, and is a subject of ongoing dialogue between Cast-Off Drama and Leeds Museums and Galleries.

So I think I'll leave the presentation there. Please find in Appendices 1 and 2, two Monstrous Model Toolkit exercises. These are tried and tested Cast-Off Drama life-model / life-drawer exchanges explored on The Art of the Life-Model and through other projects since their inception in 2004. Please feel free to use these in your teaching and performative experimentation. OK that's it! The door is open! Thank you!



**APPENDIX 1: Toolkit 1: Collective histories of mark-making, patron history, inheriting and progressing another's marks.**

1. The model chooses a pose 'from the antique' – a pose from a figurative picture or sculpture that they feel confident in maintaining, and will enjoy recreating a number of times.
2. The model takes up the pose, and the artists arrange themselves around her /him. It is suggested the artists work on A2 size, cartridge or sugar paper.
3. Modelling / drawing exchange for 30 minutes.
4. Once the 30 minutes is up, the artists attach an A4 sheet to their picture and spend a moment writing about the choices they've made and what they hope the future direction of the work will be. This is the 'log' of the work.
5. The artists return the sketch, with their A4 'log' sheet attached to the tutor.
6. At the following session, the tutor presents the sketches with the A4 log attached face down so the image cannot be seen. The artists choose one at random – they have to work with whichever one they pick.
7. The model resumes the pose s/he took previously. The pose must be accurate. The model can however choose to add or remove drapes and coloured pieces to vary the composition of the sitting session by session. The artists arrange themselves around her / him, using their chosen drawing as a guide. When they find the viewpoint the work was made from, they continue working on the drawing for 30 minutes, progressing the work as they see fit. They can choose to read, follow or ignore what is written on the log sheet.
8. Once the 30 minutes is up, the artist adds their ideas and hopes for the direction of the work to the log sheet and again returns the A2 drawing and log to the tutor for the following session when another artist will 'inherit' it.
9. The process lasts for as many sessions as there are in the module / project. The aim is for the artists to work with whichever picture they 'inherit' and commit to the challenge of working on a piece others have started, whilst making confident decisions of their own to progress the work using materials and marks as they see fit.
10. The finished pieces are collectively produced and of indeterminate ownership. The model's role, however, is consistent. S/he occupies the 'patron' position and is the 'northern star' (point of constancy) in this exercise.



© Cast-Off Drama, 2004 – 2008, Venus Interventions / Inheritance Project – exploring the Patron history of the life-model, collective mark-making, indeterminate and shared ownership.



## **Appendix 2: Toolkit 2: Peephole: fairground history, model changing room, looking and looking back**

1. Box off or screen a rectangular space in the room with lightweight cartridge paper or newsprint. The area should be at least 7ft high and long / wide enough for a model to sit, walk, lie or stroll comfortably in.
2. Make some small holes in the paper at different points along the screen.
3. The model positions her/himself inside the box; the artists position themselves outside. Invite each to peer in and out through the holes.
4. Artists to choose an initial drawing position. Model to choose an initial posing position. Each is free to move and roam as they want in their allotted spheres. All are welcome to eat, talk, sing, dance, etc.
5. Model and artists each have a pair of scissors. When the exchange commences and both sides are clear, either side can use the scissors to make the holes bigger for looking out through and posing in front of (model) or looking to draw through (artists), and can make new holes. They are invited to consider the effects on their modelling or drawing of peeping (being peeped at).
6. Model and artists to indicate using hands and fingers, or by talking, which hole they wish to cut before bringing the scissors close. Holes can vary in size.
7. The posing / drawing session lasts as long as people want it. It doesn't matter how many or how few holes are cut.



© Cast-Off Drama, 'Peep-Hole Performances', 2007 – 2009 – exploring the fairground and performer histories of the model, the model's changing room, booths and screening



© Cast-Off Drama, 'Peep-Hole Performances', 2007 – 2009 – exploring the fairground and performer histories of the model, the model's changing room, booths and screening

### Appendix 3:

#### **Attitudes of the Life-Drawing Group? DISCUSS:**

1. The life-model should be seen and not heard
2. The life-model can teach us nothing about art.
3. The life-model should nurture the artist.
4. A muse should be amusing.
5. A muse should be a-musing.
6. The life-model is the property of the artist.
7. Clothed life-models are a disappointment. Nude life-models are up for anything.
8. Good life-models can do any position. Bad life-models break without permission.
9. There is no real difference between a life-model and a bowl of fruit.
10. Time is immaterial. Good life-models do not count the time.
11. Life-models should never claim the artists' work as their own.

Discuss:

Do you agree or disagree with the statements made above? What aspects, conventions or expectations of models are referenced in these statements?

What attitudes to / perceptions of the life-model occur in life-drawing circles?

What is the role of the model in your opinion?

What value judgements are made about life-models in your experience?

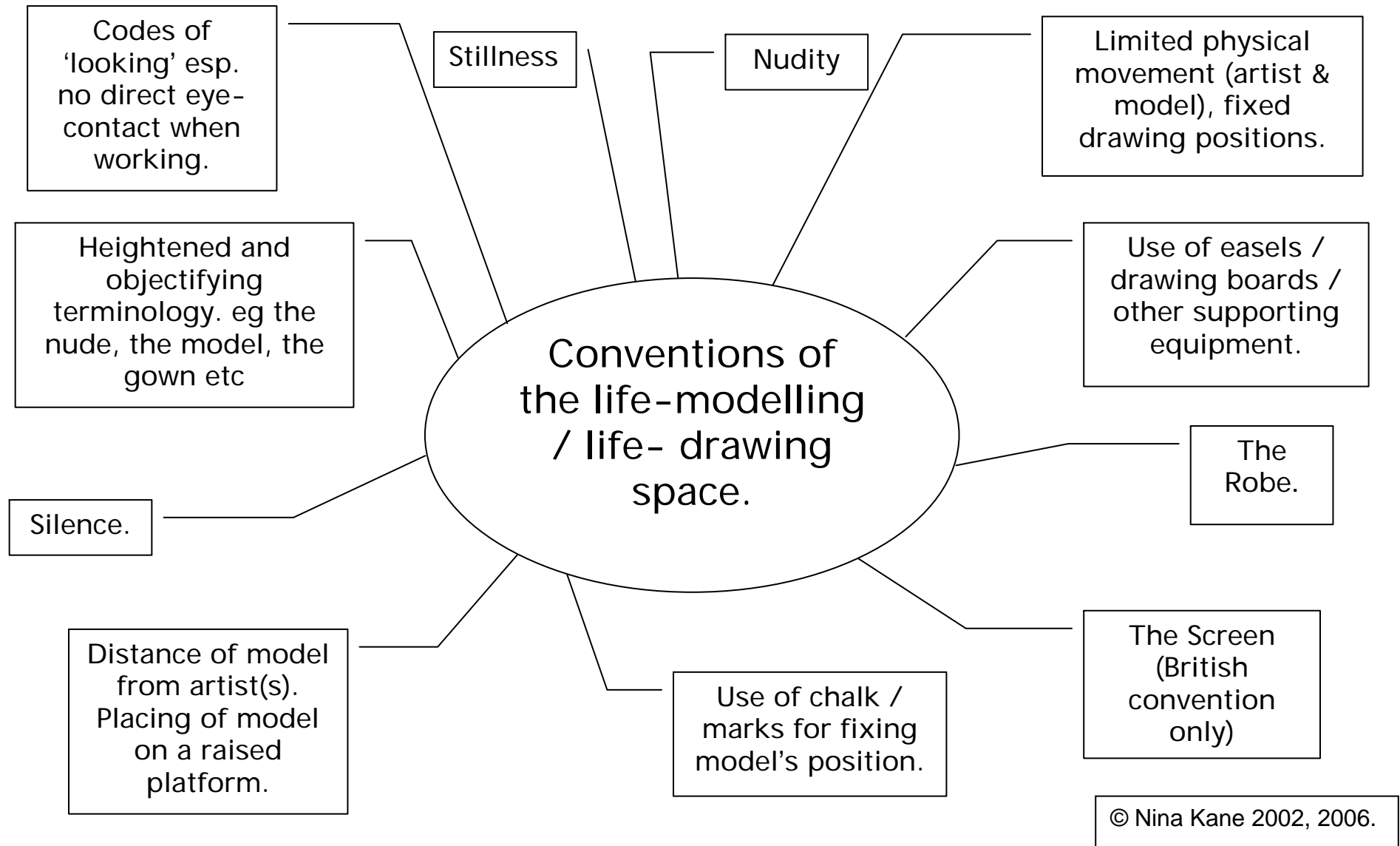
What is the function of 'unwritten rules' in relation to the model within life-drawing practice? How do 'unwritten rules' assist the making of figurative art?

© Nina Kane, 2004, 2014

Blank page – see below for appendices 4-6 in Landscape format.

#### APPENDICES 4-6:

**Questions:** How familiar are these conventions? Do they operate in all life-drawing situations? Where do they originate? What is their function? How useful are these for figurative arts-making?



Verbal Direction. Tutor / Lead

**Questions:** In your experience, how is a model posed and to what effect? Are these systems used exclusively or in combination? What do we look for initially in a pose? If you are a model, how do you develop your 'pose-repertoire'? How best can you negotiate a pose? Is it useful to think of poses as narrative (ie. telling a story), abstract (arrangements of light, shade, tone, form), emotive..? What is the history of the poses we see repeated in figurative arts history? How are poses passed on culturally and for what reasons?

Physical contact. Lead artist/ tutor physically 'sculpts' the model into desired position.

Verbal Direction. Tutor / Lead artist tells model how to place their body.

Model-initiated posing. Model draws on own 'pose repertoire' or body habits to set pose.

Use of other physical systems as a way in to creating pose eg. Yoga, T'ai C'hi, sign language, ballet positions, circus.  
NB. Usually defined by model's expertise /training in a given system.

Striking a pose... common ways in to pose-setting and pose-negotiation.

Group – negotiated pose. Having fixed their own positions artists in a group negotiate a pose that suits all angles.

Art-historical specific. Pose is directly copied from a work of art – eg. the model sits in the pose of the Mona Lisa, or of Manet's Olympia using an image of the original as a guide.

Art-historicalesque / 'Cipher' posing: Model takes a pose that is suggestive / resonant of an art-historical type. Eg pseudo ballet pose that is called 'Degas-like'.

When we engage in life-modelling / life-drawing we encounter, often intuitively, aspects of different traditions. The emotional 'tenor' / dynamic of a life-drawing session can be informed by the model and artist's instinctive engagement with the different histories of the profession.

**Activity:** Which 'tradition' of modelling are you most familiar with? Can you think of any other histories of the model? Next time you look at a work of art think about where you would find information on the body / bodies behind the image.

**Question:** Why are there so few accounts of the working practice of life-models and their contribution to art history? What do people most commonly associate life-modelling with? What is the difference between a 'model', a 'study' and a 'sitter'? What sort of profession is life-modelling?

© Nina Kane, 2002, 2006

