

Modeling as an Older Woman: Exploitation or Subversion?

Alessandra Bruni Lopez y Royo



FIG. 1. PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR. PHOTOGRAPH BY TERRI LEE-SHIELD, 2008.

I.

In my mid-forties, out of boredom, I answered a casting call for non-models to appear in a feature about “real women” and “real beauty” to be published in a British weekly. The first Dove campaign of 2004 had just been released. By including women of realistic sizes and different ages it had generated a buzz, with a series of articles in various magazines that “cashed in” on these newer ideas of natural, unretouched beauty, simultaneously promoting them, even though later Dove admitted to retouching the photos (Jones 28-29). After the shoot, on an impulse, armed with professional pictures and some tear sheets, I approached a modeling agency. I was turned down, but was signed up by a second

agency upon recommendation of the first, with the caveat that modeling work would come my way only occasionally “because of your age,” as the booker, a young woman in her twenties, was quick to point out. Nine years on, I am still modeling, on the books of a few agencies, but I also freelance, having expanded into realms of modeling which are not agency dominated.

In the beginning I tried to hold on to my “day job” as a lecturer and modeled whenever I could squeeze it in between marking, lecturing, and writing papers. Eventually, I embraced modeling as a career, as I could not handle the pressure of such different ways of working and, effectively, being. So far I have not regretted my decision, despite the fact that modeling is generally regarded as frivolous, “so impermanent and so vapid,” as an acquaintance told me, mystified by my career choice. Most people associate modeling with fashion runway and fashion editorial, but this is only one of its many strands, albeit one that has been the focus of several studies (Entwistle and Wissinger; Mears; Evans). The modeling landscape is indeed varied and intriguingly complex, including several types of modeling with an interesting creative synergy, from art modeling—also subject of a number of studies, especially in its life-modeling variant (Hollander; Phillips)—to fashion illustration, fetish modeling, erotic modeling, commercial modeling, editorial beauty, and now, increasingly, fashion films, which intersect with music videos. Modeling as an activity is mired in stereotypes and is perceived as most objectifying: the model is understood to have no agency. Indeed, the exploitation of young fashion models has been copiously written about, and a number of initiatives, such as the Model Alliance in New York, have sprung up to give models some protection and support.

Nowadays models tend to diversify, especially if they are in it for the long haul, and thus they may choose to go freelance with no agency representation, or part-freelance, as I have, moving seamlessly between industry-led (by which I mean both the fashion and advertising industries) and more creative types of modeling, not constrained by commercial demands. However, boundaries are not so demarcated, and the

different kinds of modeling do feed into each other. Though modeling is seen as the purview of the young, with most fashion models and, to an extent, art and fetish models already deemed to be too old by age twenty-five (with notable exceptions), older models have started to be seen much more often in the past decade, most significantly in fashion, inclusive of catwalk, and in editorial spreads, which are very important in terms of visibility. It is a phenomenon that has an international dimension. In the United States, photographer Ari Seth Cohen, with his *Advanced Style* blog—now turned into a book (2013) and a film (2014)—has been promoting stylish women over sixty since 2008. Cohen is also a casting agent, putting forward some of the women he has photographed for major fashion campaigns, such as Lanvin in 2012. The UK's answer to *Advanced Style* has been the Channel 4 film *Fabulous Fashionistas* (2013), directed by Sue Bourne, which focused on the sartorial choices of a group of women over sixty-seven, who became overnight celebrities after the documentary was aired. They have appeared frequently as editorial models, especially the Bath-based seventy-five-year-old Jean Woods.

The visibility of these older models demonstrates that older women have beauty and style and are involved in a newer construction of beauty and glamour centered on agelessness or the defiance of aging, as written about by Twigg (“Clothing”; *Fashion*) and endorsed by a proliferation of blogs aimed at women of a certain age (and men too): it must not be forgotten that the above mentioned *Advanced Style* was first and foremost a blog, and it has acted as a stimulus for several older women to appear as editorial models at an age when this would previously have been deemed unthinkable. This is an important development, though it must be pointed out that older models as such have actually been working for decades: commercial modeling has always relied on older models and actors, albeit in highly stereotypical roles, the so-called “character models,” often emphasizing the decrepitude associated with older age in order to market age-specific products. These “character” models now include the “real people” category (of all ages), after the success of the Dove campaign. In other words, commercial modeling has always had

older models; it is their appearance in fashion and editorial modeling work that is a novelty. A full discussion of these developments would lead us astray; the above are only pointers to get a sense of the complexity of the milieu.

Throughout ten years of modeling, I have had an opportunity to reflect in an autoethnographic key on what it means to be an older female model (Anderson; Phelan; Ellis). I have been asking myself some crucial questions: Did I take up modeling because it was my way of removing the mantle of invisibility that growing older seemed to envelope me in, as a woman, especially with regard to the perception of being desexualised?¹ Or was it a desire to challenge preconceptions? And even though it was, overall, empowering for me—those occasions when I have felt reified notwithstanding²—how relevant would this experience be to other aging women who have no interest in modeling? As someone told me, with a hint of condescension, there is more to life than being photographed; why would I want to discuss it? My answer is that such a discussion is indeed timely: through reflecting on my own embodied experience of modeling, I have come to the conclusion that putting oneself forward as a model in contexts which are perceived to be “age-sensitive” can become a political act of subversion, and this matters. Through this piece, therefore, I hope to engage in a critical conversation on what modeling as an older woman entails and the kind of shifts it potentially engenders, thus contributing to current discourses on modeling as a relatively new field of inquiry as it intersects with age studies. I am motivated by an awareness that until now the older female model has never figured in these discussions as a subject; her existence has hardly ever been commented upon, and this silence has validated her objectification.³

II

I am in the green room on the site of a TV company that runs several shopping channels. I am to model a cream that is meant to perform miracles in erasing wrinkles instantly. We will be going live in ten minutes. I have just been told exactly what to do by the director: look into camera, apply the cream, don't speak unless one of the presenters asks a specific question, don't smile, to allow the cream to settle. We are

on for an hour and the two presenters talk nonstop about the merits of the cream and invite viewers to place orders. I wear no makeup, apart from mascara. The two presenters are middle-aged women like me, but they wear makeup and their hair is well styled and expertly colored. They have worked on this series for quite a long time and can establish an immediate rapport with their viewers. Throughout the hour, I hear repeatedly the phrase “looking younger.” I look at myself in the mirror, after the cream has settled. I do not look younger at all. The cream begins to flake as soon as we finish; imagine using egg white on your skin, you’d get the same tightening effect. I wonder what the viewers thought of me, with my long, white, and wispy hair. Did they regard me as a bag lady?⁴ If it works on a bag lady it works on anyone!

We all know, deep down, that there are no miracle creams and that it is not possible to look younger by applying a cream. We can look refreshed, but not younger. Nevertheless, we are constantly told to try this or that product, so that we can be ageless or look x years younger. As a model, I do find myself complicit in perpetuating a notion of agelessness, or in embracing the idea of wanting, desperately, to look younger, which in my personal life I care little about (though I obsess over fitness, partly because of a love of dance and partly because of the specter of osteoporosis, which totally crippled my mother). This is brought home to me when I do the kind of commercial work I describe in the vignette above—I even lent my face to promote a natural enhancement/semi-permanent makeup product website. Do I need to justify myself for doing it? Commercial modeling pays, and like everyone else I have bills to honor; we live in a society in which earning an income is mandatory. My feelings of alienation from my own image are a side effect of modeling, as Soley-Beltran has discussed in connection with her own experience (214). All this does not seem to be empowering at all. But no job in a late-capitalist society is totally immune from engendering a sense of alienation: it is an effect of the very system (Churchich 232). In this respect, modeling is no less exploitative than any other profession. And, I maintain, there is more to modeling than commercial stereotyping, as I am about to illustrate.

It is Saturday morning, yet another rainy London day, and very windy, too. The

studio is miles away from the tube station, in an industrial area, totally deserted at this time of the day, but I find it all right, after taking a couple of wrong turns. I glance at the watch: no, I am not too late. I take a deep breath and ring the bell. A young man opens the door. As I walk in, I see the makeup and hair team still setting up, and I know we are running late, no need to fret. The designer and the photographer are deep in conversation, and the other model is sipping coffee out of an old mug in a corner, by the makeshift changing area, where several outfits are hanging on a rack. She is immensely pretty, about an inch or two taller than me, maybe 5'10" (since I started modeling I find myself noticing people's heights and gauging how tall they are) not older than twenty, I reckon, and I know at a glance she is a UK size 6 (US size 2), but she looks healthy—some young women are naturally slender. We smile at each other. The designer walks towards me and air kisses me. "I have a fabulous red gown for you," he says with a wink. "Will it fit me?" I ask with sudden anxiety, forgetting he already had my measurements. I am not a 6, and today I feel absolutely enormous, especially after seeing the slenderness of the young model. "It will. I made it a comfortable 8. For you." I am relieved, but I quickly remind myself that my hips are more of a 10 than an 8—childbearing hips, as someone called them in the past. More fretting: it is a tight fit and I struggle to do the zip up. The photographer, a tall Polish woman with a broad smile, takes me through the mood board, which she had already sent me by email. We are working on a submission to a fashion magazine that is putting together a punk-themed issue. The models will be made up and styled as punks, my long white hair braided and taken up to create a mohican. She asks me if I can be shot nude. This was not mentioned earlier. I don't answer immediately; I need to consider it carefully. I am also an art model, and she has seen my portfolio. I have boundaries, but nudity is not usually a problem for me, so long as it is tasteful. But today I do not want full nudity, I don't feel comfortable about my body, it is one of those days, so we agree on non-frontal topless images and nude-color knickers. The concept for the shoot is that I am after the other model's clothes, so I begin the shoot in my knickers, trying to grab her jacket, then I wear "her" clothes while she pulls out more and more outfits. There will be a mock fight between us. Finally, I am to don the red gown, as she puts on a different one, and then we should hug, showing we have made up and we both share the clothes. The narrative is quite simple, it will all come to life through body attitudes and facial expressions. What makes it stand out is the

fact that I am one of the two models, and I am well over fifty in age. I change into my dressing gown and go to be made up. It will be a long day. As I look at the other model again, I briefly reflect that I am more than old enough to be her mother, yet in this shoot I am not being asked to play a motherly role, as I would if I were doing a commercial; I am an older woman who is interested in this designer's clothes, all of vibrant colors. The subtext is that this designer makes clothes for all women and all women, regardless of their age, look great in them. I interpret the punk element as a homage to the roots of the grande dame of British design Vivienne Westwood, now in her seventies, still making clothes for women (of all ages), but I am also reminded of Jean Paul Gaultier's aging punks at Paris Fashion Week Autumn/Winter 2014. The Bakhtinian dialoging of fashion! The thought makes me smile.

At its best, modeling encourages a collaboration between the model and the photographer and between the model and the designer, in which the model can access her own resources as a performer, turning into a character in a photographic narrative; at its worst, modeling is sheer exploitation.⁵ The notion of boundaries is very important: no model should ever be pushed to do something she is not comfortable doing, and negotiation is a key factor.

When I model outside a commercial frame, I can participate in shoots with ideas of my own. I can have a say on what suits me and what does not. Perhaps because I am older and can be more assertive, I have never felt exploited. Editorials (not to mention art photography) are not particularly well paid, but they do set trends: thus, for example, if older models are seen in editorials, they will also be seen more frequently in commercial work in less stereotypical roles, though advertisers are very careful about conforming, which is why an older model tends to be cast mostly as a grandmother. Another older model, signed with my old agency, who does much more commercial work than I do because of her look, told me she was getting tired of appearing in ads for retirement homes and medication for dementia and longed for more challenging shoots. I am not the right type for straight commercial work: my hair is far too long, to begin with, too white and wild. I am always asked to hide it, somehow, unless the client wants it to be the feature of the ad, as



FIG. 2. EDITORIAL SHOOT FOR VIGORE MAGAZINE. PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVEN BROWN, 2014.

happened with a hair-care range for grey-haired women (and men). My body is also too toned, as I do weights to increase bone density (Shaw), so I never look frail enough. The issue of thinness is something I occasionally have to confront and sometimes fret about, but no one has ever suggested I should lose weight, or worse, stop training because my legs are too muscular— though I know very well that this means some jobs will not be offered to me as I do not fit the type; somehow there is an idea floating around that older women cannot be sporty, and the notion continues to be perpetuated, even though muscles can be built at any age (Pathy, Sinclair, and Morley 922).

Older models are also very occasionally seen in photographic art nude—and not only as signifiers of decrepitude, as Gullette has shown in the case of Jeff Wall’s statuesque older model for *The Giant*, a photograph he took in 1992. I have done a fair amount of art modeling. I have a deep connection to my body, a sense of being embodied, and displaying my body with confidence allows me to challenge stereotypes. Dancers such as fifty-two-year-old ballerina Sylvie Guillem are my inspiration: I love the sheer sense of power afforded by being in full control of my body and how it moves. Here I embrace a post-Foucauldian feminist take on the disciplined body, noted by Seppå when she discusses “practices of the self” in classical ballet, which would include “the individual’s possibilities of functioning as an active agent in the constitution of the power relations that form her/his historical being” (193). Art nude allows me to work with poses, gestures, and slow motion, “wearing” poses as if they were garments, and drawing my inspiration from dance. I am not unique in posing for art nude at my age, for both visual artists and photographers. A recent BBC series dedicated to drawing has featured older models posing for a life-drawing class, and it seemed to have been well received (Wharton). These activities, whilst not being fully mainstream, are marking a shift in the way older women and older bodies are perceived.

The increased visibility of older models in fashion editorial spreads featuring high street fashion inspires older women to shop more; this is

the main reason why advertisers and businesses seem to be keenly interested in using them, as the “grey pound” is understood to have a significant economic impact. But there is more to it. Seeing an older woman in images such as those produced in the fashion shoot I described also stimulates older women to view themselves differently, to appreciate themselves and their bodies and live the aging process without internalizing demeaning views of being old or “too old” (for virtually anything).

Ultimately, older female models can make a difference to the way the experience of aging is culturally thought about and theorized. I feel it is important to highlight that modeling as an activity can be empowering and creative, rather than viewing it as necessarily demeaning and objectifying. The politics of representation in which modeling qua modeling is inscribed is crucial for the aging woman, who is currently bombarded with contradictory messages about her standing in society: she has to work for longer years than her mother did in order to qualify for a pension and is increasingly being told how she should approach the process of aging, as the proliferation of books and articles on this topic would indicate, in a way that seems to erode her agency as subject. My embodied experience of modeling and my self-reflexivity have allowed me to connect modeling with larger themes and concerns, such as the politics of beauty, desexualised aging bodies, and the double standard of aging—discourses in which I am enmeshed, as I am, first and foremost, an aging woman. As someone who has chosen to model in her later years, what intrigues me about it is the subversive quality that can be found—or, at least, that I have found—in the act of modeling as an older woman, despite the potential objectification of a model’s body and the sexual dispossession of the aging female body “involving the subject’s relation to norms, its mode of becoming by means of assuming and resignifying injurious interpellations and impossible passions” (Butler and Athanasiou 2). Here Judith Butler’s and Athena Athanasiou’s theorization of plural performativity as political, with subjectivity having an *ec-static* character, one of “being beside ourselves and moving beyond the powers by which we are enabled” (17), resonates with me and allows me to frame



FIG. 3. "CORSETS AND LINGERIE." PHOTOGRAPH BY VANESSA MILLS, 2014.



FIG. 4. "ART NUDE." PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK BIGELOW, 2013.

my somatic experience as an older model, moving from the individual to the collective. In other words, taking a cue from Butler and Athanasiou, I interpret *ec-stasy* as the process of being solicited out of oneself through somatic responsive dispositions towards modes of “becoming-with-one-another . . . out of sync with regimes of social regulation and the identitarian apparatus” (71), bringing such somatic responsive dispositions into awareness, and acknowledging the resulting sensations and emotions stemming from the somatic experience.

My contention, in sum, is that modeling as an older woman has been deeply satisfying, particularly when I have been able to “own” it in more artistic contexts. I am doggedly persistent and believe that changes can be brought about. The visuality of the internet and instant digital photography are now totally embedded in our lives; we live in a culture where images have an insidious power of persuasion, where practically everyone is using Instagram as a matter of course. I would therefore like to see greater numbers of older women taking up modeling for fun, not just for a living—to experiment creatively by taking self-portraits or by modeling for others, with the aim of producing images that have dignity. Through the images thus produced, current stereotypical representations of beauty, the body, and aging can be challenged and subverted even if the images are only being uploaded on Instagram and other social networking sites.

NOTES

¹Though I acknowledge that in the popular imagination there is also a contradictory view of the older woman à la Helen Mirren, petite, curvy, and sexy—the “thinking man’s sex symbol”—or à la Barbara Windsor, also petite and curvy, perhaps a little “chavvy,” and definitely sexy (Dolan).

²I have discussed a few of these episodes in a paper, “Over Fifty and Doing What? Reflections on Being a Mature Model,” presented at the International Research Summer School of the Centre for Women, Ageing and Media, University of Gloucestershire, July 2013.

³Here I should add that although I do acknowledge the existence of a growing cohort of older male models, some of whom I have worked with, throughout this paper I deal exclusively with the older female model and modeling as experienced in my body and person, as well as through the creation of my model persona.

⁴When the Marks and Spencer Autumn/Winter 2012 campaign, “For all the women you are,” with silver haired model Yasmina Rossi came out, she was called by many “a

bag lady” because of her grey locks.

⁵Here the horrendous stories of abuse concerning world-famous photographer Terry Richardson, currently being investigated for sexually assaulting models, come to mind. See the statement by Sara Ziff of the Model Alliance.

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Alessandra Bruni Lopez y Royo (aka Alex B.) is a model and a writer. She is currently Research Associate of the Centre for Media Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and a member of All Walks Beyond the Catwalk, an initiative founded by Caryn Franklyn, Debra Bourne, and supermodel Erin O'Connor to change perceptions of beauty and body image in fashion and the media. Her blog is at <http://alex-thereal-doesnoteffaceitself.blogspot.co.uk>. She was awarded a Research Fellowship in January 2015 by British Academy/ASEASUK tenable at EFEO Jakarta to conduct research on fashion and its impact on Indonesian women. Readers may write to Alessandra Lopez y Royo at al19@soas.ac.uk.

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Age, Culture, Humanities 2 (2015)

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