



fig.1 *Faith Ringgold, 1977*
Oil on canvas, 121.9 × 91.4 cm

The Toucher

Touching

Touched

*to holding on, to knowing again that moment of rapture,
of recognition where we can face one another as we really are,
stripped of artifice and pretence, naked and not ashamed.*

– bell hooks

Alice Neel enjoyed painting people naked. In 1975, the feminist critic Cindy Nemser arrived with her husband Chuck at Neel's studio on West 107th Street, where they were lulled into a cocoon of amiable chatter before Neel got down to the point: 'You look so fussy with all those layers of clothing and all that Mickey Mouse jewelry.'¹ Even those who remained buttoned up, such as the artist Faith Ringgold (fig. 1), found themselves metaphorically laid bare: 'Alice had a way of painting people so that you saw them in ways you'd never seen them before.'² These portraits possess not only the thrill of that original moment of exposure – shared, because she had to meet each subject in their vulnerability – but also a compelling sense of what we might call our human relationality.

Back in 1970, Neel had dethroned Andy Warhol (fig. 2), replacing the glittering image of the King of Pop, complete with shock wig and sunglasses, with a humble portrait of a wounded man (p. 91). Given the strength of Warhol's persona – here was an artist who wrote about 'How Andy Puts His Warhol On', and who declared 'nudity a threat to my existence' – the exchange is almost unbearably tender: his eyes are closed and his face is slack; his scarred chest sags over a surgical corset worn above smart brown trousers and laced-up brogues.³ A chalky blue aura emanates from

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his torso, emphasising how much of the rest of the canvas has been left unpainted. For Neel, who rarely made preparatory sketches, the work succeeds because of its emotional economy: 'It gets down to the raw essentials.'⁴

Neel joked that she should maybe have been a psychiatrist given how much she 'love[d] plumbing the depths of the human psyche'.⁵ If so, she might have followed the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, who understood the psyche as fundamentally interpersonal – forged in the 'transitional' space between subject and object, in that fertile ground between you and me.⁶ Neel's works are not images of a sovereign being so much as a record of her *encounter* with that person. Her paintings are charged with the reciprocity of seeing and being seen; or, in the haptic terms of the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, they relate to how the toucher, in touching, is also touched.⁷ This lends a tone of intimacy to her paintings, which already have intimate settings: out of necessity as much as instinct, she had always created makeshift studio spaces at home, first in Greenwich Village and then in Harlem and on the Upper West Side. When her boys were young, sitters had to pass their sleeping beds to get to the far end of the railroad apartment.

An electric blue line traces Warhol's edges, becoming more pronounced in his jaw and left shoulder and the knot of hands sketched onto his lap. This sinuous line, a signature of Neel's later work, was partly a residue of her process: she would begin by using a stiff paintbrush to draw the outline of her sitter before applying colour to flesh them out. But it was also a device to draw attention to the porousness of human boundaries. As Judith Butler has written: 'When we think about who we "are" and seek to represent ourselves, we cannot represent ourselves as merely bounded beings, for the primary others who are past for me not only live on in the fiber of the boundary that contains me (one



fig. 2 *Andy Warhol sitting for Alice Neel, 1970*
Polaroid by Brigid Berlin



fig. 3 *A Spanish Boy*, 1955
Oil on canvas, 52.1 × 68.6 cm

pp. 24–25
fig. 4 Neel with New York mayor Ed Koch at Gracie Mansion, 1982
Photographer unknown

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meaning of “incorporation”), but they also haunt the way I am, as it were, periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded.’⁸

To present our edges as a space of becoming is a political act, because it acknowledges the ways in which we are defined by our interrelations with one another. Born at the turn of the century, Neel worked in a society riven by racism, homophobia and poverty. But she believed that bodily beings are alike in their wretchedness and glory. Even when abstraction became the lodestar of postwar American modernism, she stuck resolutely to making figurative paintings: ‘Anyway, in the end, what is the thing if it isn’t humanity?’⁹ And when she invited someone to sit for her – whether a heavily pregnant woman, a boy from her neighbourhood (fig. 3) or a fellow Communist Party member – she bestowed on them all the nobility associated with the history of portrait painting. ‘If it is good to be recognized,’ the political philosopher Hannah Arendt said, ‘then it is better still to be welcomed.’¹⁰

Neel had been a hypersensitive child, and her blue line might also be an acknowledgement that she had had to learn to live with a thin skin to the world. She described this quality in her first published artistic statement, in the one-off review *The Hasty Papers* in 1960, relaying how she was ‘taken to Sunday School where the tale of Christ nailed to the cross would send me into violent weeping and I’d have to be taken home’.¹¹ She had a period of nervous exhaustion as a teenager; then, in 1930, following the death of her baby Santillana to diphtheria and her second daughter, Isabetta, being taken by her husband Carlos Enríquez to Cuba to live with his family, she became seriously unwell. She spent a year in psychiatric care, including on suicide wards; as she put it, ‘I didn’t do anything but fall apart and go to pieces.’¹²

Creating art became crucial for Neel’s recovery. The studio was a space in which she felt free from social pressures and where



To Alice - My friend : Next



time without fig leaf

Ed Koch

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her acute sensitivity could be repurposed as a strength. As she explained in an interview with Nemser, ‘When I painted I was completely and utterly myself. For that reason it was extremely important to me. It was more than a profession. It was even a therapy, for there I just told it as it was.’¹³ Such vulnerability took immense courage, which must have emboldened her sitters to join her in the frankness of their shared space; enabling them to set aside what T. S. Eliot called the ‘face to meet the faces that you meet.’¹⁴ There were occasions when people would come to sit seventeen times for a single painting, and the process could be painful for Neel, who empathised to such a degree that she would leave herself behind: ‘Oh listen. Sometimes I feel awful after I paint. Do you know why? Because I go back to an untenanted house ... I leave myself and go out to that person. And then when I come back, there’s that desert.’¹⁵

Given the kind of unmasking at stake, it was rare for Neel to dabble with the potential vanity of commissioned portraits. ‘I never wanted to work for hire because I don’t want to do what’s going to please some subject,’ she stated. ‘I don’t want to have to turn out a product.’¹⁶ One of her most striking nudes, of the *Village Voice* art critic John Perreault (pp. 98–99), was typical in the serendipity that occasioned its making. Perreault was curating an exhibition about the male nude and wanted to borrow her radical 1933 portrait of the downtown eccentric Joe Gould (p. 41) (featuring no fewer than five sets of genitalia; at the time of writing it is still censored by Google Images). Instead, Perreault was persuaded that he should be her Olympia. He recalled: ‘I was young and carefree then, so I committed myself to doing the painting. Which is kind of nervy when you consider that this curator is posing for a painting that’s going to be in the show he’s curating.’¹⁷

Like Robert Lowell (one of the few who got away¹⁸), Neel was a confessional poet. As she explained in a statement in 1976 for

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the *New York Times*, ‘What I feel, what I think and my involvement with the sitter all comes out in the painting.’¹⁹ That is why she could not stand what she considered to be the slick polish of Alex Katz’s portraits – ‘aren’t people more complex than that?’ – and wrote off Fairfield Porter as ‘a mild dish’.²⁰ Although her work was often admired by fellow artists, its intense intimacy could blind critics from recognising her talents. When Neel bumped into the Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Henry Geldzahler and asked why her work had not featured in any of his recent exhibitions about the return of figurative painting, ‘He looked at me, and guess what he said. “Oh. Now you want to get professional?”’²¹

The wonky quality of Neel’s painting is precisely what brings her people to life – giving an impression of their hopes and fallibility. In her eighties, when she was known to telephone friends just to say, ‘Guess what, I’m alive!’ Neel had an even greater appetite for candour.²² She had always felt a disconnect between her wholesome looks and the devilish twinkle of her spirit, and in 1980 she made her first large-scale self-portrait, in which she was, of course, unapologetically naked (p. 140). A few years later, she painted performance artist Annie Sprinkle in her fetish gear (p. 111); Sprinkle remembered how ‘we both got a thrill out of her being 83 or 84 and me being the sex-goddess slut that I was.’²³

Over a career spanning seven decades, Neel’s empathetic powers allowed her to venture into people and paint ‘what the world has done to them and their retaliation.’²⁴ She charmed her sitters and made them complicit in how they were portrayed, so that even New York mayor Ed Koch (fig. 4) felt emboldened to promise: ‘next time without the fig leaf’.²⁵

Eleanor Nairne

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This is for you Katherine Ross, for teaching me just about everything I know about empathy and the emotional membrane between our inner and outer worlds.

1. Alice Neel: *The Woman and Her Work*, exh. cat. (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, 1975), p. 80.
2. Faith Ringgold quoted in Edith Newhall, 'Neel Life Stories', *New York Magazine*, 19 June 2000, <https://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/features/3409/>, accessed 20 May 2022.
3. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1977), pp. 1, 11.
4. Neel quoted in Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), p. 101.
5. Neel quoted in Wendy Slatkin, *The Voices of Women Artists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 263.
6. See D. W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena', in *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 1–26.
7. This paraphrase, and that of the essay's title, borrows from the beautiful contraction of Merleau-Ponty in Heather Phillipson's poem 'Relational Epistemology', in *Instant-flex 718* (London: Bloodaxe, 2013), p. 19, available at www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/07/poem-week-relational-epistemology-heather-phillipson, accessed 20 May 2022.
8. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), pp. 27–28.
9. Nemser, *Art Talk*, p. 110.
10. Hannah Arendt quoted in Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, NJ, and London: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 180.

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11. Alice Neel, 'A Statement', in Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank, eds, *The Hasty Papers: A One-Shot Review* (New York, 1960), p. 50.
 12. Nemser, *Art Talk*, p. 103.
 13. Nemser, *Art Talk*, p. 110.
14. T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915), www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock, accessed 20 May 2022.
 15. Nemser, *Art Talk*, p. 116.
 16. Nemser, *Art Talk*, p. 114.
17. John Perreault quoted in Newhall, 'Neel Life Stories'
18. In her interview with Henry Geldzahler, Neel mentions Lowell as someone she wanted to have painted. Henry Geldzahler, *Making it New: Essays, Interviews, and Talks* (New York: Turtle Point Press, 1994), p. 235.
 19. Alice Neel, 'I Paint Tragedy and Joy', *New York Times*, 31 October 1976, p. 13.
 20. 'Alice Neel', interview by Ted Castle, *Artforum*, October 1983, www.artforum.com/print/198308/alice-neel-35457, accessed 20 May 2022.
21. Neel quoted in Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), p. 130.
 22. Mary Tierney quoted in Phoebe Hoban, *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty* (New York: David Zwirner Books, 2021), p. 281.
 23. Annie Sprinkle quoted in Newhall, 'Neel Life Stories'.
 24. Neel quoted in Patricia Hills, *Alice Neel* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), pp. 189–90.
 25. Photograph of Alice Neel and Ed Koch signed by Koch, Alice Neel family archives, Vermont.

Interviewer

What is the most reckless
thing you do?

Alice Neel
My paintings.