Serial images: The Modern Art of Iteration
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Chapter Two

Edgar Degas’ Female Nude and the Nature of Activity

Interpreting Degas’ Series of Female Nudes
In 1996, Richard Kendall curated the exhibition “Degas: Beyond Impressionism” at the National Gallery in London. To my knowledge this was the first contemporary exhibition of the artist’s work to present his images in series. Kendall wrote a catalogue for it which provides one of the few analyses of Degas’ use of serial iteration. He shows how Degas’ serial practice is grounded in his practice of tracing. He maintains that “certain practices of transfer and repetition had been used by Degas for many years” (1996:71), with the result that “tracing provided the generating force of Degas’ late career” (1996:81). Methodologically, tracing the forms of previous sketches to produce new ones allowed Degas to perfect his images, re-use certain successful forms, and re-situate those forms in different contexts in order to explore their further possible effects (Kendall, 1996:81). Degas’ seriality shifted from practical exercise to his “self-conscious and self-contained statement” (1996:71). For Kendall, the trace is central to Degas’ seriality, the form through which the meaning of Degas’ late artworks is articulated.

Kendall understands the serial structure inherent to Degas’ use of tracing techniques primarily in terms of form. The form in each image is primary because form defines Degas’ images and renders them endlessly
Form is the most manipulable aspect of Degas' images whereby the formal properties of tracing, like line, mass, and volume, are open to endless permutations in the continual re-invention of his subject matter. Kendall explains that the physical properties of drawings executed on tracing paper strengthen Degas' adherence to serial iteration because the paper's shiny surface allows the artist to copy forms with heightened precision. Tracing paper's lack of texture discourages novel stylistic flourishes. This allows formal line alone to be repeated; content is subordinate to the preservation of that line (1996:77). The precision of the trace and the properties of tracing paper maintain the integrity of form, which, according to Kendall, is the central feature of Degas' art (1996:115,156).

Degas' tracing practice includes the practice of pasting together different traced images onto the ground and adding new cardboard backings to enlarge the image with more pasted tracings. Together, the perceptible joints of additional backings and the obvious grid-like notations of his pasted networks emphasize two further aspects of Degas' images: the articulation of the surface and therefore the traces of the artist's activity of articulating it. It is not the form, but the generation of that form which is iterated in Degas' late works. Thus, the practice of tracing allows Degas endlessly to repeat certain key forms throughout his images and self-consciously to reveal traces of his own activity in each repetition.

Degas' move from traced drawings to tracing with pastels brings together form and the activity of constructing form with the naturalistic colouring effects of pastels. Pastels allow for the combination of line and colour, therefore allowing Degas to distinguish between
“static and active elements in his images with more fluidity”, to “bring animation to a contour [and] ease a spatial transition” (Kendall, 1996:97). Degas’ use of fixative to hold his coloured pastel grounds not only makes possible the addition of more traced pastel repetitions, but shapes the viewing of any late image into “a heterogenous or cumulative one, simultaneously engaging a variety of hues, layered textures and competing directional strokes” (Kendall, 1996:100). In Kendall’s analysis, the seriality achieved through tracing is developed by Degas from the mere repetition of significant forms to the iterative actualization of those forms by the inclusion of explicit traces of his own making activity. The viewer is led to follow Degas’ dynamic facture, and therefore the generation and differentiation of forms across series of images. This further develops the seriality of the work by emphasizing the viewer’s iteration of Degas’ making activity.

Thus Kendall analyzes Degas’ serialized late images in terms of his practice of tracing. Kendall begins by examining Degas’ serial iteration historically, through his use of canonical forms like the female nude. Degas consciously repeats historically significant styles, such as Ingres’ strong lines and Delacroix’s romantic use of colour, in order to develop his signature impressionism through the vehicle of the female nude. Kendall then examines Degas’ seriality practically, through the evolution of his tracing technique. He concludes that Degas’ serially

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1 These results are continued in Degas’ oil paintings which, like his pastels, unite line and colour in an active, fluidity of contour and facture that reveals the continual activity of the artist’s revisions (Kendall, 1996:23).
iterative tracing technique allows him to manipulate differences in similar forms and to reveal his making-activity through the images’ surfaces.

Kendall’s analysis of Degas’ serial imagery makes use of three distinct critical oppositions: a form/content distinction, an original/copy distinction, and an activity/stasis distinction. These oppositions are not new; they are employed by a variety of commentators on Degas’ work and have shaped its analysis. Yet they have obscured the meaning of seriality in his oeuvre.

According to Kendall, Degas subordinates the content of his images to their form. Kendall distinguishes the traditionalism of Degas’ female nude from the novelty of his formal, serial practice. Yet it is the female nude that most critics find to be both innovative and troubling. The figurative content of Degas’ late images consists almost wholly of anonymous, non-individuated working class women who never return the viewer’s gaze. Griselda Pollock and T.J. Clark argue that while the figures are situated in intimate but everyday spaces, such as baths, those spaces are presented in an improbable and voyeuristic viewing context. Anthea Callen maintains that

2 As I will show, Kendall’s formalist analysis, the historical-materialist analyses of Pollock, T.J. Clark, Callen, and Broude, and the semiotic analyses of Armstrong, Sidlauskas, Thomson, and Lipton reach opposing conclusions about the female nude, but start from the same form-content opposition.

3 Pollock (1992), Callen (1992), and T.J. Clark argue that in the culture of the time women were socially proscribed from returning the gaze of men.

4 Female prostitutes, working class models bathing in improbable conditions and often impossible physical positions, ballet dancers performing for the wealthy, male members of the
in Degas’ images viewing and touching the body are analogously sexually charged acts.\(^5\) Degas’ female nudes are not only self-absorbed with their bodies, they lead the viewer visually to touch them too. Thus Degas’ images conform to male and bourgeois hegemonic viewing practices. In contrast, Carol Armstrong holds that, while Degas’ figures are sexualized, they are also grotesquely de-eroticized, disorderly, active, and unreadably closed to the viewer.\(^6\) Degas shifts the viewer around in impossible

Jockey Club; these almost exclusively comprise the subject matter of Degas’ serialized late images (Pollock, 1988:74). Pollock and T.J. Clark argue that only middle class men would be privy to such a view. Yet Degas not only puts the anonymous, working class, female body on display, he arguably shows her to be either oblivious or indifferent to it. However, Pollock argues that women especially of this class in this period would ordinarily never be noticed, and certainly not seen in mundane contexts like bathing, stretching, or resting backstage. (1988:56, 62, 73, 78; 1992:33, 107, 111). Not only would women not be so indifferent to voyeurism, but they would usually not be seen in such public spaces at all.

\(^5\) Privately, women would not have engaged with such absorption in acts like bathing, for bathing, Callen argues, “was directly associated with lascivious sexual activity” (1992:173) Callen’s essay “Degas’ Bathers: Hygiene and Dirt – Gaze and Touch” provides a very strong argument for the relevance to Degas’s images of the contemporary cultural proscriptions surrounding women’s bathing.

\(^6\) Armstrong (1986) argues that the gender trouble found in Degas’ images links not only the issues of class and sexuality, but also sociological and epistemological issues about feminine lack of self-awareness, self-consciousness, and self-reflection with the formal properties of Degas’ images. The female nude is presented as a dynamic, chaos of colour, line, mass, and volume structured by Degas’ style. She is the matter at once shaped and obfuscated under Degas’ formal innovations. The viewing subject is utterly distinct from the art object, denied an aesthetic union
perspectival relations to the images: above, yet below, and too close to the figural form in a disembodied gaze. Armstrong argues that there is no hierarchy of form over content as Kendall's analysis suggests. Rather, Degas' facture is the screen that separates form from content, and it is his modernist emphasis on style and facture that heightens the gender disparity inscribed in his images. While the political analyses of critics like Pollock, Clark, Callen, and Armstrong see Degas' formal manipulation as an activity that imposes on the female nude, all nevertheless agree with Kendall to the extent that they see Degas' work in terms of the opposition of form and content.

Kendall employs the original/copy distinction to show how Degas' originality paradoxically emerges *sui generis* out of his copying practice. Degas' originality lies in his activity of constructing new images out of old ones. His images are genealogical, characterized by assemblage. His acts of painting and piecing his images together are

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7 Armstrong (1986) insists that Degas presents the canonical image of female figures as disorderly and requiring aesthetic restraint within formal devices. This interpretation of the canon is presented in Clark (1956: chs. 1, 2) and critically discussed by Nead (1992:5-33). For an alternate view, see Dawkins (2002) and Salomon.

8 Degas re-uses and reconstructs previous forms from his own repertoire and other artworks by copying, superimposing, and transferring from one image to another, between media and across genres.
explicitly manifested in each image [Fig. 1]. Thus, vision and touch are connected in the images' structure because viewing is emphatically the activity of feeling the surface — feeling not only voluminous colours and energetic hatching, but feeling the joints, edges, and pasted on paper. The viewer gets caught in the skewed perspective, moves with the momentum of the facture, is raised to the fractured surface, and then led back onto the figure's sculpted body. Degas re-invents by explicitly reconstructing the female nude to make the erotic figure a touchable, visual object.

This leads to the third of Kendall's distinctions, that of activity and stasis. Kendall shows dynamic activity, transformation, and movement to be fundamental to Degas' seriality, his imagery, and his style. Through tracing, dynamic activity is iterated in new images which re-actualize the figure in different situations, activities, and moments. Degas' iteration of form is the iteration of the novel actualization of form. Each iteration is different due both to the difference of Degas' constructive activity actualizing the figure and to the viewer's visually tactile experience of looking. Yet Kendall discusses all this

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9 See Kendall (1992), Callen (1992), Thomson (1992) for distinct readings of Degas' activity as constructive. Lipton argues that Degas' compositional devices are carriers of meaning. I argue they are the site of the construction of meaning.

10 Vision and touch are thematized in both content and structure. Callen argues that "Several studies could be combined during the various stages towards a definitive image — a final mise-en-page itself often modified by cropping or adding extra fragments" (1992:167-168). For Callen this shows that fragmentation defines the image; I argue it shows that constructive activity defines the image.
activity in terms of the stability of the figurative form: it is acted upon; it does not act.\textsuperscript{11} There is neither a temporal narrative nor a sequential narrative of events either within an image or between serial images in Degas' late oeuvre. The only narrative is that of the repetition of submissive and vulnerable poses (Thomson, 1992:153). This underscores the stasis of the figure who is offered to the viewer's active and physical gaze.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} It should be noted that in Kendall's analysis, there is movement in the images because movement is given to them via traces of the artist's work. Kendall does not suggest that Degas' images move. Rather, activity in the image is presented in the activity of the artist. Kendall rarely suggests that Degas' images have any active quality to them, whether they stand alone or are seen in series. Thus he discusses the serial iteration of the works, which would be sure to heighten any active quality in individual serial images, in terms of revisions (1996:123), improvements in the "refinements of format and nuances of surface" (1996:104), capricious "invention" in changing a form: "Running the gamut of the available palette, Degas toyed with 'increasingly violent...harsh colours'" (1996:104-105).

\textsuperscript{12} Kendall discusses Degas' serialism in terms of re-inventing and exploring the formal nuances between repeated images (1992:19). In the cultural context of the nineteenth-century proscription of the woman's gaze (at men in particular), Pollock claims Degas' personal disdain at being seen or looked at, and his fascination with looking at others, can be understood in terms of the formative, maternal gaze which, after the famous mirror stage, is forever lost yet always pined for (1992:121-125). Degas' continual repetitions tame that formative gaze, reforming the frightening absence of the mother (and her formative look) in order to master it. For Pollock, Degas' serialized images of women are his way of mastering the threat he perceives in women by controlling their presence in different formulations within the controlled environment of the artist in his own studio. Callen's analysis makes the same move: 'In his subject matter and its very repetitiveness, in his pictorial structures, and in the public reception, Degas' work constitutes this same fear of, and
Kendall's three basic distinctions are fundamental to analyses of Degas' late images. No matter how they are read, the formal elements of Degas' work are radically distinct from the iconography. Each of the three distinctions shows different ways activity is basic to the images: in the artist's constructive activity, in the dynamic articulation of the figure's body, and in the viewer's looking activity. But each also shows that it is the element of activity which resists any reading of Degas' subject matter as fused with his formal innovations. The female nude is either the vehicle for Degas' innovative practice or she is subordinated and defined by his active style. This is what is claimed to be encoded in Degas' presentations of the female figure, his specific development of impressionism, and his use of seriality. However, if activity is taken as basic in the interpretation of Degas' late artworks, these critical oppositions are avoided and harmonized. When seriality is shown to define both the female figure and the formal structure of Degas images, a new interpretation of his work emerges. Serial structure is used to articulate the key themes which Degas embraces of early modernist art: the novel and constructive activity of the artist, sexuality, desire to control, a female subject which resists fixity" (1992:163). None of these commentators see a narrative or theme in the series. See also Kuspit (1989), Sidlauskas, Lipton, Callen (1995), and Broude.

Callen's analysis still treats Degas' serial iteration as a side-effect both of his personal problems with women, and of contemporary social conditions which brought working class women out of domestic realms and into visible, public positions as, for example, barmaids, dancers, and laundresses. Transgressions of space by women, both Pollock and Callen argue, threatened the sanctity of typically male terrains. Callen (1992:162) and Pollock (1988: ch.3).
The crux of my interpretation of Degas' serial imagery is that activity is basic to the making and viewing of his late images, to their formal properties, and to his serially iterated subject matter. The subject matter of Degas' late works, after 1880, is almost exclusively female ballet dancers and female nudes, with a great deal of formal iteration between the two genres. Figural forms are swapped back and forth, such that the same one appears as a dancer tying her shoe, then a bather drying her leg, then a bather washing her leg, and so on. What unites them is their activity. Here, gender, activity, and serial iteration, certainly the most conspicuous elements in the structure of his late work, are related. How they are related and what meaning arises when they are seen in relation is the focus of my analysis.

Degas produced cycles or suites of variations of women bathing, women climbing into the tub, women drying their feet and dancers lacing their shoes, women drying their hair, women combing their hair, women having their hair combed, nude women standing, dancers standing, dancers dancing, dancers stretching, dancers resting, and so on. The serial iteration in Degas' oeuvre is easily recognized. To illustrate Degas' explicit use of

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14 Sidlauskas makes a similar argument in her analysis of narrative in Degas' Interior, 1868-9.

15 See Kendall (1996: 126).
Kendall follows the path of the drawing *Three Nude Dancers*, 1893-8, private, a charcoal drawing on tracing paper. This, he explains, was traced on a second sheet *Three dancers in the wings*, 1900-10, private, and also *Three standing women, nude studies*, 1893-8, unknown. *Study of a nude, hands on hips*, 1893-8, unknown, pulled the foreground woman into a drawing of her own, while the foremost two were included in the drawings *Two standing dancers*, 1893-8, unknown, and *Two dancers*, 1893-8, unknown. This image was then transformed into *Two dancers*, 1893-8, Chicago, and also *Dancers in the wings*, 1893-8, unknown. "Almost twenty additional varieties of this versatile theme can be identified and more than thirty compositions linked back to their shared roots" (Kendall, 1992:82). This series of dancers is representative of Degas' late iterative series, such as the after the bath series [Figs. 1-6]. Their general structure is that of a single motif of one or more minimally active female figures iterated in multiple images genetically related to each other in composition and form.\[16\]

The figure in Degas' *Breakfast at the bath*, 1893-8 [Fig. 1] is iterated in *After the bath, woman drying herself*, 1895-1905 [Fig. 2] and in *Woman seen from behind, drying her hair*, 1905-1910 [Fig. 3]. The figure's right arm and her head are lowered in *Woman drying herself*, 1893-8 [Fig. 4], and *After the bath*, 1900-1910 [Fig. 5]. In *Woman at her toilette*, 1900-5 [Fig. 6], only her arm is raised. Each image presents the female figure as a body particularized by her context – here it is bathing – rather than individuated as a

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\[16\] While my analysis concentrates for the most part on this series, its structure can be generalized across Degas' late serial iterations.
subject. The figures are not presented with individuating interiorities but are merely bodies that perform various acts. Each female body is active, moving, and apparently unconcerned with her viewers. The actions are simple, mundane and do not appear to be performed for anyone. Nevertheless, the figures are active. The active quality iterated throughout the series is made by the dynamic contours configuring both her form and her context, sculpting the figure out of perspectival and tonal depths. She is shaped by the formal properties of surface articulation, multiple perspectives, and layers of mediation. Kuspit claims that the activity articulates her "internal reality". Yet there are no signs of interiority; for instance, she does not address the viewer, even obliquely, which is why it is so difficult to determine whether or not Degas' late female figures are oblivious or indifferent to their display. Without an interiority, the female figure is the product of Degas' surface articulations; she is an active form but not a self.

While the female body is the dominant form, it is not radically distinguished from any other object in the image. Female figure and context are treated in the same

17 Different images of the same unselfconscious female figure perspectively position the viewer beside or almost below the figure to act with her and to feel her body as she touches it. But the viewer is also kept outside and on the surface of the image, in a distant, voyeuristic position of mastery. Touch and gaze are combined by the simultaneous perspectives. Callen argues that the desire for physical, tactile engagement with the body is encoded through the rational, controlling viewpoint of the look (1992:169).

18 Kuspit (1989: 61). By internal reality, Kuspit means more than physicality.
terms both by Degas' dynamic facture and by the multiple perspectives which draw the viewer onto and around her body and her environment. Kuspit argues that activity renders the "unfixed, shifting boundary between external and internal reality", intermingling figure and context (1989:61). In this way, it is the image, not the figure which addresses the viewer and facilitates the viewer's participation in the image. She is a form instead of a subject, for it is not the figure who guides the viewer's active participation in the activity presented in the image. The activity which informs her centralized body and her surrounding context sets the viewer's visual route through the image.\textsuperscript{19} The implausible nature of both the context and the figure further relate them. For, as Pollock and T.J. Clark argue, Degas' contexts are ultimately impossible ones, but are presented as natural, everyday environments.\textsuperscript{20} Thomson adds that the figure's acts are implausibly awkward and often impossible, yet they are presented as mundane, everyday activities.\textsuperscript{21} The awkwardness and impossibility of many of the figures’ positions is difficult to reconcile with this prosaic

\textsuperscript{19} In a general discussion about Degas' visual strategies, Sidlauskas argues that Degas' project was one of "conceptualizing a figure's relation to its surroundings" to shape psychological content (673). In my view, the expression of psychological content is not at all a feature of Degas' late images.

\textsuperscript{20} See Pollock (1988:70, 74-5, 78, 83) and Clark (1984:146, 253-7).

\textsuperscript{21} Thomson shows how the acts Degas' figures are shown to perform, such as stretching, leaning, and bending, unnaturally and awkwardly distort them, but are contextualized as normal and routine. Thomson (1992:151)
dimension. Thus the central problem is how to understand the activity animating both Degas' figures and their contexts.

On the one hand, it can be argued that Degas' figures are representations of women. They appear to be everyday working class women performing mundane activities in familiar settings. Yet they do not address or engage the viewer and the viewer is not led to identify with them. The viewer looks at the figures from many angles, feels her body, and appears unseen. The figures are not subjects, but objects of an erotic visual touch that are repeatedly presented in different scenarios. On the other hand, Degas' female figures can be read as sheerly formal

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22 Kuspit argues Degas' style develops into "subjective realism" (60)

23 Pollock reads the figures by their size and shape (1992:28).

24 Kuspit reads the activity of the figure's body as expressions of her interiority, thus viewing her as a subject (1989:60). By contrast, Heather Dawkins, like Armstrong (1986), thinks that the combination of a tactile viewing experience and dominating viewing positions from above safely distances the viewer's voyeurism and objectifies the figure (143). Both Pollock (1992) and Dawkins interpret the viewing positions as male because women were denied such a view. In their different essays in Kendall and Pollock's 1992 collection, Pollock, Dawkins, Thomson, and Callen all interpret Degas' figures as performing for the viewer.

25 In this way, Degas' perspective differs dramatically from the types of visual spaces constructed, and the way visual space is constructed, in the work of his female impressionist counterparts like Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt. See Pollock (1988:ch.3), Pollock and Parker, Thomson (1992:157), and Nead.
pictorial concerns. Presented without signs of interiority, these figures act as objects both of the artist’s aesthetic manipulations and of the viewer’s visual interest. They are not subjects, but vehicles of Degas’ making-activity (Boggs, 481). These two interpretations of the status of the female figure in Degas’ late images can, in my view, be connected. For activity is the primary issue in the images, animating not only the artworks’ surfaces but defining both the figure as intrinsically active and the viewer’s activity of looking. Thus Degas’ figures are representations of activity rather than of individuals. They are active, unstable, and transforming before the viewer’s eyes. Hence Pollock can interpret the viewer’s gaze on the figures in terms of the flâneur: visual, uninvolved, erotic, and generalizing everything seen in the same active terms. In terms of the masculinist discourse that defines the canon of the female nude, Degas’s images homogenize figure and context into a visual statement

26 Without subjective interiority, the figures are not so much social beings as they are formal motifs. They are situated on the same aesthetic plane as any other element, which means the activity articulating their bodies is no different than that of any other object.

27 Pollock argues that the “flâneur symbolizes the privilege or freedom to move about the public arenas of the city observing, but never interacting, consuming the sights through a controlling but rarely acknowledging gaze, directed as much at other people as at the goods for sale. The flâneur embodies the gaze of modernity which is both covetous and erotic” (1988:67). Like Pollock, T.J. Clark understands the repetitive insistence on distancing and mastering devices, such as Degas’ perspective and facture, to reinscribe a stable and assertive, masculine, bourgeois position on a cultural arena that is socially and politically shifting and often at odds with how the bourgeois male previously understood himself (1984:ch.4).
about the active quality of all things. Therefore the awkwardness of poses is part of Degas’ modernist aesthetic of representation. His use of the centralized female figure emphasizes the familiar nature of the activity he represents, while the poses in which he places her decontextualize her altogether. Both strategies serve a generalized representation of the active nature of the existence of all things.

Understood in terms of Degas’ modernist aesthetic of representing activity itself, the identity of the figure as a female subject is completely subordinated to the interests of the artist. The female figure is used as a vehicle for the artist’s reconstruction of the world through an undeniably masculinist point of view. Degas’ modernist innovations are achieved through the construction of social spaces with which, historically, no woman could identify. His varying multiple viewpoints and his artifices of framing and cropping his figures may indeed help to articulate what thus far has been called a general thesis about the active nature of existence. Yet, as Pollock makes clear, they also succeed in both positioning the viewer in a certain relationship to the image which appeals fundamentally to a heterosexual, male voyeuristic point of view (1988, 62-65). Degas employs conventional geometrical perspective which so organizes the space of the picture plane that the viewer is positioned outside of the scene and as the principle which dominates or orders the scene.²⁸

The vehicle for Degas’ representation of the activity of all things

²⁸ As Pollock (1988) explains, the point of view given to the viewer is male because both what the viewer sees and how the viewer is made to see it do not fit with women’s viewing experience, particularly at the time Degas made and displayed his images.
is a specific view of women in particular. Degas treats women as stereotypically submissive and pliable. I argue that both an aesthetics and an erotics of vision are at work here. Degas' repetitive manipulations of the female form maintain the masculinist thrust of modernist aestheticism and the female nude is indeed its vehicle. What remains to be understood is the end to which these strategies are employed.29

Returning to the series of images, activity stands out as an integral feature shared by Degas' serial images. It is clear that Degas inscribes his own constructive presence in the images through his hatchings, rubbings, smears, and signature dynamic contour lines. The activity of looking is not only shaped by Degas' use of conventional geometric perspective, but is made specifically active by Degas' introduction of many points of view. The viewer's position in relation to the image is mobile, shifting, and never completely stable. Moreover, the layered hues of Degas' picture plane, invigorated by hatching and rubbing, lead the viewer onto the figure's body, to feel the textures and volumes they create. Perspective draws the viewer in, while colouration and handling engage the viewer visually to feel the voluminous space she is in. The facture, colouration, contour, perspectives, and layers of picture plane shape the viewer's visual experience of Degas' late images into a shifting and tactile looking activity.

Like the figure's elbow in Woman in a tub, 1884 [Fig. 7], various perspectives position objects close to the

29 The masculinist basis of Degas' modernist practice is argued in different ways in Armstrong (1986); Kendall and Pollock; Pollock (1988); Callen (1995); and Elliot and Wallace.
viewer. Following the curves of the delineating contour, they provide a way in through the image's surface onto the figure's body. The act of viewing fleshes out the figure and her environment. In this way, the viewer's activity is constructive, for the viewer's responses are not just guided by the image and Degas' handling of it, but by the viewer's own reactions to colours, tones, patterns and trajectories as well as the viewer's motivations and desires to see and feel. Moving into the picture plane perspectivally, the viewer is led into the activity that articulates the image. The orange and copper hatching raises areas of the figure's back in *Woman in a tub*, making those areas visually feel both tense and warm in comparison with the muted, greyish skin tones beneath them and the glistening white light effects which glance off them. Following the heat of the orange leads the viewer down the figure's back, in and out of the ridges of her spine and bottom, around her left leg and through the creases of her belly which pushes onto her thigh. The viewer is led erotically onto her body to feel its volumes, but the contours also draw the viewer back onto her left arm, which leans against the cool tones and flat handling of the metal tub, and then onto the richly mottled and warm tones of the floor.

As Callen maintains, vision and touch are integrally related in Degas' late images, but this effect is not restricted to the figures (1992:165). The viewer's moving, visual touch feels all over the image, raising the tactility of the smooth floor that is warm in most places but occasionally gritty, of the thin soaking cloth that invites the viewer visually to rub her backside, of the smooth lock of dry hair that lightly falls down her back, and of the crisp bedskirt that also leads the eye around to try to peek at her forbidden front. The visual activity that brings viewers into
the image to feel both the subject matter and Degas’
facture, points to another aspect of the activity of the
images. Not only is the viewer revealed to be active and
participating in the activity in the images, but everything in
them is active. The hatching, blurring, brushing, and
contours which animate the viewer’s visual experience also
animate the figure and her entire surroundings. This is
intriguing, for the animation of each object in the image is
not a matter of seeing the image in motion. For example,
while the Woman in a tub’s twisting right arm, her right
hand and the cloth it pulls with it, her falling lock of hair,
and her left arm that leans down and tensely holds her
weight, can all be said to be moving, nothing else appears
to be in motion. Yet everything is active -- buzzing, alive,
persistently existing.

Like the activity of the viewer, the activity of the
content enlivens Degas’ late images. Nothing is static;
instead, each represented object is in a state of flux,
persistently active in just being what it is. Each
represented thing appears to be in a constant process of
actualization that continually makes it or maintains it as
what it is. The busy, buzzing flux of Degas’ picture plane
does not just reflect back the viewer’s looking on the
activity of the artist’s making, but says something about
those objects represented in the picture plane. Each thing
is in a constant state of becoming represented through the
activity of the artist and traced by the activity of the viewer.
One way of discussing the active state of Degas’ imagery
is in terms of the philosopher Henri Bergson’s
metaphysical notion of *durée*.\(^{30}\) Bergson’s metaphysics of duration is, of course, contemporary with Degas’ artistic practice. But more relevant than mere contemporaneity is the fact that the philosopher’s ideas help to uncover what sort of activity is happening in the artist’s images.\(^{31}\) They also open the larger questions of how the representation of that activity relates to Degas’ presentation of the non-individuated, anonymous female figure, and what his characteristic employment of serial iteration means in that context.

Activity and the Metaphysics of Modernism

For Bergson, existence is ultimate.\(^{32}\) It is not a

\(^{30}\) While commentators often refer to Bergson’s notion of *durée* in the French, I prefer using the English translation of ‘duration’ and will do so throughout.

\(^{31}\) The interpretation of the active quality of Degas’ late artworks in terms of Bergson’s metaphysics of duration is not a new idea. The fluctuating, active quality of his images particularly invites such a reading. However, my correlation of the serial structure of Bergson’s duration with a serially iterative structure of Degas’ late images will make it possible to show how meaning is generated in the process of viewing Degas’ fluctuating and serially iterative artworks, and thus how meaning is related to the iteration of the female figure in Degas’ subject matter.

\(^{32}\) Joyce Medina (32) uses the phrase in her interpretation of activity in Cézanne’s serial images. Medina employs a Bergsonian analysis in order to show that the ongoing serial structure in Cézanne’s work presents a continual “surplus of meaning” that defines our relation to the world: there is always something more (113). By contrast, I argue that there is only meaning when it is constructed, so that meaning does not depend upon a “surplus”. I should also note that, in the context of my analysis, while Cézanne’s images are serial, they are not
transcendent property beyond experience, but the activity which makes all things uniquely what they are. Bergson’s account of active existence is connected with his theory of time, where he discerns two gauges of time. One is duration or “inner continuity” where “there is succession without mutual externality” and the other is spatialized time, “mutual externality without succession” where we perceive the divisible motions of the external world. Duration involves novelty and qualitative differentiation through the passage of time. By contrast, spatialized time leads to “linear representations of succession, in which events appear to be arranged in co-extensive space, which deprives them of their temporal quality, and their potential for novelty and freedom” (Crocker, 405). Time is spatialized by describing it in terms of an order of discrete events. Such narrativity breaks up the flow of time.

Understood in terms of duration, the antecedent and successive states of time are not separated. Past, present and future interpenetrate and qualitatively change with the unidirectional, intransitive flow of duration. Reading the spatialization of time back into duration wrongly suggests

iterative. Cezanne’s images present a narrative of perspectival variations; the phenomenological point is that we can never see the whole of a thing at once.

33 Bergson’s theory of time and existence is explicated in his *Time and Free Will*, *Matter and Memory*, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, and *Creative Evolution*. Bergson’s fusion of time and existence is similar to Heidegger’s.

34 As Crocker explains, “the continuous flux of inner duration lends to external motion the capacity to retain elements [through memory], and thus to form a sequence that may be measured with clocks and similar devices” (Crocker, 408).
that continuous time is a discontinuous structure of juxtaposed, simultaneous moments. Space is the medium of extension and quantification, by which externality enables us to distinguish simultaneous things and sensations from one another in its homogenous medium (Bergson, 1927, 95). By contrast, the durational nature of time is, for Bergson, found in our actual experience as the irreducible, purely qualitative, cumulative flow of a multiplicity of states. It forms an indivisible, heterogenous continuum. Actual existence is nothing else than the serial indivisibility of durational becoming.³⁵

Activity is fundamental to Degas' facture and style, his perspectival structure, his layered levels of colouration, and his roving angles of vision. It is also fundamental to the reception of his images, for viewing them is a matter of iterating the activity presented in them. Moreover, Degas' figures perform actions which are expressly their own, if only in the active tension of maintaining a pose. Especially in the late images, the figure's acts do not appear to be for anyone else, but nevertheless do not suggest any interiority. And like every other object included in the picture plane, Degas' figures vibrate, resonate, or pulsate through the formal properties by which they are presented, a resonance that carries no suggestion of a transcendent principle or overarching narrative in the images. For instance, there is no suggestion that the scene happens at a blurring glance as we pass it, that the figure is caught at a moment in the process of moving, or that she is part of a

³⁵ Bergson's own account of duration develops from a subjective account of time and consciousness in *Time and Free Will* to an objective principle of actualization in later writings like *Creative Evolution* and *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. See Bradley (2003).
show or performance even when her figure is iterated across series of images. On the contrary, the content of Degas late imagery appears calm and quiet, yet very much alive. It is the twofold nature of the activity in Degas' late imagery, namely the vibrating resonance and the calm quietude, which most obviously lends itself to a Bergsonian reading of the images. Neither static nor fixed but actively existing as just what it is, each thing is an event. The female figure, the floor, the tub, the hairbrush, the barre, the tutu – each quietly buzzes with a muted electricity in its simple activity of being what it is. The dynamic facture, layers of colour, and traces of Degas' making-activity inscribed all over the surface of his images make activity their primary feature. This emphasis is supported by the looking activity of the viewer, who is brought into the dynamic presented in the picture plane through the various angles of vision, and who is in part guided onto the space of the image by Degas' facture and layers of colouration. The viewer's visual touch of the image underscores the activity of actualization happening in it. Here, the activity of looking sculpts out of the surface the perspectival depths of the picture plane to feel them visually in the round. Giving visual attention to different regions of the image raises their visual relief and brings them into focus out of the flux that shapes those them into visual events. The activity of looking at Degas' images therefore involves participating in the actualization of what is seen. While the constructive activity of the artist is iterated in the activity presented in the image, the looking activity of the viewer iterates that activity and thereby brings it to the foreground. No element of Degas' late images is stable; everything is fluctuating. Yet there is no particular source, origin, or
primary power which gives each discernable thing its active nature as an event. The artist, whose self-reflexive handling of the image maintains the presence of his making-activity, is not presented as its origin. For the activity is as much a matter of the viewer's impulses to move in one direction or another, depending on the tonal feel, perspectival trajectory, or layer of colouration of various regions, as it is a matter of the non-narrative immanence of the activity which makes each thing resonate in and for itself. Indeed, each aspect of Degas' images has its own active quality. The activity of the tub is not that of the floor, or the woman's back, or her arm. Each aspect is presented differently — through different colours, contours, facture, perspectives — which gives each event and each region of events a different feel and so a different dynamic. No matter how small we discern each region to be, it appears differently depending on how its activity unfolds in relation to another region. Furthermore, there is no suggestion that the activity which animates the various parts of the image and differentially relates them comes to an end at some point. Activity continually makes each element of the image what it is. Each shift in colour, each movement into the picture plane, each articulation of the surface, is an act that emerges out of previous acts and moves into new ones. No event of the image is a fixed thing because every event leads into a new one: it is actualized differently in relation to where it emerged from and to what it further relates. At the same time, no element is reducible to any other. Rather, they all differentiate in relation to one another in different ways. In the same image, for example, the fluctuating activity of the tub is different from that of the floor or the female figure. But the active quality particular to the tub itself
differentiates as the viewer moves around it, feels its different areas, or approaches it from different angles of vision, trajectories of hatched lines, contours of its delineation, tones of colour, or movements of the figure's body. Its continual differentiation is due to a multiplicity of acts, none of which is basic to its active presence in the picture plane, but all of which inform it.

Serial Differentiation in Degas' Late Images
The activity of actualization in Degas' images gives them a moving quality, but not one which suggests anything is moving in space. Rather, every event in the images appears to move in time. Of course, each event of the image, either the making or the viewing of it, takes time. But the images are also presented as in time, as existing temporally. The active fluctuation of the image, presented in the vibrating character of its formal properties, is iterated through both traces of the artist's activity and the paths of the viewer's activity. Both are shown to shape the subject matter: the dynamism of the artist's activity of making and of the viewer's acts of looking, which are guided by the artist's activity, bring out the temporality of each event in its process of differentiation.

For instance, looking at the central white towel in Woman at her toilette, 1900-1905 [Fig. 6], the dense bright white rubbings which make the towel area encourage the viewer visually to rub with them. This participation visually activates the shimmering activity of the towel. It also iterates the minimally narrative activity of the female figure's act of rubbing her neck with it. The towel is centralized in the picture plane in relation to the viewer. But the perspectival route into the image that leads the viewer to enact the figure's activity with her is not found where it is
expected, specifically at the towel. It is found both at the figure’s left shoulder, which in a skewed use of perspective is further away from the surface of the image than the towel, and at the yellow curtain, which is perspectively too close to the viewer to be in focus. The curtain acts as a trajectory into the activity which develops the space of the picture plane. However, the skewed perspective, the insistent activity, and the enactment of the viewer with the figure, foreground the temporal movement presented in the picture plane. The continual differentiation of areas of the picture plane from one another and from themselves sculpts out the activity in temporal relief. For as the viewer moves from one area of the towel, like that closest to the figure’s head, to another, like that closest to her wrist, the activity of the towel changes. It differentiates, and the towel appears different from one region to the next.

The differentiations between regions are achieved in the course of the viewer’s activity of viewing one region after another, although without any determinate visual agenda to follow. The activity which differentiates the image has no beginning or end. The active differentiations emerge out of one another. This means that in the presentation of the activity which continually differentiates the image, there is no guiding or controlling principle. Neither the activity of the artist, nor the looking activity of the viewer, nor the activity performed by the female figure, dominates the differentiating activity of the image. There is no controlling gaze onto the image. There is also no controlling gaze out of it. The figure does not address the viewer by returning the viewer’s look. The figure, remember, is not presented with the interiority of a subject, much less a viewing subject. Rather, it is the actively differentiating structure of the figure which addresses the
viewer, leading the viewer into the image to participate in the activity it performs. Neither of the three elements - artist, viewer, or image - control the activity presented, but each is related in the performance of the differentiating activity.

Each moment of activity in the image is embedded in the next. Either in making or viewing the images, previously seen regions are not lost as they inform new moments of activity or are differentiated in relation to them. As viewers move through the image, the specific activity which characterizes different areas is actualized by the viewer’s visual attention. But as the visual movement is led on, the activity of different areas informs the activity of new ones. Already seen areas do not cease to be, but instead provide the antecedent conditions for the activity of the next moment. Past moments of the activity of the image are recollected into present moments in a movement of continual active differentiation which is iterated by the fluidity of Degas’ facture. Looking at one area indeed actualizes it as part of the image, but the effect of that area does not end with its actualization. As with the foremost area of the cloth, for example, the actualization of one part leads into the actualization of a next without making any part exclusive of any other. One part differentiates into another; past areas are differently recollected into present areas of actualization, harmonizing with them. The duration of the image is a matter of recollectively bringing together past regions in the actualization of new differentiations of it.

It is in this way that the duration of Degas’ images involves the viewer in actualizing the present out of the past in the context of the image. The movement of viewing iterates the immanent serial activity manifested in the
image. For the iterative structure of the viewer's performance of the differentiating activity in the image is one of intransitively related, cumulative enactments of the picture plane in order to follow the actualization of the image. Thus the activity of the viewer enacts the immanently serial duration structure of the image by recollecting the artist's making activity and following the image's differentiating activity. Viewing activity is specifically iterative activity. It does not simply repeat the dynamism of the line and colour, nor simply reconstruct the artist's acts of creating the image, nor simply move from one articulated region to the next. The structure of the viewer's activity is immanently serial because it participates in the actualization of the spatial and temporal dimensions of the picture plane in visual acts that iteratively actualize the activity presented as ongoing in the image.

Duration is the domain of qualitative difference. It is a process of interconnectivity in which past and present, existence and temporality, differences and seriality, are fused in the actualization of new events. The duration of Degas' images stages the actualization of the process of differentiation that give them their temporal, moving quality. Their durational quality is realized in the activity of differentiating the image from itself, performing the actualization of the image with it. The space generated in Degas' picture plane by the artist's shifting perspectives, angles of vision, layers of colouration, contours and hatching, also pertains to this differentiating activity. The performative acts of looking at Degas' images sculpt out his imagery in both spatial and temporal relief, animating the images as actively existing temporal and physical subjects. In terms of the viewer's engagement with the images, participating with their activity reveals their
durational quality. The formal properties of Degas’ late images impede the viewer’s ability to consider them quantitatively as, for instance, minimally or numerically different repetitions of the same. The perspective, hatching, colour, and shifting tonalities differentiate the images to reveal that beneath the conceptually similar iconography of series of bathers or dancers is the activity of actualization which persistently makes them uniquely themselves.

Nevertheless, the iconography of the figures and their contexts is mundane. The ongoing activity actualized in each image is presented as unexceptional, everyday activity. As with the Woman at her toilette [Fig. 6], or in Woman bathing in a shallow tub, 1885, or After the bath, woman drying herself [Fig. 2], Degas’ images present the activity of actualization as the actualization of the everyday world. The activity is not monumental or world historical, but significant because it makes the mundane specifically historical in nature. The fusion of time and activity enacted by the durational activity of the images and iterated by the viewer is made basic to the existence of the things represented. The immanently serial structure, by which the form and content of Degas’ images undergo the differentiating activity which persistently shapes each thing spatially and temporally into what it is, extends to the viewers who performatively participate in that finite and prosaic activity.

This performativity correlates the structure of the viewer’s activity with the structure of the figure’s activity. Therefore Armstrong’s criticism that Degas’ female figures are denied subjectivity because the viewer cannot relate to them does not hold. The female figure is not hidden behind Degas’ style. She is not mutated into a facet of the pure
physicality of the artist's handling, in distinction from the viewer's disembodied gaze. The figure's dynamical actualization is reflected back onto the viewer who acts with her acts. This is because the viewer's gaze is embodied: vision and touch come together in the actualization of the temporal and spatial dimensions of the picture plane. The viewer's gaze moves into the space of the image and with the activity of the figure. Viewing activity iterates the activity of actualization which happens there.

This reflection back onto the viewer also occurs because Degas's visual angles and perspectives position the viewer above and looking down onto the figure, as well as directly before the figure within the picture plane and visually touching her body. In addition, the viewer's tactile gaze is made to move with the figure's usually self-absorbed and body-oriented actions, like drying herself, tying a shoe, or feeling the tension of a stretch. The viewer acts with her acts, guided by the acts actualizing her existence, without ever coming into contact with the figure's interiority. The figure remains anonymous, unidentifiable, and not at all the directing principle or primary unity of her active existence. She is understood in terms of the activity of actualization of durational events: she is presented with no independent interiority or unity prior to her actualization. Her unity is a matter of the unique acts of actualization which continually make her what she is.

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36 Brendan Prendeville employs Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the body to argue for the embeddedness of the viewer in Degas' images. However, he concludes that the viewer becomes another atomized participant in a scene. I obviously do not agree with this view.
Degas' late images employ the traditional tactics of the canon of the female nude which comfortably situate the viewer outside the picture plane. Pollock, for instance, shows how Degas adheres to the traditional strategies of exhibiting the female nude in almost all his late images, from mundane bathing moments to routine dancing activities. But the conventions Degas employs always complicate so many perspectives, layers of colour, shifts of tone, trajectories of hatching and rubbing, that the initially supposed voyeuristic distance collapses. The viewer is brought into and onto the image. Thus Degas' conventions do not allow the viewer just to caress the figure; they make the viewer move with her in terms of the activity which actualizes her existence in her particularized space. They draw the viewer to identify with the figure's unique activity of existence.

I therefore contend that the mundane scenarios in which Degas' apparently unconcerned figures are presented do not appeal to a voyeuristic viewpoint. They are not instances of Suzannah and the Elders. The figures do appear to perform their ostensively routine acts. Yet except in very few drawings, there is a context which serves the minimally narrative purpose of placing the figure in an everyday setting. While this makes her activity appear normal, it also sets off the distorted tension of her pose. Not all poses are awkward, but most appear difficult to sustain for very long. This, of course, manifests the achievement of the artist in bringing his figure to life, so to speak. It also subverts any voyeuristic expectations the viewer may have. Even taking into account the visual touch for which Callen argues, the visual experience suggested

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37 This point is elaborated in Pollock (1988:ch.3).
by the iconography of the female nude is repudiated by the shift in the viewer's engagement in the image: an erotic gaze at the female nude is replaced by a sympathetic enactment of her activity. Their poses are often bizarre, but Degas' female figures do not appear threatened, submissive, or victimized. Their poses may be distractingly tense, but they do not appear ill at ease with the activity that animates their own bodies. Unexpectedly, the viewer acts and moves with the figure through the different acts which actualize her existence in the picture plane. Much in the way the direct gaze of Manet's *Olympia* turns the tables by meeting the viewer's gaze with a visual dare to look, the activity which quickens Degas' female figures addresses and draws the viewer to perform the actualization of the figure on the terms given by their uniquely actualizing acts.  

This is the case even when the female figure contorts awkwardly in uncomfortable positions. These awkward positions have been interpreted to be the sheer product of Degas' visually controlling, masculinist point of view. However, these poses occur only in some of Degas' images, like the Philadelphia Museums' *After the bath, woman drying herself* (1894-6), National Gallery, Edinburgh's *Woman drying herself* (1896-8), and *After the bath* (1893-5, private). Furthermore, these images are more successful in drawing the visual touch of the viewer into the perspectival plane of activity. This is not because the activity of the facture, colouration, and perspectival angles that lead viewers into and through the picture plane are any more sophisticated. Rather, the activity of the figure is sufficiently remarkable to draw the viewer directly towards, and into participation with, the acts which constitute her being. Thomson sees a narrative in Degas' iteration of imagery both from his own repertoire and from other sources. For instance, he argues that Degas turns the female figure from Millet's *Two Bathers*, 1848, on her side in his own 1893-5 *After the bath* and the 1895 *The Bath, woman seated drying herself*, thus creating a narrative of submission and even of victimization (Thomson, 1992:153). Yet
Because it is the actualization of the female figure that is iterated throughout Degas' late oeuvre, Degas' use of iteration is obviously linked to his treatment of the female form. The presence of the figure is marked by mobility: by the activity of actualization that makes the figure what she is and guides the viewer to see her in precisely the terms of her own actualization. Viewing the figure is not only a matter of coming into a tactile, visual contact with the figure, but acting with her activity of actualization as it unfolds the visual three-dimensional, active presence of her body. The activity of actualization performed both by the figure and by the viewer is activity performed on the figures' own terms. It is her differentiating activity of actualization which moves the viewer through the image. This activity does not actualize the viewer; nor does the viewer actualize the figure. The figure's activity is the controlling point of view in Degas' late images.

Degas' serial iteration of specific images makes explicit their immanently serial structure of intransitively related, cumulative acts of becoming. It is the activity of the figure which links series like the dancing series which includes New York's Metropolitan Museum's *Dancers, pink and green*, 1885-95, Musée d'Orsay's *Blue Dancers*, c.1895, and Cologne's Wallraf-Richartz-Museum's *Degas iterates poses of movement or tension from the tradition of the female nude. These can be traced back to classical Greek sculpture, such as Tanagra figurines. Degas abstracts his figures from contextualizing environments, fills the picture plane with their bodies, and thus concentrates the viewer's attention on the figures' activity* (Kendall, 1992:190). As I see it, the narrative is only occasionally about submission but always about activity. See also Millard, Thomson 1988.
Dancers, 1900-1910, or the bathing series which includes Breakfast at the bath, 1893-8 [Fig. 1], After the bath, woman drying herself, 1895-1905 [Fig. 2], and also the Art Gallery of Ontario's Woman at her bath, 1893-8, Harvard University Art Museum's drawing After the bath, 1893-8, the Kimball Art Museum's drawing After the bath, woman drying her hair, 1893-8, National Gallery London's After the bath, woman drying herself, 1890-5, the Norton Simon Foundation in Pasadena's After the bath, 1890-3. The differences between the contextual situations in the serially related images has two effects. One is that altering the context of the figure's activity minimizes the importance of context. The performance is generalized across apparently different women in different environments, underlining its prosaic nature. The other effect is the generalization of the iterative structure of the activity that spatially and temporally actualizes the figure. By iterating the same structure in different presentations of the same form, Degas' serial images reflexively emphasise that the iterative activity which continually differentiates the figures from their environments, from themselves, and from each other, is a general structure applicable to all things.

The iteration of figural forms which relates series of images in Degas' late oeuvre starkly reveals the differential activity which actualizes those figures. The iteration of the figure exposes the differences generated by their activity of actualization. Their differences are not just the result of situating the figure in a new context or colour scheme. While the form of each figure in the dancing and bathing series appears the same, the activity which shapes her form continually differentiates through the various perspectival angles leading the viewer through the picture plane, through the various directions and acceleration of
the facture which lead viewers in, out, and over each thing in the picture plane, and through the various tones which affect how each body feels to the visual touch.

Equally, the viewer’s movement from one serial image to the next iterates the activity performed by the viewer. Just as past regions are brought to bear or carried over to inform the actualization of a present region of visual attention in the activity of viewing any one of Degas’ late images, so each serially situated image informs our view of the next. Degas’ serial images can be viewed in any order, but viewing each series involves both participating in the differentiating activity within specific images and performing differentiations between images. The already seen, performed, and hence actualized image becomes a virtuality out of which the next serial instantiation of the form differentiates into actuality. The past is carried into the present; the process of actualization is enacted through the differentiations which occur in the actualization of the next image out of the material of the past.

Generalizing Over Nature: The Serial Activity of Degas’ Female Nudes

In this way, Degas’ serial images present a general account of the nature of existence. Each image involves the viewer in the performance of actualizing the figure. The activity of actualization is directed by the facture, colour, and perspective which manifest the figure, but this activity is made perspicuous only when the viewer attends to the figure and enacts her actualization with her, not for her. The nature of the figure’s existence, as it is presented in the image, is the ongoing performance of her own event of
actualization. The viewer enacts the qualitative differences which actualize the figure’s becoming activity, so that viewing the figure temporalizes her existence by continually differentiating new moments of her actualization out of past moments in a cumulative process of differentiation. This gives each figure her active quality. Across series, the viewer performs the same sort of activity, differentiating images of the same figure in dramatically different ways, actualizing the figure anew with each serial differentiation from the last. For this reason, Degas’ images are not mere repetitions of one another. The viewing of each serially similar image involves new performative acts which differently actualize the same figure.

Iterating the differentiating activity of actualization across series of images generalizes it as an account of existence in general. The commonplace nature of the contexts, figures, and routine activities performed in Degas’ subject matter suggests that active existence, understood as the continual novel actualization of temporal becoming, is neither a transcendent property beyond experience nor the domain of special limit situations, but the nature of everyday life. The series of specifically female figurations only supports this interpretation. For it is well established that the history of the canon of the female nude, which typifies Degas’ late oeuvre of bathers and dancers, is marked both conceptually and iconographically by the identification of women with nature. Degas’ exploits the female nude and the discourse that surrounds it. It is the perfect vehicle for Degas’ presentation of the nature of existence in terms of the activity of actualization.

See Nead.
As a canon, the female nude is marked by a masculinist discourse about the nature of the feminine. In this tradition, the nature, matter, chaos, transgression, and incomprehensibility that the female body is made to represent is restrained by the order, form, balance, harmony and legibility conceived as the domain of masculine artistic practice. Feminized nature is made rational by what are conceived to be the masculine regulatory practices of art history. This makes all the more convincing the argument that “the woman’s body” in Degas late images, “becomes the landscape; the fusion of woman and nature is complete” (Thomson, 1992:155). But Degas goes much further. In the light of the urbanization and industrialization of Degas’ period, modernism reconceived nature to include, and be represented by, mass culture. Moreover, mass culture not only represented nature, but was conceived as the feminine.  

Degas’ replacement of the traditional Venus-like figure with figures like The Baker’s Wife, 1885-6, can thus be seen as a profoundly meaningful manoeuvre. His female nudes constitute a correlative set of double representations: of the traditional female nude as working class woman, of working class women as mass culture, and of mass culture as nature. The activity of existence, understood as a matter of free, durational events of becoming, is thereby best presented in the figure of the female nude. The hotly debated relation between content and form in Degas’ late serial imagery which has hitherto perplexed both critics and viewers alike is in fact completely coherent and intelligible. The female nude is the mode of a

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40 See Huyssen’s account of the naturalization and feminization of mass culture.
modernist ontology of continual actualization that is expressly articulated in Degas' serially iterative oeuvre.