Bathtime: Renoir, Cézanne, Daumier and the Practices of Bathing in Nineteenth-Century France

Linda Nochlin

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BATHTIME

When I think of "Bathers" as a sub-category of the genre of the nude in the later 19th century , something like Renoir's *Grandes Baigneuses* immediately comes to mind[1] (Fig. 1). In my mind's eye, I see a painting of naked women of generous proportions dabbling in a river or lolling by the ocean, their nudity sometimes enhanced by a little drapery, or even the occasional towel, their presence within the natural setting enlivened by a playful gesture or ennobled by a contemplative attitude. Nothing would seem less problematic than the late 19th-century bather: it seems to be a natural "given" of art history: timeless, elevated, idealized, and as such, central to the discourses of high art.

Yet of course, the *baigneuse* theme is anything but a given; the opposite of natural. On the contrary it is a construction, particular to a certain historical period, though based on and attaching itself to a long artistic tradition, and far from being natural, in any sense of that term, it is a highly artificial and self conscious construction at that.

1. P.A. Renoir, *Grandes Baigneuses,* 1887, Philadelphia, The Philadelphia Museum of Art.

What I am going to attempt to do in this essay is precisely to problematize an apparently unproblematic and "natural" subject by putting the bather, and bathing, back into the history of social institutions , practices and representations from which Renoir and most of the high artists of his time abstracted them. The point of this investigation, in other words, is not so much to discover anything new about Renoir's *Grandes Baigneuses,* but rather, to consider what it has excluded; what about bathers and bathing during our "bathtime" of the later 19th century has the painting occluded? This is not, strictly speaking, going to be a monographic study of Renoir's *Bathers* at all, although Renoir's painting will lie at its heart.

I had a reason for choosing the title "Bathtime". It is meant to imply a study focussing on a certain historical period in France and the project of my research has been to locate Renoir within an historically specific discourse of the pool, bathers and bathing, a discourse both visual and textual, extending from approximately 1850 to the fin-de-siècle. The issue, therefore, cannot be reduced to the simple one of a certain representation - the bather - (in French, during our period, an almost invariably feminine noun, the "baigneuse") but rather, the problematization of what has generally been accepted without question as a "natural" subject in the art of the period, and especially its vanguard art, although it exists as a popular Salon theme as well.

The Salon of 1887, the year when Renoir completed his *Grandes Baigneuses,* contained at least twenty-five representations of female bathers, including works by Renault, Lebrun, Dufaux, Dumonchel and Benner all indistinguishable in theme from Renoir's painting, except perhaps for the relatively daring Dufaux with its half dressed, contemporary figures slipping in and out of the water. The bather was a perennial favorite in the Salons of the 19th century, a theme increasingly secularized and generalized as the century progressed and earlier classical or Biblical pretexts - Dianas, Susannahs, or even the more up-to-date Orientalist "Sarahs la Baigneuse" vanished, giving way to the newer bather-subject of preference: the "Baigneuse" *tout court*[2].

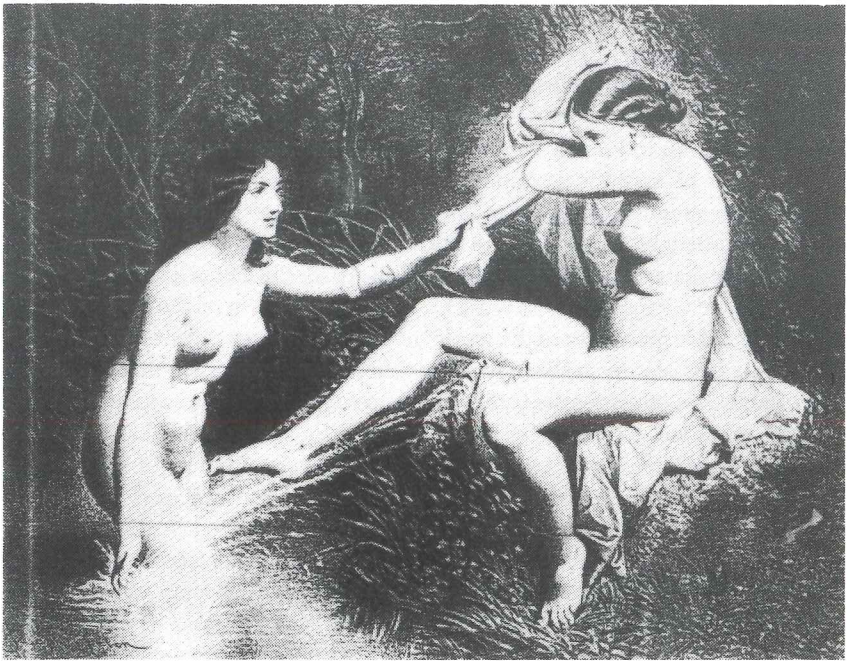
Why, at a certain moment in the history of French art, did the naked female figure, alone or in company, in water or near it, become so important?[3] Speaking from an historical vantage point, Renoir's *Great Bathers* may be said to belong to a certain moment of Bathtime: that of the artistic *rappel à l'ordre* of the 1880s (a recall to order presaging the better-known one which took place in France after the First World War[4]) when, after the bold attempt of Impressionism to eradicate the past and create an art modern in both its formal strategies and its subject matter, certain painters in

the group, most arduously Renoir, dissatisfied with the openness, instability and vivid contemporaneity characteristic of high Impressionism, attempted to restore a sense of permanence, timelessness and high-minded harmony to their art.

As such, the *Grandes Baigneuses* may be seen as the site of multiple contradictions and repressions. In it, Renoir rejects the present in its complexity, dynamism and destabilization of traditional relationships; its confrontation of gender and class issues; its engagement with urbanism and modernity. Renoir espoused high-minded reasons for undertaking his project in the *Bathers*.[5] Yet it is important to see that in it, he returns not merely to the traditional sanctions for the bather-subject provided by Raphael and Girardon, whose work has often been cited in relation to the formal and iconographic specificity of the work;[6] nor even to the precedent of such minor artists of the 18th century as Pater, who specialized in semi-prurient bather fantasies deploying semi-clothed female bathers in imaginary settings of great piquancy; nor even the precedent provided by his teacher, the long-suffering Charles Gleyre. More importantly, perhaps, Renoir returns to the kitsch sensibility of his own era, if a little earlier, works like *L'espièglerie,* of which there are versions from 1849 and 1867, mass-produced lithographs in which the theme of mischievous naked bathing-girls, teasing and splashing one another other is archly frozen in place for the pleasure of a male viewer. The standard range of poses and physical types, the gamut of complexions and ages, the sense of savoring the delectable details of the youthful bodies-all these features are shared by works as different in ambition as Renoir's *Bathers* and the popular lithographs of the period (Fig. 2).

This then, is the construction of the female bather within a convention which may encompass a variety of discourses and practices, from mass culture to high art, from the site of erstwhile vanguard production to that of the most conservative "official" specialists in the nude, like Bouguereau. All of these *Bathers* are replete with what I would call "the aesthetic effect";[7] they are smooth, fetching, playful relaxed, and strenuously removed from any context that would suggest either contemporaneity or the realities of urban existence, including the existence of the opposite sex. There are rarely any men in these pictures aside from an occasional faun or satyr-the pastoral idyll represents only the naked female: the male presence is an absence or rather, it is displaced to the understood position of the creating artist and the consuming viewer, not to speak of the potential buyer of the work.

Is there any position available for the female viewer of Renoir's painting, or, more interesting, for the female viewer of Renoir's time? Long consideration and a too



2. *L'espièglerie*, 1849, anonymous lithograph.

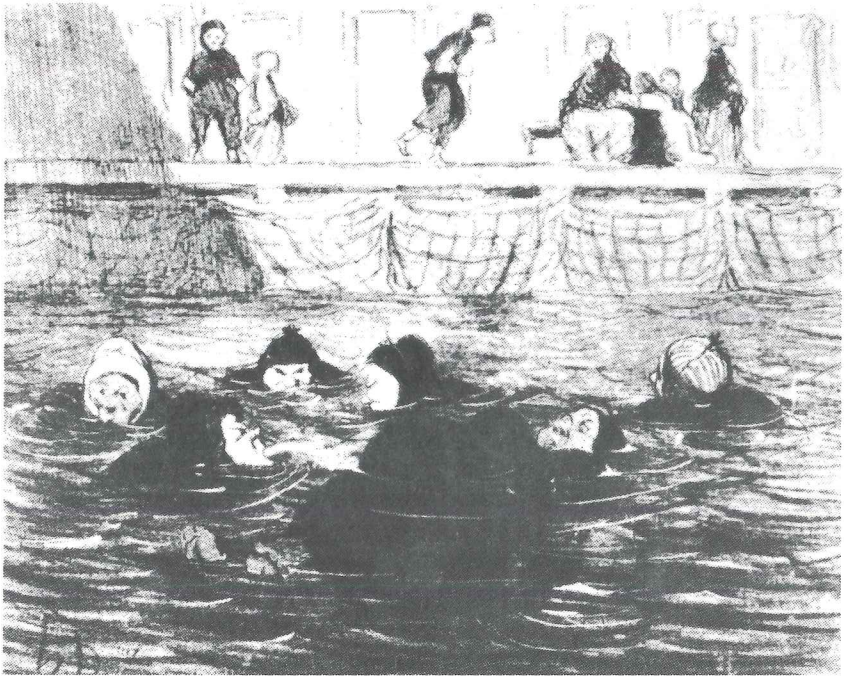
tight belt in Paris gave me a possible answer. Perhaps Renoir's nudes enable a certain feminine fantasy as well as the more conventional male one, a fantasy more conscious and historically restricted one, but a meaningful fantasy nevertheless: a fantasy of bodily liberation. It is difficult to imagine how women, especially ample women, condemned to the strictures of corsets and lacing, must have felt before this vision of freely expanding flesh, the pictorial possibility of unconstricted movement, of simply breathing deeply, of not having their breasts pushed up under their chins and their ribs and lungs encased in whalebone. The imaginary pleasure of lolling about with their uncorseted flesh exposed to air and light in the epoch before sun was supposed to be good for you and well brought up ladies scrupulously covered their pale skins with parasols, veils and long sleeves, not to speak of long skirts and stockings must have been considerable. Perhaps this aspect of openness, unfetteredness and deconstriction might have appealed, not merely to men, for obvious reasons which have been reiterated innumerable times, but, for the reasons I have just stated, by women as well.[8]

Another, very different, and less investigated practice of bathing was coming into being during the bathtime under consideration, a time a little earlier than that of Renoir's *Baigneuses* but certainly contemporary with other artists' highly idealized and aesthetically specific constructions of the *baigneuses* motif, a practice whose representation has, for the most part, been left unstudied by traditional art history with its consistent neglect of all forms of visual representation that cannot be referred to the discourses of High Art.[9] I refer to evolving popular practices, discourses, and representations of bathing, and swimming-water-sports and water-amusements in general[10], and specifically these practices as they involve *women* that mark the 19th century as a whole and its latter half in particular.

3. P.A. Renoir, *La Grenouillière*, 1869, Moscow, Pushkin Museum.

Not that Renoir was ignorant of the swimming of his day. Indeed, in his representations of *La Grenouillère*, done in company with his friend Monet in the late 1860's,[11] he had even recorded the activities of contemporary bathers off the island and on it in his lively record of contemporary enjoyment on the waterside (Fig. 3). The Impressionists, with Renoir prominent among them, at this early point in their existence as a group, were calling into question the traditional practices of

the high art of their time by representing bathing as well as sailing and rowing as a contemporary activity, carried on in bathing suits and bonnets in the context of urban, or more accurately, suburban, social relaxation rather than an elevated, classical *topos* represented by artificially posed nudes in idealized pastoral landscapes.[12]



4. H. Daumier, *Naiads of the Seine*, 1847, lithograph.

But in addition to such revolutionary paintings of the sixties – revolutionary in their synoptic style and vivid broken color which is part of the modernity of their subject - there exists an unexplored archive of visual alternatives to those provided by the

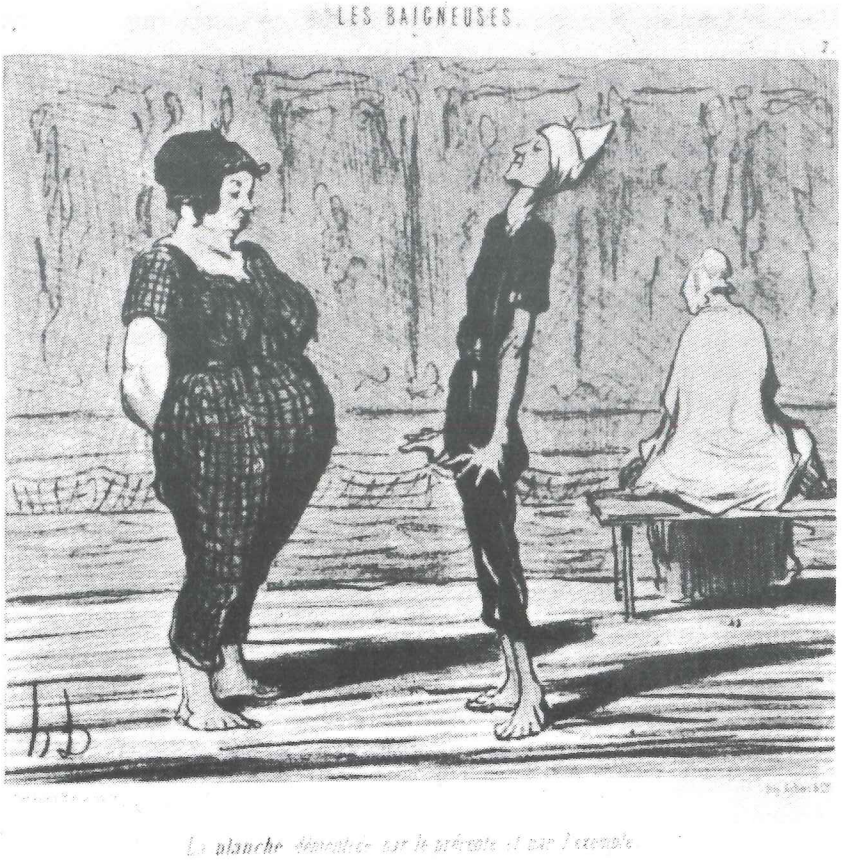
Salon's, and the later Renoir's idyllic versions of the *baigneuse* theme. This is the whole realm of representation produced by the nascent mass-media of "bathtime", a production focussed for the most part on Paris itself although in some cases, on its suburbs, and dealing with contemporary swimming and swimming pools: female bathers beneath the notice of the sort of elevated artist and conservative yearner for the simpler, more natural verities of the past whose persona Renoir was increasingly affecting by the decade of the 1880s.

As early as the middle of the century, Daumier was engaging with bathing and bathers, male and female, but in Paris, not in the country, clothed, not naked, ridiculous, not elevated[13] (Fig. 4). One can only think, in looking at Daumier's caricatures, like his *Naiads of the Seine,* that he was pillorying not merely his victims, but the high-art bather theme itself, such as it existed in endless dreary Salon representations of his time: the naiads, Dianas and Susannahs and just plain *baigneuses*, whose ranks cast a pall of boredom over the art experience, year after year.

Daumier's *Naiads of the Seine* plays on the oxymoronic humor of this juxtaposition of terms. There can't be serious naiads of the Seine, Daumier implies, because, like Marx, he believes that antiquity can only be repeated as farce in modern times. The present day Seine gets the bathers it deserves, that are appropriate to bathtime today: bathing-suited, spindle-shanked, frowsy-headed, anti-classical in figure type. His bathers are grotesques of the Seine, but living, breathing contemporaries, not classical nymphs or goddesses.

Here, the connection between the female bather and the world of nature is severed, revealed for the farce that it is: nothing could be less natural than these bathers and their baths: modern life, essentially urban for Daumier, is necessarily sundered from the pastoral: women's bodies cavorting in that prototypically modern body of water-the Parisian *piscine*-is naturally funny. Modern women bathers, and men too, for that matter, Daumier's lithographs asserted with brilliant and acerbic formal inventiveness, were neither naked nor classically beautiful, but they engaged with the splendors and miseries of the modern world with a certain courage and sense of adventure; their forms are cast with an edgy energy of contour and character utterly foreign to the later Renoir's bland *poncif.*

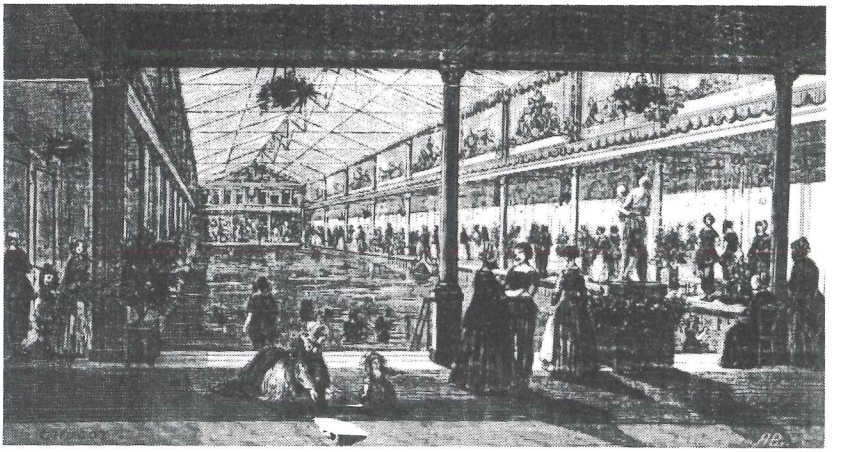
Of course, Freud's understanding of jokes should be kept in mind while enjoying Daumier's *Baigneuses* (Fig. 5). For Freud, jokes are never innocent, and in looking at these images, the aggressive and destructive aspects of humor assert their presence. On the one hand, the *Baigneuses* series can be read in the light of Daumier's more specific anti-feminist caricatures of the late forties as misogynistic lampoons directed



5. H. Daumier, *The Board demonstrates the Principle*, 1847, lithograph.

against the foolish and grotesque pretensions of middle-class women who should, one can understand by inference, be home taking care of husbands and children rather than cavorting about in public in this unseemly manner; yet on the other hand, and in the context of this essay, they, like Daumier's caricatures of the classical theater of his time and his wildly satirical pillories of classical literary narratives, can also be understood as powerful attacks on the anachronistic hollowness of a high culture which proposed the classics as the only valid aesthetic discourse for a modern nation. Whether or not Daumier actually authored the phrase "il faut être de son temps",

his caricatures constituted a powerful visual counter-discourse in the popular press to that language of classical timelessness and elevation represented by the Salon, the lycée, and the classical theater.[14]



6. C. Hugot, *Bains Lambert*, c. 1852; illustration from Texier's *Tableau de Paris*, 1852-53.

Daumier, it turns out, was not working from imagination. As luck would have it, his home on the Ile Saint Louis was almost next door to the most prominent women's swimming pool and Ecole de Natation in all of Paris: the Ecole de Natation pour Dames of the Hotel Lambert on the Quai de Béthune (or Quai d'Anjou) of the Ile Saint Louis (Fig. 6).

The second half of the 19th century was certainly "bathtime" for the Parisian public, which flocked to the public pools established on the Seine, and later, after 1884, in all the *quartiers* of Paris, for sport, hygiene and pleasure. What the "official" discourse of swimming for women emphasized was the pool's high-class ambience and its health-giving properties: "The cold baths of running water, those for swimming above all, are for ladies the most powerful means of hygiene; for young ladies [les jeunes personnes] it is the best of gymnastics; they are also recommended for both by all the doctors, but only on condition that the water in which they are taken is healthy and salubrious - that is to say, as pure as possible".[15] The article, illustrated by Daubigny and others, goes on to praise the qualities of the Seine where the Bains Lambert are located - a point at which the river has not yet received the "tribut des

immondices" (tribute of filth) from the great city. The article, using as its major illustration a print based on the original by Hugot which had appeared in the 1846 *Illustration* stressed the advantages offered to women by the Bains Lambert. Elegance, decorum and amenity are emphasized by the often repeated and varied *visual* representations of the interior of the Ecole de Natation of the Bains Lambert. The classical columns and pediment as well as the classical sculpture suggest the baths of antiquity and it is noteworthy, in the interests of decorum, that the only nude female body represented in the prints *is* that of classical sculpture: all the contemporary ladies are properly dressed; a maid is prominently featured in the foreground and bathing costumes are as concealing and unseductive as possible.And indeed, in the series of pirated variations of Hugot's print, one can see the gradual disappearance of less than fully-clothed figures all together. Propriety, good morals, decent hygiene and healthfulness are the primary characteristics stressed by this visual representation of the female bather. Nudity, as I have said, exists only as a sign of elevation in the form of a reference to classical antiquity, establishing the high-class credentials of the pool as a site of upper middle- class recreation, strictly segregated by sex as well as class. Yet this is only one side of the discourse on women's bathing establishments and their habituées current within popular representation during our bathtime. Other draftsmen or journalists might figure the subject quite differently (Fig. 7). Notions of sexuality, voluptuousness, and seductiveness haunted the imagination of the commercial artist who designed this print of women at the swimming pool. Memories of the odalisques of Ingres and his prototypical Turkish bath are roused by the languid poses and the intimate crowding together of female bodies. Despite the reassuring presence of the *maitre naigeur* and the contemporary bathing costumes the print stirs up a certain uneasiness connected with sexual exoticism .

"Low" or popular art can, it is clear, no more be viewed monolithically, as a single entity, than can high: here too, there are different voices, different tasks the image is intended to perform, with different audiences in view. In the *Bain des lionnes,* the naked classical statue seems more a reference to the near-nakedness of the swimmers, and their lack of *tenu,* than to bourgeois decorum and elevation. Indeed, many accounts of women's swimming pools stressed the unfortunate presence in them of ladies of the theater, and even worse: smoking and drinking and carrying on "like men."[16] Women on their own enjoying themselves without the benefits of male companionship or protection then as now inspired suspicion, sexual innuendo, and often, gross satire (Fig. 8).

Daumier's *Baigneuses* were not the only series to poke fun at women's attempts

7. *Le bain des Lionnes*, 1850; illustration from Negrier's *Les bains à travers les ages*, 1925.

to learn how to swim or amuse themselves in swimming pools. And of course, these representations of *feminine* swimming pools and the practices of women bathers constituted only part of both the popular and official discourses of bathing and swimming during our period.

Ultimately, the discourses of bathing and swimming must be understood in connection with other regimes of "reglementarianism" - official government regulation - connected with the body and its practices, regimes brilliantly analyzed by Michel Foucault, and more recently, by Alain Corbin in his studies of prostitutional discourse and that of smells and garbage, as well as Georges Vigarello, in his histories of cleanliness, sports, and posture and deportment training.[17] Bathing and its representation must be viewed as part of a more generalized politics and policy of "putting the body in its place": a policy which had its origins during the later 18th century and was associated with Enlightenment ideals of control, hygiene, and civil order. Like the discourses of prostitution, sanitation and wetnursing to which it is related in that all are discourses of the body's products, comportments or employments, there is an evolving official government code of regulations in the realm of swimming and bathing, stipulating prohibitions and approving practices. This

8. G. Bertal, *Smoking and Drinking;* illustration from Briffault's *Paris dans l'eau,* 1844.

official "regulationism" is accompanied by a stream of propaganda extolling the physical and social benefits of swimming and bathing, and, at the same time, by a plethora of irreverent satire aimed at the foibles associated with water-sports, a contradiction-laden discourse which marks the bathtime of the second half of the 19th century. In none of this material, however, is it a matter of naked goddesses lolling about on the banks of classical or Edenic shores, but rather, a question of modern women emerging from locker-rooms, learning the strokes and the dives, taking showers before and after, and eyeing each other in bathing suits. Nakedness and the elevation of the nude is never an issue here, but rather, the ludicrous effects of contemporary bathing costumes on less than perfect bodies. Popular art tells a story of mundane dangers and down-to-earth (or water, more accurately) triumphs.

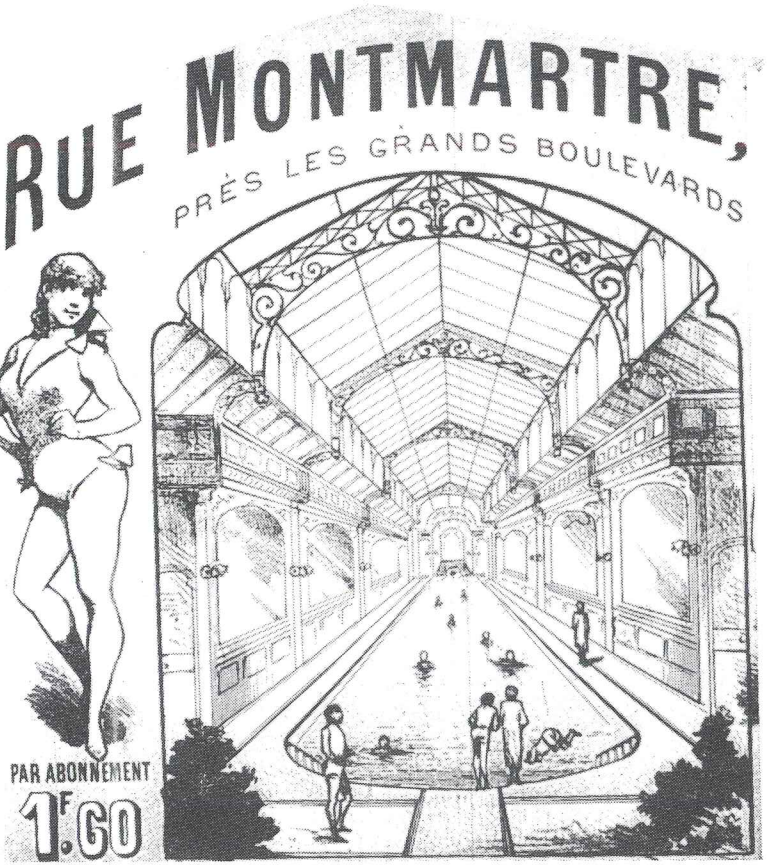
The Parisian *piscines* are seen as both beneficially democratizing, where men are concerned, and perhaps somewhat equivocally in the case of women.[18] What might be perceived as a beneficent, temporary mixing of social milieus in the case of male swimmers had different overtones in the case of female ones, as demi-mondaines, grisettes, dancers and actresses, mingling with respectable girls and women, might well be a corrupting influence.[19]

9. Nadar, *Les Chaleurs*, c. 1860; illustration from *Petit Journal pour Rire*.

Crowding, jostling, and loss of control over the urban river-space, especially in the case of the cheap *bains à quatre sous* - was perceived as a real issue, whether represented humorously by Nadar (Fig. 9), or more objectively as in a photograph of the Seine viewed from the Louvre, from the 1880s, showing the area around the Pont Neuf encumbered with floating wooden piscines.[20] Swimming pools had become very popular by the decade of the 80s. In 1884, the year of the grand opening of the Piscine of Château-Landon, one of the first swimming pools to be constructed *away* from the Seine, 200,000 people attended the pool, of which 1,000 learned how to swim.[21]

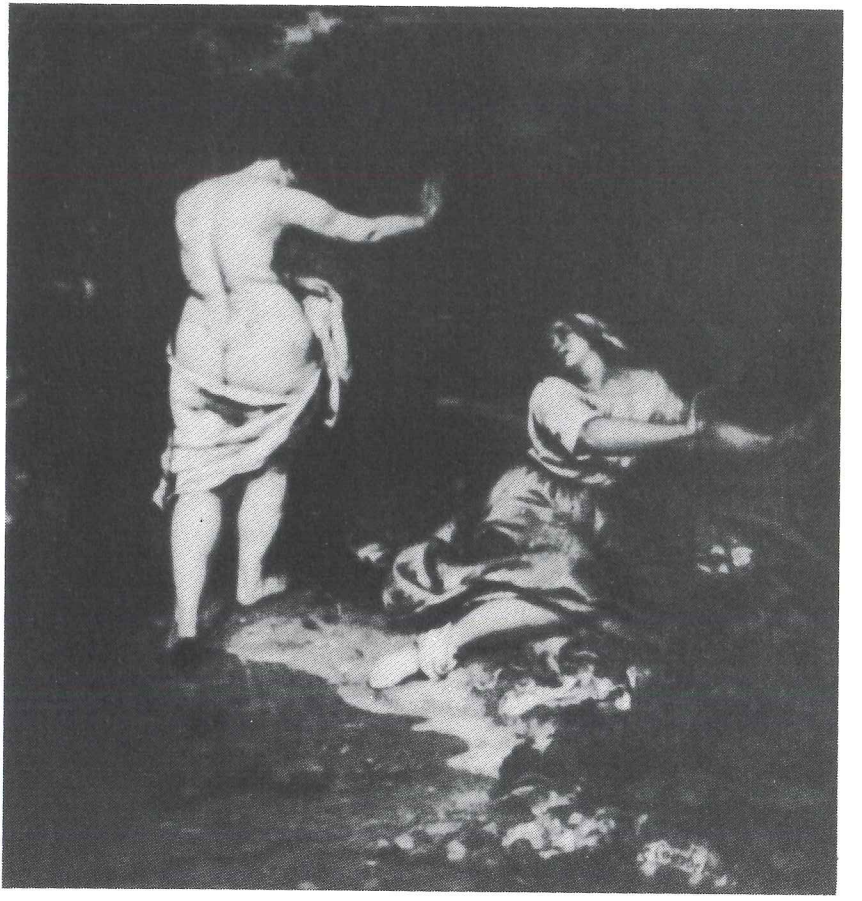
Sophisticated posters began to appear, advertising the attractions of the various municipal pools (Fig. 10). What I find interesting about a poster like this one published by Emile Levi in 1882, advertising the *Bains Bourse,* is, in comparison to Renoir's almost contemporary *Grandes Baigneuses,* its modernity. I am not talking about quality here -the poster, although it has a certain pizzaz, makes no claims to aesthetic excellence - but rather the way the image engages with commodity, how it catches the eye of the spectator, male or female, and keeps it focussed on what is at stake: the pool, the bodies, the prices. Segmented in its construction, combining print and illusionistic representation as boldly as a much later cubist collage, each part has its specific work to do, its task of commercial communication. The deeply receding space of the pool, emphasizing its amplitude, is decoratively related to, yet, in terms of signification, separated from that communicating prices and amenities - the print section - which in turn is separated from the two "come on" figures - the *commère* and the *compère,* as it were - connecting the viewer with the possibilities offered by the image. The woman is someone we know from the ads of our own day: sprightly, up-to-date, come hither, her sexuality already functioning as a visual sign of exchange-value in much the way we take for granted in modern advertising. Color is flat, outlines simplified, the easier to get the message across and the cheaper to print up multiple copies. It is in the "low" art of the *piscine* poster that visual representation and modernity intersect, in a way utterly foreign to Renoir's enterprise.

Of course High Art too had its own counter-discursive strategies during bathtime, that campaign of subversion from within which art history has always identified with Modernism itself. In both Courbet's *Bathers* of 1853 and Manet's *Déjeuner* of ten years later, the latter originally entitled "Le bain", the traditional elevation of the bather theme is called into question with a disconcerting "shock of the new". In both cases, although differently, a disconcerting combination of alienation *and* the reality effect is involved (Fig. 11). In the Courbet, "reality" is signified by the coarse



10. Poster of the *Bains de la Bourse et de la Presse*, 1882, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (detail).

fleshiness of the fat body and the presence of abandoned clothing, but alienated by the meaninglessness of the gesture which calls into question the naturalness of the *topos* itself. In the Manet painting, abandoned clothing as well as the presence of contemporary, dressed men signify, once more, contemporaneity, but the formal language in toto refuses the natural as a possibility of representation.



11. G. Courbet, *The Bathers*, 1853, Montpellier, Musée Fabre (detail).

This was a subversion from within in which Renoir, as an Impressionist, had actively participated. But by the 1880s and 1890s, things had changed within the avant-garde itself. It was not just Renoir who was fleeing immediacy and contemporaneity but other vanguard artists as well, most notably Gauguin, who actually left France itself in search of more timeless, universal, indeed, eternal values inscribed on the bodies of naked, dark-skinned females.

Earlier in this lecture, I made the assertion that Renoir's *Great Bathers* might be said to belong to a certain "subcategory or moment" of bathtime: that of the *rappel à l'ordre* of the 1880s, a historical moment when, after the bold attempt of Impressionism to eradicate the past and create an art modern and contemporary in both its formal strategies and its subject matter, certain artists in the group, most arduously Renoir, attempted to restore a sense of permanence, timelessness and high-minded harmony to the openness, instability and vivid contemporaneity characteristic of high Impressionism. I should now like to suggest, very sketchily, why this should be the case; to indicate the various "overdeterminations" mediating the construction of the *Great Bathers* and other works of this period.

I should like to make it clear that I consider the *Bathers* an ambitious but badly flawed painting rather than a masterpiece: a record of conflicting desires, intentions and practices and interesting as such. It is certainly not a painting which either innovates or summarizes. These contradictions, I maintain, exist not merely on a formal level, as at least one authority has contended,[22] but are the inscription of much more complex conceptual and ideological muddles.

The *Great Bathers,* with all its ambiguities and failures, constitutes a response to a multitude of pressures during the period preceding its creation, including:

1) Growing demands on the part of women for rights, education, and subjecthood within industrial society, a sign of "progress" which Renoir increasingly found dangerous, and reacted to with longing for the "good old days" when women - and everyone else - knew their places.[23]

2) Market forces demanding specialization and individualization of artistic production.[24] This, in a way, might be considered part of the same objectionable "progress" that Renoir so disliked, and he complained bitterly about it in his letters. Nevertheless, he understandably did his best to succeed within the dealer system and through the cultivation of wealthy clients. Increasingly, during the 80s, each artist had to be positioned as a unique, (almost invariably male) hero of creation and self-creation. Renoir and his fellow artists felt, not incorrectly, that Impressionism's brief communal enterprise had blurred and blunted the uniqueness of individual styles and

personalities. Viewer's had difficulty, for example, telling the difference between Monet's and Renoir's versions of *La Grenouillière*. Now, by the decade of the 80s, stimulated by the dealer system and a competitive market extending as far as the United States, the unique artist was encouraged to produce identifiable objects: it was no longer a question of "Impressionist works" but of "Monets" or "Renoirs". One might call it "bending to the market" or "opportunism" but that is to imagine that at all times an artist like Renoir is consciously catering to the wishes of others and would, on his own, do something quite different. On the contrary, I would say that most of the time, producer and consumers shared the same values, and that it is a question not so much of bowing to market pressures as a version of Althusserian "interpellation" in the realm of cultural institutions: certain positions and formations gradually emerge which call into being subjects who will fill them. "The artist" by the 1880s, was already positioning himself as a specialist and a genius, not as a representer of modern life, but of its opposite, an inventer of timeless, aestheticized realms of value, beginning, perhaps, with experience, but transcending it. Monet became a specialist in series; Renoir in bathers, Gauguin of Tahitians, etc., with styles that could not be confused with those of other artists. Cézanne, of whom more later, but more specially, Seurat and the Neo-impressionists, offer a counter-example to this more general trend of the 80s and 90s, sticking to the city and to an interchangeable style, but, like Renoir, rejecting the fluidity and experiential ephemerality characteristic of Impressionism at its high point in the 70s.

Renoir's *Great Bathers,* then is part of the history of that retreat from experience, from daily life, from urban subject matter and from social engagement which defines one strand - perhaps the dominant one - of Modernism, until the advent of cubism. The question is, of course, to what extent can such a painting be associated with the modernist enterprise at all.

In Renoir's case, I think certain special factors are at work in the "rappel à l'ordre". Impressionism, and Renoir in particular, came in the late 1870's to be associated not only with the inchoate, the momentary, and the transient but, at the same time, with the quintessentially feminine in both subject and style. In other words, I believe there is a hidden, and probably an unconscious, gender agenda at work here. There is a way in which, in the *Great Bathers,* Renoir may be said to be ridding himself of what was considered "feminine" formlessness and the triviality of a "feminine" style."[25]

Renoir, who could hardly but be aware of this discursive effeminization of Impressionism in the critical texts of the period generally and that directed towards his own production particularly, took harsh steps to remedy these "flaws". Earlier,

Renoir had engaged with the rest of the Impressionists in constructing a painting of daily life, of the city or suburbs with men and women interacting as social beings within the milieu of historical experience, even if this might be a Utopian world of desire and pleasure, as it had been in the *Moulin de la Galette* of 1876 and other works of that period.

Now, in 1887, the male is positioned outside the world of the painting, as desirer and viewer rather than participant. The representation is no longer social and concrete but reduced to the "timeless" realm of women's bodies in a vague, natural setting. History and the social order are occluded in order to produce an atemporal, natural realm, in which a masculine subject views a feminine object.

The end of Impressionism, viewed from the vantage point of gender discourse, coincides with a (possibly unconscious) rejection of the "feminine" at the end of the century, a return to "solid" values on the part of a certain fraction of the avant-garde: the nude, specifically the bather, inscribed in the order of the "natural," stands for the return of value in art itself. Nowhere can this mythology of the return of solid values to art be so convincingly deployed as in the case of the ambivalently approached *female* body. It is here that aesthetic goals can coincide most productively with unconscious psychosexual factors and these unconscious impulses in turn erased, modified, or sublimated. The *baigneuses,* freed from contemporary specificity and historical narrative alike are now understood to be the primary realm of pure aesthetic, of course masculine aesthetic, challenge.

And what of the other "Great Bather" painter; what of Cézanne? (Fig. 12). I am afraid I can only briefly sketch in what I feel to be Cézanne's achievement vis à vis the bather, bathtime and the construction of a modern-modernist and vanguard-representation of the nude. One might start by observing that in the work of Cézanne, modernity intersects with the female nude in terms of a language, a pictorial construction, not a subject matter. Cézanne's "doubt" as Merleau-Ponty called it, calls into question both subject and object: the painter's vision, his powers of inscription, the naked body and the space-surface it must exist in or on.[26]

Cézanne, like Renoir in his youth, had represented the concrete and the contemporary in his early work, albeit a sexually charged and bizarre "daily life", often dependent for their peculiar *frisson* upon certain melodramatic types of popular imagery.[27] But his retreat from contemporaneity does not, like Renoir's, involve a recall to order, a return to traditional modes of representation. In fact, one might say that Cézanne never abandons contemporaneousness, in the form of immediacy, as a mode of access to experience. It is simply that now, in the later work, the present

12. P. Cézanne, *Great Bathers,* c. 1906, Philadelphia, The Philadelphia Museum of Art.

enters his practice as a painterly process rather than being a subject matter.

In terms of perspectival construction, Cézanne's decentering of the pictorial point of view relates both to desire and sexuality in the construction of his bather paintings. Cézanne refuses Renoir's obvious, single, centered viewpoint in his *Great Bathers,* and, by shattering one-point perspective, destroys the understood presence of the desiring individual male as the painter/spectator's point of view.

In laying emphasis on Cézanne's famous doubt, I should like to compare it, a doubt of which the signifier is revealed *process,* with Renoir's doubtfulness, an uncertainty veiled by the harmonious stasis characteristic of a *product.* For Renoir of course doubts too; or rather, he has troubles about the validity of his art, especially about the everyday subjects, impermanently painted surfaces, and the unstable compositions - in short, the processive structures - characteristic of high Impressionism. And, from a different standpoint, like most female nudes of the 19th century, his

bathers as subjects of representation are sites of contradiction and uncertainty, inscribing anxieties and their repression.

Cézanne's bathers, unlike Renoir's, do not bathe or play or talk. In his *Great Bathers* of 1906, there is no longer any sensory illusion, or narrative pretext, as in Renoir's: no splashing, drying, or "espièglerie". The specific qualities of the body - not just the seductiveness of the female, or its fearsomeness and power - but its very anatomy, its proportions, its ability to support itself, and perhaps most especially its *boundaries,* that which separates the body in its integrity from that which is not the body (the so-called "background"), boundaries which, in the form of contour, were so carefully and lovingly maintained by Renoir and the academicians of the day, are here disregarded, suppressed or made ambiguous. Perhaps most importantly, the very signs of sexual difference themselves are erased or made to seem inconsequential in the late *Bathers.* In short, Cézanne's late *Bathers* constitutes a heroic effort to escape from the dominion of the sexual-scopic implicated in the traditional masculine gaze on the female sex, as well as the heavy-breathing sexual violence or equally disturbing repressive strategies characterizing his early work, not to speak of their inscription of the personal, the contemporary, the concrete - and the popular.

What Cézanne is erasing is as important as what he is constructing in the *Great Bathers.* He is erasing a traditional discourse of the nude, encoding desire and the ideal as well as its opposite, humiliation and awkwardness(the historical turf of naturalism as well as of piety); above all, in these *Bathers,* he is erasing the codes constructed for the purpose of maintaining gender difference from classical antiquity down through the 19th Century, and in some way, negating his own relation to such difference. As much as the poster-maker or the caricaturist or mass media print-maker, although with diametrically opposite ends in view, Cézanne is a destroyer of traditions of visual representation, a re-inventor of the body for a public which gradually, learns to appreciate his practice as a kind of analogue to the modern epistemological dilemma itself, and which finally might be said to fetishize it as such.

In concluding, I should like to say once more that in studying a major 19th-century theme like the *baigneuses,* serious attention needs to be paid to alternative discourses and practices, to other modes of visual production rather than the conventional high art studied by conventional art history. Advertising, mass media prints, cartoons, etc. exist not just as undifferentiated, visually indifferent " sources" for high art, but, on the contrary, as alternatives, and often, as adversaries of it. As alternatives, they have very different work to do and from time to time enter into a positive dialectical relationship with the practices of high art while at other times, an equally important

relationship of fierce rejection or negation. It is only through an understanding of such relationships and the cultural struggles through which they are manifested in all their complexity that we can begin to construct an inclusive and truly social history of 19th-century visual representation, a history in which works like Renoir's *Grandes Baigneuses* will be viewed not as neither a masterpiece or a sorry failure, but rather as the result of certain kinds of practices, the product of a particular, shifting structure of cultural institutions at a particular moment of history. It is only thus that works of art, specifically bathers, and, more generally, bathtime itself as a cultural entity, can be more fully understood.

Notes

1. This essay was inspired in part by the exhibition, *Renoir: The Great Bathers*, held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art from September 9 to November 25, 1990. I presented some of this material as a talk at the museum on that occasion The special issue of the Philadelphia Museum of Art *Bulletin* (Vl. 86, nos. 367-368 [Fall 1990] dedicated to the painting, written by Christopher Riopelle, Associate Curator of European Painting at the Museum, was extremely helpful and the reader is encouraged to consult this document for the most up-to-date information available about the painting and the numerous sketches and other works related to it. I profited from conversation both with Mr. Riopelle and with Joseph Rishel of the Philadelphia Museum.

2. These conclusions are based on a methodical search for representations of female bathers in the Salon *livrets* from 1814 until 1890. This was not an easy task, although it became somewhat easier after 1879, when partial illustrations in the form of engravings were provided. The difficulty in combing through the *livrets* trying to find evidence of *baigneuses* and related themes in the listed titles was daunting. *Diana* was clear enough, as was *Bathsheba* or just plain *Une baigneuse*. But what about *Le bain*, which especially if it were by a woman artist, might turn out to be a mother bathing her baby; or *Aux bords du lac*, which often meant the presence of nudes on the shore, whereas *Aux bords du Lac Leman* inevitably referred to a landscape? Guesswork was inevitable, but some interesting information nevertheless resulted from this survey.

3. In attempting to answer this question, or at least, to formulate the questions to be asked about it, my approach will be both diachronic and synchronic: both concerned with change and evolution and with the interaction of simultaneous practices and products.

4. For a discussion of the 20th-century "rappel à l'ordre", a time after World War I when political conservatism in France found its artistic equivalent in a variety of reactionary "harmonizing", sometimes historicizing styles, see *Les réalismes. 1919-1939*, (exh. cat.), Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou. 1980: Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War. 1914-1925*, Princeton, 1989; and Romy Golan, "Modes of Escape: the Representation of Paris in the Twenties," in *The 1920s: Age of Metropolis*, (exh. cat.), ed.Jean Clair, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. 1991, pp. 336-377. All of these constructions of the conservative reaction after World War I influenced me in my thinking about the recall to order characteristic of many of the dominant art styles in France, particularly those of the erstwhile avant-garde, during the last twenty years of the 19th century.

5. For Renoir's ideas about his work during this period, see Christopher Riopelle, Philadelphia Museum of Art *Bulletin*, 1990, *passim*, and Barbara Ehrlich White, "The 'Bathers' of 1887 and Renoir's Anti-Impressionism," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 55, no. 1 (March 1973), pp. 106-26, *passim*.

6. See, for example, Riopelle, Philadelphia Museum of Art *Bulletin*, 1990, p. 28 and fig. 30 for the François Girardon relief, *Nymphs Bathing*, c. 1670, in connection with Renoir's project.

7. This is, of course, an opposing effect to Roland Barthes oft-cited "effet de réelle", or "reality effect". It seems to me what many of these purveyors of the female bather were getting at were "effects of the aesthetic" within a basically naturalistic premise. This effect is particularly evident in the orientalizing bathers of Gérome, in which motifs from Ingres "aestheticize" the otherwise scrupulously "objective" representations of naked black and white women in obsessively detailed interior spaces. For a further examination of this *topos*, the "sign of the artistic" in realist art, see my essay "The Imaginary Orient,"

in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, New York, Harper & Row, 1989, pp. 47-49.

8. It is interesting to note that Renoir, with rare exceptions, represented his mistress (later his wife), Aline Charigot - a fat woman by all accounts, and a lower-class one - in unfashionably *uncorseted* attire. She often is depicted dressed in flowing, sometimes waistless garments, which, in a sense, signify in clothed terms what the bathers signify in unclothed ones: the rejection of fashion and history, and the substitution for them of an ideal, perhaps timeless, condition of freedom and unconstriction. When Renoir does portraits of fashionable women sitters, like Mme. Charpentier, for example, they are, of course, always represented as properly corseted, their ample flesh constrained in accordance with the historically specific codes of elegance and propriety governing the presentation and representation of the female body in the later 19th century.

9. The recent controversies over High and Low art and their relationship to which the recent, extremely controversial exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (*High & Low Modern Art and Popular Culture*, Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, 1990-1991) has given rise, have stimulated interest, I hope, in these neglected aspects of visual representation which social and cultural historians, in this country, in England and in France, have been investigating with great intelligence and originality for quite a few years now. There has also been a good deal of original work on the history and social positioning of the body in recent years, an issue, like that of popular art and culture, relevant to the subject of this essay. See, for example, the various investigations of the body in relation to cleanliness, sport, and hygiene by Georges Vigarello: *Le propre et le sale: L'hygiëne du corps depuis le Moyen Age* (Paris, Seuil, 1985); *Le corps redressé* (Paris, Delarge, 1978); and *Une histoire culturelle du sport, techniques d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, EPS/R. Laffont, 1988). These studies investigate subjects relevant to bathing and swimming in their textual, if not in their visual aspects.

10. For a long discussion of the rise in importance of boating and sailing as leisure activities in the later 19th century, see Paul Tucker, *Monet at Argenteuil*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1981. Robert L. Herbert, in *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society* (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1898), devotes a substantial section of his study to sailing at Argenteuil and rowing and boating at Chatou (pp. 229-245).

11. See the versions of this theme by Renoir of 1869 now in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm and in the Oskar Reinhart Collection in Winterthur. Robert L. Herbert publishes a richly detailed engraving of men and women bathing together at La Grenouillere of 1973 (Herbert, *Impressionism*, fig. 210, p. 211) and there is a spirited and sexy color print of 1880 illustrating mixed bathing and general good fun at this popular bathing establishment in Francois Beaudouin, *Paris/Seine*, Paris, Nathan, 1989, p. 172.

12. Renoir himself looked back at the period when he painted at La Grenouillère with great nostalgia, choosing to envision it as an idyllic, pre-industrial pastoral era rather than the period of vigorous urban modernization that it was: "In 1868 I painted a good deal at La Grenouillère. I remember an amusing restaurant called Fournaise's where life was a perpetual holiday ... The world knew how to laugh in those days! Machinery had not yet absorbed all of life; you had leisure for enjoyment and no one was the worse for it." Renoir, late in life, cited in Antbroise Vollard, *Renoir: An Intimate Record*, tr. H. Van Doren and R.T. Weaver, New York, 1934, Alfred A. Knopf, p. 49. (orig. publ. 1925). It is interesting to see how often artists, and the rest of us as well, tend to look back at our youthful years as "pre-industrial", simpler and more leisured, despite the fact that one person's youth is, of course, another's old age, and that the period from which Renoir was looking back so nostalgically was dubbed "the gay 'Nineties" by people who had been young during it looking back from their vantage point of the 20th century.

13. Daumier's series devoted to female bathers in the pools of Paris, entitled *Les baigneuses*, appeared in *Charivari* in 1847. There was also a series featuring male *habitués* of the Paris swimming pools.

14. For an excellent account of Daumier's counter-discursive practice and the complexity of the notion of counter-discourse itself, see Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: the Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press 1985. See especially Chapter 3. "Counter-Images: Daumier and *Le Charivari*", pp. 149–197.

15. Article-advertisement for the Bains Lambert, illustrated by Daubigny and others, c. 1850, in Album *Bains*, Salle des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

16. For a description of the coarse behavior of women at swimming pools, one of many, see Eugène Briffault, *Paris dans l'eau*, Paris, J. Hetzel, 1844, p. 99: "Au bain des femmes se rencontrent surtout des héroines de la galanterie et du plaisir opulent; les autres femmes se tiennent à l'écart, et les bonnes renommées se séparent des ceintures dorées. La cantine est pourvue de pâtisseries, de vins fins et d'eau-de-vie; le punch et quelquefois aussi le vin de Champagne y sont joyeusement fêtés. On y fume tout autant que chez les hommes".

Many of the illustrations accompanying these descriptive texts are far from flattering either to women's bodies or their character!

17. See, for example, Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York, Vintage/Random House, 1975; his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. trans. by A. Sheridan, New York, Vintage/Random House, 1979; or his *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. by R. Hurley, New York, Vintage/Random House, 1980. See also, Alain Corbin, *Les filles de noces: misere sexuelle et prostitution: 19e et 20e siècles*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978; and his *Le Miasme et La Jonquille: L'odorat et l'imaginaire social XVIIIe-XIXe siècles*, Paris, Aubier Montaigne. 1982. Equally relevant is the work of Georges Vigarello, cited above, n.9.

18. See, for example, Eugène Chapus, *Le Sport a Paris*, Paris, Librairie de L. Hachette et Cie, 1854, p. 187: "A l'école de natation, la suprématie des rangs disparait dans l'uniformité du peignoir et du caleçon exigé pour tous. Il n' y a plus de distinction que dans l'art de piquer les têtes, de faire la *coupe* ou les *coulants*, de remonter sans faiblir les eaux du fleuve. Les grands dignitaires de l'école de natation sont ceux qui risquent les *têtes à la hussarde* du haut du tremplin, ou qui se jettent crânement du sommet du perchoir dans le bassin; ...".

19. See, for example, the descriptions cited by Michel Jansel, *Paris Incroyable*, Paris, 1986, pp. 98–99 of the "perfect equality" reigning in all the female bathing establishments of the mid-19th century; nevertheless, the "vraies jeunes filles" distinguished themselves by preferring sugar-water to the stronger refreshment selected by more morally equivocal women swimmers.

20. The Seine became choked with "établissements flottants" at the end of the 19th Century. See (exh. cat.) *Deux Siècles d'architecture sportive à Paris: Piscines, gymnases...*, Paris, Mairie du XXe arrondissement, 1984, p.34.

21. See (exh.cat.) *Deux Siècles d'architecture sportive*, pp. 29–31 and cat.no. 37, p. 34 for the history of the Château-Landon pool and of the origin of pools away from the Seine in 1884, as well as the staggering attendance figures at Château-Landon. Also see Paul Christmann, *La Natation et les bains*, Paris, Librairie Alcide Picard et Kaan, 1896, pp. 16–27. Christman, president of the Société des Gymnases Nautiques, created at Château-Landon the first covered pool provided with warm water. A staunch advocate of all-year round pools in Paris, from a point of view both hygienic and patriotic, he seems to have gotten the concession to supply warm water to the Paris *piscines* (p. 44–45).

22. See for example, Barabara White's contention that the two sides are disparate in style, which accounts for the failure of the painting to attain unity: "The forms on the left side and foreground are linear, realistic and clarified; on the right side and in the distance they are Impressionist. But the figures do not relate to one another or to their setting in a natural or comfortable fashion ... With such complex intentions, it is no wonder that, in the end, Renoir created a stilted, labored exercise that lacked stylistic unity". Barbara Ehrlich White, *Renoir: His Life, Art, and Letters*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1984, p. 174.

23. For extended analysis of Renoir's reactionary attitudes towards women see Tamar Garb, "Renoir and the Natural Woman, *"The Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1985), pp.3-15. Also see Desa Philippi, "Desiring Renoir: Fantasy and Spectacle at the Hayward" in the same issue of the *Oxford Art Journal*, pp. 16-20, as well as articles by Fred Orton and John House also published there. Of equal importance in evaluating Renoir's gender position is Kathleen Adler's review article, "Reappraising Renoir", pp. 374-380.

24. For a detailed, and radical, analysis of the place of economics in the transformation of French painting during the period from 1870 to the end of the 19th century, see Nicholas Green, "Dealing in Temperaments: Economic Transformation of the Artistic Field in France during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Art History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (March 1987), pp. 59-78.

25. For an analysis of the association of femininity and Impressionist style, see Anne Higonnet, "Writing the Gender of the Image: Art Criticism in Late Nineteenth-Century France,"*Genders*, no. 6 (Fall 1989), pp.60-73 and Tamar Garb, "'Soeurs de pinceau': The Formation of a Separate Women's Art World in Paris, 1881-1897". Ph.D. dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1991, pp.337-339.

26. The classic article constructing this topic is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "Cézanne's Doubt," first published in 1945 and then republished in the great phenomenologist's *Sens et non-sens*, Paris, 1966, pp. 15-44.

27 For the best study of the early Cézanne, and especially of the sources of the violence and sexual "perversity" characteristic of his early works, see Robert Simon, "Cézanne and the Subject of Violence," *Art in America*, vol. 79, no. 5 (May 1991), pp. 120-135; 185-186.