



The Real Real Thing: The Model in the Mirror of Art

Wendy Steiner

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Our era is defined by the model. From Victoria's Secret and *America's Next Top Model* to the snapshots we post on Facebook and Twitter, our culture is fixated on the pose, the state of existing simultaneously as artifice and the real thing.

In this bold view of contemporary culture, Wendy Steiner shows us the very meaning of the arts in the process of transformation. Her story begins at the turn of the last century, as the arts abandoned the representation of the world for a heady embrace of the abstract, the surreal, and the self-referential. Today though, this "separate sphere of the aesthetic" is indistinguishable from normal life. Media and images overwhelm us: we gingerly negotiate a real-virtual divide that we suspect no longer exists, craving contact with what J. M. Coetzee has called "the real real thing." As the World Wide Web renders the lower-case world in ever-higher definition, the reality-based genres of memoir and documentary are displacing fiction, and novels and films are depicting the contemporary condition through model-protagonists who are half-human, half-image. Steiner shows the arts searching out a new ethical potential through this figure: by stressing the independent existence of the model, they welcome in the audience in all its unpredictability, redefining aesthetic experience as a real-world interaction with the promise of empathy, reciprocity, and egalitarian connection.

A masterly performance by a penetrating, inquisitive mind, *The Real Real Thing* is that rarest of books, one whose provocations and inspirations will inspire readers to take a new—and nuanced—look at the world around them.

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