

The Century Project

now reaches out to all



NATURALLY, GOD DOESN'T approve of people who appear naked in photographs. Mind you, God also doesn't much care for people who look at naked photos or, for that matter, the people who make them. I think it's very comforting that we're all screwed—together. I also take great comfort in emphatically not believing in that particular God. Any more. I did, mind you. I did for a long time. 18 years out of 21. It was all I knew. Forgive me: I might have told you that you were going to hell.

Christianity was more than "how I was raised." It was who I was supposed to be. My complete given name is Christy Ann. If you say "Christy Ann" quickly, and slur it a little, it sounds like "Christian." That was not an accident.

My parents will never look at this photo, they are not interested, they are ashamed. And I used to be ashamed of myself. But my Self is all I've ever had. This has caused some problems.

I was "mySelf" so much that my parents put me in mental hospitals when I was 16, and later kicked me out of their home, which was their prerogative. I have been "mySelf" to the hilt, but Self is a knife, and it twists deep inside reluctant flesh. I was both "Christi-an" and I was not, caught on the hook of who I was born to be. What does it mean to be faithful? So there was a war between me and my Self; you can judge who won.

If this is a mistake, it is my own. But I know that I was created naked and free. I am coming to know another God on my own. The Holy Spirit came as a dove; human beings were meant to fly. Can you see how this body is held by the air? There is a god, and God is Love, and I am in Love, and—I hope—so are you.

It took me 18 years to discover I had wings. I can no longer wait to fly.

Christy, 21

Paul Rapoport



My mother says I have “the nerves of a Brass-Ass Monkey!”

My family says I am “the good child. The one that follows instructions and obeys the rules (most times).”

My ex-husband, boyfriends, and lovers say I am “uncompromising!”

My friends say I am “outspoken, compassionate, funny, and non-judgmental!”

My daughter says “My Mommi is crazy!”

I say “I am energetic, vibrant, and transparent!” “I am liberated from the pain of my past!”

Most important: “I am a goddess!”

Antrece, 45

HOW LIKELY IS IT FOR photographs and words of naked girls and women to illuminate, even heal? How likely is it for a man to have made those photos?

In 2000, that man, the photographer Frank Cordelle, appeared in a city near me for four days. In 2006, people were still talking about that visit. In 1999, he appeared at TNS’s Eastern Gathering. People are still talking about that too, and the article on him in *N* 13.2, well over a decade ago.

Everywhere he goes, he leaves a permanent impression. But it’s not him as much as his work: The Century Project. The reactions to it leave no doubt about its significance. How would you like to produce work that set off this comment:

I never saw anything more compelling in my entire life.

And that’s not unusual; it’s *typical!* Let’s continue:

This is the most moving art exhibit I have ever seen. I was not expecting to sit down to write with tears in my eyes...

You present a STRENGTH to women, even during/after some of their weakest times. This I will never forget.

We have a brief time in this life, and it is the rare individual who breaks out of the day to day and moves to add something beautiful, strong, and curative to life. You have done a great thing.

What’s going on here? What is The Century Project? Frank Cordelle describes it: “a chronological series of nude photographic portraits of more than 90 diverse girls and women of many ages, shapes, sizes, and conditions, plus their personal statements about their bodies and experiences.” That’s simple...and it’s not.

Cordelle has traveled all over the country to both exhibit his project and find more subjects for it. How does he do it?

Anyone who knows him knows the meaning of *tenacious*. Still, he doesn’t “convince” girls and women to pose. His work is so strong that wherever he takes it, volunteers come forward. So the project has grown in its nearly 25 years and the

feature

nearly 15 it has been exhibited (often at colleges). It is now a collection of 98 photographs and stories, by and about people from the age of 0 to nearly 100.

Tens of thousands of people have seen The Century Project exhibited and been overwhelmed by it. They have laughed, they have cried. Some have hurriedly left the exhibition space—and returned, with every friend and family member they could find.

What are these naked girls and women doing here? They are exposed—but so are we. What are they telling us? *See us and hear us, for our bodies and souls are your revelation.* They eliminate pretense, from viewers as well as themselves, by their personal physical and emotional disarmament. The nudity here does not suggest degradation or immorality but embraces sincerity and valor. It represents both vulnerability and strength.

The people in The Century Project may be funny or sad, placid or severe. Many reveal calm or exulting spirits, refus-

ing to be embarrassed about their lives, refusing to be ashamed of their bodies.

IT'S EASY TO ASSUME that Frank Cordelle is just another nerdy guy taking pictures of naked babes. Exploiting females. Making a fast buck off loose women. Standard glam shots, models preferably bleach blonde between the ages of 22 and 22.

That kind of narrow manipulation in our culture partly explains why Cordelle's work is a shock. Make that *SHOCK* as big as you can write it. With women, that often means recognition: whatever their appearance, they see themselves or someone they know refracted through The Century Project. For this is no *Playboy*, no *Pirelli* calendar, *MTV*, or *Girls Gone Wild*. The women in Century exhibit an extraordinary variety in their bodies: age, size, shape, condition, experience. That alone is a trenchant comment on so many women's exclusion from the media's superficial pandering.

On seeing The Century Project, some women contemplating breast augmentation have suddenly and explicitly rejected it. Abused women have felt able for the first time to talk about their issues. Older women have accepted their radiant selves. The Century Project has, in fact, saved lives.

And men? They may come to this work expecting salacious entertainment. Many leave stunned by the honesty they see, the struggles and triumphs of lives they might never imagine.

The result of all this: The Century Project removes decades, even centuries of accumulated grimy public misconception about bodies, which has obscured life in its unfathomably abundant diversity and depth. Viewers are immediately confronted by visual subjects that to this day are still hardly public: bodies developing, abused, renewed; disease, injury, recovery; birth, puberty, pregnancy; and so much more.

In Cordelle's own words, "the project has shown how art may bridge educational and therapeutic gaps, and perhaps most importantly, may stimulate thought and discussion about subjects that are often taboo in our culture, or sometimes too personal, too painful."

How can we *not* react to this? It is all basic to our very existence, no matter what our sex and gender. We know about it, we think about it, but where is it in public life, where are the great debates? I don't mean the ideological posturing, the political paternalism. Those show, don't they, that the tyrannical taboo ruling America is not just about sex but bodies. *Bodies*: a fundamental concern and joy; yet publicly we cannot discuss them in their magnificent totality, reveal them, or learn about and from them in the simplest ways.

Isn't *that* the real war? Not against Afghanistan or Iraq. It's the war against bodies, right here, right now, that lies behind the culture of control by fear. Naturists know this truly well. With The Century Project, it explodes—in the most serious, haunting, alarming, *gripping* ways.

Century is provocative: it provokes us to think, to realize and react. It works in a way so simple, it is almost preposterous: by

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combining photographs of women's bodies with their own thoughts about them. That's all!

Yet it has never been done. Not with such insightful and accomplished artistry, that's for sure. Nor by a photographer who has been called "an amazing healer."

Cordelle disavows that, however. He is right; he heals no one. He merely gives women some of the space and means to grow and heal themselves. *Merely!*—with results you have read above, from visitors to Century. Now add those to the following sorts of comment from women who are in The Century Project. Our Bodies, Our Selves, indeed!

This brought out a lot of emotions for me, who struggles every day to accept my body as a recovering anorexic. Posing for you was one of the greatest experiences of my life, though I didn't realize it at the time. (Katie, 16)

Your photograph of me was a life-changing image—the first time I perceived my own body as something other than the painful dysfunctional enemy. Through your lens, I saw myself as capable, fun, and sexy. The muscular dystrophy continues its inexorable process of weakening me spindle by spindle, but I refuse to let my physical limitations prevent me from pursuing my dreams. (Linda, 33)

I am now free to feel my emotions again. Today I have my body back. I am no longer separated from it. (Karen, 50)

It was interesting posing in the nude for Frank. I had never done this before. It took 68 years to get there and I smiled a lot because it was fun! See, Mother! See your beautiful daughter! (Madeleine, 68)



Katie, 16



Linda, 33

feature

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Karen, 50

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Madeleine, 68



Okay, here's the deal: when I first heard of this project, I didn't know anything about the writing. I thought Frank was simply taking pictures of unclothed females, ages 0 through 100. Right away I asked if he had a 62-year old. He didn't; so then he did.

Three weeks went by before I saw the exhibit and read the stories—so personal, so powerful. And this was on the evening right before my photo shoot the next afternoon. I can tell you truly that if I had known about the writing, I would never have done it, any of it.

But I was already committed and here I am, eczema and all,

talking—I talked the whole time. It was great; I love to talk. My life is filled with words. (Writing is different, more personal. Even though I do a lot of it, my writing is private. Putting my words out into the world gives them weight, renders me accountable, vulnerable, as if that part of me written about and exposed is now set, forever unchangeable. Words, whether thought, spoken, or written, assume power to shape our realities. Maybe written words most of all. That scares me.)

Anyway, I'm talking here about how I've come to believe that energies and memories and emotions are all held in one's hair. Think how in some settings—religious, military, prison, cult, gang—heads are shaved. Or in others, hair is grown long.

What really got to me, though, was that when I found a reference to this whole hair idea to send to Frank, I read that hair should be washed after time spent in hospitals. Wow—I'm a nurse! Could some of the pain and sorrow and grief inherent in my work be coming home in my hair and out through my skin?

I think I should wash my hair after every shift, but I don't.

Margaret, 62

feature

*On the moment
Of this picture
I stood there for me.
Now I am
Displayed for you.*

*Look
At all these women
Until you are comfortable.
Look
At them
Until you know
Who you are.
Now
I am comfortable.
I know who I am.
(Maxine, 19)*

Another shock! These women can really write; their words are as piercing as their images. You can't separate the two: both photo and statement are crucial. Overwhelming, I'd say. That is one reason why taking in The Century Project at an exhibition requires a couple of hours—and that's only for the first visit!



Maxine, 19



*Life at its fullest at 94. A little naughty always.
I love men and adore the naturist clubs that
have rejuvenated me.*

*I posed so some old lady will not fear age, and
some old men would know old women are not
so strange. I loved the challenge of posing nude,
such excitement!*

*My husband would have said, "Some picture,
kid!"*

Mary, 94

At first I was completely against doing the photos. I don't like my body. I'm not at all comfortable with it either. My breasts are very large and the first thing people notice. My back bothers me constantly. I've thought about a reduction, but being only 15, the doctors won't touch me.



I sometimes feel unnoticed, but when I get attention, I get it because of my breasts. It makes me wonder if guys even look at my face or are interested in getting to know me because of

my personality. But you know what? This is me. I'm not hiding any more. You can see me. If you don't like what you see, don't look at me. I have enough insecurities where I don't need any more from someone giving me a sarcastic comment.

I'm uncomfortable, and I'm pouring my heart out to people I don't even know. Why? Because I know other girls feel the same. I'm not alone, I want to help someone. I'm not a size 3, I probably never will be; as nice as it would be, it's not me.

The Century Project has shown me so much. I've come so far with my insecurities and I'm damn proud of myself. I am just another woman, growing up with millions of thoughts going through my head. I'm taking a look at society, seeing all the beautiful women. Seeing what's expected of women, wanting it, but hating every second of it, and trying to learn to love myself. Instead of trying to change who I am.

Kelsi, 15

feature

OVER THE YEARS, Cordelle has thought of turning his remarkable life's work into a book. He approached various publishers. Some reactions from both them and exhibitors: "no thanks;" "not for us;" "too political;" "take out the pictures of kids."

Did these people know what they were rejecting? They may yet find out: finally, after nearly 25 years, this magnificent creation has been turned into a book, *Bodies and Souls: The Century Project*. This is the climax (but not the end) of work that I believe has no parallel. Quite aside from its potential psycho-social impact, this book suggests that Frank Cordelle is a major portrait artist, as fine as (in their own very different ways) Alfred Stieglitz, Arnold Newman, and Yousuf Karsh, to name a few.

Could The Century Project revolutionize the way we regard women, thus ourselves and each other? Whatever the answer, no one encountering Century is likely to forget it. So confront it in your own way wherever you can, and be challenged—into recognition and resolve.

From well beyond exhibition spaces or the pages of this book, the people in them direct us to peace and hope, to life in its transcendent dignity. The Century Project is ultimately about the indomitable human spirit. Trust women to reveal it—and an astounding artist to present it, and unbind us all. **N**

THE AUTHOR is editor of *Going Natural / Au naturel* and on TNS's membership advisory board. He acknowledges an obvious conflict of interest: he is the publisher of the book. But he has not written about it because he has published it; rather, he has published the book because he has been involved in and written about The Century Project for many years, and wants to make this unique work widely available.

The Naturist Society invited this article. It has known Century for 13 years at least.

Bodies and Souls: The Century Project, photography by Frank Cordelle, with a foreword by Dr. Naomi Weinschenker. Published by Heureka Productions in Fall 2006; 9" x 12", 224 pages; 98 illustra-

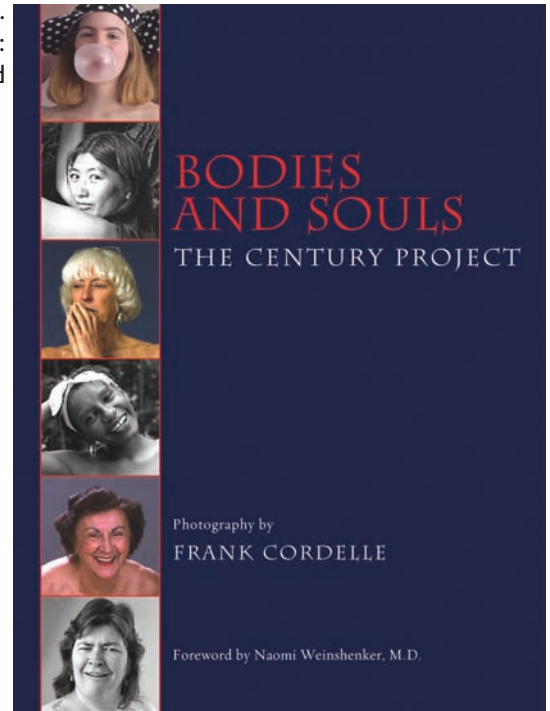
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The Century Project's Web site,
including exhibition schedule:
www.thecenturyproject.com.

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