

## Why 'Akt' and Why Not 'Nackt'?

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In the German language, when referring to an artistic representation of a naked human body, the noun 'Akt' is employed. This word was not always used to denote such an artistic representation. The combination of questions - (1) when, (2) where, (3) by whom, and (4) why was the noun 'Akt' first used in this particular meaning - was the starting point of my quest. This article chronicles the inception of the problem and the vain attempts to solve it. In short, it is the story of the 'null result' of 'Akt' research, so far.

Denn wer die deutsche Sprache beherrscht,  
wird einen Schimmel beschreiben und dabei  
doch das Wort 'weiß' vermeiden können.[1]

### 1 Introduction

Some months ago I visited an exhibition of photographs in Erfurt. The photographs were mainly of naked people. Needless to say, it was an aesthetically pleasing exhibition. However, on the intellectual level, it proved the resurgence of a tantalizing question. While looking at the pictures and reading the captions, I, whose mother tongue is Dutch, realized again that the German word for this kind of pictures is 'Aktphotographie'.

### 2 The Question

In general, the German word is 'Akt' when speaking of an artistic representation of a naked human body, be it a drawing, a painting, an etching, a statue, or a photograph.

The equivalent technical term in other modern European languages is 'nude' (English), [2] 'nu' (French), 'naakt' (Dutch), 'nudo' (Italian), 'desnudo' (Spanish). So, for instance, the illustration by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (Fig. 1) is titled 'reclining nude', 'nu couché', 'liggender naakt', 'nudo sdraiato', 'desnudo reclinado'. In German, however, this drawing is known as 'liegender Akt'.[3]

Around the year 1770, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, considered by many - especially Germans - the father of the discipline of art history, still used

'Nackt' to mean a 'representation of the naked man or woman' ('darstellung des nackten mannes und weibes').[4]

And in the *Oeconomische Encyclopädie* of Johann Georg Krünitz we read under the lemma 'Nackt':

Naked figure [Nackte Figur], though signifying every uncovered human figure, more particularly it stands for such a figure of the fair sex.[5]

Therefore, if 'nackt' and 'nackte Figur' still meant 'the artistic representation of a naked human body' around 1770, and if the word 'Akt' had taken over by 1900, the change from 'Nackt' to 'Akt' must have taken place sometime - roughly speaking - in the nineteenth century.

As the German term 'Akt' is different from the terms in the other modern European languages, it begs for an explanation; of its origin, of its exception, of its irregularity.

Surprisingly few people have felt the urge to explain the discrepancy between, on the one hand, 'Akt' and, on the other hand, 'nude', 'nu', 'naakt', 'nudo', 'desnudo'.

I find this surprising, as the word 'Akt' seems to derive from the Latin 'actus' and 'agere' meaning 'movement' and 'to move'. However, the naked humans depicted in a typical 'Akt' mostly do not move or act but rather do the opposite: they stand, sit or recline in a leisurely or even in a lascivious fashion.

Consequently, the question must be: Why is it 'Akt' and why not 'Nackt' when in German one means the artistic representation of a naked human body?



Figure 1: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Reclining Nude (Isabella) / Liegender Akt* (charcoal, 1906)



Figure 2: Rembrandt, *The Bed / Ledikant* (etching, 1646)

### 3 Attempts at Answering the Question

#### 3.1

I first turned to the most authoritative of general dictionaries, the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, and then to three specialized etymological dictionaries. The *Deutsches Wörterbuch* [6] gives as the fifth meaning of the noun 'Akt':

*5 the naked human body (in certain posture). a as a work of art respectively as a model for this.*[7]

It presents as the first recorded instance of the word 'Akt' in this particular meaning a quote from a letter from Conrad Gessner to his father Salomon Gessner in the year 1787:

Furthermore a few painted nudes [Ackten] stood out, in which the colour and the individual parts are very beautiful, but then are so exaggerated that even in the easy postures every vein is swollen like a rope.[8]

This contains valuable information. At least now we know that the noun 'Akt', spelled as 'Ackt' and meaning 'the artistic representation of a naked human body', was used as early as 1787. On the other hand, it seems implausible that the introduction of the noun 'Akt' into the German language and into the technical jargon of the fine arts was occasioned by the apparently casual mentioning of it in a letter by the son of a minor Swiss poet and artist. In other words, the term 'Akt' must have been used before 1787 and by one or more influential writers.

The *Duden* gives:

Since the eighteenth century 'Akt' has been attested as a technical term in the visual arts. There it signifies the posture of the naked model and the accordingly designed artistic representation of the naked human body.[9]

The *Kluge* gives:

Akt [...] as a term in painting of the eighteenth century 'Posture of the human body (by a model)', after that generally 'representation of a naked (female) body'.[10]

And Pfeifer gives:

In the second part of the eighteenth century *Akt* becomes a technical term in the visual arts and denotes [a] the posture of the naked living model, [b] the study drawing that is made after this model (*Aktstudie*, second half of the nineteenth century) and [c] the artistic representation of the naked human body.[11]

The *Duden*, the *Kluge* and Pfeifer are in almost literal agreement. However, the dictionaries do not clarify the matter by pointing out the origin of the noun 'Akt'. Instead they whet our appetite for a real explanation.

Continuing my search within the field of linguistics, I found two academic articles that deal directly with the problem. Witold Mańczak offers a purely linguistic solution: 'Akt' could have come into use (1) through 'Nackt', as a calque or loan translation of 'le nu' (French) [12] or 'l'ignudo' (Italian) [13], and then (2) by a process of apocope the word 'Nackt' and its article lost its pronounced 'N' and its written 'c': 'ein Nackt' ['ain 'nakt] became 'ein Akt' ['ain 'akt].[14] Alfred Bammesberger, another linguist, though mostly in agreement with Mańczak, offers a further hypothesis: the change from 'Nackt' to 'Akt' was made in German because of prudishness.[15] This hypothesis has two problems: (a) it assumes that the German public, the German artists, and/or the German academics were more prudish than their English, French, Dutch counterparts. This assumption is hardly convincing. And (b) how to explain the further expansion – an example of linguistic pejoration [16] – of the meaning of 'Akt' into coitus, short for 'Geschlechtsakt'?[17] Following this meaning of the word the only true 'Akt' would be the depiction of the 'act of congress' as, for example, in Rembrandt's *The Bed* (Fig. 2).[18] If the Germans indeed were or are so prudish that they collectively changed 'Nackt' into 'Akt', should they not meanwhile have changed the term for 'the artistic depiction of a naked human body' back into 'Nackt' or rather have changed it further into a new innocuous term as an example of euphemism treadmill?[19]

#### 3.2

Unsatisfied with the answers provided by linguistics I turned to the other relevant academic field: the history of art itself. In the vast literature on the history of art in general and on 'nudes' in particular I found four texts that looked promising, at least initially.

Kurt Karl Eberlein took care of the lemma 'Akt' in the *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte*. He gives:

By nude [Akt] is understood in the visual arts the gesture, the posture, the movement that is studied using a naked body. A nude [Akt] is, therefore, according to the original meaning of the word, always more or less a study. Only recently the meaning has been obfuscated and expanded to include all representations of a naked human body.[20]

Unfortunately, Eberlein did not elaborate on the origin of the word 'Akt'. However, he did mention the compound 'Aktstellung' and its Italian equivalent 'l'atto'. [21] This suggests that the German 'Akt' may be a loan translation of the Italian 'atto'. Regrettably, I could not find any proof of this in a concise exploratory search.

The first monograph that I found was *'Akt' bei Dürer*, the 'Habilitationsschrift' (München, 1993) and later monograph (2001) by Professor Anne-Marie Bonnet of the university of Bonn. Bonnet quotes both the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* and Pfeifer and appears to be satisfied with their clarification when discussing the 'History of the understanding and the use of the term 'Akt' in art and the history of art' ('Verständnis- und Gebrauchsgeschichte des Begriffs 'Akt' in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte'). Her conclusion being that 'the obfuscation of the concept and its expansion of meaning to include all representations of a naked human body', already noticed by Eberlein, calls for 'appropriate working terms and an adequate description hermeneutics.' [22] Yes, probably, but it leaves us in need of a satisfactory answer to our question.

Doris Hansmann writes in her *Akt und nackt* an entire chapter titled "'Nude is different from naked'" On the terminological handling of the naked body in art' ('Akt ist anders als nackt' Zum terminologischen Umgang mit dem unbedeckten Körper in der Kunst). Sadly, Hansmann does not go into detail about the origin of the term 'Akt'. Rather she apologizes:

On the exact time in which the term was adopted in the fine arts there is disagreement [...] To try to answer this question is, however, for the main argument of this work inessential.[23]

Well, indeed it is, but what a pity for us in our search for the answer to this question.

Oliver König wrote his doctoral dissertation on nudity ('Nacktheit'). In this work, König devotes a complete section on the encyclopedia and dictionary entries of 'Nackt' and 'Nacktheit' since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Unfortunately, König does not ask when, where, by whom and why 'Nackt' was replaced by 'Akt'. He skims over the question of the origin of the concept of 'Akt' in the fine arts. His closest encounter is this:

The keywords 'naked, nakedness' [Nackt, Nacktheit, Nacktes] vanish completely, instead there appear succinct remarks on the keywords 'nude' [Akt] and 'nudity' [Nudität] (for example in the editions of Meyers Lexikon of 1877 and 1897 and the Brockhaus of 1908).[24]

Though it does clarify that 'Akt' appeared relatively late in the encyclopedias and dictionaries, it disappointingly helps us little in answering the question when exactly and by whom the word 'Akt' entered academic discourse while supplanting the word 'Nackt'.

#### 3.3

So, finally – desperate circumstances calling for desperate acts – I consulted a number (N=10, 5 ♀, 5 ♂) of German professors of the history of art. I asked them by e-mail how, when and by whom 'Akt' came to replace or stand for 'Nackt'. Of the 5 (=50%) academic specialists who replied, not one was able to answer my questions.[25] One respondent, however, expressed wonder over the surprisingly mysterious origin and nature of the term: 'It is here like with many other terms: it is used commonly and familiarly without a single thought of its history.' [26]

### 4 Conjecture

As the general and specialized dictionaries, the learned articles and monographs, and, lastly, the expert professors could not provide a satisfactory answer to the question, I offer here my own broad supposition.

Taking everything together, I hypothesize that a German-speaking academic (theoretician or historian of art?) deliberately introduced the change of 'Nackt' into 'Akt', which was then adopted by the wider academic and artistic world. I further presume that this must have taken place sometime between roughly 1770 and 1900. The three key elements of my conjecture thus are: German-speaking, deliberately, and late eighteenth to beginning of twentieth century. As to the motives of the intentional change from 'Nackt' into 'Akt', even I dare not speculate.

Finding an original text document that shows the deliberate substitution of 'Nackt' with 'Akt' would constitute sufficient proof for this conjecture. On the other hand, it would be difficult to refute this my conjecture. Nevertheless, if anyone comes up with a better guess, a more plausible hypothesis and with proof for it, I will, of course, gladly accept it. Until that happy event this tantalizing problem – which looks like valid *Dissertation* or even *Habilitation* material – remains very much unsolved.

## 5 Acknowledgement

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[1] Kurt Tucholsky, "Vormärz. 1.", (*Die Schaubühne*, 2. April 1914, p. 381) in *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2: Texte 1914-1918, (Herausg. Bernhard Tempel), Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 2003, p. 106.

[2] Interesting in itself, and maybe a parallel to the story of 'Akt', is the distinction between 'naked' and 'nude' in English. The noun 'Naked' was used as 'artistic representation of a naked human body' until well into the eighteenth century, for example by Alexander Pope and William Hogarth (OED, Second Edition, vol. X, p. 199). The first recorded use of the scholarly loan translation 'nude' dates from 1708: 'A Nude or Nudity, is a naked Figure painted or sculpted without Drapery (or Clothing.)' (Edward Hatton, *New View of London*, Vol. II, p. 824/2. According to the OED, Second Edition, vol. X, p. 582). Kenneth Clark wrote the eponymous book (*The Nude*, 1956) in which he gave the meaning of 'nude' an idiosyncratic twist, sanctifying the, of course, arbitrary distinction between 'naked' and 'nude'.

[3] To be quite complete; in a number of other languages – Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Czech, Slovakian, Slovenian, Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Swedish, Hungarian – the scholarly term for the artistic depiction of a naked human body is also 'akt'. This can be explained by the predominance of German scholarship and the influence of its academics in the nineteenth century in these countries. A comparable example, somewhat later, of the influence of German technical vocabulary, is the psychological term 'Gestalt' that was borrowed in many languages, including English. Some other famous / notorious German words that have found their way into English and other languages are 'Angst', 'Doppelgänger', 'Gesamtkunstwerk', 'Kindergarten', 'Kitsch', 'Leitmotiv', 'Zeitgeist', 'Zugzwang'.

[4] Johann Joachim Winckelmann, quoted in *Deutsches Wörterbuch* [vol. 7, 1889, p. 246: Nackt, adj. II. 1) d) Winkelmann 3, 217].

[5] Johann Georg Krünitz, *Oeconomische Encyclopädie*. Band 100, Berlin: J. Pauli, 1805, p. 441 'Nackt':  
Nackte Figur, bedeutet überhaupt zwar jede von Kleidungen entblößte menschliche Figur; in engerer Bedeutung versteht man darunter aber eine solche Figur vom schönen Geschlechte.

[6] Trickily, there are two 'editions' of the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* or *The Grimm*, after the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm who originally started it in 1838. The first edition was published in 32 volumes between 1854 and 1961 (or from the first published installment of 1852 till the reference supplement in 1971). The revised edition ('Neubearbeitung') was planned and published later, partly overlapping the publication of the first edition. Volume 1 of the first edition, published in 1854, does not contain the lemma 'Akt'. It does however have the lemma 'Nackt' in volume 7 published in 1889. Volume 2 (1986) of the revised edition does contain the lemma 'Akt'.

[7] Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Neubearbeitung, 2. Band (Affront – Ansitzen), Stuttgart/Leipzig: S. Hirzel Verlag, 1998, column 139 'Akt':

5 der nackte menschl. körper (in bestimmter stellung). a als kunstwerk bzw. als Modell dafür

[8] Salomon Gessner, *Salomon Gessners Briefwechsel mit seinem Sohne. Während dem Aufenthalte des Letztern in Dresden und Rom, In den Jahren 1784-85 und 1787-88*. Bern und Zürich: Heinrich Gessner, 1801, p. 258:

Dann zeichneten sich noch besonders einige gemahlte Ackten aus, an denen die Farbe und einzelne Parthien sehr schön sind; aber dann wieder so übertrieben, daß auch in den ruhigen Stellungen jede Ader, wie ein Strick, schwillt.

[9] *Duden – Herkunftswörterbuch* (4. Auflage) Mannheim: Dudenverlag, 2007, p.26: Akt: [...] Seit dem 18. Jh. ist 'Akt' auch als Fachwort der bildende Kunst bezugt. Es bezeichnet dort die Stellung des nackten Modells und

die danach entworfene künstlerische Darstellung des nackten menschlichen Körpers [...].

[10] Elmar Seebold, *Kluge: Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011, p. 25:

Akt: [...] als Terminus der Malerei des 18. Jh. 'Stellung des menschlichen Körpers (durch ein Modell)', dann allgemein 'Bild eines nackten (weiblichen) Körpers'.

[11] Wolfgang Pfeifer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003, pp. 22-23:

Akt m. [...] In der 2. Hälfte des 18. Jhs. wird Akt ein Fachwort der bildenden Kunst und bezeichnet die Stellung des nackten lebenden Modells, die danach zu Studienzwecken gefertigte Zeichnung (*Aktstudie*, 2. Hälfte 19. Jh.) und die künstlerische Darstellung des nackten menschlichen Körpers.

[12] *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. Vol.11 (N – Pari), Neufchâtel: Samuel Faulche, 1765, p. 275:

nu, le, (Peint. & Sculpt.) le nu, ou le nu d'une figure, désigne les endroits du corps qui ne font pas couverts.

[13] Leon Batista Alberti, *Della pittura*. Milano: Società tipografica de' Classici italiani, 1804 [1436], pp. 55-56:

[...] così nel dipingere uno ignudo, bisogna prima disporre e collocare a' luoghi loro le ossa ed i muscoli, [...].

[14] W. Mańczak, Der Ursprung von dt. Akt 'nu'. *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 219, 1982, p. 373.

[15] Alfred Bammesberger, Zur Polysemie von dt. Akt. *Sprachwissenschaft* 30 (1-4), 2005, pp. 77-81.

[16] W. V. Quine, *Quiddities – An Intermittently Philosophical Dictionary*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1987, pp. 53-54.

[17] Carl van Bolen, *Sexual Lexikon – Handbuch des Sexualwissens*. Wiesbaden: Reichelt Verlag, o.J. [c. 1960], p. 13:

Akt; [...] 2. abkürzende Bezeichnung für d. Geschlechtsakt.

[18] Then another problem arises: the theoretical distinction between art and pornography. This partly coincides with the distinction between 'Akt' and 'Nackt'. The subjective nature of such a distinction becomes clear when reading: 'The criterion to distinguish between a real and a fake picture, between a nude and a naked, lies in two concepts: aesthetics and sensuality' ('Das Kriterium zur Unterscheidung des echten vom unechten Bild, des Aktbildes vom Nacktbildes, liegt in zwei Begriffen: Ästhetik und Sinnlichkeit.') (Foto-Magazin 8, 1968, p. 38; quoted in Duden - Das große Wörterbuch. Band 6, 1999, p. 2693 'Nacktbild'). It parallels the equally hazardous attempt to distinguish between art and kitsch.

[19] Steven Pinker, 'The Game of the Name', *The New York Times*, 5 April 1994.

[20] Kurt Karl Eberlein, *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte*. (ed. O. Schmitt), Band 1 (A – Baubetrieb), Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1937, column 282:

Unter Akt versteht man in der bildenden Kunst die am nackten Körper studierte Gebärde, Stellung, Bewegung. Ein Akt ist also der ursprünglichen Bedeutung des Wortes nach stets mehr oder weniger eine Studie. Erst in neuerer Zeit ist die Bezeichnung verunklärt und ohne weiteres auf jede Nacktdarstellung ausgedehnt worden.

[21] *Ibid.*, column 284.

[22] Anne-Marie Bonnet, 'Akt' bei Dürer. (Bonner Beiträge zur Renaissanceforschung; Bd. 4), Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2001, p. 26-27:

Es ist gerade die im Reallexikon der deutsche Kunstgeschichte festgehaltene 'Verunklärung' des Begriffs durch seine Ausdehnung 'auf jede Nacktdarstellung', die für die Klärung dieser unterschiedlichen Sachverhalte hinderlich ist; deshalb werden hier geeignete Arbeitsbegriffe und eine adäquate Beschreibungshermeneutik entwickelt.

[23] Doris Hansmann, *Akt und nackt - Der ästhetische Aufbruch um 1900 mit Blick auf die Selbstakte von Paula Modersohn-Becker*. Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaft, 2000, p. 20 (footnote 29):

Über den Zeitpunkt, zu dem der Begriff in die bildenden Künste übernommen wurde, besteht Uneinigkeit [...] Der Beantwortung dieser Frage nachzugehen, ist jedoch für den argumentativen Kontext der vorliegenden Arbeit unerheblich.

[24] Oliver König, *Nacktheit: soziale Normierung und Moral*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990, p. 69:

Das Stichwort 'Nackt, Nacktheit, Nacktes' verschwindet ganz, statt dessen gibt es knappe Ausführungen zum Stichwort 'Akt' und 'Nudität' (z.B. bei den Ausgaben von Meyer's Lexikon von 1877 und 1897 sowie dem Brockhaus von 1908).

[25] Surprisingly, all 5 male professors replied and none of the 5 female professors did. Statistically highly significant, but what, if anything, does it mean?

[26] Professor Thomas Noll (University Göttingen), e-mail 11 Jan. 2012: Es verhält sich hier wie mit manchem Begriff: Er wird als üblich und geläufig benutzt, ohne dass man über dessen Geschichte sich Gedanken macht.