Naked bodies in Western performance and installation art are frequently taken for granted by artists, or treated as a primarily aesthetic feature, whilst the broader cultural significations of unclothed bodies are often ignored in the conceptualization of work. Such treatment of naked bodies as isolated from popular cultural – often sexualized – readings of nakedness may to an extent have been effective in the past due to the framing of the work as ‘high art’. However, this approach has become problematic in recent times: the boundaries between popular culture and ‘high-art’ audiences have become increasingly blurred. This process has arguably been accelerated by the broad accessibility and intermingling of contents from different contexts on web platforms; work previously designated to the ‘high-art’ frame of the gallery is now accessed equally by a range of audiences with different – at times voyeuristic – interests and reading practices. I suggest that this shift should be taken into account in the conceptualization of performance artwork.

In this chapter, I will propose a conceptual approach to nakedness in performance art that engages with the different ways bodies may be read by audiences, drawing from research in psychology on the framed perception of naked bodies, and perspectives from performance and cultural studies on the collapse of the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, and perceptual frameworks of nakedness, respectively. In the first part of the chapter, I will examine nakedness in installation and performance work by Spencer Tunick, Marina Abramović and in one of my own works. These analyses will form the basis for three propositions on the conceptualization of naked bodies in performance art. In the second part, I will discuss the practical implementation of this approach in my performance installation ELECTRODE (2011).
Naked bodies and the art frame

In the summer of 2007, American photographer Spencer Tunick made an installation in the centre of Amsterdam that encompassed 2000 naked people. Tunick’s photographic work concerns different spatial arrangements of large groups of unclothed people in public spaces. In Amsterdam, he positioned naked volunteers on canal bridges and in the Europarking garage, an architectural landmark designed by architects Zanstra, Gmelig Meyling & De Clercq Zubli in the late 1960s. In the photos, the naked bodies are arranged as an articulation or extension of the architectural structures of the environment they are presented in. Commenting on the motivations behind this practice, Tunick emphasizes that he is interested in using naked bodies ‘in an almost abstract form’ and that his work ‘has nothing to do with sex or eroticism’ (Tunick in Dutch Amsterdam 2007). This approach to naked bodies as material to realize aesthetic objectives, regardless of their potential cultural signification, is also apparent in his statement that he uses his website to ‘collect [...] men and women with different skin colors’, whom he is planning to use in the creation of ‘a more painting-like photo [...] For example by drawing a line of black bodies through a group of only white bodies’ (2007).

In his approach and rhetoric, Tunick seems to make an effort to place his work into what psychologist Beth Eck (2001) describes as the ‘art frame’ in her study of people’s perception of representations of naked bodies. Drawing from outcomes of focus group experiments in which participants were asked to describe images of naked people, Eck suggests that the interpretation of representations of naked bodies is to a considerable extent dependent on the context they are situated in. She initially identifies three contextual frames: art, information and pornography. If a representation of a naked body is perceived as (part of) an artwork, it is more likely to be experienced as an aesthetic phenomenon, rather than a sexual (pornographic) spectacle. Likewise, the informational frame of medical drawings prevents depictions of naked bodies in this context from being experienced as sexually explicit and ‘indecent’.

Eck’s findings correspond with art theorist Kenneth Clark’s (1956) suggestion that the presentation of naked bodies in a high-art context renders these bodies into ‘nudes’. His writing suggests that ‘nude’ is to be understood as equivalent to a certain form of clothing, which one might choose to wear. Thus, ‘being nude’ is different from ‘being naked’; only when naked, a person is truly exposed and in a state where sexual activity would be conceivable. Considering this, do Tunick’s