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About Venus & My Social Generation

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First of all I've to thank Odette Straten, Marjolein Nagengast and all the team of the Museum Het Valkhof for support and believing in my Venus projects.

I have an introduction: especially in my poems I use language borrowed from mathematich, physich, chemistry, mythology, medicine and I usually address my work to a very small target (almost non-existent target!). I admit that my works are usually very cryptic and hermetic: almost unreadable! In the last two years something happened and I felt the need to produce projects more understandable for everyone so I developed some photographic and digital works (PopBottles, Venus, My Generation Social). During my lecture I will try to answer to all the questions about Venus that press and people have asked me in the last 3 month.

I started to work on "Venus" a couples of years ago. I uploaded the project on my site in march-April 2011 and the press has rediscovered this work thanks to the success of POPbottles series.

The idea comes while I was retouching photographs for a friend's book and I was thinking on our society and the perennial debate about being and appearance, about the "virtual body" in the social networks and the urgency of being. The urgency to be accepted, to be (the) present, transforming the appearance into being. In other words all the dynamics behind the human evolution, the natural consequence of what was in the past. I selected paintings depicting Venus because she is known to be the goddess of beauty. Since one of the topics touched by "Venus" is the change of the aesthetic canon, it seemed appropriate to me to choose precisely the icon of beauty for excellence. As I said I write poems, very hermetic and cryptic, so my first thought was that Venus was a project rather trivial, but as I showed it to some friends I realized that it opens many possibilities of debate so I developed the whole project.

I've been attacked because I've altered original classical pantings: I think that the concept of "untouchable genius" it's crashed when Duchamp, decades ago, has grown a mustache at a beauty universally known. In order to show how little is known the art's history, in march I shut off my website for a month, proposing, instead of my work, only Duchamp's Mona Lisa.

Use an icy photo editing software to crumble icons and myths, those images apparently invulnerable to the collective unconscious, is amazing and tragic at the same time .. depends on the

point of view.

I'll tell you an anecdote: few days after the Venus upload on my website, I crashed into a breaking new online journal article about another artist, Nazareno Crea, who have had an idea very similar to Venus and with whom I then had a pleasant exchange of mail on the subject. Recently I have discovered another project very close to "Venus" and conceived by Joshua Marr. I was pleasantly surprised and this coincidence made me realize - once again - how easy it is to grasp the Zeitgeist (spirit of the times)!

I've been recently contacted by V. Swami from the Department of Psychology of the University of Westminster for a future collaboration in which the Venus project will be involved. Her research on the psychology of aesthetics focuses on two main topics. The first examines the impact of stimulus-related factors on appreciation of works of art. Her research in this area has examined the impact of symmetry and asymmetry on the aesthetic appreciation of Dayak masks from Borneo and Piet Mondrian's neo-plastic paintings. Related work has examined the impact of titular information on the appreciation of surrealist art and the impact of modifying the perceived body size of women in paintings and sculptures on aesthetic appreciation. The second area of research focuses on the impact of observer-related traits on their aesthetic appreciation. The main body of this work focuses on observer personality - operationalised using the Big Five personality dimensions - show this influences preferences for different art forms and for artistic activities in general. Much of her research in this area is focused on how personality influences appreciation of surrealist art forms (literature, film, paintings).

Venus is a way to stimulate debate on current issues. One of the main purposes is to highlight the change of aesthetic canon through the centuries .

What I did is not exactly a critique - as many people have said around the world - and I don't have any declared moral purposes, I just used tools and dynamics that exist: to criticize or decide if our society is right or wrong is not my prerogative and I will not even judge the contemporary concept of "body". I have some ideas about it and I'm working on some projects on this theme but I prefer not to express my point of view.

The press and public have spoken of anorexia, photoshop, must-be-perfect so I have had necessarily spoken, in many interviews, also about these topics but when I conceived "Venus" I had not even imagined to touch certain topics: I'm interested in the change and mutation of the perception of ourselves. The "right/wrong debate" about the use of photoshop, the perfect phisical form and women's body is born spontaneously from the audience not by me.

So, the message is not intended to anyone specifically because there isn't a precise message: this

project can be interpreted in different ways.

Many people have often asked me if I consider more beautiful the original Venuses or the ones retouched by me. I think that all epochs have their own parameter to judge the world: for those who lived in those days the women portrayed by the artist I have choosen were handsome and perfect and perhaps the people of that time might consider our beauty-standard too skinny. I believe that in all things is necessary to consider the context in which the observer is located. We are engaged in a specific social context and it is normal to be influenced by the spirit of the time.

"Must be perfect" is an "empty" concept, there isn't one and only one ideal of perfection because the parameter to judge the world is constantly changing. "Perfection" is a concept that becomes "full" only within a specific context with rules and customs well defined, I think that the excesses in any direction are always psychologically and physically destructive.

The media's role is crucial to consolidate any type of standards, not only that of beauty, because the messages conveyed by them reach the general public.

Often people need to escape from reality (and everyday problems), they can do this through film, music, art .. may happen that the most vulnerable end up identifying with their idols to the point of trying to emulate the gestures and habits.

Imitation, after all, is the basis of being human: we are accustomed from childhood to repeat gestures and words to learn the language and the rules of our society. If a certain type of product or standard (both behavioral and beauty) is constantly proposed is probable that in the long run, you will end up with buy / emulate it. Some lifestyles are promoted as commercial products, in a certain way you can talk about "consumerism" for the beauty and customs.

About this topics I can want to quote what Marvin Minsky says in "Society of Mind":

4.8[1]

> "As individuals, we'd never be able to trust ourselves to carry out our personal plans. In a social group, no one person would be able to trust the others. A working society must evolve mechanisms that stabilize ideals - and many of the social principles that each of us regards as personal are really "long-term memories" in which our culture store what hey have learned across the centuries."

30.4[2]

> that is unimaginably large in size, but has no shape at all.
> When you get right down to it, you can never really describe any *worldly* thing, either—that is, in any absolute sense. Whatever you purport to say about a thing, you're only expressing your own beliefs. Yet even that gloomy thought suggests an insight. Even if our models of the world cannot yield good answers about the world as a whole, and even though their other answers are frequently wrong, they can tell us something about ourselves. We can regard what we learn about our models of the world as constituting *our models of our models of the world*.

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1 M. Minsky, "Society of Mind", Simon & Schuster, p. 46
2 Ibidem, p. 304

30.7[3]

I think it is implicit in "Venus" an eyes on the imposition of a stereotype of beauty but this dynamic has always existed in all ages. Regarding this theme, some lines taken from the paragraph "On the influence of beauty in determining the marriages of mankind" from chapter XIX of *The Descent of Man* by Charles Darwin:

> "[…] In one part of Africa the eyelids are coloured black; in another the nails are coloured yellow or purple. In many places the hair is dyed of various tints. In different countries the teeth are stained black, red, blue, &c., and in the Malay Archipelago it is thought shameful to have white teeth like those of a dog. [...] In the Arab countries no beauty can be perfect until the cheeks "or temples have been gashed". In South America, as Humboldt remarks, "a mother would be accused of culpable indifference towards her children, if she did not employ artificial means to shape the calf of the leg after the fashion of the country." [...] The natives of the Upper Nile knock out the four front teeth, saying that they do not wish to resemble brutes. […]
> Hardly any part of the body, which can be unnaturally modified, has escaped.[...]
> The men of each race prefer what they are accustomed to behold; they cannot endure any great change; but they like variety, and admire each characteristic point carried to a moderate extreme. Men accustomed to a nearly oval face, to straight and regular features, and to bright colours, admire, as we Europeans know, these points when strongly developed. On the other hand, men accustomed to a broad face, with high cheek-bones, a depressed nose, and a black skin, admire these points strongly developed. No doubt characters of all kinds may easily be too much developed for beauty. Hence a perfect beauty, which implies many characters modified in a particular manner, will in every race be a prodigy. As the great anatomist Bichat long ago said, if every one were cast in the same mould, there would be no such thing as beauty. If all our women were to become as beautiful as the Venus de Medici, we should for a time be charmed; but we should soon wish for variety."[4]

I believe it is not too smart to criticize our society, without realizing that if we get here is due to a spontaneous evolution of mankind. All that is seen as artificial (mutilation of plastic surgery for examples) derive from a manner of acting and thinking that has always belonged to the human race. If such behavior is seen as wrong then, instead of criticizing, take action! Realize that you can choose because you have a body and you can control it.

My research on the "virtual / physical" body is also developed in another project "My Social Generation" a photographic project on how western teens use social network and how they are changing the awareness of themselves; I have played the role of the imaginary 13 years old girl

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3   M. Minsky, "Society of Mind", Simon & Schuster, p. 307
4   C. Darwin, "The Descent of man", D. Appleton and Company, Vol II, Chapter XIX, p 322-338

Amy Little Princess and I've produced some colorful "social-teen" selfportraits.

Like my other projects it is not my intent to transmit a single specific message, the connotation given to the project is neutral: I just report the facts, trying to cancel, as far as possible, my point of view. Who needs to show himself in an extreme and obsessive way often hides a great vulnerability, they need constant appreciations and confirmations to avoid dealing with their fears. Undoubtedly, teens have a floating personality and the unreachable models proposed by the mass media can throw them into a hell of fears and anxieties also due to the lack of emotional education by parents.

Teens go through a delicate phase in which their body grows and changes and in the society in which we live the risk of degenerating is high: I think that in the social networks there is a silent mutation in action in fact what you are worth (not only for the teens) is measured according to the "i like" you receive.

I say just one last thing: I don't consider "appearance" in a negative way.

We were born and, therefore, we can't escape from showing us because we own a body that is impossible to hide. Despite this, and despite my job as photomodel, I believe that the images are "death things". They are fragments of a dead past that we drag around, perhaps because of the fear of being free. I always quote Roland Barthes when I express these concepts as he defines the photographers some kind of "agents of death".[5]

Living without memories, without habits, without ties... living without the certainty of being able to put together all the mental and physical processes that develop the thought... to live without the certainty to recognize themselves, to have self-awareness… who could do that?

And then I wonder: what kind of past and which memories are we staring on the internet - a virtual world suspended between existence and non-existence, made of the same substance of thoughts - sharing pictures, video, personal information on social networks ?

And what role are taking our physical memory?

Between 10 years, looking back and finding so much information "ready to use", what reaction will we have? I think that, in this context, the most important and difficult thing is to get full awareness of ourselves and understand the importance of having the opportunity to live.

This is much more important than any externally proposed /imposed standard.

I close this lecture with two questions:

What will be the perception of themselves, and then of the other, between two centuries?

The second questions is: Why do you think what you think ?

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5 R. Barthes, Camera Lucida, Hill & Wang