

Venus: in the threshold of the screen

On Janina Rajakanga's *Venus*
by María Villa



Venus, the Roman goddess, in her “pearl perfection”, as the Uffizi proudly present this icon of western art painted by Sandro Botticelli around 1480 in Italy, is emerging from the ocean in a clam shell.

She’s just been born out of the foam —thanks to the severed genitals of Uranus thrown into the sea’s womb— and yet, Venus is already coming of age.

An adult but a virgin, wringing the sea water from her hair, modestly covering herself. She is the fairness of her flesh, an epitome of innocence, and frailty, ripe for the visual pleasure of the beholder. But her story seems to stop there. Being born is enough; no aging, learning, acting in the world is envisioned. Being that perfect, naive body, and being displayed and loved is already an accomplishment.

1480.

In Latin, *venus* designates love, desire, charm, adoration (as in *venerable*); but the root of the word (*wenos*) is also present in *venom*, as in love-drink, magic philter; and we hear its echo in *venereal* disease. Her Greek counterpart, Aphrodite (*aphrós* (ἀφρός), literally “sea-foam”), would endlessly renew her virginity, her purity, in the same sea water. According to her many devotees through European history, she was said to protect fertility, but she was as well, of course, the patron

goddess of prostitutes. In early Rome, old sources say, girls coming-of-age would offer their toys to Venus as a rite of passage, or as a token for prenuptial good auspice. Boy's rites into manhood, in contrast, entailed becoming citizens and starting military training.
1480.

And what does that have to do with us, with youth, love, and desire in 2022?

Nothing, and everything.

Janina Rajakanga's surreal rendition of the myth of the *Birth of Venus* presented this November in Baltic Circle (Helsinki) and XS Festival (Turku), rewrites the story of the Roman goddess in an unsettling, warm, and fierce light. Her piece, emerging from an artistic collaboration with a group of teenagers (Natalia Foster, Mea Holappa, Seela Merenluoma, and Volta Rajakangas-Moussaoui) developed over seven months, restages Venus in a dramaturgy that is as polyphonic aesthetically as it is touching, irreverent, and courageous.

A small wooden house by the beach in Lautasaari, Villa Salin, owned by Naisiasialiitto Unioni, a Finnish feminist association founded in 1892. Inside, crowded in the *eteinen*, the thirty-people audience removes their coats and shoes to enter a dimly lit living room, walls covered top to bottom with baroque paintings, mirrors, drapers. A bare Persian carpet lays at the center. Those of us sensitive to loud noises are wisely advised to take some earplugs. We sit on the assorted Luis XVI furniture lined up on the edges like we have come to visit our grandma for some glögi,... Loud noises? Before we are all settled, four barefooted girls in disparate happy colorful clothes come kneel at the center, light a few candles, and start quietly and slowly reciting, looking into each other's eyes: *Gentle, slowly, careful, ...* the tone and demeanor envelops us slowly, almost a whisper, a sweet and intimate plea, even flirtatious. And yet, repeated over and over, it gradually feels different, stronger.... they take us in vertiginous progression into discomfort, fear, frustration, outrage: *Gentle, slowly, careful!*

The performance has the grammar of a spell. These four girls sweep us —adults, peers, parents, friends— into a journey through rhythm, strikingly beautiful singing, talking, banging, moving, humming, posing for the selfie, and unscripted dancing from the gut. It quickly feels like we have been infused with a touch that feels like burning



again... that place where we ache for affect or endure puzzling hormonal upheavals (something we might or might not remember made us into the sexuate adult beings we have come to be). They take us under their skin.

But they take us as well under the patriarchal gaze that seeps through their every interaction: in the city; on the treacherous public/private street of social media and its terrifying dark alleys; in posting themselves for likes; in sexting; in the stereotypes they half desire and half just tolerate, ironize, or plainly suffer. Their voices and movements make vivid how they are constantly judged or misinterpreted as they try to navigate and find a safe space within all this, how they fiercely fight back, or break into anxiety and depression, or eventually fail to cope with the pressure and explode. And how they are judged for that too: *angry, unstable, delusional, crazy, loud, erratic, problematic, slut...*

In an interview we had days after the show, Janina tells me now this work first started a few years ago, herself a puzzled mother trying to unpack the way her daughter's life, identity, and sense of self-worth were swiftly changing and being shaped through digital interactions.

When my daughter was around 11 years old I started noticing her behavior online, how she was presenting herself, and I thought it was very classical male gaze material... how she was dressing and what sort of positions she was taking, what angle she was using. I was quite shocked to realize that a girl that young already has learned somewhere how she should present herself to be accepted. And then I began thinking about making a piece about it and doing it with her to deal with this issue, start looking into it together. ... We did a couple of residencies, just the two of us. It was also the time of covid. I couldn't really work with anyone, so I worked with her. And we spent time doing and sharing material between us.

Janina had been working from 2017 with teenagers in another project (*Teens*) that investigated with adolescents several questions she has been asking in many of her recent pieces where the presence of non-professional dancers is essential. Questions about intimacy, connection, and movement: Which bodies get to dance? What does dance look like, feel like, for them? How may those movements bring in everyday life and may expand it in unpredictable ways?... How can dance take on a transformative course where a different relationship with the body, personal and those of others, is explored?

Except the conversations this time quickly touched upon a very complicated matter: the erotization of young girls, abuse, harassment, the desperate need for coordinates, for boundaries. And the loud ideas about beauty and desirability that aggressively frame

today's mainstream gendered norms through the attention economy of social media. It eventually landed as well on young girls' innocence, their desire and rage; their performed physical perfection an imperative that is shame-sculpted into their identity... and patriarchal views on seduction shaping it all. *Venus*, 1480.

In our interview, Janina stressed how physicality and touch were so central in teen's lives, not just for the need of boundaries, but also as a paradoxical craving, an important affective dimension of existence and of her own mother-daughter relationship, oscillating between needing distance and proximity:

It all came from loving someone who's in this in this age... I guess in a sort of moment of crisis, always or a moment of change, when they need to be in your arms or they need more. There are of course moments of them taking distance, but also others of needing caressing or like they need to know that they're okay, because the change is so huge in those years. ... and because everything that has to do with touch in that age, they are thinking through it. They are beings in becoming. Touch is now valued in a different way. Or you need to think through who can touch you, and where they can touch you, whereas a child is free of that.

And how does one work with all that?

The project soon expanded into a quartet, as Janina invited three other girls to join this exploration. She explained a great part of the collaborative process of the piece revolved around dialogue on the many other ramifications of teenager life and experimenting together with ways to embody, rewrite, or explore them via voice, rhythm, and movement. She took notes and worked on lyrics, the text for the piece, and proposed the songs based on these conversations. Then she would suggest the version, either physically or in text, for the group to reflect together on how it worked, what felt right and how to develop it.

Of course, I'm an artist in her forties, so I have a lot of tools that they don't, but then they have all the information and they have the sort of urgency and of course the agency of it.

As conversations structured the collaboration, she recalls how easy it was to navigate the topic, partly because they were eager to open it up, share and discuss all the ramifications of it. They needed a space to articulate these feelings and experiences, in particular their online life, of which all of them had been actively taking a conscious time off—the older they were, the more troubling they found it.

Their collaboration took place just after the pandemic had swept through our social and communal existence. It is no secret teenagers were disproportionately affected by it because precisely of how central interaction is in this delicate and tumultuous passage between childhood and adulthood. They were locked-up in there, thirsty and deprived as we all were for resonance, action, affection, and dialogue, but somehow in a many times more vulnerable position than both children and adults are to the messy manipulations of online existence. Isolated, in search for answers to who they are or wish to be as their entire existence is morphing, they may also become easy prey to toxic ideas and predatory behavior. And at the same time, the social world around them was coming to an unprecedented halt that would alter the grammar of (adult) interaction in ways that no one could foresee.

Could there be a way to rewrite or reclaim that goddess of love and desire? And what would that look like? Once diving into topic, Janina explains what became interesting was to find a way to present the issue that would be their own take on the matter, avoiding the predictable directions. It had to reshape the myth creating the potential to redefine the girl's relationship with the goddess...



I feel that I am a bit too old for the male gaze, because the perfect goddess is like in her twenties, maybe just about the beginning of thirties. And my daughter was too young, of course. We were both on either side of it. None of us could match it, but I felt we're still trying, we both are still trying to somehow fit that role. [...] So one of my interests was to remake the goddess. How can you then, in a live situation where people are there watching you, rewrite it? [...] I wanted to look into this goddess of love and try to challenge it. What else could it be beyond what is usually presented? It was then that someone called the performance a *spell*: a spell for it to be to be otherwise. We talked about witches, or making magic. And so, in order to make a change what would be the form? So then we played that there was the circle of witches who were trying to become humble and honest at the start, instead of what they were expected to do or be.

First, they started looking into images from paintings of Venus, how she had been pictured, and then went somehow into a different iconography, one often used online among teenagers where self-harming emerges –teens will cut their skin open so they bleed, or at its worst cut their wrist, and then make a video for TikTok; a video about feeling bad or hurting themselves, with *The Sound of Silence* as soundtrack. On one side, this was horrific, but on the other it highlighted how online presence was allowing teens to talk about mental health openly. The image of the depressed girl, sinking deep, surfaces also in Venus as being contained, surrounded by others.



And when suddenly it appears, the goddess, we have been following a troubling sequence where the force of these girls and their refusal of the whole game is clear... as Venus shows up all the ramifications of its objectified flesh are floating in the air. The goddess is re-staged remarkably, her icon appropriated by these bodies without forcing the analogy or making it trite, and every single detail that is put into this one image as the girls sing, grounds it further in a goddess of love that feels as familiar, approachable and real, as it is strong and challenging.

The questions behind it

As a researcher and curator, I am fascinated by the way Janina's work thinks through different forms of embodiment that are part of movement; how she explores practices of movement and living in these widely different bodies of ours on the everyday, both on the public and the private realm, and how that is then staged or brought into her choreographies. An important part of this work, in my view, are precisely how affects and troubling questions are mobilized by the dancers and their encounter with the

audience. And the way we might envision other forms of inhabiting these bodies beyond biopolitical constraints and binary norms. When asking her about this dimension of the practice and the liberating potential of it, she explains:

I find that the space we have for physical expression in the everyday in Finnish society is very limited. How are we allowed to embody our feelings or states; we are mainly allowed to sit and walk. And I find that there is such a huge potential. For example, in *Over your fucking body*, I addressed this fact that most of us are fucking, but we are talking about embodiment and dance as if we were not fucking. So there's this secret life of everyone, which is surely not a secret because we have the porn industry and we have a lot of products around sex, but still when going about into a dance show, we always go "why they do these weird things?". And then we go home and we have sex with our partner or partners, and we are being very close to what we've just seen onstage, but we don't combine this. We can't see that this is already in me.

All these things that are already in us and are the vocabulary for this emotional world ... my work is very much about making a movement practice out of that. I guess that's where it this practice of freedom takes place. That it is not only the freedom of people who for example go on narcotics, assuming that you can only be expressive if you can explain it by what this person has been taking. Instead, it is already a thing or a way of communicating that is available to anyone. And then of course, a very very important part is that it is in peace. It's a movement practice that is not violent.

In this space for diversity in embodiment, in the exercise of expanding it, Janina's works open up avenues for the fluidity of beings, allowing for bodies to support each other, connecting modes of being and feeling everyday in those bodies to the dance space. In her work there is often a search, a process of playful discovery that dives into our emotional make up, investigating how age is embodied, or masculinity, intimacy, anxiety, power, bringing a fresh and often uncanny playfulness to how we navigate gesture and social codes. Her work is a multilayered movement research in constant shifting as much a *mis-en-scène* that engages directly with the audience in subtle and at times irreverent ways.

Depending on the topic at hand, she might enter herself the space of the performance, or as in *Venus*, step out of the stage altogether and give other bodies full voice. Unlike many performances catering the inclusivity topic in the art grant system –which deal today with marginalized bodies in gestures that border on tokenism or merely play around with stereotypes– Janina's work feels both real and nuanced. This happens, among other things, because it is grounded in experiences in the flesh and stories and relationships of those same bodies that confront us, instead of aiming for performative illustrations.

I try to start with who does this issue belong to? In this case, I wanted to talk about this erotization of young girls, that was touching me as a person, bothering me, and then make a piece about it. I could never imagine professional dancers making this piece with me. I can't imagine that there would be anyone else than the actual subjects. It was very clear that they need to be teenagers themselves who perform and embody the subject because it's their issue. And then in the process of making I start to think about what needs to be or could be embodied? For example, with them, I thought about that sort of physical freedom of moving is possible. We talked about living room dances where when nobody is watching. Or at a high school party, if there's performances, what would there never be in there? So this is how we made the animals, like the dinosaur and the pig and other things that were there. A girl could never impersonate an animal in public. It would be too embarrassing or it wouldn't be accepted.

There is something raw, incredibly affective, personal, beyond language, ambivalent yet deeply empowering, that keeps pulsing in works like *Meadows* (2021) in the effort of deconstructing and queering male embodiment, or approaching the dancing bodies of elders in *Tanssikaverit* (2021), and now with this quartet of *Venus* –girls discovering a path to resist systemic objectification of their bodies and manipulation of their identities. Through the dramaturgy and the dancers that are coming together in these pieces, there is something that defies any representation tricks, taking the work to a different level altogether. It brings on a load of kinesthetic empathy that makes it quite hard to subtract yourself and look at the work as detached outsider.

Towards the end of course conversation, we touched upon the small space where the piece was presented, Villa Salin, with the group of senior feminists that welcomed the process into their home, and how Janina worked with it, in particular in relation to sound and voice.

Sound has this thing that it goes quite straight into people. Sound either if it's loud or if it's really beautifully sung. But then also, like one pivotal point for me was this screaming, because I keep hearing feminists talk about women are not allowed to use their voice or be loud like a loud girl. Even in the school world, like a loud girl is always a really bad thing. It's worse than a loud boy. [...] And then in the Finnish parliament, as we were making this piece, there was also one male minister who said that these five women that are in charge of the government at the moment had been screaming about something. This idea that women scream like men never scream...

So I wanted also to just let them scream because they scream in such a way!... I could really see that the teenagers are having a feminist fight in their daily life. It's the same old issues of women's rights. That is why I wanted to go somewhere where women have been fighting for their rights and to give them that space.[...]

It's funny. First we went there and we were a bit fearful that we were going to be too wild for the space. But then actually everyone, even these older ladies who look after the house were very touched and very happy that we were there. We even broke something from the one of the lamps and they were just like: it's okay. It's life.