

## Venus, Goddess of love

*'I strongly believe in our right to be frivolous'* (Mounira Al Solh)

Rudi Laermans

1.

At first glance, the stakes of the performance by Anyuta Wiazemsky Snauwaert – also the performer – and Kim Snauwaert seem crystal clear. On a round bed the performer reads a book and calmly mimes, one after the other, a series of poses that models have assumed on famous nude paintings by Giorgione, Velazquez, Titian, Cabanel and a few other Big Names in art history. The quoted canvasses depict Venus, the goddess of love, or a figure resembling her. The performance therefore straightaway suggests an interpretation: 'this is a simultaneously ironic and feminist deconstruction of the dominant masculine canon and its underlying "male gaze"'.

Yet there are several frictions: all too blatant 'facts' that counter this seemingly evident reading. For what about the long and somewhat improbable title, which returns in the performance on the back wall in the form of the very same sentence made up of pink neon letters: 'Female Russian Immigrant I Married for Papers and Turned into My Muse in Order to Build a Great Career, as a Woman'? Why the book, which does not appear in the imitated paintings? And what about the little white fan to the left of the bed? Moreover, the performer is not naked. She is wearing flesh-colored underwear with a short rose-red bathrobe on top: only her legs are bare.

So, something is wrong here. Upon further notice, the performance subverts the critical coherence that direct interpretation suggests.

2.

In his classical study *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, Kenneth Clark distinguishes between the naked and the nude. Whereas the naked body is unclothed, the nude is the body 'clothed' in art – read: represented according to artistic conventions that in turn translate a cultural body ideal. In 'Female Russian Immigrant...', the performer's total body is neither naked nor nude. The tincture of the worn underwear, however, produces a strange doubling. The underclothing covers the body, but its slightly fleshy color indirectly uncovers it: the veil's tincture invokes that which is veiled. In a word, the upper and the middle part of the performer's body are clothed in nudity. Something like: 'you can see a pale simulation of what you'd like to see in reality'.

Within a feminist reading, the dressed body appears as a blunt denial, not to say a castration of the male gaze: visual lust is thwarted. This male gaze exists in principle in duplicate: the male spectator reproduces the original,

genuinely productive and studious look of the male artist. However, the title of the performance leaves no doubt that the author of the work – or at least the 'I' who claims this position – is a woman. 'Female Russian Immigrant...' playfully deconstructs the male gaze, yet that very title supplements the work with a meaning corroding the implied critical female gaze.

3.

The transformation of the naked into the nude body invariably goes hand in hand with a particular kind of staging: every nude is theatrical. Whether female or male, the nude body poses and literally exhibits itself: the body reflexively offers itself to the gaze of the onlooker. This always happens within a well-thought-out setting: the female nude usually lies on a bed. No theatricality without scenography, indeed.

The act of posing disappears in the definitive posture, which is an apparent snapshot that actually demands a time-consuming amount of labor. Paradoxically, the work involves little more than idleness: through its continued immobilization, the represented body can dissolve into a painted or photographed still. Nothing, however, is more difficult than doing nothing. A living body always produces movements, however small or nearly imperceptible, not the least because it breathes.

'Female Russian Immigrant...' moves backwards in time with each pose, as it were: from the painting to being painted, from still to being still. The performance deconstructs artistic fetishism, or the forgetting of the labor which each image presumes but that may not appear within it since this would shatter whatever kind of artistic pleasure. Hence, the performance's genuine momentums are the intervals between poses. Pillows are shifted, hair and clothing are rearranged: a staging of the staging and scenographing that both condition the next pose's performativity. These transitions define the actual *mise à nu* of the passive posing as an active performance.

4.

In the tradition of the nude painting or photograph, attributes function as stand-ins for male desire. The best known are the putti, who are allowed to view and touch the female body because, like children, they know no sexual desire: their shamelessness is genderless.

In 'Female Russian Immigrant...' there are two requisites. First, there is the book, which does not appear in any of the paintings cited. This attribute refers to another, barely traceable intertext that, across the various poses, underpins the overall performance. Not that Jane Birkin's funny saying is completely unknown: 'My mother was right: When you've nothing left, all you can do is get into silk underwear and start reading Proust.' Crossing this suggestion with the cited images provides a rather prosaic explanation for the actual ingredients of the performance. No need for interpretation since by way of speaking, Birkin's phrase dresses the quoted naked bodies.

The performer is holding the book with one hand; or the book lies next to her. A tiny bit of psychoanalytic imagination suffices to decipher the book as an imaginary substitute for the masculine sex. For those who find this metaphor far-fetched: in psychoanalysis, only the exaggerations are true, thus T.W. Adorno famously contended.

The second requisite, the small fan on the left, may be less easily interpreted away. Perhaps the attribute's meaninglessness represents the banality of reality within the frame of the always meaning-laden fictional representation? The environment, by the way, permeates in still another way the performance (or, rather, in the video recording of the work). One can hear collective murmur in the background; or there is the sound of footsteps – as if the performer is lying in a bedroom along a street.

5.

The nude and the naked are by-now historically outdated categories: in our culture the glamorous and the pornographic body dominate. The performance entertains a relation of negation with both.

The glamorous body is ostentatiously extraordinary: it seems eternally youthful and happy – it glows and shines, never seems to work and is of course invariably dressed in luxurious clothes. Au contraire, the performance shows a quotidian body – the familiar 'girl next door' – that makes no attempt to upgrade or disguise its ordinariness. It is not at all encased in plushy underwear or an expensive-looking bathrobe. The performer's clothes look rather sloppy and shabby: everydayness prevails.

The pornographic body usually appears in two stages. In the first phase, the body removes pants and shirt, dress and stockings, bra and panties...: sometimes very slowly, sometimes hastily because of horniness. Subsequently it surrenders to sexual acts. Their pornographic nature is intrinsically linked to their visual magnification and that of the genitals involved. The porn body is in fact both hypersexualized and visually hyperreal: too genuine, too exact, too close.... It is more-than-nude because it dislocates the gaze with an excess of proximity and details. 'The only phantasm at stake herein is that of reality, of the real, about which no one knows where it begins or where it ends,' Jean Baudrillard concludes.

Through the way 'Female Russian Immigrant...' directly dialogues with the art historical past, the performance indirectly evokes the cultural present as well. The body remains shrouded in clothes because in a pornographic culture any theatrical staging of nudity is futile. No *mise en scène* can compete with the obscene: visibility is no match for tactility (as scrolling and tapping confirm within our digital culture). Pornography is indeed not about representation but penetration.

6.

'Female Russian Immigrant I Married for Papers and Turned into My Muse in Order to Build a Great Career, as a Woman': the title insinuates that the female performer is a recently naturalized foreigner directed by a native female artist. This suggestion once again tilts the possible feminist reading of the performance. But in which direction?

Here the artist, whether painter, photographer or director; there one or more collaborators who have the status of model or performer. Someone invents and instructs, the other executes; someone directs, the other is directed; someone is autonomous, the other heteronomous; someone disposes, the other is subordinate. For centuries, this relationship was heteronormative and patriarchal. 'Someone' was not a neutral nobody, but a man; and the complementary other was a woman. The past tense intimates a past reality. This, of course, is not true: patriarchy is everything but dead. Nevertheless, it has become somewhat more likely that the position traditionally held by a man is now occupied by a woman.

This eventual gender shift does not by definition undo the power relationship between an artist and her model or performer. Power and gender maintain varying relationships: a female creator can command her female muse as tightly as a male director. Beyond the kind of feminism morally indulging in essentialist fantasies of harmonious sisterhood lies the political recognition of sometimes crass inequalities among women. Women also exert power over other women; women also objectify other women into objects of desire. The chances logically increase with the feminization of power.

Coda

Kim Snauwaert and Anyuta Wiazemsky were married on August 3, 2018 in Ghent. The police investigated whether it was not a sham marriage to provide Wiazemsky with a residence permit. The wedding party was conceived as an artistic performance; evidently, the marriage also had real legal and other social performative effects.

What is real, what is unreal? Where does fiction end and reality starts – and vice versa? In almost all social spheres, *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* must remain strictly separated, otherwise they soon begin to dysfunction. Art, on the other hand, is the domain in which the distinction between fictionality and reality may always be questioned, deconstructed, played with...

'Female Russian Immigrant...' is a performance (so: fiction) that brings a real social relationship into play and mixes it with the mimicry of fictional images, which, in turn, harken back to once-existing relationships. Nothing but ambiguity: art is a mirror palace.