



A Venus or an obese woman?

A visit to exhibition Ice Age art. The arrival of the modern mind in the British Museum. Tuesday May 14th and Wednesday May 15th 2013.

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She gives an introduction, then she guides you along the showcases in the exhibition rooms and finally she collects her thoughts and findings.

1. Who is Venus?

A Venus or an obese woman? The exhibition opens its doors on 7th of February 2013 and immediately causes uproar on the website of the British Museum. Curator and archaeologist Dr. Jill Cook dared to describe the 'Venus van Dolni Vestonice' as *'a mature, obese woman who's had children'*.

The cynical internet reaction 'Pathologizing Venus' remarks:

"At the heart of the exhibition is this more representational sculpture, described, perhaps bluntly as a 'mature, obese woman who's had children'... In a museum as sophisticated as the British Museum, has Foucault's theories of Power/Knowledge or 'The Birth of the Clinic' made absolutely NO in-roads? Perhaps Dr. Jill Cook, the exhibition's curator really needs a wider education... Obesity is a medical term to describe a body which is overweight and likely to suffer health problems

as a result. But, as Foucault has so persuasively argued, medical terms are not value-neutral. And the word 'obese' has infected almost every type of public discourse in the past 10 years with an insidious ferocity that rivals no other. It's no longer politically correct to call someone 'fat' but you can call them 'obese' with impunity. And if 'fat' once meant rotund and jolly and perhaps suggested a lack of moderation on the part of the object, it now infers non-normative, psychologically unstable, unfit, usually economically underprivileged and sick.

Regardless of any awareness of why 'obese' has a negative, pathological connotation, it is simply an inaccurate description for this figure, since 'obese' is still chiefly – as it was in its first recorded usage of the word in 1651 (in Noah Biggs Matæotechnia Medicinæ Praxews: the vanity of the craft of physick) - a medical term.

Using the word to describe a piece of representative art from the Ice Age is profoundly inappropriate, unless the exhibit was a record of medical pathologies in pre-history – which it isn't. Additionally, it is questionable as to how truly representative (as opposed to abstracted) this piece is, as it is the breasts and hips which are exaggerated, probably to highlight the fertile nature of the female body – as child bearer and feeder.

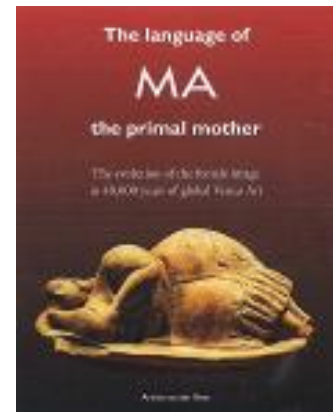
Finally, there is a perfectly useful established archeological term for these sorts of prehistoric figures. They're called 'Venus Figurines'. A term which carries much less negative value judgement with it. It has also been adopted by art historians."



A 'Venus scholar' responds. This seems to be a reaction from the medical world. The following report article aims to enlighten the Venus-issue from the approach of matriarchal study. This is a new scientific discipline where several sciences, for example archaeology, anthropology, art history and psychology with a link to the evolution of human consciousness, are studied in an integrated way. Within this new discipline there is special attention for egalitarian societies of peace: the female and feminine values are of equal value to the male and masculine values; the female is respected and valued because of her contribution to human evolution. The time is ripe for a new approach in which the contribution of woman to evolution is reclaimed.

World Women's day 2013. On the eve of World Women's day 2013, on March 7th 2013, I presented in Amsterdam my latest English book about Venus Art and Venus figurines: *The language of MA, the primal mother. The evolution of the female image in 40,000 years of global Venus Art*'. The foregoing comment 'Pathologizing Venus' and the approach of Jill Cook is mentioned.

Afterwards I exchange mail several times with Jill Cook. I ask her if she was interested in the MA book. After her yes I send her the large book. She writes a friendly thank you, she is planning to read parts of it in its next weekend... Silence... In May I am going to contact her again to tell her that I am planning to visit London in the last week of the exhibition. She responds immediately and sends her very good wishes; she does not react on the content of the MA book.



Going to the exhibition. On May 10th and 11th Academy PanSophia organises a conference "The comeback of God with breasts'. Afterwards on Monday 13th May we take the boat from Hook of Holland to Harwich and the train to London. My son who is living and working in London organized tickets for two days and so I find myself standing in line on Tuesday 14th of May in the 10.00 o'clock group which is allowed to enter for the exhibition. Every fixed hour a restricted group of people with special tickets is admitted. You can stay as long as you like.

2. The tour.

The exhibition. For hours I am fascinated, standing in front of the beautiful Venuses in their showcases; museums from Germany, France and England and –Oh great happiness!- from the Czech Republic and Russia lent Venus Art for this exhibition. Here they are united. What story do they tell? What is it that they want to express in their body language?

Next day I am there again at 9.00am. It is strictly forbidden to take pictures and that's why every important title and subscription must be noted in my notebook; this takes hours. But the reward is enormous: you see a lot more the second time.



The rooms. In my mind I walk again through the three dark rooms, only the showcases are illuminated. At once people fall silent. This quietness is caused by the cave-like darkness. It is reinforced by the mysterious sound of falling drops of water. At the end of the last room you understand where the sound comes from: an artificial cave where a film is being shown with this sound from the Chauvet cave in France. Many animals pass by, but no human figures. But... five (!) vulvas were also found there.¹

In London Venuses are normal women. It is striking that in the titles and subtitles the figurines are described as 'women' and not as 'Venuses'. The curator wants to avoid this wretched word in all cases. I will go into this further on.

The oldest known female portrait from Dolni Vestonice is called *'the oldest known portrait or Mona Lisa'*.² The 'Venus van Hohle Fels' is called *'the Schwabian Eve'*.³ A picture of her is presented in the following way. Although this Venus when found in 2009 was presented to the world by the archaeological team as 'pin-up of the Stone Age', Cook criticizes the mostly male approach which interprets female figurines erotically: *'she is an expression of reproductive sexuality, she is not erotic'*.⁴ It is not perfectly clear to me what the difference is between 'reproductive sexuality' and 'eroticism'. But in any case Venus is not a pin-up.



Venus is no sex-bomb. Jill Cook rejects this *erotic* interpretation of Venus Art, which is unfortunately still popular. For the series of pin-up drawings by Dale R. Guthrie in a Playboy from 1984, the much older representations of women scratched or painted onto rocks from 15,000-10,000 BC were used by him as models. You will find them on the lowest row.⁵

She writes in the accompanying catalogue she produced: *'For Dale Guthrie they are simply an expression of testosterone-based behaviour: the human animal signalling to mate. From this it follows that they must have been made by men for men and so constitute the erotica of the day, a common assumption since the first discoveries'*.⁶

Venus is no 'earth mother' or 'archetype'. Cook also rejects the psychological approach of Carl Gustav Jung and Erich Neumann: *'the representation of maternal figures shows the domination of the male psyche by their mothers. Making images of large lactating breasts rather than sexy young girls would, Neumann thought, express the unconscious sexual preferences of the males because of this dominance'*. Cook continues: *'Thus the twentieth century created the archetypal 'earth mother' and considered it a form of male fantasy'*.⁷ Finally the conclusion: *'Although often consciously used on the Web, Neumann's views are incapable of proof and the archaeological evidence bids us to look elsewhere to material capable of analysis'*.⁸

To which 'school' does Cook belong?

Cook chooses to state her position in the following sentences: *'In the 1960 archaeologists attempted to impose a more objective approach by producing a shape-based typology to distinguish different types of figure. This derived from the idea that the form of the torso followed strict rules of construction by conforming to a lozenge shape within a circle. This Flintstone woman...emphasises an imposed geometry as a pan-European convention that allows no artistic licence'*.⁹



I summarize: 'Slim figures are rare, there is an emphasis on pregnancy and some evidence of obesity. This physical diversity proves that there is no idealized concept or stereotyped convention that might be expected if the figures were the product of a cult. These figures are normal women and this approach finds adherents among physicians and many women who see the figures as a reflection of the real physiology'.¹⁰

Now we know which approach she chooses. She belongs to the school of the New Archaeology which developed after 1960. This school is aiming for 'objective' research. In this approach 'Venuses'

become 'normal' Stone Age women, 'Flintstone women'. In this article I will prove that this approach outdated. There is a new 21st century approach which integrates psychology and symbolism. But before going into this, I will take you to the exhibition.

Inside the first room. You are welcomed by a single beauty standing all on her own in a separated show case: the 'Venus of Lespugue' from France. She is mentioned in the title of the description at the exhibition as '*a woman who had children*'. Under this title the subtitle '*famous sculpture of a woman admired by Picasso*'.¹¹

Her description in the catalogue does not make you very happy. It says: '*imposing the skeleton of a young woman onto this image, the volumes of the sculpture can be seen to represent a heavily obese figure with setting aside artist licence, some abnormal pathology of the breasts and abdomen. The realism of flesh unsupported by muscle has led some observers to regard her as monstrous while other find the sculpture elegantly beautiful*'.¹²



The 'woman' from Dolni Vestonice. In the first room on your left, you find several linked show cases with several Venus figurines from France, Italy, the Czech Republic and the Russian Federation. In a separate show case you find the lady mentioned, the 'Venus van Dolni Vestonice'. This famous Venus has the privilege of being the first one created from baked clay and not from ivory. '**This is the one who is described at the exposition in the title of her description as a 'mature, obese woman who's had children**'. In the catalogue she is described in the title as '*the woman from Dolni Vestonice*' and in the subscript '*a nude figure of an obese body*'.¹³ The accompanying catalogue text says: '*The figure is pear-shaped with broad hips and big buttocks suggesting the effects of gravity on excess lateral tissue as caused by obesity*'.¹⁴

No 'Lion Lady' but 'the 'Lion Man'. In the first room on your right, you find show cases with Ice Age art from Germany from the Aurignacian - 40,000 to 30,000 BC: animal-humans and animals. There is 'der Löwenmensch' or 'the Lion person'. This 30 cm statue dates from 34,000-30,000 BC. Originally it was interpreted as male and described as the 'Lion Man'. In 1989 the German Elisabeth Schmid saw in the 'Lion person' female body parts. In my MA book I follow this line; here she is called 'the Lion Lady'.¹⁵ This 'Lion Woman' or 'the Lion Lady' does not show abundant male manes and originally could have had breasts. Furthermore the statue shows a clear triangular vulva, so 'it' could to be a lady who wears a mask of a lioness, a theme which is repeated often in Ice Age art, as the following will show.



At the London-exhibition the statue is traditionally called 'the Lion Man'. Why? Cook gives the following quite unsatisfactory explanation: '*Schmid's identification of a lioness, because of the absence of an abundant mane, cannot be maintained because no depictions of the extinct species known as the cave lion show this characteristic*'.¹⁶



The Hohle Fels 'woman'. In the *catalogue* she is pictured extensively after the 'Lion Man' as the 'Hohle Fels Woman'. She is not shown at the exhibition. She has already gained our attention in the foregoing where she was mentioned as 'the Schwabian Eve'. Although Cook describes some of her most prominent body parts as '*functional and pleasing areas*' of her body, she seems to hesitate between realism and

symbolism: 'there is something more imagined than real about her'.¹⁷

The 'Woman' from Willendorf. Another lady is presented in the catalogue who was not exhibited. Cook states: 'Perhaps the most famous female image of the last Ice Age, it shows an **overweight woman with a faceless, bowed head whose body has probably borne more than one child...**'.¹⁸

Further in the catalogue this overweight woman is allowed to come back again, this time you find her photo next to two modern paintings of very fat women. One is titled 'the merchant's wife at tea' of Boris Koustodiev from 1918: a beautiful but fat lady spends her time eating sweet pastry and fruits. On the other page a very large modern painting from 1996 of a sleeping and misshapen saggy woman, whose bulging fat deposits take unsavory form in her abdomen. It is titled 'sleeping by the lion carpet' of Lucian Freud, because on the tapestry behind this 'sleeping beauty' there is pictured a lioness and lion.



A goddess, sex symbol or a monstrous mother? On the left page under the tea drinking woman, the 'Woman of Willendorf' has the honour to be pictured with the following text: 'a sculpture variously regarded as showing a goddess, sex symbol or archetypical mother figure despite also being labelled as monstrous'.¹⁹ This combination of pictures suggests that Venus is as monstrous as the sleeping lady. This is disgusting. It must be a genuflection to modern commercial sales techniques; the British Museum is not averse to this, given the many souvenir shops and displays throughout the museum.

In the section 'gathering thoughts' that I have to read and re-read in an attempt to structure Cook's approach, I encounter again and again the big image of the painting of Gustave Courbet from 1866 'L'Origine du Monde'; the naked lower body and vulva with black Venushair of a lying female torso without face is so realistically presented as if it were a photograph; this irritates me.

The heavily pregnant 'women' from Kostienki. Jill Cook reveals herself as a specialized gynaecologist because she seems able to recognize various stages of pregnancy. About a figurine from Kostienki Cook is sure that this is about 'a miniature representation of a young woman heavily pregnant with her first child'.²⁰ The 'Venus van Kostienki' is called 'a heavily pregnant woman in the late stages of pregnancy'.²¹



And the same thing is remarked of a figurine with bowed head and round cap on her head, who has bracelets around her elbows and wrists. She is decorated with a V-shaped rope in her neck and a horizontal band on her back.²² In the subtitle the text reads: 'the full drooping of the breasts indicate that this was

not the woman's first child'.

Both last mentioned heavily pregnant ladies from Kostienki are damaged and possibly intentionally broken with force and buried in a pit. Are they purposely broken when the two ladies died in childbed, Cook asks herself?²³ Apparently, she is not aware of the fact that a lot of Venus Art was deliberately broken.



Early pregnancy. Cook suggests a tall, flat and very skinny woman with bowed head, small bust and hands clasped on her abdomen to be 'a newly expectant mother' and as 'a woman in the early stages of pregnancy'.²⁴ She describes two ladies from Avdeevo in Central Russia as 'two women in





the early stages of pregnancy'.²⁵ Here you see of picture of four ladies. The mentioned ones are from left to right no. 2 and no. 4.

A 'tall woman'. The young 'Venus of Yeliseevichi' from Central-Russia is described by Cook as 'a tall woman'. The subscript on the exhibition reads: '*her muscular legs suggest long walking...prominent pudenda suggest her sexual potential*'. The catalogue says: '*...the representation suggests an attractive, healthy young woman perhaps reflecting the sexual potential of someone who has not yet had children*'.²⁶



In the last show case in the first room we find in Cook's terminology the 'women' of Mal'ta in Siberia. Some are naked, others are exceptionally dressed, most of them extremely skinny and even stick-like; they have been made out of animal bones.²⁷ In Mal'ta in Siberia 29 female figurines were found; 5 of them are exhibited in London. It is breathtaking to see them in reality at last, to notice how small they are.²⁸



The 'women' from Tursac and Sireuil. In the neighbourhood of the Russian Venus figurines are some from France and Italy. The French 'Venus from Tursac' from the valley of the Vézère is at the exhibition described as '*an obese woman who had babies*'. She is a '*birthing figure, in kneeling posture with a large stomach*'. In the catalogue she is described as: '*an abstract depiction of a woman kneeling to give birth*'.

The 'Venus from Sireuil' in the Dordogne is mentioned in the catalogue as a '*kneeling figure of a woman*'. They both are '*women who are pregnant and close to giving birth*'.²⁹

Just a few other famous French ladies of the catalogue: the 'Venus of Brassempouy' is called '*the celebrated head of a young woman*'.³⁰ The 'Venus van Laussel' '*a woman holding a horn*'.³¹ And more about her: '*she, like another figure with an object in her extended right hand, is pregnant*'.



Birthing 'women'. The Italian Venusfigurine from Grimaldi known as 'the Hermaphrodite' with breasts and so called phallus is no longer interpreted by Cook as male-female but maternal-feminine. The bottle-shaped appendage that was previously interpreted as a phallus undergoes in the catalogue the transformation into a baby.³²

Another example: she does not use for the 'Double Venus' from Laussel the old-fashioned name 'the Playing Card figure' or see in it a mating couple, but describes her as '*a woman birthing a child*'.³³ In the next section you will find her picture.

A sacred space within a sheltered cave. The shelter in Laussel in France is more than 80m long and almost 20m deep. In an isolated and separated part of this shelter there was found a space of thirty square meters of 5 meters high and 20 meters deep, of which the French archaeologists assume that it was a women's department. Four of the five Laussel reliefs were discovered here.³⁴ The find of the fifth relief of the 'Double Venus' was never properly classified. Four of the five are definitely female. They show lunar horns and carry masks with headgear like the 'Venus with the Lozange Head'.³⁵ They are heavily pregnant and with lunar horns as are the 'Venus van Laussel' and the 'Venus van Berlin'. One of them is in birthing position: it is the above mentioned 'Double Venus'.³⁶





Only in the fifth figure found here, 'the Huntress', does Cook not recognize a young and slim girl but a man, traditionally described as 'the Hunter'.³⁷ She is agreeing on the issue 'that women participated in social or ritual celebrations' when she describes the Chauvet cave and the Austrian figure traditionally known as 'the dancing Fanny of Galgenberg'.³⁸ She may add the shelter of Laussel as another meeting place for women's social and ritual celebrations.

Venus loves music. Special places in these caves are in fact sanctuaries; here little debris was found so people did not live here. In these 'cathedrals' of the Old Stone Age sacral rituals were performed.³⁹

Before the entrance of the first room you come across a replica of a clay model of a male on the left and female bison in the right from the French cave le Tuc d'Audoubert. In this cave 200 heel marks were preserved in the soft floor 20m from the carefully staged setting of the two bisons. This suggests that some kind of dance took place here.⁴⁰

The exhibition shows some very old and important flutes from Germany.⁴¹ Immediately next to the 'Venus van Hohle Fels' was found a old flute that was almost as old, from 40.000 to 31.000 BC.⁴² Ancient flutes, found in the German caves in Geissenklösterle and Hohle Fels prove that early modern people loved music. Although the Venus of Hohle Fels did not come to London herself, they brought her flute to England.



Art, music and modern mind. Scientists assert that the making of three dimensional art and the making of music have everything to do with new developments in the human brain. That is made clear in the subtitle of the exhibition: '*The arrival of the modern mind*'. Creativity and symbolic thinking took place in the pre-frontal cortex. Archaeologist Jill Cook tries to make a connection with neuro-scientists, who link brain development from 40,000 years to the cultural evolution of humanity. They make a distinction between the Neanderthal and the Cro-Magnon (the modern human). But in this symbolic thinking '*realism was not the goal. The artists were simplifying, exaggerating and distorting to engage the mind of the viewer*'.⁴³ The realism which Cook discerns in Venus figurines is contradictory to this symbolic approach. Here again there is this ambivalence in Cook's interpretation of Ice Age art. I will come back to this later.



Bestiality changes into femininity. At the end of the catalogue in the chapter '*Sex or Symbol? Images of Women. 18,000-10,000 BC*' Jill Cook emerges more and more as a female archaeologist of the second generation that wants to put right what 19th and 20th century male archaeologists did wrong.

The woman and reindeer. Take the bone of 'Woman and reindeer' or 'La Femme au Renne' from France. In 1875 the first archaeologists considered this image of a reindeer above the heavily pregnant woman as a vice of bestiality. The observation

of the reindeer having an erect penis requires the misreading of a crack in the bone surface as an engraved line.⁴⁴ Cook: '*This is in line with the view that Ice Age art is all but male adolescence sex/pornography and hunting, which is a provocatively sexist opinion...*'.⁴⁵

The 'amorous pursuit'. Next to that there is the engraved bone from the cave of Isturitz in France; in the 19th century the founding father of French archaeology the priest Abbé Breuil called it *'the amorous pursuit'* or *'La Poursuite Amoureuse'*. He saw a man with a bestial face reflecting his sexual desire going after and conquering a woman, but this is more easily said than seen and proved. Jill Cook: *'The more complete human figure has a narrow drooping breast indicating both her femininity and the probability that she has nurtured more than one baby.* According to Cook, depending on the French gynaecologist Durhard, the figure on the right is a woman and she is pregnant. *'The other*



figure was initially described as a man with a bestial face'. This 19th century assumption proves to be wrong. Jill Cook: *'Subsequent work on the piece revealed the lines of the top of a narrow breast like that on the other figure, just below the elbow on the broken edge'.*⁴⁶ To me it seems is obvious that the 'bestial face' of this second woman to the left has something to do with the mask of a lioness that she is wearing.

Nude 'woman' from Barma Grande, Italië. Back to the left showcase in the first hall. The 'Venus van Menton' is called in the description under her show case at the exhibition: *'Yellow nude from Ventimiglia who shows obesity'.* In the catalogue one reads: *'...the yellow steatite figure is depicted as postnatal'.*⁴⁷

About the other three ladies found in the cave in Ventimiglia close



to Grimaldi: *'The other three complete figures are possibly pregnant and are shown with gynaecological views of open vulvas'.*⁴⁸

The other lady found in the caves of Grimaldi, who in the 19th century was nicknamed Mr. Punch or 'La Polichinelle', she describes as *'a figure found in Grimaldi with an open vulva, equally misnamed 'la Polichinelle'.*⁴⁹



The last room. Along an elongated intermediary room with several very refined tools and utensils you enter the final room. Here abstract figurines from the last period of the Ice Age present themselves, from the period 18,000-11,000 BC. In this phase Ice Age art is becoming more schematic and abstract. The human female forms which show ladies in profile are reduced a minimum. Most of Cook's predecessors missed, and some of her present colleagues still miss, the femininity of the figurines, but fortunately Jill Cook recognizes the femininity in these abstract forms. She describes de figurines as *'minimalist profile sculptures of women'.*⁵⁰



No pebbles but ladies! River pebbles were minimally altered to enhance their female forms.⁵¹ The catalogue: *'At Ölnitz suggestively shaped pebbles collected from the river are more or less modified to reproduce the silhouette female form in three dimensions'.*⁵² The same goes for two 'similar pebbles' from the cave of Courbet.⁵³

This is a breakthrough. In the MA book I pleaded to classify the majority of the 'stones' and abstract figurines from the Neolithic as feminine and only then as male when they show a phallus or beard. This argument is supported by this specialist from the Palaeolithic.⁵⁴ This has enormous consequences for the amounts art which are classified as having no gender and as neutral where they now can be classified as female.

Cook mentions that 160 Venus figurines have been rediscovered⁵⁵ (some sources count more)⁵⁶. This means that this number can be increased by the many abstract female figurines, which so far were designated as 'stones'. A beautiful example is presented by the 'Venus van Birket Ram' dating from Israel in 230.000 BC.⁵⁷

The last beauty. The 'Venus Impudique' of Immodest Venus is the last beauty of the exhibition, which started with the French 'Venus van Lespugue' and it ends with another little French lady. The 'Immodest Venus' is labelled by Cook as a '*nude female figure... which Durhard considers characteristic of a girl before puberty, a diagnosis supported by the rest of her slim, young, undeveloped body*'.⁵⁸

Jean-Pierre Durhard is a French gynaecologist from the school of the 'anatomical realism'. He did research on many figurines and decided that they were mostly pregnant and on the edge of birthing.⁵⁹

We have come at the end of the exhibition. Afterwards people are lead through the artificial cave into the museum shop.



Home again. At home I studied my notes and compared them with the texts in the catalogue. What is to be concluded about Jill Cook's approach of Ice Age art? How does she interpret the art and where is her interpretation to be localized in the spectrum of other schools of interpretation?

3. The riddle solved: the evaluation

The shamanistic approach. In a description at the exhibition I find information about what is called: 'the spiritual significance of the shaman'. Jill Cook dares to use such terms as spirituality and shamanism; the word shaman surprisingly pops up regularly in the catalogue.⁶⁰ Cook is supportive of the shamanistic interpretation of Ice Age Art of Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams.⁶¹ In the descriptions at the exhibition, it is suggested that '*women negotiated with the spirit world*'. Jill Cook uses a psychological argument to explain why the many female pendants are so tiny: '*holding small things in your hands can make you stronger and give your more confidence*'.



The antropological approach. At the end of the third chapter titled '*Soft curves and full figurines: female sculptures 30,000-20,000 ago*', Jill Cook mentions the anthropological research of Sandra Sázelová in present arctic cultures in Northern-Eurasia: '*There is no concept of male/female superiority. Men and women serve one world through different tasks. As the hearth keepers who care for the family and home, women also attend the household's sacred objects and are regarded as more expert than men at spells and incantations. Their daily lives are a pact with spirits of which effigies are made to be worn as pendants or carried in pouches to enable communication and to protect the community and the reindeer from evil*'.⁶²

Jill Cook takes good care not to jump to conclusions when she writes: '*In citing this study, no direct analogy with the archaeological material is implied, but the observations do provide some inspiration for questioning the excavated evidence*'.⁶³

Many schools, many possible interpretations. After some short flirtations she rejects the cited schools and their models of interpretations: *'Whether they represented real or symbolic beings, the female figures described probably had important occult, or shamanic functions influential on family life. Inevitably, the evidence is circumstantial and incapable of proof...'*⁶⁴

As already said in the beginning, she rejects the 'erotic' approach. The same goes for the 'modern psychological theory' of Jung and Neumann. Human behaviour cannot be explained by archetypes, she states.⁶⁵

Pregnancy and motherhood. Remarkably present in titles, subtitles and catalogue is the emphasise on pregnancy and motherhood.⁶⁶ She repeats: *'the majority of figurines portray motherhood, when all woman's energy is devoted to giving birth successfully and raising a child. The different stages of pregnancy and birth are shown by concentration on the functional parts of the body'*.⁶⁷ The many 'realistic' figurines are normal women, although respected and equal to the men, they are nothing more or less than ordinary women.

Jill Cook makes perfectly clear that she sees nothing in feminists who deny the importance of motherhood, because this is the cornerstone of cultures where the father is not yet known. The caption of no. 13 reads: *'in traditional cultures men had little to do with pregnancy or birth'*, and this argument is repeated in the catalogue .

Males rarely depicted. Jill Cook repeats a frequently-used argument that in the Old Stone Age there are no images of 'human intercourse' and that *'the rare male figures are not represented in a state of sexual excitement'*.⁶⁸ The possible explanation could be that the male role in reproduction was not yet understood: *'If the male role in reproduction was not fully understood, pregnancy and birth may have been regarded as all the more miraculous, mysterious and determined by supernatural powers'*. Her conclusion seems to be that the large amount of feminine art proves that cultures are egalitarian and that the feminine is respected, although this is possibly going to change at the end of the Palaeolithic.⁶⁹

The ambivalence. On the one hand she opts for the down-to-earth approach of the school of the New Archaeology, which arose after 1960.⁷⁰ In this approach figurines which show breasts and vulva are normal women. On the other hand there is her sympathy for the shamanistic-symbolic and spiritual approach.

No normal 'women'. But...if some of the images are spirit-holders, as Harald Haarmann assumes, then the images do not depict normal women.⁷¹ Why do they walk naked in the middle of the freezing Ice Age? Why do they decorate their naked body with bracelets, strings, girdles, masks and headgear? Cook asserts that all figurines, except those of Mal'ta in extremely cold Siberia, walk naked. Clothing is necessary in



these temperatures and rediscovered needles prove that people sew clothing. There is the important research of Olga Soffer and others, who discovered on *naked Venus* figurines round hats, hairnets, belts, ropes and tails of braided grasses.⁷²



No realism but symbolism. In this regard I need to mention the work of Erik Trinkhaus in 2005. He did research on human skeletons in graves in Dolni Vestonice in the Czech Republic and compared them with the full Venus figurines which were found here.⁷³ Both men and women were ambulatory and remain on the move in order to ensure for themselves sharp material such as obsidian in order to make sharp tools. The corrugated structure of the femur, backbones and knees (osteo-arthritis) also in young

female and male adults shows that men as well as women must have carried heavy loads, for example the meat of a mammoth on the bones because these were used as building material for houses.

Dental research proves that they occasionally suffered from food shortage malnutrition.⁷⁴ It is very probable that these people were physically slender and muscular. This means that Venus art does not show normal women who actually lived in these encampments. But Trinkhaus also argued that Venus Art often shows mature women who are not pregnant and seem to suffer from 'obesitas' and are fat and corpulent. And therefore Trinkhaus is talking of a paradox...

An unsolvable dilemma. In my view Cook is fruitlessly trying to solve this contradiction. She comes with several possible 'solutions'. Probably there were privileged persons with high social status who could stay home close to the fire and did not need to walk long distances after which they gained weight (seasonal sedentism): *'Left behind perhaps to keep the warming and protective fires burning, sedentism may have caused some to put on weight'*.⁷⁵ Cook states that slim figures are seldom depicted in Venus Art. *'In this respect it would probably more useful to categorize the figures by modern dress sizes as this would at least indicate **the relative rarity of slim figures**, the significance of pregnancy and some evidence of obesity...'*.⁷⁶ Her main solution in solving the paradox Trinkhaus raised, is the emphasis on pregnancy and motherhood



Venusen from Mal'ta are skinny. The German linguist and ethnologist Haarmann with knowledge of Siberian cultures, states that Venus Art is multifunctional, with profane and spiritual functions, with the accent on the symbolic-spiritual aspect. Venus Art pictures ancient mothers, the protectors of hearth and home, clan and tribe, animals and plants. They are depicted either full or round to enhance their life-giving aspect or slender and stiff to enhance the death aspect.⁷⁷ The stiff and oblong statues represent their bodiless spirits. In that case the figurines seem 'doll like'. But they are no dolls or toys, as the school of the New Archaeology assumes.⁷⁸

'Venus' is old-fashioned. Finally on page 224 of the 274 text pages of text in the catalogue, the word '**Venus**' is used.⁷⁹ In the seventh chapter titled '*Sex or Symbol. Images of Women' 18,000-11,000 years ago,*' Cook writes: *'Many reviews of female images produced at the end of the last Ice Age consider figures sculpted or drawn from 40,000 to 12,000 years ago **together, regardless of their age and geographical distribution. Furthermore, whether they are voluptuous or abstracted these representations are usually all referred to as Venuses, which, whether intended or not, implies a unity and continuity of intention producing them'**.* In this remark she again questions the unity of two separate groups who are both one: the naturalistic and abstract Venus Art.⁸⁰ Naturalistic Venus art shows the life giving aspect; abstract Venus art shows the death and regenerative aspect, the millennia-old soul aspect.

Many interpretations. After this several other possible interpretations follow: *'Among archaeologists they acquire cultural traits variously becoming fertility symbols, goddesses and matriarchs, as well as avatars of social networks stretching across Europe or objects made by women for women perhaps expressing their rites of passage through life'. Any or all of these interpretations can be argued...'* She uses the usual tactic of the adherents of the New Archaeology: in describing various interpretations, the reader gets tired and is eventually convinced that there is no essential interpretation.

Subsequently Cook argues that it is more sense to forget about similarities and common characteristics and to search for **differences and changes**: 'to give arguments better resolution it is worth looking at the changes in representations of women that appear in the later part of the period separately instead of conflating them with the older figures and ignoring the differences in geographical distribution, iconography and chronology'.⁸¹

Cook and school of the New Archaeology. This is typical of the attitude of scholars from the New Archaeology. First set out how many different and various opinions and interpretations there are; and then suggest that all together these differences in approach are incapable of offering any real proof. Archaeologists from this school do not surrender to 'speculations' or 'assumptions' and describe only things that are visible and measurable.

The anatomic realism. And this is the very moment that Jill Cook shows her true face. Her flirtation with shamanism and symbolism was only a short distraction. She belongs to the postmodern school of the New Archaeology. Within this school she positions herself together with the adherents of the 'anatomic realism'; they assume that Venus figurines depict 'real fat women'; some state the fat women are sick, some argue they are heavily pregnant.⁸² These people do not talk about the 'Venus van Willendorf' but about 'Mrs. Willendorf' or 'the woman of Willendorf'. They deny sacrality, symbolism and spirituality in Venus Art.

The 21st century approach. In the 21st century science becomes more inter-disciplinary. It is good to integrate the psychological and symbolical aspects in our view of art as a mirror of human development. *The Language of MA* reconstructs a global system of feminine symbols that displays a striking consistency and continuity and shows an intercultural and transcultural cohesion in which symbolic characteristics remain - repeated over thousands of years and large geographic areas. This approach is new and therefore still little known.

Yet we have to cope with archaeologists from the school of New Archaeology and the stream of the 'anatomic realists'. Teachers with these views populate universities all over the world, they chose which books their students need to study. Curators who share their views organize and describe collections all over the world, and they write the catalogues. Until the time comes when new generations opt for a more integrated and more symbolic and spiritual approach we shall have to cope with 'the Woman of Willendorf'. You have been warned.

Annine van der Meer 22th September 2013

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¹ Annine van der Meer, *The language of MA, the primal mother. The evolution of the female image in 40,000 years of global Venus Art*, The Hague, 2013, 62

² Jill Cook, *Ice Age art. The arrival of the modern mind*, Catalogue published to accompany the exhibition at the British Museum from 7 February to 26 May 2013, London, 2013, 71; van der Meer, *The language of MA, the primal mother. The evolution of the female image in 40,000 years of global Venus Art*, 79.

³ *The language of MA*, 72-3.

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- ⁴ *Ice Age art*, 38; *The language of MA*, 13, 25, 36, 70.
- ⁵ *The language of MA*, 14.
- ⁶ *Ice Age art*, 224.
- ⁷ *Ice Age art*, 97, 104.
- ⁸ *Ice Age art*, 97, 104.
- ⁹ *Ice Age art*, 97, 104.
- ¹⁰ *Ice Age art*, 97, 104.
- ¹¹ *Ice Age art*, 97; *The language of MA*, 77, 99.
- ¹² *Ice Age art*, 99.
- ¹³ *Ice Age art*, 65.
- ¹⁴ *Ice Age art*, 64-65; *The language of MA*, 49, 78.
- ¹⁵ *The language of MA*, 75 n 108.
- ¹⁶ *Ice Age art*, 30.
- ¹⁷ *Ice Age art*, 38; *The language of MA*, 14, 72.
- ¹⁸ *Ice Age art*, 61; *The language of MA*, 25, 76.
- ¹⁹ *Ice Age art*, 76-77. Mogelijke woordspeling met Gimbutas, Marija A., "The Monstrous Venus" of prehistory or Goddess Creatrix', *Comparative Civilizations Review* 10 (1981), 1-26.
- ²⁰ *Ice Age art*, 82; *The language of MA*, 81.
- ²¹ *Ice Age art*, 80; *The language of MA*, 97.
- ²² *Ice Age art*, 82; *The language of MA*, 97.
- ²³ *Ice Age art*, 80, 106-07.
- ²⁴ *Ice Age art*, 84.
- ²⁵ *Ice Age art*, 83; *The language of MA*, 82.
- ²⁶ *Ice Age art*, 84; *The language of MA*, 85.
- ²⁷ *The language of MA*, 83.
- ²⁸ *Ice Age art*, 89; *The language of MA*, 88-5; mentions 31 figurines on page 83.
- ²⁹ *Ice Age art*, 96; *The language of MA*, 90-1.
- ³⁰ *Ice Age art*, 91; *The language of MA*, 86.
- ³¹ *Ice Age art*, 99; *The language of MA*, 66.
- ³² *Ice Age art*, 95, *The language of MA*, 78.

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- ³³ *Ice Age art*, 99; *The language of MA*, 89.
- ³⁴ *The language of MA*, 66.
- ³⁵ *The language of MA*, 101.
- ³⁶ *The language of MA*, 66.
- ³⁷ *Ice Age art*, 99; *The language of MA*, 66, 87, 89.
- ³⁸ *Ice Age art*, 42, 25, 45-47.
- ³⁹ *The language of MA*, 62.
- ⁴⁰ *Ice Age art*, 25.
- ⁴¹ *Ice Age art*, 45-7.
- ⁴² *Ice Age art*, 104.
- ⁴³ *Ice Age art*, 17 with ref. to neuro-scientist V. Ramachandran, *The emerging of the mind*, London, 2003.
- ⁴⁴ *Ice Age art*, 228.
- ⁴⁵ *Ice Age art*, 228.
- ⁴⁶ *Ice Age art*, 229.
- ⁴⁷ *Ice Age art*, 92; *The language of MA*, 78.
- ⁴⁸ *Ice Age art*, 92; *The language of MA*, 24-25.
- ⁴⁹ *Ice Age art*, 94; *The language of MA*, 24.
- ⁵⁰ *Ice Age art*, 242; *The language of MA*, 91-93.
- ⁵¹ River pebbles were minimally altered to accentuate their female forms met vb. uit de Courbet grot en Penne-Tarn.
- ⁵² *Ice Age art*, 241.
- ⁵³ *Ice Age art*, 242.
- ⁵⁴ *The language of MA*, 142, 155-160, **202-214**, zie **206**.
- ⁵⁵ *Ice Age art*, 61.
- ⁵⁶ *The language of MA*, 63.
- ⁵⁷ *The language of MA*, 141.
- ⁵⁸ *Ice Age art*, 226-7; *The language of MA*, 21.
- ⁵⁹ *The language of MA*, 70 n 89.
- ⁶⁰ *Ice Age art*, 35, 42, 102, 125-6, **140**, 245.
- ⁶¹ *Ice Age art*, 140, 280; *The language of MA*, 41 n 69; 41, 71.

⁶² Sandra Sázelová, 'Female Figurines of Northern Eurasia: an ethnographic approach', J.A. Svoboda, *Petrkovice: On shouldered Points and Female Figurines*, Dolni Vestonice Studies, vol. 15, Brno, 2008, 224-32; *Ice Age art*, 107 n 45.

⁶³ *Ice Age art*, 107.

⁶⁴ *Ice Age art*, 107.

⁶⁵ *Ice Age art*, 104, 107.

⁶⁶ *Ice Age art*, 83, **104-107**.

⁶⁷ *Ice Age art*, 105.

⁶⁸ *Ice Age art*, 104; *The language of MA* 89 n 187: 'it is pointed out that a mating/coitus is not depicted in this era'.

⁶⁹ *Ice Age art*, 68 with ref. to theory of Brian Hayden about 'transegalitarian' and male dominance; *The language of MA*, h 5 op 124, h 8 op 235.

⁷⁰ *The language of MA*, 5, **37**, 41, 47, 109, 215, 240, 252.

⁷¹ Harald Haarmann, *Interacting with figurines, Seven dimensions in the study of imagery*, Vermont, 2009, 147, 149; *The language of MA*, 41, **70-1, 83**.

⁷² O. Soffer, J.M. Adovasio, D.C. Hyland, 'The "Venus" figurines. Textiles, basketry, gender and status in the Upper Palaeolithic', *Current Anthropology* 41 nr 4, August-October 2000, 511-37; *Ice Age art*, 67; *The language of MA*, 94.

⁷³ E. Trinkhaus, 'The adiposity paradox in the Middle Danubian Gravettian', *Anthropology*, vol 58 (2-3), 2005, 272; *Ice Age art* 67 n 3.

⁷⁴ E. Trinkhaus, J.A.Svoboda eds., *Early Modern Human Evolution in Europe: the people of Dolni Vestonice and Pavlov*, Oxford, 2006; *Ice Age art* 67 n 5.

⁷⁵ *Ice Age art* 67.

⁷⁶ *Ice Age art*, 104.

⁷⁷ Haarmann, *Interacting with figurines*. 147, 149; *The language of MA*, 41, **70-1, 83**.

⁷⁸ *The language of MA*, 37.

⁷⁹ *The language of MA*, 103 she wrote 'setting aside the term Venus'...sets the mind free' etc.

⁸⁰ *Ice Age art*, op 104 she also did this.

⁸¹ *Ice Age art*, 224.

⁸² *The language of MA*, 70.