

### **AXELL: One plus One.**

1964-1972: From London to Moscow, Tokyo to Buenos Aires, Pop dictated the spirit of the time.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of those years was 1968, a worldwide revolution which signalled the passage from an industrial to a post-industrial society, from modernism to postmodernism. Political upheaval, social injustice, and an apotheosis of the new consumer society: brighter colours, transparent plastics, louder music, faster rhythms.<sup>2</sup> Speed would consume Axell; her creative life as an artist spanned those eight brief years - then crashed to a halt.

Axell's contribution to Pop art modifies accepted narratives of postwar Belgian art and feminist art histories of the 1960s, while exemplifying a personal adventure of self-liberation and self-fulfilment. From the start, she was intellectually ambitious, disguising her sex in time-honoured fashion by choosing a hard, northern, crystalline pseudonym.<sup>3</sup> In an era when TV was the new medium for entertainment, war and the space age, it would have been all too easy for Axell to remain the attractive *speakerine*, embodying, as it were, what Betty Friedan called 'the feminine mystique' on screen, while playing perfect wife and mother at home.<sup>4</sup> But Axell not only undertook a rigorous literary and theatrical training for her successful acting and film career, she also wrote the scenario for the audacious, mixed-race romance, *Le Crocodile en peluche*, and starred in it, filmed by her husband, Jean Antoine in 1963. So much to renounce for the anachronistic art of painting, with its the challenges of solitude, the blank canvas, the search for a personal style...

### **Magritte, Graverol, Mara and Co**

Magritte would be the midwife: not an obvious choice as far as stylistic originality was concerned, though he would be claimed in Belgium, of course, as the 'father of Pop Art'.<sup>5</sup> But Magritte was prescient. In 1945 he presented the young Marcel Broodthaers with Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* - a life-transforming gift...<sup>6</sup> Much later, Michel Foucault would reposition the ageing painter as a structuralist *avant-la-lettre* with his text *Ceci n'est pas un pipe...*<sup>7</sup> In between times, Magritte taught Axell how to paint in oils (with a little help from his wife Georgette).<sup>8</sup> He surely initiated her into the Surrealist heritage.

By 1964, the influence of Surrealist painting and collage techniques on the young Belgian painter is obvious in her collage *Marie-Claire*. Here, a naked woman sits demurely - her head replaced with an exotic cookery photograph, her bra dangling in anticipation, the woman's magazine *Marie-Claire* by her side. Sophia Loren, the cover image, invites us to her palace; there's a special survey on 'the French woman of today and love'. Still, disconcertingly, the crossed shiny shoes of a relaxed bourgeois man (obviously taking his time to respond to the woman's desire) tramples on these packaged fantasies. We have a feminist artist here, without a doubt.

Collage is a wonderfully stimulating medium for the autodidact. One recalls Lautréamont's dictum, *La poésie doit être faite par tous et non par un*. But painting in oils is more difficult. Magritte offered crucial encouragement to Axell in terms of both technique and composition as she moved from collage to the *Premier autoportrait*, 1964. Its open-lipped profile has carefully-modulated features standing out in relief against the flat concentric rings of a vibrant orange target. Axell creates a softer surface for the totally headless, fluffy plump blonde in *Conception du Mec-Art*, 1964, which perverted artworld usage ('*mec' art*' for mechanical art, Alain Jouffroy's term) to Axell's conception of *l'art des mecs*, an art for blokes: all body and nothing but... This work surely acknowledges Magritte's own brushy parodies of Renoir's voluptuous nudes during his *période vache* of the 1940s, his deliberate 'bad painting' that played with sentimental taste and contemporary pornography. A flatter painting from the *vache* period, *Le Galet*, 1948 (fig.1), evidently gave Axell other ideas. Magritte's woman licks herself like a cat; as voyeurs we participate in this autoerotic moment.

Certainly prior to the *Erotomobiles* (eroticised auto-mobiles), the licking tongue becomes the signifier of the Axell herself in *La Gourmandise*, all pink and orange, where her sugar-almond fingernails, make a ring round.....herself. The 'author-sign' - female - in the circular non-space of *grisaille* of course replaces the penis. *Ice cream* is even more provocative - a sexy face with downcast eyes from a black and white fashion magazine dominates a world of rainbow-coloured ice-cream: phallicism becomes pattern, vertical but hapless; the languid tongue advances and devours. *Cercle érectile* quite shockingly seems to have bitten off the penis like a slice of orange. What a comparison between the active mouths - five pairs of lips in this painting - and the vapid smiles of Wesselman's *Great American Nudes*....!

Despite Magritte's almost invisible presence in Brussels in the early 1960s, his bowler-hatted anonymity and his old-fashioned courtesies towards Axell at this time, the affinity between them surely went beyond technique alone, touching the most fundamental problems of sexuality and its depiction. Magritte's disturbing *Le Viol* of 1934 - metonymically employed to define Surrealism itself by André Breton in 1935, on the cover of *Qu'est ce que le Surréalisme?* - is perhaps the most archetypal image of Surrealism's 'headless woman', the *femme sans tête*. In this well-known image, the woman's face, entirely replaced by body parts, paradoxically turns an invitation to rape into the phallic woman: her pubis becomes a bearded mouth, her breasts become eyes. Magritte's decapitation of his Muse - demonstrating an apotropaic desire for self-protection - fails. Her look is reinstated, creating one of Surrealism's most powerful double images - what Camille Paglia has analysed as the greedy 'eye which eats', the 'Gorgonic gaze'.<sup>9</sup> But the rebarbative image invoking rape, *le viol*, perforce changes its meaning completely when authorship itself is switched. When woman - Axell herself - becomes subject, object, artist, spectator or lover (see *Le pinceau de la Gorgone*, 1972).<sup>10</sup> Who were Axell's role models? Simone de Beauvoir of course, in terms both of the message of *La Deuxième Sexe* (published in Belgium in 1949) and her heroic role as author. Yet evidently, around Magritte and his circle - Louis Scutenaire or Marcel Marien - there were strong women too. Take Scutenaire's muse, the writer Irène Hamoire.<sup>11</sup> Or the painter and collagist Jane Graverol, whose *Lolita*, 1960 (fig.2), with its pubescent female body, sexualised title, games of *dédoublement* (the four pairs of eyes on the moth which fixes the headless *fillette's* pony tail) surely situates her as Axell's surrealist precursor.<sup>12</sup>

Pop and the French movement Nouveau Réalisme arrived late - and simultaneously - in Belgium.<sup>13</sup> 'Figuratie/Defiguratie De Menselijke Figur sedert Picasso' at the Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent, in 1964 was a transitional show; 'Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme etc.', at the Palais des Beaux-Arts Brussels in 1965 preceded 'British Painting' held there in 1966.<sup>14</sup> Here the Belgian intelligentsia could see the work of artists like Alan Jones or Peter Phillips whose work Axell knew from England during her 1964 visit. Indeed Axell's Belgian Pop contemporary, Paul Mara - fifteen years her senior - who changed his style completely after a trip to New York in 1964 and 1965 acknowledged the sexiness of 'Swinging London' in *Dent'elles* with its toothpaste-ad title. Erotic attention is focussed on bare torsos (compare Axell's *Les deux clefs*, 1965), one gratifyingly body-painted with the Union Jack, flag of the United Kingdom (fig. 3). Mara's *Feu rouge*, 1967, where an abstract composition is drawn over the figure of a young girl 'keeping her knees together' even uses

the car-for-sex metaphor, like Axell, albeit here the traffic light is evoked to say 'Stop!' not 'Go!' <sup>15</sup> British Pop colours and 'hard edge' evidently affected a Belgian artist such as Joe Delahaut, even while he remained under the aegis of geometric abstraction. <sup>16</sup> So Axell was not alone as a Pop artist in Belgium.

### **Games-boards and Erotomobiles**

Axell's own *mec'art*, then, decided to take on the bachelor machine *par excellence* - the car - fusing contemporary aspects of the 1960s with her reversal of ideology of the *machine célibataire*. Profoundly misogynistic, this abiding literary and artistic trope extended from the symbolist poet, Villiers de l'Isle d'Adam's *Eve future* to Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* and beyond. <sup>17</sup> Magritte's influence receded. *L'Amour vite* and *L'oeil de la tigresse* of 1964, with their rear-mirror devices, wittily acknowledge Axell as both subject and object - artist and dominatrix. With crimson stilettos, fleshy, contoured foot arched high, and heel posed provocatively over the accelerator, *Axell-ération*, 1965, is a confident self-portrait of the artist as a girl in love with her car. We share Axell's own viewpoint, looking down towards her shoes, registering the psychedelic lemon and orange brake pads on the lime-coloured carpet. Does our presence as spectators imply she is not alone? Are we playing a dangerous and erotic game together? The compositional daring here is extraordinary. New structural possibilities for her painting, however, encountered through British Pop art, would transform the impact of the *Erotomobile* series.

Axell's closest contemporaries from a formal point of view, were waiting in London: Pauline Boty and Peter Phillips. Like Axell, Boty too - and Alina Szpocznikow, whom Axell knew (see her Pop sculptures in Lodz, Poland) - would die prematurely. All three artists fulfilled their promise, yet were cut off in their prime. <sup>18</sup> Axell travelled to London and met and talked with Pauline Boty, whom Jean filmed for 'Dieu est-il Pop?' in 1964. <sup>19</sup> The parallels with Boty are striking: Boty, who plays Pop's blonde to Axell's Pop brunette, also acted on stage and for television, and, like Axell, her relationship to other Pop artists is often evident. The influence of Boty's mentor, Peter Blake appears in terms of subject matter, colour and structure - above all fairground imagery, in *Big Jim Colossimo*, 1963. But in the more personal 'in-your-face' *Bum*, an English Punch and Judy theatre frames a sexy pair of female buttocks (fig.4). The message to men is clear here - not soft porn but '\*\*\*\* off!' <sup>20</sup> Why the aggression? Axell would have understood. To quote Boty: 'Actresses often have tiny brains. Painters often have large beards. Imagine a brainy actress who is also a painter...' <sup>21</sup> Both

Boty and Axell made explicitly feminist work, yet turned later to political themes: Boty's *Cuba Si*, 1963 or *Countdown to Violence*, 1964, may be compared with Axell's later *l'Assemblée libre* and *Campus* of 1970 or her portrait of Angela Davis.

Peter Phillips' work seems even more important for Axell at this crucial stage. Jean Antoine recalls Axell's presence at the filming of his sequences on Boty and Tilson, though not Phillips. Phillips' 'games-board' paintings from 1961-3, were based on pinball machines and funfair imagery. He was affected, as was Blake, by the subject and structure of Jasper Johns' s work, such as *Target with Plaster Casts*, 1955, but also by the shaped Cimabue altarpieces he had seen on his first trip to Italy.<sup>22</sup> From Phillips, surely, Axell espouses a striking bilateral symmetry, rainbow-coloured grounds, round peepholes with girls inside, and five-pointed stars. Compare Phillips', *For Men only - Starring MM and BB*, 1961 (fig. 5) or *Four Stars* 1963. Even more pertinently, consider *Gravy for the Navy*, 1963 (fig. 6): inside the stars, constituted of stripes whose colours are contrapuntally juxtaposed, pin-up girls are posed as mirror-images of each other. Axell would develop this idea with surprising consequences.

*Permis dans les deux sens*, 1965 loves its double-entendre, the disturbing single eye above the double portrait of an enfilade of nylon stockings (anticipating Axell's 'happening' in 1969). The twin viewing discs already evoke Axell's own granny glasses - acknowledging their debt to Phillip's *Spotlight*, 1962-3 (compare her *L'Amie du motard* and *Rétrovision* of the previous year). *La conductrice et son double* continues the game of doubles or quits - its hint of lesbianism gesturing at the same time to the famous two ladies of the School of Fontainebleau.

*Auto-stop*, 1965, uses a typical punning device for the title. No car this time - just a lonesome road - and the monochrome back of Velasquez's Rokeby Venus from London's National Gallery. The sensuality of the painting and the old-master quotation evokes Martial Raysse's renderings of Ingres, in his 'Made in Japan' series: a combination of contemporary kitsch and his own *renvoi* to the Louvre. Raysse was Europe's Warhol: his art's silk-screen-slick reproductive effects and acidic Pop colours distinguished him from his French Nouveau Réaliste compatriots. The way the body is sliced in Axell's *Auto-stop* is significant: the nude is constrained by the frame. Was it from Raysse - before the adoption of plexiglass cut-outs - that Axell would adopt the motif which spills out into a three-dimensional world? She would revive Venus many more times: Titian's Urbino Venus in *La Femme de marbre*, 1968; Cabanel's naked Venus in *Le repos de la guerrière*, 1968 and, mixing oil on canvas with formica and plexiglass, she quote Ingres herself in the formidable *Viol d'Ingres par*

*Axell*, the same year. In each case the sensual female nude, a time-honoured subject, is subverted not visually but conceptually, with a 'hard' or violent title, invariably based on a deliberate gender-switch: *Femme de marbre* from filmmaker Andrzej Wajda's *Man of marble* (1962-76), *La guerrière* from Vadim's Bardot's film, *Le repos du guerrier*, 1962 (based Christiane Rochefort's novel). In this strategy Axell anticipates Monique Wittig's sapphic classic, *Les Guerillères*, of 1969.

### **Rorschach**

To return once more to *Auto-stop*. Axell-Venus, in crash helmet stares over the motorway horizon at the setting sun. Or is the echoing red shape another crash helmet? Is Venus, in solitude, seeking another, a lover? Even for *Auto-stop* the nude was evidently a 'cut-out' element of the composition. Paintings such as *Store vénitien* 1966, whose rainbow stripes are interrupted by the cut-out nude evidently anticipate the use of reversed silhouettes in the diptych-like *Championne gauche* and *Championne droite* or the *grandes horizontales* of the pair *Couchette bleue* and *Couchette orange*, of 1967. By 1966, then, Axell's subject choices play with the notion of single versus double. Not man plus woman, but one plus one: the mirror-image double of solitude - which itself doubles as the eternal quest for *mon semblable, ma soeur...* Either Axell focusses on the single female body (herself) or, alternatively, the body is doubled, reflected. Thus the body in *Plein feu* is abandoned, and melancholy despite - in fact because of - its title which burns with desire. The body maybe accompanied by attributes (like those of the saints in the churches of Bruges or of Ghent) keys, handcuffs, safety-belts - so many social and worldly constraints to be jettisoned. But when the double is found, as in *Erotomobile*, 1966 we have a turning fantasy; two figures in rotational symmetry, about to kiss at axle-point, their lips in the centre of a real pink tyre.

*Auto-stop* - Stop! Brakes, chains, safety-belts... The relation of autoeroticism to the *Erotomobiles* and to girl-on-girl love is clear. 'Women's Lib' as praxis in the still-bourgeois Brussels of the 1960s - even with a perpetually absent husband - not clear at all.<sup>23</sup>

*L'Entretien*, of the same year shows two figures in conversation on an orange ground, their fabulous rainbow-striped stockings (still painted in oil on panel) dangling over the edge of the canvas. This doubled image, totally different from the symmetrical circles and stars of Axell's earlier game-board structures best exemplifies what I would call Axell's 'Rorschach effect'. In contrast with the purely aesthetic impact of the reversible aspects of Matisse's cut-outs, *L'Entretien* is an image which can offer its crazy other. The doubled white silhouette may be read as absence: new jagged orange

shapes - goblets, Jack O'lantern eyes - come to the foreground: the spectator is invited to participate in a schizophrenic game of appearance and disappearance. As an increasingly obsolete form of psychiatric diagnosis, the Rorschach test was still in use in '60s Brussels.<sup>24</sup> However, at this moment of the birth of psychedelia, and with R.D. Laing and David Cooper's 'antipsychiatry' taking '60s London and Paris by storm, no proof is necessary for the trickle-down effect of the Rorschach test into popular culture. Even in earlier works - the crossed white legs around the gear lever in *Changement de Vitesse*, 1965, for example, white silhouettes can be read as lack or as fantasy, as a break or indeed brake on the action, rather than presence. I doubt that Axell was a Lacanian - for her, woman was certainly not a 'lack'.... But to see *Store vénitien* as a masculine 'painting practice' with the female silhouette as a *critical* 'negative' interruption suggests Axell's positioning as regards her geometric abstract contemporaries.

The Rorschach effect continues in the *Homardises* series: the skull (or pelvis?) which appears in *Coeur pincé*, 1967, for example.<sup>25</sup> In a small late work, of 1972, *Le Val vert*, Axell's sunbather-figure compresses a Mantegnan perspective to create a bilaterally symmetric Rorschach image in which her sex glows (a *vulvaire* valley) at the focal point - far brighter than the setting sun which divides a livid turquoise sky and purple metallic foreground. The equation suggested in these works between desire and death is disturbing; prophetic?<sup>26</sup>

## Women in Space

Axell was above all a child of the space race. She shared the exultation of a new atomic age heralded with Brussels' *Atomium* sculpture and Sputnik satellite shown at the 1958 Exposition Universelle - when the city for once became an international tourist destination.<sup>27</sup> But Axell was inspired by the space race *côté femmes*... She immortalised not Yuri Gagarin but Valentina Vladimirovna Terechkova, who orbited the globe as pilot of Vostok 6 in June, 1963. Axell's *Valentine*, 1966, poses like a Venus Anadyomene in a sexy white cat-suit; the spectator - male or female can unzip the real zip to reveal Valentine's naked body in this 'interactive' work. Axell's son Philip's cosmonaut helmet floats moon-like in space to the left.

Just as the game-board format had spurred Axell forward, so did her move to plastics - a medium which crossed the boundaries between high art and design, beloved of so many '60s children such as Wesselman, Bernard Rancillac, Ruth Francken, Nicola L. - including Belgian contemporaries -

Roberte Mestdagh or Marc Verstokt.<sup>28</sup> She abandoned oils completely and by the later 1960s was working on the floor, using an electric fretsaw to cut out sharp contours: no mistakes permitted. The '60s Warholised 'look' was the silk-screen look - carefully transferred to large-scale acrylic paintings with complicated stencils by Rancillac, for example, but transformed by Axell into an eroticised game of plexiglass shadow play - with a touch of Biba.<sup>29</sup> Working at first with clartex, she moved to opaline plexiglass and formica, with its artificial resin surface and *faux-marbre* possibilities.<sup>30</sup> She could use two layers of plexiglass, and paint - with hard, bright enamel carpaint - on the front or the back of the surface (*La cloison*, 1967); she could achieve soft spray-paint effects, always wearing her mask, on Niki de Saint-Phalle's recommendation; she could play not only with mirroring effects but with the transparency of doubled images in *décalage*, or parallax - see *Le Flirt*, 1969, *Les Nageuses*, 1967 with its disco-dancing silhouettes, or the poignant and delicate *Moi-Moi* of 1968: another ambiguous portrait of the 'divided self' (*Je est un autre*).<sup>31</sup> Axell worked with bodies on the ground - as Rauschenberg had done, painting with light to make his 'blueprints' long before Yves Klein's *femmes-pinceaux* - though Axell uses cut-out shapes, not indexical body traces. Aqueous depths are suggested through the layers of *La Plongée*, the figures literally swimming in translucent layers of colour, silvered paper and clartex... The four female figures in *La grande sortie dans l'espace*, 1967, share an acrobatic exultation that looks back to Matisse's 1910 *Dance* and forward to the cut-outs of Nancy Spero.

In 1966, the *Milkyway Happening* took place at the new Wide White Space gallery in Antwerp, run by Anny de Decker, and Bernd Lohaus. With Lohaus and Panamarenko, Hugo Heyman contributed *Kleine Space-Man in Net* (seaweed and polyvinylchloride).<sup>32</sup> Axell's celebrated happening was less anticipated; surely more audacious - and again an homage to Valentina, the woman in space. The wife of a well-known collector, Denise, entered the private view of Axell's 1969 exhibition the Galerie Fonke in Ghent, completely nude - save for a cosmonaut's helmet. Kneeling in front of this apparition, Axell slowly dressed her in silk stockings, knickers, brassiere - a reverse strip-tease with sapphic overtones. She would triumph in the resulting court case...

While according to Jean Antoine, Axell took no drugs, her work became increasingly psychedelic; three times she visited London to see the musical *Hair*. Hers were no chemical ecstasies, yet her works after 1966 conform precisely to the psychedelic definition: 'There is little that is passive, static, contemplative. The art is Dionysian, ecstatic, energetic; should it move at a more leisurely pace, it still does not come to rest. The art is of Heraclitus, and Heisenberg - in terms of motion - but

also as archaic-modern visionary synthesis... Hedonistic art. The cosmic Dance. Too much in its filling of time and of space, but seeking to prevail by sheer joyous momentum. Birth and rebirth, growth and renewal. Being quivering in ecstatic oneness with itself.<sup>33</sup> Gravityless, Axell's figures float free: the urgency of her quest for liberty rejoices in these new spatial dimensions.

### Les Opalines

For the prestigious exhibition *Axell* at the new Galerie Daniel Templon, in Paris, November 1969, Pierre Restany, *eminence grise* of the Nouveau Réaliste group, presupposed himself prince of the harem (his portrait was in the show). In his preface, 'Pierre et les Opalines' he declared: 'Axell's *Opalines* are more modern than the tortured saints in Bourges or the Aphrodite of Syracuse, because they're infinitely more like the women that I, Pierre Restany, want to love in 1969'. Contemporary consumer culture has been subject to an erotic invasion: 'painting, sculpture but also the press, cinema literature, theatre, fashion, advertising: eroticism is everywhere' and part of 'a consumer's aesthetic'. Women's bodies - in pieces, *morceau par morceau*... appear in the metro or in Barbarella strips, in hippy communes or in Swedish films, in the Paris' Crazy Horse night club or Broadway's Oh! Calcutta.' But Restany confuses the spectacle of what Marcuse, in *Eros and Civilisation* called 'non-repressive sublimation' ('sexual impulses transcend the object and eroticise non and anti-erotic relationships between the individual and the environment') with the *resistance* of the works of the female artists he cites.<sup>34</sup> He claims, rightly, that Axell has joined the *women power* of Niki de Saint Phalle, Yayoi Kusama, Rissa from Germany, Jana Zelibska from Slovakia, and Marisol from Venezuela.<sup>35</sup>

For Axell's figures, intensely of their time, are no soft-porn media creations of the world of popular culture. Cut out in opaline plexiglass against silvered grounds - to my mind her most arresting and poignant works - these naked and mysterious women were not for the likes of Pierre. Or for Catherine Millet, who commented on their 'frozen eroticism'.<sup>36</sup> They constitute Axell's 'dream of fair women', an international Sapphic paean. Their look is quiet, intimate. Axell demonstrates an opalescent sensitivity of colour juxtapositions that for once transcend the rainbow hues of pop and psychedelia. The blond *Parisienne* indeed has a Brigitte Bardot hairstyle, but, baby-pink, crouches and conceals her nudity; *l'Irlandaise*, green-shadowed and with red hair, like Gustave Courbet's Jo, the Irish girl - looks out of the image with a languid invitation; *La Polonaise*, in profile with turquoise, is more demure; the full-breasted *Tchèque* more seductive, *La Persane*, in two colour

variations, has the most slanted and smouldering glance; but *Yaël Dayan* - the daughter of Israeli general Moshe Dayan (who counted Jean Antoine among her conquests) is indubitably queen, hair black with blood red shadows: *La Gioconde* of 1969. And finally, *hors-série*, with a different, vertical format, *l'Amazone*, naked and frontal, straddles an invisible body, her gloved arms stretched out of the frame; for once no self-portrait of Axell, with her pale clouds of loosened hair. She is represented with eyes closed; her all-consuming action summons ecstasy. To imagine the great Pierre Restany discoursing beneath her is obscene.

### **After '68: from *Le joli mois de mai* to *Amazonie***

Restany was given full status as guru, however, in *Le joli moi de mai*, Axell's major triptych of 1970, now in the Musée d'Art Moderne, Ostend. The famous photograph of Caroline de Bendern, borne aloft by the leonine Jean-Jacques Lebel through the streets of Paris is lyrically reformulated; she no longer **waves** a Vietnamese flag but one that is blood red (an oriflamme of love and peace, rather than Communism surely?); the monochrome street scene with its crowd heading towards the Theatre d'Odéon has been supplanted by a *gynécée* - a cluster of beautiful naked women ( all *jolies mois*? Axell adored wigs...). Their rainbow-coloured Afro curls range from lime green through emerald to pink, orange, tangerine; their hands and nails spread out in the foreground like the claws of so many Sphinxes by Fernand Khnopff. Women rule OK! The Amazon painter Axell, naked but for her specs, with paintbrush and pot of colour, occupies a separate panel to the right. Restany, who closed down the Musée National d'Art Moderne in May '68 for its 'uselessness' has his own plexiglass panel, top left; where he appears robed, with hand outstretched, for all the world like the Beatles' Maharashi (not, one may add, as an erotic object).

Indeed, Axell's arguably least successful works are those depicting men: critics, assessors, actors on the political stage. A middle-aged, besuited, Karel Geirlandt is satirically juxtaposed with two beautiful girls in *L'esprit critique*, 1970; *l'Assemblée libre*, shows the bespectacled Jean Dyréau; the collectore Marcel Mabilbe appears the same year in *La Participation* surrounded by voluptuous nudes. *Angela Davis* I and II, 1972, the political woman, is of course more powerful in splendid isolation. Despite 'protest' works like *Campus* 1970 or the putative 'togetherness' of *Group Therapy*, politics was evidently not Axell's forte.... *La Cible* was where her political questioning lay: two naked women anticipate their intimate *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, behind them a sun of concentric circles. **Are** they irradiated with a rainbow of happiness and promise - or a target of disapproval? *Tableau à*

*caresser* with its prostrate female and inviting black 'ouglor' fleece (the *toison* displaced) is more relaxed, inviting. Axell's strategies of displacement, combined with a sensuality and bravado certainly shocking in their time, exemplify the contemporary slogan: 'the personal is the political'. . . Axell's second exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in January 1971, was prefaced by the prestigious French critic G erald Gassiot-Talabot, normally associated with the Narrative Figuration movement. He observed the derision and mockery reserved for her male characters, the tensions between an accelerating aggressivity and the new Edenic quality of her more recent work; the *complexe de gyn ec ee* in her profusion of women. The critic attempts a little psychoanalysis - he detects the power of a father figure - but as *Campus* (a female student seeing her lover killed by police) succeeds *Group Therapy*, he comments on her Eden which is ripped apart by shock waves from the world of men ...

The most convincing plexiglass works of the early 1970s choose to exclude them. The focus is almost always focus on the solitary female - dreaming in a meadow (*Paysage, Le Pr e*) - with its fake-fur grass and puddles of hair overflowing the frame), or in an orange landscape with a purple sky, breasts and dark specs bared to the sun (*Les Arbres*, 1971), waiting, with her hair dripping over her face, for the blue and orange kingfisher to enter her orange sex..... or her mouth (*L'Oiseau de Paradis*, and *Le Baiser*, 1971). In *L'Oiseau au Clair de Lune* and the new jungle fantasies such as *L'El phant Bleu* surely an element of self-parody has crept in. Memories of a hippy restaurant? A weird trip? *Le Retour de Tarzan* gives man a chance: Axell plays Jane, a schoolgirl Saint Theresa in an ecstasy of pink: Tarzan descends as her delivering angel, bemuscled in flamy blues and blacks and about to land on top of her..... He reappears, bursting out of the frame - hollering in the wrong direction - far from the girl left on the beach in *Appel*, 1972. Insubstantial, plexiglass fantasy men: these Tarzans are not going to come to the rescue. Jungle landscapes with waterfalls continue the series; *L'Herbe folle* in which the sunbathing body is almost licked up by the flames, shadows, hallucinations - both inner and outer landscapes, and the red-hot Rorschach *Glacier*, with frozen blue reflections, both of 1972, are perhaps the most telling of the series. A jungle drawing, *Amazonie*, her last work, left in the studio, proves that these mindscapes were Axell's final territory. A paradise of contemporary kitsch, troubled with inner fires.

The synthetic fur lawn sculpture, *La Pelouse*, with its tongue-in-cheek notice proclaiming 'Ne marchez pas sur un Axell, 1972 ', signals both defiance and loss: an unmarked grave<sup>37?</sup>

## La Venus de Milo ou les dangers de la célébrité

Following her final exhibition at the Galerie Contour, Axell's summer visit in 1972 was with Jean Antoine to the Biennale de Venise, followed by beaches in Yugoslavia, Breughels in Vienna, and finally the Kassel Documenta. This epoch-making, vast exhibition, a new vision curated by Harald Szeeman announced the end of the 1960s and, I would suggest, the definitive cessation of Paris's influence - including Nouveau Réaliste influence - in the arts. Only Daniel Buren, as honorary minimalist, allowed France any significant representation. Pop gave way here definitively to American Hyperrealism and the melancholic European variations of Narrative Figuration. Psychedelia, peace and love were out; what Jean Clair has called 'a period of glaciation' was beginning. Glaciation and kitsch.

In the Palais des Beaux-Arts brochure of 1971 Axell is shown in a green-tinted photograph, posed between the open mouth screaming in *Campus* and a hermaphrodite version of Michaelangelo's *David*: arms cut like the *Venus de Milo*, his fig-leaf bump is replaced by a flat heart. In Brussel's Ready Museum, the following year, the strange exhibition 'La Venus de Milo ou les dangers de la célébrité' prefaced its catalogue with a discussion of Jean Galard's *Mort des Beaux-Arts* from *Le Monde* of September 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>, the very day of Axell's horrific car-crash. Classic Venus de Milo variations of Man Ray, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí of the interwar period mingled here with Buster Keaton in drag, posing on a plinth, Venus de Milo advertisements for Parfums Chantal, 'Sculpture 2,000' courses given with the assistance of the Louvre cast studios; Michel Journiac's angry and mutilated *Autopsy of Venus*, Pol Mara, Antoni Miralda... in short a plethora of non-differentiation: 'Everything is grist to the mill of idols: the fake overwhelms the real which acquiesces or responds. The legend upsets history. In this torment, Venus de Milo ends up looking like Marx or Lenin, Marilyn Monroe like Chairman Mao, and Mona Lisa like the Mannekenpis or Général de Gaulle.'<sup>38</sup> Axell's *Venus de Milo mise à nu* - enamel on plexiglass - joined the cacophony.

This text has two endings, like an interactive film.

The first involves a flashback to Axell's masterpieces of 1966, *Ceinture de sécurité I* and *II*... Diamond-shaped, in bold orange and green, in the tradition of Sanredam and Mondrian, they figure in the background of the celebrated photograph of Axell in her psychedelic dress which is how she

is best remembered. The white-silhouetted body on orange ground of *Ceinture de sécurité I*, licked into by her curls, by an open lip, by the crease of a buttock, is bound, protected by the rainbow-coloured safety belt. The safety-belt is cast aside by the pure, striding torso in *Ceinture de sécurité II*, its green companion piece. One plus One. It was because she wore her safety belt that Axell died in the early hours of September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1972, from injuries sustained in a car crash in Zwijnaarde - after a brilliant summer adventure in Mexico and Guatemala. At thirty-seven years old she was the same age as the poet Rimbaud when he died. An anonymous critic in *Marie-Claire* wrote in May, 2000: 'The violence of her destiny corresponds with that of her painting, erotic, provocative, dazzling and superb.'

The second ending of my text takes us to the moment of genesis of *Venus de Milo mise à nu* - which for the Brussels' public at the Venus show (it moved on to Paris) was her more immediate epitaph. In monochrome plexiglass, marked *Haut... marbre... fragile....* Axell/Venus straddles a rock with her draperies immodestly fallen, a wave around her legs - which are parted to reveal her sex. Her nipples are dark - her breasts two spheres, echoed once again by the dark circles of her sunglasses. The light is so brilliant that the sky has become wine-dark, like Homer's sea; blue shadows are jagged on the white columns of the Acropolis. In solitude as ever, she is happy. Cutting the *Venus de Milo mise à nu* into plexiglass, inscribing the wise word 'Athena' as surrogate signature, choosing her colours, painting with enamel, smiling at the *décalage* suggested here: liberated seventies' sybarite versus classical goddess, basking in the cradle of civilisation - Axell as Venus and in Greece, not in Brussels - is where we might also leave her. One by herself, yet soliciting our response. One always in search of one plus one.

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<sup>1</sup> See Pierre Restany, in Axell, *Un frisson de la vie. Evelyne Axell et les années 60*, Musée d'Ixelles, Sneock-Ducaju & Zoon, 1997, pp. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> For the consumer revolution - and the increasing number of cars in Belgium, see Pierre Stephany, 'Une espèce de Belle Epoque' in *Les Fifties en Belgique*, Galerie CGER, Brussels, 1988, p. 44 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Axell's pseudonym, according to some sources, is to be found in the writings of Selma Lagerlöf, first woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1909. Other possibilities, such as the writer Axel Munthe spring to mind.

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<sup>4</sup> Betty Friedan's *Féminine Mystique* (1962) was serialised as 'La Femme mystifiée' in Sartre's *Les Temps modernes* in 1964.

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Compton, *Marcel Broodthaers*, Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, Rizzoli, New York, 1989 p. 30: 'He took Magritte as his principal mentor in the campaign against Pop Art, even though Magritte was generally considered in Belgium to be the ancestor of American Pop Art...' Magritte's wry remarks on Pop as *dadaïsme édulcoré* appear in Antoine's film *Dieu est-il Pop?. 1964*

<sup>6</sup> Broodthaers was one of the first to report on the London and Paris Pop scenes in Belgium in the journal of the Palais des Beaux-Arts. See 'Un poète voyage', *Journal des Beaux-Arts*, June, 1961, and 'Gare au défi. Le Pop Art, Jim Dine et l'influence de René Magritte', *Journal des Beaux-Arts*, November, 1963

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Ceci n'est pas un pipe*, Paris, Fata Morgana, 1973, including Magritte's letters to Foucault of May 23<sup>rd</sup> and June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1966.

<sup>8</sup> It was Georgette Magritte, whose expertise was painting clouds, who divulged to Axell several *petits secrets* - tricks of the trade, - according to Jean Antoine, who had filmed the artist. In conversation, April 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

9. To decapitate = to castrate according to Freud. From the woman's point of view, 'the tusked Gorgon is *the eye which eats*,' Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, New Jersey, 1990, p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> See my extensive discussion of the headless surrealist woman in 'Feminities/ Mascarades,' *Rose is a Rose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography*, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997, pp. 135-155.

<sup>11</sup> Irène Hamoir signed the manifesto of the 'Surréalistes révolutionnaires' in 1947; collaborated with the review *Phantomas* in 1960 and featured in the special number of *Phantomas, L'humour vert*, in 1962. See *Irène, Scut, Magritte and Co. 'Ce qui est attirant est beau'*, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 245-251; René Magritte, *Jane Graverol*, Verviers, *Temps Mêlés*, 1953, Louis Scutenaire, *Peintures de Jane Graverol*, Brussels, Les Lèvres Nues, 1962; *Jane Graverol*, Paris, Galerie le Ranelagh, May 1967, etc. Graverol solicited Magritte's opinion on her paintings in 1949 founded the surrealist review *Temps Mêlés* in 1952, met Duchamp in New York in 1963, and showed her surrealist paintings and collages in Paris in 1967.

<sup>13</sup> While Michael Palmer in *D'Alechinsky à Panamarenko, Art belge, 1940-2000*, Brussels, Editions Racine, 2002 leaves out Belgian Pop completely, Axell and her Pop contemporaries, Mara, Luc Perrot etc., are treated in René Dalemans' *Couleur de notre temps. La peinture en Belgique du XXe siècle*, Brussels, Artis, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> See *Un demi-siècle d'expositions*. Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1981.

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<sup>15</sup> Illustrated in Palmer, op. cit., in the chapter 'Art figuratif' (sic).

<sup>16</sup> Compare Amédée Cartier's red, blue and yellow *Sans titre*, 1967 - a Robert Indiana without motifs, as it were, to Jo Delahaut's conventionally Mondrianesque *Signal no 13*, 1971, in Palmer, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> See Jean Clair and Harald Szeeman eds., *Les machines célibataires*, (Venice Biennale, Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs etc.,) Alfieri, 1975.

<sup>18</sup> See Sue Watlin, David Alan Mellor, *Pauline Boty (1938-1966). The Only Blonde in the World*, London, Whitford Fine Art and the Mayor Gallery, 1998 and *Alina Szapocznikow (1926-1973)*, Warsaw, Galerie Zacheta, 1998. For more on the London scene see my 'Daughters of Albion: Greer, Sex and the Sixties', *Les Sixties: Great Britain-France, 1962-7. The Utopian Years*, London, Philip Wilson, 1997 (Paris, B.D.I.C. - Editions Somogy, 1996)

<sup>19</sup> Jasia Reihardt (director of the I.C.A.), Eduardo Paolozzi, David Hockney, Joe Tilson, Brett Whiteley and the dealer Kasmin were among those who attended a private viewing of *Dieu est-il Pop?* at the Robert Fraser Gallery, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1965 - thus glimpsing Rauschenberg, Rosenquist and Segal at work in their studios. Jean Antoine's British film-footage affords a fascinating follow-up to Ken Russell's *Pop goes the easel*, 1962, starring Derek Boshier, Peter Phillips and Peter Blake, produced by Huw Weldon and broadcast on BBC TV's 'Monitor' series, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1962. Antoine's pioneer interviews, *L'Aventure de l'Objet*, *Dieu est-il Pop?*, and *L'Ecole de New York* were shot through the year 1964 and deserve far greater recognition and acclaim.

<sup>20</sup> See Boty's orgasmic canvas *Five, Four, Three, Two, One*, 1963, with its slogan 'Oh for a fu\*\*.'

<sup>21</sup> Pauline Boty in *Screen*, 9, November 8, 1962, quoted by Sue Watlin, 'Pauline Boty, Pop Artist', in *Pauline Boty*... op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> See Marco Livingstone, 'Peter Phillips' in *Retrovision. Peter Phillips, Paintings 1960-1982*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, 1982 (and other venues) especially pp. 14-22. Phillips was President of the organising committee of the show *Young contemporaries, 1961* at the Royal College of Art, with David Hockney, Allan Jones and Ron Kitaj, Derek Boshier and Patrick Caulfield, when British Pop as a group phenomenon may seem to have emerged. Phillips left Britain in 1964 (prior to any knowledge of Robert Indiana's work).

<sup>23</sup> Axell did not enjoy her loneliness: 'Mon chéri... comme chaque fois que tu me laisses seule, je suis happée par une période de mauvaise humeur, de malaise, d'incertitude...' Letter to Jean Antoine, October 5<sup>th</sup> 1964.

<sup>24</sup> Described by Hermann Rorschach in *Psychodiagnostik*, 1921, the Rorschach test depends upon the 'projective' identification of forms seen in ink-blots. A contemporary website declares of one image 'Describing the figure as female or acknowledging the androgynous nature of the blots is

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supposed to be a homosexual response'. See Didier Anzieu, *Les méthodes projectives* Paris, PUF, 1960; Roger Macchielli, *La dynamique de Rorschach*, Paris, PUF, 1968; *Le psychopathe délinquant. Étude expérimentale à travers le Rorschach*, Charles Dessart éditeur, Brussels, 1968.

<sup>25</sup> The lobster (beloved of the Belgians) evokes both Dalí's telephone as surrealist precursor and the Father (Axell's father ran a silver tableware business). The 'Death and the Maiden' trope of *L'Homard amoureux* the naked girl suffocated and killed in the crustaceous grasp - is evident.

<sup>26</sup> Dalí transmitted to Jacques Lacan the anamorphic implications of the sex-like skull from Holbein's *Ambassadors* in London's National Gallery. Lacan (after Baltrusaitis) made the link between anamorphoses, geometric perspectives, and what he called 'the phallic ghost'. See Lacan: *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, 1973, p. 82. *La petite source* in grey and white abandons bilateral symmetry but merges Axell's naked body with a glacier-scape: here the message of frozen desire, enhanced by metallic reflections is all the more death-like.

<sup>27</sup> See Louis de Lentdecker, 'Pavane pour une grande dame', *Les Fifties en Belgique*, 1988, op. cit., p. 292 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Roberte Mestdagh showed geometric work in plexiglass and Marc Verstockt his *Gele Kubus*, 1968 in polyester in *Belgische Kunst, 1960-1970*, Kolnische Kunstverein, 1970, where Axell's *Joli mois de mai* was the star. See *Le Plastique et l'art contemporain*, Grand Palais, 1970, but above all Philippe Decelle et al., *L'Utopie de tout plastique, 1960-1973*, Fondation pour l'architecture, Brussels, 1994 and the Plasticarium collection.

<sup>29</sup> The Biba boutique, which opened in Kensington, London in 1964, marketed Barbara Hulannicki's neo-Pre-Raphaelite style in Art Nouveau surroundings. In contrast to Mary Quant's 'Op' look, this began a period of revivalism and a 'Portobello Road' aesthetic. Alphonse Mucha, Aubrey Beardsley and Burne-Jones reproductions vied with the psychedelic posters, heralding retrospectives such as Beardsley at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1969. Axell responded.

<sup>30</sup> *Le Peintre*, 1970, is painted with enamel on 'PMMA opalin' described as 'polymétacrylate de méthyle (plexiglas, altuglas, perspex, lacite)' in Decelle, above, note 25.

<sup>31</sup> I refer of course not only to Rimbaud but to R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self, an existential study in Sanity and Madness*, (Pelican Books, 1959, 1965) published in French as *Le moi divisé, de la santé mentale à la folie*, Stock, 1979. For a similar work see Lourdes Castro (Portugal), *Ombre portée rose et rose décalée*, 1966, in Decolle op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> See *Wide White Space. Derrière le musée, 1966-1976*, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels 1994 (MAC, Marseilles, 1996). The shocking-pink reversals on the invitation card for following show, *Das Grosse Buch*, (Hofhaus Press) confirms that Rorschach was in the air; the next show (April 1966) was Broodthaers' *Moules, Oeufs, Frites*.. Undoubtedly the Wide White Space shows captured the true avant-garde scene in Belgium during this decade.

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<sup>33</sup> Robert E. L. Masters and Jean Houston, 'Art and psychedelic experience' in *Psychedelic Art*, New York and London, 1968, p. 81.

<sup>34</sup> Herbert Marcuse, preface to the Vintage edition of *Eros and Civilization. A philosophical Enquiry into Freud*, (Beacon Press, 1955), New York, Vintage Books, 1961, pp. ix-x. See also *Eros et Civilisation*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1963.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Restany, 'Pierre et les Opalines', *Axell*, Galerie Daniel Templon, November, 1969.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Millet: 'Les femmes, les "opalines" d'Axell, aux poses conventionnelles et figées sont découpées dans une matière qui glace au maximum leur érotisme...' *Arts*, December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1969. Her combination of reviews of Axell, Robert Ryman and Olivier Mosset mark an interesting transitional moment for the Paris art scene.

<sup>37</sup> The slogan was evidently a pun on an advert for 'Axel's carpets'. The notice was painted by Jean Antoine's father, Georges, who had worked in film titling - evidently the spur to his son's career.

<sup>38</sup> *La Venus de Milo ou les dangers de la célébrité*, Ready Museum, Brussels, and Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, Palais du Louvre, Pavillon de Marsan, 19 January - 26 February, 1973, unpaginated.