

Pop's Ladies and Bad Girls: Axell,  
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Dada must have something to do with Pop ... the names are really synonyms. (Andy Warhol<sup>1</sup>)

In entertainment slang, *bad girls* ... describes female performers, musicians, actors and comedians ... who challenge audiences to see women as they have been, as they are and as they want to be ... In the visual arts, increasing numbers of women artists ... are defying the conventions and proprieties of traditional femininity to define themselves according ... to their own pleasures ... by using a delicious and outrageous sense of humor. (Marcia Tucker<sup>2</sup>)

The accepted story of Pop Art, as in many modernist tales, is one of male subjects and female objects.<sup>3</sup> Its canon has relied exclusively on male artists whose iconography has often objectified women. Yet there were women who were initially, or can be retroactively, associated with Pop Art as subjects/artists rather than objects. Even though many of them were included in early Pop shows, they rarely have found a secure place in Pop Art's histories<sup>4</sup> – and even when they are included, they are viewed mostly as exceptions that serve to take the temperature of the 'hard-core' canon of classic (mainly American) Pop and assure the 'coolness' of its male protagonists.<sup>5</sup> It is true that the 'popness' of each of them varies in degree, as determined by the aggregate 'popness' of their iconography, style and modes of production. A further variant is their different cultural contexts. Moreover, a proto-feminist dimension is legible in several of them, emerging in the form of a conscious voicing of sexual difference in an, often humorous, Pop vernacular. The varying degree of their 'popness' along with their proto-feminist concerns and humour – contradicting what most critics have defined as the 'impersonality' of Pop Art – have hampered their initial incorporation into Pop Art's canon.<sup>6</sup> Since the first critical negotiations of Pop Art, however, many shifts in its critical discourse have paved the way for their reconsideration, challenging us to examine the different roles that women artists have played in Pop inscriptions of *difference*.<sup>7</sup>

It is thus frustrating that Warhol's *double entendre* (Pop as an abbreviation of 'popular' and a colloquial term for 'father') still resonates in light of recent literature on Pop, pointing not only to the early gendering of the movement but to the lasting gendering of its discourse. Given the nature of Phaidon's survey series 'Themes and Movements', it would be farfetched to criticise the long-overdue volume *Pop* (edited by Mark Francis, with a survey by Hal Foster), which summarises Pop Art for a twenty-first century audience, either as a gender-based revision of Pop Art or as a proxy for a long-awaited exhibition of international Pop Art in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Whether seen as a remake of the catalogue of the Pompidou exhibition *Les Années Pop* or a complementary version for an Anglo-American audience, *Pop* – through Foster's survey, its catalogue entries, and an anthology of related documents – contextualises Pop Art within the continuum of fine and popular arts of the 1960s and delineates its international dimensions within pre-set limitations.<sup>9</sup> Although concurring that Pop begun as an Anglo-Saxon affair, Foster expands Pop Art's canon to officially include

1. G.R. Swenson, 'What Is Pop Art', *Art News*, November 1963, pp. 24–7.

2. Marcia Tucker, *Bad Girls* (New Museum of Contemporary Art: New York, 1994), pp. 4–6.

3. Aside from the hybrid yet still understudied case of Warhol's Superstars. See for instance Leanne Gilbertson, 'Andy Warhol's Beauty #2: Demystifying and Reabstracting the Feminine Mystique, Obliquely', *Art Journal*, Spring 2003, pp. 25–33.

4. With the exception of Marisol and Joyce Wieland as well as the ladies of the Latin American Pop who fared quite better, a short list of women (other than those discussed in this article) whose intersection with Pop art has been variably neglected includes Lourdes Castro, Chryssa, Gioetta Fioroni, Dorothy Grebenak, Jann Haworth, Kiki Kogelnik, Mara McAfee, Patty Mucha, Chryssa Romanos, Niki de Saint Phalle, Marjorie Strider and Idelle Weber.

5. Lucy Lippard in her early canonising of New York Pop (*Pop Art* [Thames and Hudson: London, 1966], pp. 69–139) mentions many women, including Drexler, Marisol, Strider, Weber and Kusama, but only to reinforce by opposition the 'coolness' of her 'hard-core' super-five (Warhol, Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist and Wesselmann). Marco Livingstone (*Pop Art: A Continuing History* [Thames and Hudson: London, 2000], p. 13) includes Boty, Haworth, Marisol and Saint Phalle but claims that Pop art was the preserve of male artists, suggesting that one of the reasons for this is 'the social conditioning of women ... [who] are presumed to value *intimacy and emotion*'. Although Livingstone has rectified his own omissions in a series of recent Pop shows, this statement haunts his amendments and makes his acknowledgment of Haworth as the 'mom of Pop' in the catalogue of her retrospective (*Artist's Cut* [The Mayor Gallery, London, 2006]) rather innocuous.

6. The reasons for women's exclusion from Pop art's discourse are more complex and do not only relate to criticism's biases. For the individual case of Drexler's neglect, see Sid Sachs 'Two or Three Things I Know about Her (A Sketch for Rosalyn Drexler)', in *Rosalyn Drexler: To Smithereens: Painting 1961–2003* (The University of the Arts-Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery:

Philadelphia, PA, 2004), pp. 9–13; for the institutional reasons for women artists' marginalisation with regards to British Pop artists such as Boty and Haworth, see the unpublished thesis of Sue Tate (ex Watling), 'Why Are There No Great Women Pop Artists?', MA thesis, Bath College of Higher Education, 1995, at Women's Art Archive/Make, Goldsmiths College of Art, London.

7. The exhibition *Hand Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–1962* (The Museum of Contemporary Art: Los Angeles, CA, 1992), has broadened our views of proper Pop strategies by denouncing the 'either/or division' that separated Abstract Expressionism's hand-paintedness and Pop's cold and machine-like production. It is the seminal interpretation of Warhol's work by Kenneth Silver ('Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art', in Russel Ferguson (ed.), *Hand Painted Pop* (Rizzoli International Publications: New York, 1993), pp. 179–205), which has, in light of queer theory, radically shifted the critical interpretation of Pop art from that of an art of surface as a metaphor for late capitalism's subjectivity to that of surface as a metaphor for (queer) sexual identity – that is, from an art of evacuated subjecthood to an art of subjective otherness.

8. *Pop* (Phaidon: London, 2005).

9. *Les Années Pop: 1956–1968* (Centre Georges Pompidou: Paris, 2001).

10. See note 36.

11. See Lawrence Alloway, *Six Painters and the Object* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum: New York, 1963) and Robert Rosenblum, 'Pop and Non-Pop Art', *Art and Literature*, Summer 1965, pp. 80–93.

12. Laura Mulvey's article 'Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious, or 'You don't know what is happening, Do you, Mr. Jones?' was initially published in *Spare Rib* (1973) and is reprinted in *Pop*, pp. 285–7. Drexler's work is represented by *Love and Violence*, 1964 (*Pop*, p. 131) and Boty's by her diptych *It's a Man's World I*, 1964 and *It's a Man's World II*, 1965 (*Pop*, p. 138).

13. See notes 1 and 28, in *Pop*, p. 48.

Gerhard Richter among its Anglo-American protagonists (Richard Hamilton, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol and Ed Ruscha) by discussing the artist in a single Pop essay rather than in the usually separate section on German Pop that defines the non-English manifestations of international Pop as secondary in most Pop catalogues and surveys. His Foucauldian focus on Pop Art's passion for images explains – yet does not justify – his canonisation of a selection of artists and works (paintings in particular) and his questionable disregard for Pop or Pop-related 'object-makers'.

Foster's main goal, however, is to provide a typology of paradigmatic Pop images exemplified by what he ingeniously theorises as Hamilton's 'tabular', Lichtenstein's 'screened', Warhol's 'seamy', Richter's 'photogenic' and Ruscha's 'cinematic' image. He also manages to get away with detrimental definitions of Pop Art that capitalise on its 'coolness' and 'impersonality'. Acknowledging American Pop's relative 'death of affect', Foster explains it as a symptom of the naturalness of consumer culture for American artists, rather than as a criterion of 'popness' in and of itself; he thereby challenges its validity in each individual case, proving again the most voracious representative of Pop blankness, Warhol himself, neither just an empathetic social realist nor just an indifferent viewer, but both: a postindustrial subject 'in shock'.<sup>10</sup> Despite the predictable rehearsals of his past criticism, Foster constructively opens up the definition of Pop subject matter. He identifies it with the 'new look of the world' – the 'mediated semblance' of the post-industrial environment rather than the narrowly defined commercial iconography of Pop – while he admits the structural change of Pop Art's media as a complex combination of the photographic with the painterly, the ready-made with the hand-made, and, of course, figuration with abstraction. By distinguishing the 'fine disregard' of his own 'hard-core' Pop artists from the widely 'deskilling' processes of 1960s' art, his view complies with Lawrence Alloway's initial apotheosis of American Pop painting and Robert Rosenblum's defense of Pop's modernist quality. Yet Foster manages to dismiss the strict overlap of Pop subject and manner that Rosenblum defined some forty years earlier as a criterion of canonical Pop, while analysing the paradoxes of the variable relations between Pop subject-matter and Pop modalities.<sup>11</sup>

In regard to gender, however, both *Pop* and Foster's essay exemplify the ambiguous steps that even the most advanced literature on Pop still takes – or even the tricks of Pop's discourse. On the one hand, the catalogue includes a feminist critique of Pop imagery by Laura Mulvey and three works by two important women Pop artists, the American Rosalyn Drexler and British Pauline Boty.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, this pleasant addition can be viewed as a predictable move of limited effect and value. Boty's and Drexler's inclusion is itself countered by the renewed virility of Foster's Pop canon and by the fact that the discussion of their work is not part of his main survey but is instead displaced in the catalogue entries that accompany the illustrations of their work. Furthermore, while Foster does bring up the issue of women Pop artists (such as Marisol and Niki de Saint Phalle) and summarises the reasons why women artists often abstained from Pop Art and why women Pop artists were neglected, he does it in two footnotes – the convenient margin where women Pop artists have been tellingly displaced ever since Lucy Lippard's history of Pop.<sup>13</sup> Even though we must celebrate the long overdue acknowledgment of Drexler in such a publication and Foster's honest homage to Boty (even though by means of the simple inclusion of her name in the list of the RCA's Pop

artists, since Boty is usually left out), we must admit that their choice seems to be merely a critical gambit that fulfills a post-feminist quota while acknowledging two important curatorial precedents in the United States and the recent rediscovery of Boty.<sup>14</sup>

Any constructive criticism must have something to propose, however. Nevertheless, revising the Pop canon to include women Pop artists is not what I would like to suggest. Coming too late to the scene of feminist art history, I have learnt to distrust the canon for its unshakable masculinist foundations and I am aware of the limitations and dangers that the separate examination of the work of women artists entails. Subjecting artists voluntarily or not to a universalising category – whether ‘woman’ or even ‘women’ – that feminism at its best has tried to denounce, and perpetuating the patriarchal assumptions responsible for the predicament of women and women artists, promotes neither their art nor feminist art history’s cause.<sup>15</sup> However, as a woman art historian who cares for radical inscriptions of difference ‘within the feminine’,<sup>16</sup> I would feel myself an accomplice to their neglect if I allowed the feminist deconstruction of subjectivity to further silence distinct and specific ‘cases’ of subjectivities articulated ‘from within the feminine’ and pronounced through a language that, like Pop, is hostile to women. This is also especially important when the artists, like the ones I am going to discuss, do not fall within the rigid chronological frame of feminist art while being rendered further invisible due to the complexities of Feminist Art’s discourse itself.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, I feel obliged to at least amplify the voices of ‘singular women’ who have not only employed Pop in a sophisticated way but have also radically modified it according to their specific socio-historical position as women artists and their personal understanding of womanhood – the one available to them culturally and historically as well as experientially, even though often grasped intuitively rather than through an alignment with feminist theories to come.

To begin redressing the asymmetry resulting from this double neglect of women Pop artists by both Pop and Feminist Art’s discourse, this article deals with three of the ‘ladies’ of international Pop. To Pop’s embrace of Boty and Drexler, I add another painter, the Belgian Axell, in order to denounce the Anglo-American monopoly of Pop’s margins, and to remind the reader that Pop’s rediscoveries, like mine, are selective, predicated upon the exclusion of other women who were in dialogue with Pop. The reasons for their neglect from the Pop canon and for their relative abstention from Pop Art is beyond the scope of this article, which will focus on defining their different Pop idioms and reclaiming the proto-feminist agendas that underlie their work and their public personae. Their marginal employment of Pop through disparate strategies will, I hope, cast new light on the predominantly heterogeneous phenomenon of Pop Art, while the reconsideration of their work will illuminate unwritten episodes of women’s art from the 1960s. Although because of their invisibility, these Pop women cannot etiologically be claimed as a legacy for the work of neo-Pop feminists such as Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger, they nevertheless constitute important precedents. Certain similarities – in attitude and in the common medium of painting – do stand behind my selection. By grouping them together, however, I mean neither to homogenise their Pop nor to essentialise their different perspectives. Conversely, by rehabilitating their disparate versions of Pop, I would like to reinforce the need for a continuous redefinition of Pop

14. Drexler was included in the exhibition *Pop Art: US/UK Connections, 1956–1966* (Menil Collection: Houston, 2001), and had a small retrospective in 2004 (see note 5).

15. For the dilemmas and the complexities of dealing with ‘women artists’ see Anne Wagner, ‘Sex Differences’, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner and O’Keeffe* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 1996), pp. 1–29 and Griselda Pollock, ‘Differencing the Canon: Feminism’s Encounter with the Canon’, in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art Histories* (Routledge: London, 1999), pp. 23–37. My notion of ‘singular women’ and singular ‘cases’ derives from the questioning of the monograph as a feminist tool by Kristen Frederickson and Sarah E. Webb (eds), *Singular Women: Writing the Artist* (The California University Press: Berkeley, CA, 2003).

16. ‘We can read for *inscriptions of the feminine* – which do not come from a fixed origin, this female painter, that woman artist but from those *working* within the predicament of femininity in phallogocentric cultures in their diverse formations and varying systems of representation’, Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, p. 33.

17. Women Pop artists have been largely neglected by feminist art histories as well. The emergence of feminist art in the 1970s and the proliferation of feminist criticisms ever since have contributed to the marginalisation of women Pop from feminist art discourse due to their dangerous and often essentialist flirtation with the enemy’s camp, popular culture. Aside the feminist critique of Pop Art itself, the feminist critique of the ‘nude’ and the unquestioned (until recently) acceptance of the maleness of ‘gaze’ in visual arts must have also obstructed the serious consideration of Boty’s and Axell’s radical explorations of the genre. Ironically, feminist theory has helped rescue the nudes of male Pop artists from their inherent sexism, as for instance in the case of Brenda Schmahmann, ‘Casting a Glimpse, Diverting the Gaze: George Segal’s Representation of the Female Body’, *American Art*, Autumn 1998, pp. 10–29. A postmodernist analysis – informed by a feminist perspective – of the masculinist bias of Pop Art and its discourse has been conducted by Cécile Whiting in her pioneering but still isolated gendered reading of Pop: *A Taste For Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997).

18. For a review of the 1990s 'bad girl' shows and of the feminist controversies triggered by them see Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2006), pp. 355–64. Although I discovered this study as a yet unpublished dissertation after I wrote this article, Buszek's feminist history of this slippery genre of popular culture, her documentation of its empowering potential for women artists as an icon of self-possessed female sexuality and her review of the conflicting feminist positions regarding the issue of sexuality and desire provides a 'third generation' feminist perspective indispensable for this article.

19. According to a phone interview with Peter Blake, 25 August 2004. Drexler's experience of a season as a 'lady wrestler' in Hell's Kitchen in the early 1950s is detailed in her novel *To Smithereens* (NAL: New York, 1972).

20. The New York-ishness of Drexler's junk sculpture is actually questionable. She first exhibited found-object sculptures along with her husband's paintings at Courtyard Gallery, Berkeley, CA in 1954 while temporarily residing there. While those works are now destroyed (only one is known to me through an unidentified review of the show at the Billy Kluver Archives, NJ, USA), Drexler's neglected association with the San Francisco alternative art scene merits further investigation that might illuminate certain aspects of her gritty vernacular.

21. Her first painting show was a dual show with sculptor Tom Doyle at Zabriskie Gallery (April 1963), and it is mistakenly listed as a 1962 solo in all her catalogues to date.

22. Drexler resumed painting in the 1980s. Although this section was written as a response to the first recent retrospective of Drexler's work at the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, Philadelphia, two more exhibitions took place since its writing (see n. 24 and 29). The latest one (*Rosalyn Drexler: I Am the Beautiful Stranger, Paintings of the 60s*, Pace Wildenstein, New York, 2007), by being the only one in an important commercial gallery and in New York, promises to change the fate of the artist. In its catalogue several works, including *Marilyn Pursued by Death*, 1963, which in previous catalogues was dated in 1967, appear with corrected dates. Unless I have further documentation (as in case of *Love and Violence* which was published in *Art Voices* a year prior to the date ascribed by Pace Wildenstein), I follow the dates in Pace Wildenstein's catalogue, because, according to my communication with John Mason, they are based on the dates signed on the verso of the paintings. This decision was made also according to the will of the artist, who obviously has no further record of the dates of her works.

rather than of its canon. By evoking the controversial feminist *topos* of the 'bad girl', however, to address the representation of women and/or the public personae of Axell, Boty and Drexler, I not only want to underscore the proto-feminist thrust of their Pop but also to suggest the complicity of feminist art criticism in their marginalisation due to feminism's intergenerational conflicts and lack of consensus about feminist uses of pop culture's genres (the pin-up in particular) and the possibilities of an empowering visualisation of female sexuality and pleasure.<sup>18</sup>

### Drexler's bad girls

Immortalized in a wrestler's pose in Andy Warhol's *Album of a Mat Queen*, 1962 and remembered by Peter Blake even to this day as a 'woman wrestler' rather than a Pop painter, Rosalyn Drexler (b. 1926) is one of the nearly forgotten female participants of New York Pop, although she remains an acknowledged novelist and playwright.<sup>19</sup> Her works can be found in important public US collections, including the Whitney Museum, yet mostly as bequests rather than acquisitions and condemned indefinitely to storage rooms. Yet Drexler's dual presence in the New York art scene was quickly felt even by the media. She was hailed, for instance, along with Warhol, in June 1963 by *Harper's Bazaar*, while her work was included in several historic, yet not the most influential, Pop shows of the sixties. As part of the downtown avant-garde of the 1960s that led to Pop, Drexler was associated with both of its most alternative scenes: the Reuben Gallery, where she had her first show in 1960, and the Judson Poets' Theatre, where she first staged her plays in 1964. Like many of her contemporaries, Drexler originally began as a 'junk' sculptor, a saviour of urban debris and a *bricoleur* of found objects and took part in only one happening.<sup>20</sup> Although she did not stop making sculptures as abruptly as she wants us to believe after her Reuben show, and she did not make her public debut as a painter until 1963, it was around 1961–2 that Drexler shifted to figurative painting, initiating a body of idiosyncratic Pop painted collages which she abandoned by the end of the decade.<sup>21</sup>

Along with recent paintings, some of Drexler's early masterpieces were first exhibited in the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery in spring 2004.<sup>22</sup> Considered one of her first collage paintings by curator Sid Sachs, and certainly one of her few works that represent a consumer object, *God Shaves*, 1961–2 features a frontally depicted everyday man – towel and razor proudly in his hands and foam on his face – in front of a golden disk of Warholian deification and pre-feminist laughter.<sup>23</sup> Aside from this welcome surprise, the selection of 1960s Drexlers offered a typical sampling of the main themes of her early production. We can distinguish at least three categories of paintings: pictures that deal with media stardom and modern spectacles in general (such as *Marilyn Pursued by Death*, 1963 and also the small and parodic *Al Capone Combs his Hair*, 1963), ambiguous erotic couples (*Kiss me Stupid*, 1964, Fig. 3), and male-populated business-like interactions that range from political summits (*Do you Have Back Trouble Too?*, 1964, featuring John F. Kennedy and probably Nikita Khrushchev) to gangster business as usual (*Love and Violence*, 1963, Fig. 1).<sup>24</sup> In most of these painted collages, Drexler staged everyday scenes that she clipped from diverse sources such as tabloid papers and film posters, often photo-mechanically enlarged and always painted over with oil or liquitex. De-contextualised by means of their placement in flat,

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**Fig. 1.** Rosalyn Drexler, *Love and Violence*, 1963, acrylic, oil and paper collage on canvas, 172.1 × 154.3 cm. © 2007 Rosalyn Drexler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Ellen Labenski. Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York.

monochromatic and often geometrically framed fields, Drexler's 'transaction paintings', as Robert Storr has astutely named them, of love or violence amount to visual clichés of the mediatised, whether noirish or pulp, melodrama of post-war American 'dreamed' life.<sup>25</sup>

Drexler's Pop idiom does not rely facilely on the inclusion of Pop idols such as Monroe in *Marilyn Pursued by Death* (Fig. 2) and the lost *Something's Got to Give*, 1967 or Chubby Checker in the eponymous painting of 1964. Certainly the references to media heroes and spectacles (from television, as in the televised death of Kid Paret, to fiction cinema, as in *The Dream: a.k.a. King Kong Eats his Words*) shares international Pop's fascination with American mass culture. Yet her twisted selections – such as Marilyn's ominous flight from paparazzi lenses rather than the publicity shots used by Warhol, or her penchant for Pop culture's anti-heroes, from Al Capone to Kid Paret – turn Drexler's fascination into an obsession with the darkest side of popular culture ranging from wrestling to noir and plain pulp.<sup>26</sup> Drexler's *Marilyn* is in fact the most *noir* of all. In addition to the literally black background from which she emerges along with her companion, running in vain away from photographers after a friend's funeral, she is encircled by a deathly red line that recalls police practices of tracing the positions of murder victims, and turns the painting into a posthumous

23. My notion of the transgressive power of 'laughter' as a feminist strategy is informed by Jo Anna Isaac, *Feminism & Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (Routledge: London, 1996).

24. The focus of this article is on Drexler's representation of women. Other series of works include her *Men and Machine* paintings that first resurfaced in *Rosalyn Drexler and the Ends of Man*. Paul Robenson Gallery, Rutgers (The State University of New Jersey: Newark, NJ, 2006). Most of her *Good Life* series remain unlocated.

25. Robert Storr, 'Pulp Pictures', in *Rosalyn Drexler: To Smithereens*, p. 3.

26. Wrestling is the spectacle par excellence for Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Noonday Press: New York, 1972), p. 15. It is not accidental that Drexler has also borrowed images from the books of crime photographer Weegee, as in *Study for No Pictures*, 1963. In my upcoming dissertation 'Women in Pop: Difference and Marginality', New York, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, I will further discuss the relation of Drexler's and Warhol's noir/tabloid sublime with Weegee's noir sensibility and voyeurism, as well as the cinematic quality of Drexler's taste for violence.

27. Even though the often suggested comparison of her work with the *Death and Disaster* Series of Warhol is just, her sensibility also warrants comparison with the overall underground sensibility of his Factory and, paradoxically, with the satirical realism of Oldenburg's soft sculpture. Even though Drexler focused on the consumed figure rather than the consumer object, they both shared an absurdist realist strategy and aesthetics.

28. See Allison M. Gingeras' distinction between neo-Pop, which deals with the 'grittier cult forms and vernacular culture', and classical Pop's sensibility, as it reflects an inherent duality in Pop, 'Performing the Self: Martin Kippenberger', *Artforum*, October 2004, p. 173.

29. For an analysis of masculinity as represented by Drexler see Michael Kimmel, 'Rosalyn Drexler: Unmasking Masculinity', in *Rosalyn Drexler and the Ends of Man*, pp. 58–67. Drexler's one-dimensional men are worth comparing with those of another Pop artist from New York, Idelle Weber, as well as with early works of Rosenquist and Howard Kanovitz. For a reading of Drexler's representations of men as extensions of the media, by means of machines ranging from guns to computers see my review of her latest show at Pace Wildenstein: 'Rosalyn Drexler: Who Does She Think She Is?', *NY Arts Magazine*, (September–October 2007).

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**Fig. 2.** Rosalyn Drexler, *Marilyn Pursued by Death*, 1963, acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 127 × 101.6 cm. © 2007 Rosalyn Drexler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Ellen Labenski. Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York.

memorial of the death of Monroe's private self by the media while she was still alive. Moreover, most of Drexler's 'transaction' pictures (of slapping, hitting, looting, fighting, shooting, killing, smoking, dancing, embracing, kissing) are populated by intentionally unidentifiable figures implicated in familiar scenarios of love and violence drawn from pop culture and media imagery. Having left the city gutter of the Reuben days for the mass media spectacle, Drexler did not opt for the fake sheen of the American dream. Instead, she continued her task as a saviour – yet of mass-spectacle excess, in the form of found images of interpersonal and social violence.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the Lower East Side, with the grittiness of its mass and vernacular culture, left an indelible mark on the rest of her production.<sup>28</sup> The synecdochic power of these underlying yet de-narrativised visual clichés of erotic or business intrigue enables Drexler's anonymous women and men (lovers, killers or executives) to invoke American pop culture, through an assortment of pictorial devices.<sup>29</sup>

Critics have already pointed to the various framing devices through which Drexler might alternately reference the layout of magazine covers and the



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**Fig. 3.** Rosalyn Drexler, *Kiss me Stupid*, 1964, acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 50.8 × 61 cm. © 2007 Rosalyn Drexler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Ellen Labenski. Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York.

cinema screen itself. But what is most important here is the way she over-paints her collaged cut-outs: turning volumes into flat geometrical shapes and reducing rudimentary value gradations to even starker contrasts in an abstract simulation of the appearance of cheaply reproduced photographic illustrations for magazines and newspapers. Even more than her actual borrowing of images from their mass media vehicles by means of clipping, the formal and material evocation of their omnipresence from screen/paper to life and vice versa colours the ‘popness’ of Drexler’s vision. Drawn from the mass media that served for her as a modern image-bank of collective memory, Drexler’s paintings become near-nightmarish apparitions of American everydayness fashioned with means appropriately available to the colonised imagination of the media man: lurid colours and photographic effects.<sup>30</sup> Whether their origins are pulp or tabloids, B or noir movies, Drexler’s paintings anticipate the subsequent ‘tabloidisation [or pulp- and noir-isation if you prefer] of modern sensibility’.<sup>31</sup>

Drexler’s ‘popness’ can also be mistakenly and superficially discredited, through the contrast of her alleged painterly ‘hotness’ with the ‘coolness’ of the hard-core boys of Pop, with the most prominent of them being of course Warhol. Yet comparing Warhol’s silk-screened and serial appropriations of products (whether consumer products, public faces, or news icons) as the perfect metaphor for Pop’s compliance with late capitalism’s standardisation to Lichtenstein’s own duplications of found images only proves that the degree of impersonality involved in mainstream Pop is neither absolute nor determinative. Michael Lobel has recently revealed Lichtenstein’s anxious negotiation of depth and surface (artistic originality and its Pop antidote) in his impersonally mechanical yet modernist appropriations from pop culture.<sup>32</sup> Drexler’s use of hand-applied

30. Storr (*Drexler: To Smithereens*, p. 3) puts astutely the antiaesthetic drive of Drexler’s flat colours: ‘[her hues] frankly vulgar materiality banish aesthetic aura the way enamel house-paint on a construction-site fence bounces light back at the spectator . . . depleting rather than . . . enriching its glow’.

31. Jack Kroll, ‘Tabloid Universe’, *Newsweek*, March 1964, p. 53.

32. Michael Lobel, *Image Duplicator: Roy Lichtenstein and the Emergence of Pop Art* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2002).

33. Drexler's own myth of her artistic origins is in accordance with such an interpretation. In Thomas Sokolowski, *Rosalyn Drexler: Intimate Emotion* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 1986), Drexler associates her artistic origins with her mother's childhood gifts (cheap reproductions of realist masters and colouring books) and her ongoing search for the 'real' to a traumatic experience: her father's disbelief in her creation when she 'copied a picture from a kids' book for which she 'felt dishonest'. In a sense her Pop realism is a continuous praxis of artistic dishonesty, hiding copies by copies.

34. Drexler, dual interview by the author and Sachs, 28 May 2004.

35. Foster's 'The Return of the Real', in *The Return of the Real* (The MIT Press: New York, 1996), pp.127–37, first classifies the contradictory interpretations of Pop art's realism as simulacral (based on copies) and referential (still symbolic or transparent realism) and theorises Warhol's realism as 'traumatic'.

36. Foster, *Return of the Real*.

paint or warm colours and her selection of particular subjects do not suggest in and of themselves an expressionist 'hotness' and a subjective depth that deprive her pictures of their own 'popness'. Drexler's painted collages are embalmed appropriations of reproductions of reproductions with the structure of industrial reproducibility and repetition (keys to several definitions of Pop Art) internalised – presented in layered form rather than in a Warholian grid-based series. Neither paintings nor collages, they are rather *faux* paintings with their appropriated images of images further copied in paint – simulacral surfaces over-painted by hand in a gesture of fake originality. They thus take part in the same anti-expressionist sensibility that nourished American Pop, albeit in ample paint, not as images of mechanical duplication but as statements of ultimate artistic duplicity.<sup>33</sup>

The notion of *faux* painting seems to be contradicted by the emotional charge and political engagement of Drexler's pictures, which often deal with political issues such as the struggle of the sexes or American racism. The chasm between a detached vision of the American dream gone wrong and its personal and critical mourning is in fact deepened by her comments. Drexler does not hide her 'disturbance' by the daily media news, which stokes the emotional intensity of her works. Recently, however, she denounced the significance of the content of selected scenes, instead emphasising their independent power as images.<sup>34</sup> The incompatibility of these two states of mind is not unlike the incompatibility of the two prevailing interpretations of Pop's realism as simulacral and referential.<sup>35</sup> Instead of taking the temperature of Drexler's pictures to measure their 'popness' according to the degree of their affective-ness or affectless-ness, Foster's interpretation of Warhol's 'traumatic realism' offers a model that bridges the incompatibility of simulacral and referential views of Pop realism.<sup>36</sup> Traumatized by contemporary media reality and social reality itself, a 'subject in shock' (as Warhol for Foster) rather than a conclusively empathetic or evacuated subject, Drexler overpaints her traumatic cut-outs to 'screen' with paint the repetitive return of the real. The result, according to the psychoanalytical accounts of trauma, is both the warding off of the wound and its unavoidable melancholic production. As in Barthesian photography, structurally linked to Drexler's images, trauma ruptures the screen that wards it off as a piercing *punctum*, a painful arrow that can hit the viewer whether by means of content (weird details, awkward gestures and expressions in the case of Drexler's rich gesture and body language) or through pictorial means as Foster suggests in the case of Warhol (such as the sinister colours used emphatically by Drexler): so for instance, the strangely arrested hand in *Kiss me Stupid* (Fig. 3) or the red tie that singles out the twice-appearing figure, recognisable from media during the civil right struggles as Sheriff Connor, in Drexler's *Is it true what they say about Dixie?*, 1966 – a quasi-fascist march of one-dimensional businessmen that intimates rather than transparently represents American racism. Likewise, in *Baby, It's All Right* of 1963, the return of the real pierces reality's apathetic screen in the form of an awkward yet menacing fleshy shadow on the cheek and hand of the otherwise tenderly embraced girl.

In such paintings of the erotic entrapments of women and men, it seems that the rupturing 'real' takes the form of a masculine menace. Drexler, after all, is one of the first artists to address the issue of rape and her own experience as a 'lady wrestler' has not escaped a certain mythologising: the pre-feminist act of a woman learning how to 'fight back', as Drexler's heroines potentially do. Drexler's women, however, neither always fight

back nor stand alone. Stemming from noir or B-movie 'romance' narratives, but embodying the gender roles that movies both reflect and help to socialise, they are always represented in relation to men. They are trapped in the inevitable dance of desire and abuse that belies the discontents of both dangerous liaisons and familial partnership in American patriarchal society by means of dependency. Yet Drexler's girls are indeed the tough or *bad girls* of the underbelly of the affluent American society, the outlaws of *The Feminist Mystique*.<sup>37</sup> Unlike Marisol's performers of bourgeois femininity socialising in parties or strolling with their babies and dogs or Lichtenstein's girls who dream and cry for engagement rings, formed differentially from their lovers,<sup>38</sup> Drexler's *bad girls* might not really fight back – but at least go as far as they can.<sup>39</sup> More often than not, the 'real' of the patriarchal power structure does lurk in her images, destroying the potential 'pleasure' of her girls. In *The Bite*, 1963, for instance, both gaze and mouth (of a Bacon-like meatiness) nail the female partner in her immanent position of reclining powerlessness. The iconographic differences between *Rape*, 1962 and *Embrace*, 1964 do not make evident the contradictory nature of their subject-matter. In both cases, the towering and darkened leaning of the male turns women's pleasure into threat, love/embrace into rape.

The same ambiguity, however, might have been used to empowering ends. In *Kiss me Stupid* of 1964 (Fig. 3), for instance, Drexler prefigures Barbara Kruger's destabilisation of the patriarchal conspiracies of mass media sign systems. Here we have the ultimate Drexler embrace: a violently erotic or erotically violent kiss unites two figures – the girl's face, turned towards us, dissolves in an abstract pattern of erotic *jouissance* while her hand, an awkward claw, seems violently immobilised by her lover's fist. A found image itself, *Kiss me Stupid*, is coupled with a found title, the title of a comedy featuring Kim Novak, released the year of the painting's production. Drexler has commented on her love of titles that she chooses after she finishes the work and that she juxtaposes ironically with her images. But here she also steals the language of mass culture in the same way that Kruger steals the colloquialisms of the marketplace. Juxtaposing a media-found image and a title with discarded pronouns that heighten the ambiguity of the couple's body language, she exposes mass culture's clichés of women's victimisation but also plays with the viewer's expectations for prescribed gender roles. Who is stupid? And whose pleasure is at stake? Who is really forcing this kiss? Amidst the threatening and abusive power of Drexler's post-war males, who significantly appear interchangeable in her 1960s gallery as lovers/politicians/executives/gangsters and mafiosos, Drexler offers positions for alternative spectatorship and for different, pleasurable, subject positions. In a sense, she precedes Kruger as a teller of feminist 'obscene jokes' that do not exclude women from her audience.<sup>40</sup>

### Pop's bad girls

Boty (1938–66) is the already rediscovered blonde of British Pop while the Belgian Axell (1935–72) is a latecomer with an idiosyncratic hybrid of British and French Pop influences.<sup>41</sup> Unlike Drexler and her empowering painted images of bad girls, they incarnated Pop's bad girls through both their art and relatively wild lives, nourished by the different counter-cultural moments of the London/Paris/Brussels axis during the 1960s.<sup>42</sup> Both the life and work of Boty and Axell, who actually met in

37. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Norton: New York, 1963). For a similar view, see Storr, *Drexler: To Smithereens*, p. 3.

38. See Lobel 'Engendering Difference', in *Image Duplicator*, pp. 127–59.

39. As do her contemporaneous heroines in her plays and novels, see especially Selma in *I am the beautiful stranger* (Dell Publishing: New York, 1966).

40. Isaac, *The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, p. 46.

41. Boty and Axell enjoyed relative success during their short lives, which makes their posthumous neglect more conspicuous. Described as a Pop icon by Terry Ann Riggs ('It's a Man's World: An Analysis of the Life and Work of Pauline Boty', MA thesis, Courtauld Institute, 1996), Boty was forgotten after her death only to be rediscovered by David Allan Mellor in 1993 on the occasion of the Barbican Art Gallery exhibition *The Sixties Art Scene in London*. Mellor and Tate (ex-Watling) contributed to the catalogue of her first retrospective, *Pauline Boty: The Only Blonde in the World* (Whitford Fine Art and Mayor Gallery: London, 1998). Ever since, Boty has indeed reappeared in British Pop exhibitions. Tate's dissertation, 'Gendering the Field: Pauline Boty and the Predicament of the Woman Artist in the British Pop Art Movement', Bath Spa University College, 2004, listed in British Library since 2005 but withheld by the author, is a long-awaited illumination of the artist's work by a rare witness of all Boty's works. Axell's first solo took place at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels already in 1967. Her posthumous silencing is disrupted by a series of retrospectives, largely due to her husband's commitment to her belated recognition. Sarah Wilson's interpretation of her work, on the occasion of the exhibition *Erotomobiles* (The Mayor Gallery: London, 1993) and her recent retrospective *Evelyne Axell: From Pop Art to Paradise* (Maison de la Culture de la Province de Namur, Musée provincial Felicien Rops, Galerie Detour, Namur and Jambes: Belgium, 2004), remains the most valuable scholarly contribution to Axell's nascent literature.

42. Their biographies are full of mythologised love affairs (in the case of Axell, even with women) or incidents of liberated behaviour. The status of Axell as a married mother in Brussels of the 1960s makes her expressions of liberation more exceptional compared with the swinging Londoner Boty. Yet interviews of friends of Axell, such as Poumi and Themis Tibbs, corroborate that the monopolised view of Axell in the various biographies circulated by her husband Jean Antoine need to be read with extreme caution, especially considering that he

was largely absent from her life due to his work as a roaming film producer for Belgian TV.

43. Axell met Boty at her studio in 1964 during the filming of *'Dieu est-il Pop?'*, an art documentary on British Pop artists (Boty, Caulfield, Jones, Phillips) by Axell's husband. Mr Antoine speculates that language problems must have limited the depth of their discussion. In contrast to *Pop Goes the Easel, Dieu est-il Pop?* features Boty as a fully fledged Pop painter accepting the Pop art rubric for her art. Boty died in 1966, aged 28 from cancer after giving birth to her daughter, for the survival of whom she refused to accept treatment. Axell died in 1972, aged 37, in a car accident.

44. In response to Boty's rediscovery at the Barbican, James Hall ('Unatural Selection', *New Statesman and Society*, 10 March 1993, p. 34) sees Boty as 'a fringe Pop-artist ... trained at the Royal College of Art but whose main claim to fame is that every man who set eyes on her fell head-over-heels', and argues that her feminism is narrow because 'she doesn't set up any alternative models of femininity. Every Boty girlie is a girlie is a girlie. They are locked into their bimboism as firmly as they are locked in their panel in the picture'. See also notes 17 and 18.

45. For the masculine ethos of RCA, see Tate (ex Watling) *Why Are There No Great Women Pop Artists*.

46. In *Pop Goes the Easel*, Boty points to the duality of her concerns: dreams and popular culture. Her pre-edited interview with Russell, however, reveals the real depth of her concerns (Adam Smith, 'Pauline Boty: Now You See Her, Now You Don't', unpublished manuscript, pp. 97–105).

47. Boty's laughter is part and parcel of the Boty myth.

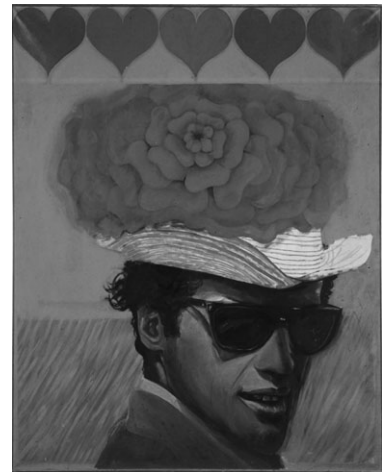
1964, are uncannily shot through with similarities, most prominent being their acting careers, their tragic early deaths, and above all their spectacular celebration of female sexuality in life and art.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, their brief success and posthumous neglect is predicated upon the comparable detrimental effects of their stunning beauty and unabashed celebration of women's pleasure – responsible for the relegation of their art's motivation to a personal love of life that has diminished the sophistication of their proto-feminist Pop projects.<sup>44</sup>

Neither of them studied painting formally, but unlike the self-taught Drexler they did study art. After gaining her national diploma at Wimbledon Art School, where she specialised in stained glass, Boty joined the Royal College of Art in 1958 (a year before the RCA enclave of Derek Boshier, David Hockney and Peter Phillips), again as a stained glass major – a more obvious option for post-war women's art careers as well as an easier department to enter under the masculine ethos of the fine art departments of the RCA at the time.<sup>45</sup> Her major might have been behind her exclusion from the 1961 selection of paintings and sculptures for the famous student show *Young Contemporaries* that brought international attention to RCA's Pop. However, her inclusion in Ken Russell's TV documentary *Pop Goes the Easel* (1962) that introduced the work of Peter Blake, Boshier, Boty and Phillips as Pop artists placed her at the centre of British Pop even before her first painting exhibition at the Grabowski Gallery in 1963.

Boty's earliest work is comprised predominantly of collages that mingle clippings from Victorian illustrations with excerpts of contemporary consumer culture (ranging from magazine cut-outs to cigarette packs and wrapping papers). Despite the surrealist effect of their dream-like quality and Ernst-like Victorianism, Boty's neo-dadaist collages reveal her own early fascination with pop culture's content and look by means of their titles (as in the unidentified *No Triffids*, probably inspired by the popular science fiction book *Day of the Triffids* published in 1951) and their iconography (ads of American coffee beans, news-photos of baseball players, film-stills of Marilyn, or women's hair-dye sampling curls, etc.).<sup>46</sup> Her early endeavours in painting consisted of abstract paintings with monochromatic fields interrupted by wavering targets, circles or other quasi-geometrical shapes – which she herself linked to the 'shapes' and 'atmosphere' of 1930s musicals. Her 'proper' Pop (in terms of British Pop) production, begun around 1963, consists of a series of paintings in which she grafted her penchant for quasi-geometric abstraction to her collagist strategies of cut-and-paste, spectacularly translated into paint. A genuine member of the British post-war youth that brought London to its 'swinging' boom, the fashionable Boty was also known as the Bardot of Wimbledon and the RCA, as a participant in its satirical revues, a theatre and TV actress turned radio presenter, the sexy twister of *Pop Goes the Easel* and Peter Cook's *Establishment*, as well as the hostess of pot- and alcohol-laced parties that featured Bob Dylan and her husband's New Left milieu. In her painting, therefore, Boty celebrates popular culture with a mood which changes from her dream-like apparitions of space-age science fiction to the unabashed *fanzine frenzy* of a sixties girl. Both her changing modes and moods are, however, constantly underlined by a mature proto-feminist consciousness and liberating laughter – both literal and metaphoric.<sup>47</sup>

Like Warhol and Blake, Boty also deifies media stars. Yet aside from Hollywood's Monroe, it is alternative media idols that find their way into her Pop portrait gallery, ranging from cult figures of new wave cinema such as Monica Vitti and Jean Paul Belmondo to legendary antiheroes such as gangster Big Jim Colossimo. In such portraits, the copying of publicity stills and news pictures, deliberately invoked by means of quasi-photographic *grisaille*, meaningfully highlights the illusory reality of their mediated existence. Moreover, their adornment in each painting intensifies their individual significance in her pantheon of media heroes/heroines, as if lifted from a fan's personal album. As long as the strong influence of Blake, her friend and Pop mentor, lasts, these painterly Pop icons are juxtaposed with a series of valentine hearts, rows of zig-zag patterns, fairground letters, etc. Yet, unlike Blake's indiscriminate, nostalgic apotheosis of circus monsters and tattooed ladies alongside contemporary movie-stars (most prominent being Bardot herself), Boty's heroes and heroines are deliberately of present day mythology.<sup>48</sup> It is thus Belmondo rather than James Dean who is featured in her *With Love to Jean Paul Belmondo*, 1962 (Fig. 4) as the new idol of teenage rebelliousness and freedom, but also as the object of a contemporary and sophisticated woman's desire.<sup>49</sup> Underneath a row of green and red valentine hearts, Belmondo is crowned by an eroticising rose that has escaped the decorative frames of Blake's Victorian cards to embody her own desire. She thus turns Belmondo into an equivalent of Bardot, but 'for women only', in a subversive inversion that locates female desire within Pop's iconology and in a fanzine gesture that validates the pleasure of the female gaze that is involved in popular culture's objectification of male pop stars and in the consequent expressions of female fandom.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, unlike Blake's amassing of calendar pinups and publicity stills of sexy stars that recall bachelors' walls, and unlike Warhol's repetition of flat ironed faces of public glamour and private vacuity, Boty significantly isolates her media stars. In *The Only Blonde in the World* of 1963 (Fig. 5), she gives a glimpse of a feathery vision of Marilyn captured in an unsuccessful flight to privacy, both like and unlike that of Drexler's Marilyn. Bracketed by two brilliant green wings with red target-like forms, Marilyn is momentarily revealed as if by the instantaneous opening of a photographic aperture which threatens to make her vanish in a parodic juxtaposition of her three-dimensional (yet photographic) self with the flat imperviousness of abstraction – that is modern art's revered proof of deep subjectivity.

It is, however, in paintings such as *5-4-3-2-1* (Fig. 6) and *My Colouring Book* both from 1963, that Boty arrives at more individual, and distinctly proto-feminist expressions of the fan-drive of her Pop endeavours. In the latter she literalises the 'broken heart' lyrics of the eponymous Pop song through a series of painted scrapbook templates that translate the pasted lyrics into paint. Literalising Blake's Pop art goal of achieving the equivalent of Pop music in painting, Boty expands her sources from visual to musical and radically mingles word with image. By denying the representation of her female heroine, she rejects the canonical victimisation of the feminine in Pop romances such as those by Lichtenstein and instead visualises the voice of her desire (as well as that of its singer, Dusty Springfield, a rare female Pop star of the time) and its loss.

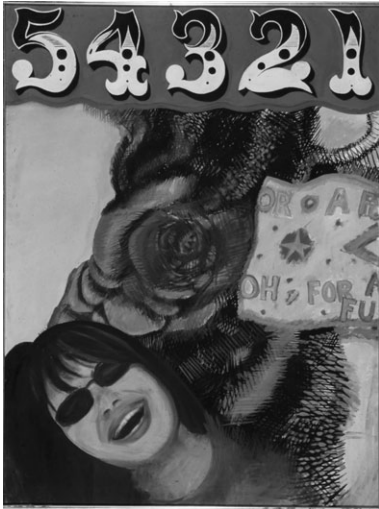


**Fig. 4.** Pauline Boty, *With Love to Jean Paul Belmondo*, 1962, oil on canvas, 122 × 152 cm. Private Collection. © The Estate of Pauline Boty. Reproduced courtesy of the Women's Art Library/Make.

48. For Boty's comments on her 'nostalgia for Now' and the 'present day Mythology' of her works, see *The Only Blonde in the World*, p. 9.

49. According to an e-mail conversation with Smith, Boty was the author of her radio transmissions for *Public Ear* (between 1963 and 1964) such as 'Teenage Heros' (17 November 1963), where she considers Belmondo the new James Dean, a prototype for teenagers' rebelliousness. She also compares his masculine myth to the feminine one of Bardot (Smith, *Now You See Her*, p. 128). Her choice of Belmondo is also significant since Boty was a serious supporter of New Wave cinema according to her brother John.

50. My emphasis on the 'fanzine' element of Boty's Pop is aligned with positive views of female fandom (as opposed to its standard view as passive occupation), as initiated by the studies of Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garbar in the late 1970s at Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. For a feminist view of fandom as anthropological fetishism see also Lorraine Gamman and Merja Mäkinen, *Female Fetishism* (New York University Press: New York, 1995). The mediation of desire through fans' imaginary romances recalls that of David Hockney's encoding of references to his homoerotic worship of Cliff Richard. Boty's work bears evidence of further dialogue with Hockney.



**Fig. 6.** Pauline Boty, *5-4-3-2-1*, 1963, oil on canvas, 125 × 100 cm. Private Collection. © The Estate of Pauline Boty. Reproduced courtesy of the Women's Art Library/Make.

51. According to Nick Garland, Boty modelled herself on Bardot 'in a knowingly humorous, daffy way' (Smith, *Now You See Her*, p. 20). For the empowering potential of such a feminine impersonation, prior to feminist art, see Simone de Beauvoir, *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome* (Reynal & Company: New York, 1960), originally published in *Esquire* in 1959.

52. Sarah Wilson ('Greer, Sex and the Sixties', in *The Sixties: Britain and France, 1962–1973 The Utopian Years* [Phillip Wilson: London, 1997]) analyses the revolutionising power of the contraceptive pill in England, largely popularised in the 1960s.

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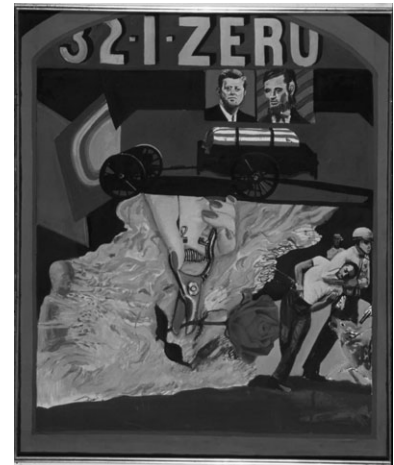
**Fig. 5.** Pauline Boty, *The Only Blonde in the World*, 1963, oil on canvas, 1224 × 1530 × 25 mm. Tate Britain, London. © The Estate of Pauline Boty/© Tate, London 2007.

Boty's celebration of popular culture was not naïve, however. Having criticised the romance narratives of women's magazines as a radio presenter on *Public Ear* as post-war propaganda for women's return to home – literal 'commercials of marriage' in her words – she demonstrated concern with woman's duality in post-war media as either mother/wife and household consumer or as consumable object of male desire, be it star or pin-up. Exploiting the sexy glamour of the latter two in art and life, she found her own way to voice and defend women's neglected right to pleasure.<sup>51</sup> As such, in *5-4-3-2-1* she celebrates one of the first Pop mod television shows, *Steady Ready Go*, for which she and her friend Boshier had danced. Despite the vestigial homage to Blake by means of funfair numbers that themselves reference both the song with which the show began and the space-race excitement, Boty celebrates not the paper body of Blake's pasted pin-ups but the ecstatic laughter of the show's celebrated presenter, lost in what has been justly interpreted as an orgasmic pandemonium of labial and hairy rose petals, reinforced by the illustration of some explicitly empowering lyrics: 'Oh, for a fu\*\*'. Whether or not she painted the brunette presenter of *Steady Ready Go* as a stand-in for herself, as implied by several reviewers, *5-4-3-2-1* is a magnificent appropriation of the pleasure principle by a girl of the pill generation and its celebration in a Pop vernacular.<sup>52</sup>

As Boty's student rebelliousness, marked by her participation in the carnivalesque demonstrations of the RCA Anti-Ugly action, subsided, it gave way not to a more politically informed view of the cold-war world under the influence of her husband's New Left agenda, as implied by Sue Tate (ex Watling), but to the more sombre look of her latest sociopolitical

concerns.<sup>53</sup> In *Countdown to Violence* of 1964 (Fig. 7), which Adam Smith calls ‘Countdown to Vietnam’, Boty’s youthful Pop culture enthusiasm succumbs to the traumatic social reality of her times, in light of the media globalisation of the 1960s. The pill-generation’s countdown to women’s sexual liberation, which is here countered by a pessimistic countdown to worldwide extinction, can be seen as a possible sequel to *5-4-3-2-1*. Under an ambiguous red and green arch that recalls Phillips’ pin-ball machine framing devices, Boty pieces together different representational systems, abstraction and figuration, flat colour fields and fairground signage with iconic excerpts of mediated (war, racial and political) violence. A familiar media image of a self-immolating monk from Saigon is dissolved into a symbolist sea of orange flames revealing a glimpse of the Birmingham race riots (best remembered from Warhol’s (*Race Riots* series) while both scenes are crowned by Kennedy’s funerary carriage and black and white imitations of photos of Kennedy and Lincoln. However, the blossoming power of female sexuality evoked by Boty’s roses is here lethally and literally cut by a familiar female hand that is borrowed from one of her early collages. In light of British Pop’s purposively defective painterliness that ranges from Hockney’s to Boshier’s, Boty’s compendium of cold war era disasters does not partake in the radicality of the Warholian repetitive and simulacral appropriations. Conversely, her painted-collage aesthetics is more comparable to Ronald Kitaj’s anarchic compartmentalisation of the pictorial space and even James Rosenquist’s near surrealist combination of fragments of media imagery. Capitalising on the critically distancing effects of montage, but maintaining by means of *grisaille* the media origins of her apocalyptic vision of 1960s politics, Boty’s puzzle is a melancholic compendium of found icons of (American) civilisation’s discontents; it samples the underbelly of her time’s global visual inflation neither as a transparent piece of (social) realism, nor as an uncritical simulation of its media reappearance but as another scrap book ‘page’ from the journal of a now distressed young woman of the 1960s.

Boty’s further political input to Pop ranges from expected youthful idealisations such as those of Castro and Che Guevara in her lost *July 26*, to her response to the missile crisis with her *Cuba Si* to the adamantly feminist politics of her most discussed diptych *It’s a Man’s World I and II*, to which I will return. It also includes more idiosyncratic responses to local politics such as the Profumo scandal addressed in her *Scandal 63*, where her leftish and sexual politics enmesh indelibly. In the latter, it is not just a news topic of local interest that is taken as a subject matter. Instead it is the complex class, race and gender nuances of the scandalous affair that are exposed by Boty’s juxtaposition of the working class Christine Keeler with the male protagonists of the affair in an indictment of the hypocrisies of the Conservative Party’s politics, while the role of sex and media in contemporary politics is intimated by her use of the emblematic photograph of Christine Keeler by Lewis Morley. By painting Keeler nude and gazing defiantly the viewer, however, unlike the pathetic character described by the press Boty presents Keeler, as Maria Elena Buszek observes, not as ‘a dizzy street urchin lured by powerful men into a life of debauchery’ but as an admirable woman – ‘a subtle reminder of the surprising realms in which the sexualized woman exerted a powerful influence in modern culture’.<sup>54</sup> Posing Keeler in an appropriated pin-up pose popularised by a photographer for whom Boty did not hesitate to denude herself during the very same year, the artist seems to acknowledge



**Fig. 7.** Pauline Boty, *Countdown to Violence*, 1964, oil on canvas, 98 × 83 cm. Private Collection. © The Estate of Pauline Boty. Reproduced courtesy of the Women’s Art Library/Make.

53. Watling, *The Only Blond in the World*, p.17. Conversely, in an early collage of Boty (from 1961) owned by the equally critical Derek Boshier, the mingling of pop heroines (such as Monroe), with feminist heroines (such as Colette) and political rebels (such as the leader of the guerrilla war that gained Cyprus its liberation from England), proves that Boty’s socio-political consciousness along with her proto-feminist agenda preceded her marriage.

54. Buszek, *Pin Up Grrrls*, p. 265.

55. See note 18. For Morley's memoir of the Boty photo-shooting see his '... The Bare ... Facts ... Pauline Boty ...', in *Caught in the Act: The Theatre Photography of Lewis Morley* (Royal National Theatre: London, 1999), p. 94–6. These 'tasteful pin-ups' were never published by the glossy magazine that commissioned them, but Boty's daring pin-up poses can be studied at the Tate Gallery Archives.

56. Sarah Wilson, 'Axell: One + One', in *From Pop Art to Paradise*, pp. 23–42.

57. Antoine's various art documentaries must have been a great source for Axell that familiarised her not only with contemporary European and American art but with the art of contemporary women artists. In addition to Boty, Niki de Saint Phalle, Lee Bontecou, Kusama and Marisol, were filmed by him. Considering the isolation in which women artists worked even in the 1960s, such exposure might have reinforced Axell's consciousness as a woman artist. Not to mention that Bontecou might have provided a prototype for a woman artist working with an electric saw on the floor or Marisol's discussion of her use of herself as a model might have influenced Axell's own use of herself as a model.

58. Moreover, the dangling (painted) bra and the (pasted) cover of *Marie Claire* echo uncannily Richard Hamilton's *Pin-Up*, 1961 and an early collage by Tom Wesselmann. As such, her collage seems an even more programmatic intervention in the terrain of sexist Pop, given the pair of male shod feet that are pasted over *Marie Claire*'s special issue on the contemporary French woman.

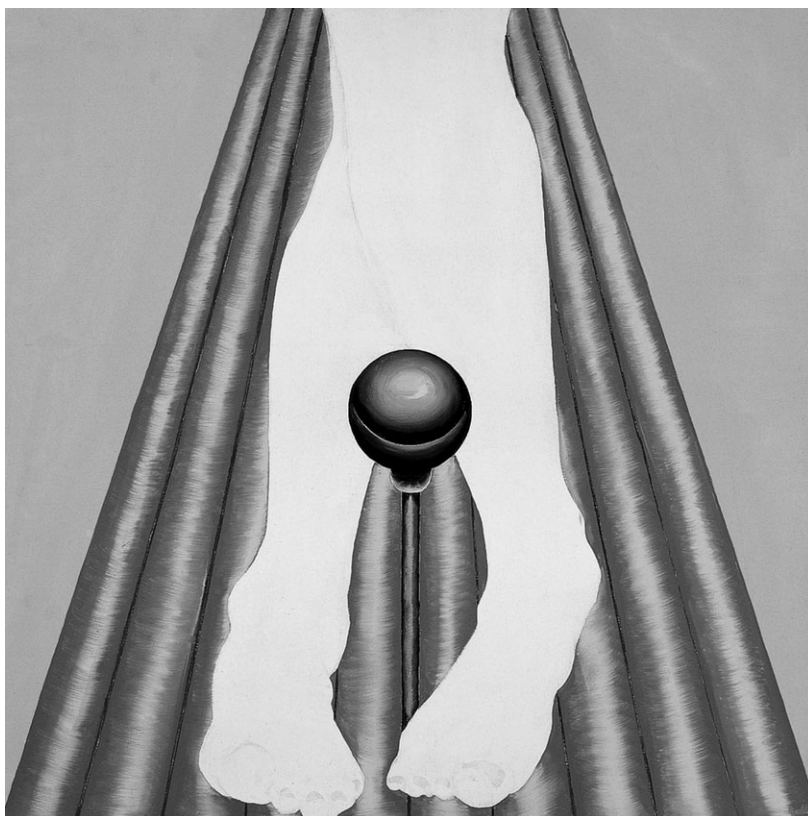
the feminist potential of the pin-up as the popular culture's genre of the sexually aware woman, a view that does not necessarily concur with its contemporaneous manifestations in popular magazines like *Playboy* but does echo the genre's feminist history and its empowering potential for women artists.<sup>55</sup> Evidently what mostly unites Boty's Pop politics, whether sexual or not, is their relation to the body, and as such her politics are part and parcel of 1960s revolutionary thought, and resemble Axell's sexual politics.

Evelyne Axell, who chose to be known simply as Axell as she launched her career in the male-dominated *milieu* of the Belgian art system, has, like Drexler and Boty, also expanded Pop's agenda by responding critically to contemporary socio-political issues such as race, gender, etc. Matching Boty's mythologised beauty and *joie de vivre*, she proved herself an even more explicitly (proto) feminist celebrator of women's bodies, sexuality and desire with a diverse series of works, dominated by erotic female nudes. Axell studied drama and had a short but successful career primarily as a theatre and then cinema actress in Paris and Brussels, and had first-hand experience of television as an interviewer and presenter. Around 1963, she quit acting to reinvent herself as a painter. Her initiation into oil painting was undertaken by her husband's friend, René Magritte. Magritte's legacy, only recently deciphered by Sarah Wilson, accounts not only for the surrealist look of her early oils, but also for the lasting impact of the radically empowering autoeroticism that distinguishes her imagery.<sup>56</sup>

Axell's deliberate self-fashioning as a woman Pop artist was predicated upon an epiphany of British Pop as revealed to her in London during the filming of her husband's 1964 documentary on British Pop *Dieu est-t-il Pop?*<sup>57</sup> She was also constantly challenged by her friend Pierre Restany's Parisian circle of Nouveau Réalistes, most prominent being Martial Raysse and Niki de Saint Phalle. Unlike Boty and Drexler's reliance on the ready-made, Axell's 'popness' does not depend on media 'found' imagery or exact appropriation, aside from a few exceptions that include her renditions of contemporary political events and old masterpieces in plastic. Her oeuvre largely comprises a gallery of nudes of female (often auto- or homo-) erotic desire and covert self-portraying quality. Yet her engagement with Pop art was very self-conscious, and evolved over time in interesting ways. Her oeuvre starts with an untitled collage, which employs clippings from women's magazines. In this, she significantly introduces a cut-out pin-up – a bathing-suit beauty – juxtaposed with a painted female nude in a parodically contemplative position, her thinking mind displaced by the abject formation of a culinary recipe.<sup>58</sup> One of the last series of works depicts brilliant dreams of Tarzan's paradise seen through the eyes of Jane – or better yet, Axell's glasses. From beginning to end, Axell's work is profoundly involved with contemporary popular, mass and consumer culture, yet from a woman's point of view.

Axell denounced her early oil preludes in favour of her late and cooler works in plastic. Yet the series *Erotomobiles* (Fig. 8) stage a magnificent wedding of the surrealist body and commodity fetishism with Pop's fascination with the luxury consumer product *par excellence* – the car. However, unlike both Surrealist and Pop art, Axell's car paintings subvert the normative eroticisation of commodity and machine, as Wilson astutely observes, creating proto-feminist women's 'bachelor machines' by turning car-parts into symbols of erotic female desire. Unlike Hamilton's analogies between cars and women's curves in his critical debunking of marketing





**Fig. 8.** Axell, *Changement de Vitesse*, 1965, oil on canvas, 102 × 102 cm. Mayor Gallery, London. © The Estate of Axell.

strategies, Axell's cars are dismantled to their phallic or clitoral symbols (such as velocity levers, starters or car keys), touched or penetrated by female body parts, perverting the post-war European fascination with (American) cars and their media eroticisation. Unlike Lichtenstein's vehicles of active drivers and passive beauties, Axell appropriates the driver's gaze in order to subvert its maleness in soft-porn-like, yet empowering, fantasies of hetero- and significantly homo- and auto-erotic desire, as in the case of car-mirror or car wheel-shaped reflections of women or nude female body parts.<sup>59</sup> In most of these works, Pop's dialogue with hard-edge abstraction takes the form of brilliant monochromatic fields and a geometric regimentation of the flat pictorial space by means of target-like or ocular concentric frames, stripes, etc., where body parts are inserted either illusionistically or as flat silhouettes.

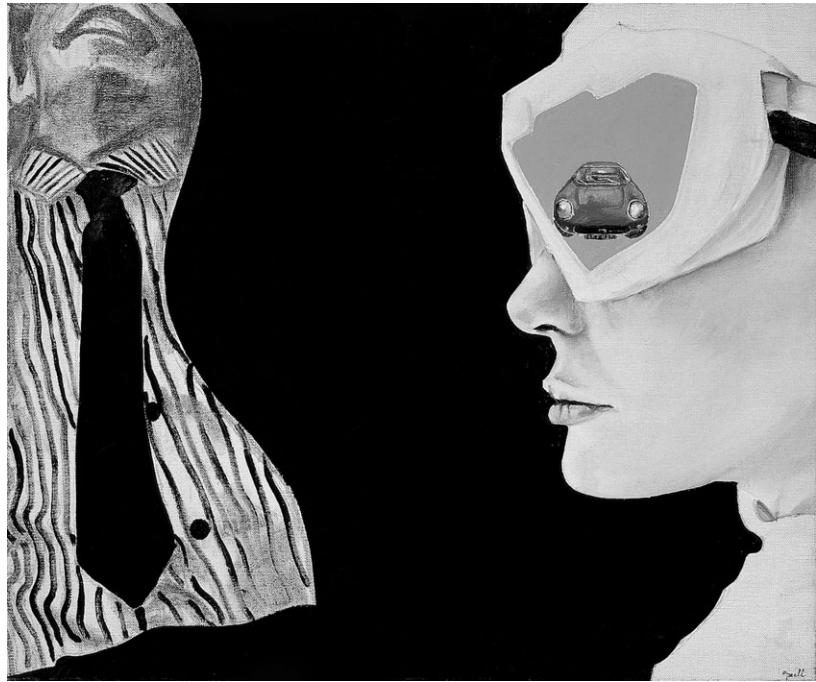
In a slightly different work of the same period, *L'Amour Vite* of 1964 (Fig. 9), the waving and mutilated spectre of a man represented in cinematic black and white, seen from his waist up to his laughing mouth, is juxtaposed with a female spectator whose eyes are substituted by the hot fantasy of a fast red car, in a manner that recalls the revelation of male fantasies in early Rosenquist.<sup>60</sup> Whether a pun on unfulfilled love by means of the car's and love's 'fastness' or a displacement of desire from driver to car, Axell's fantasy subverts European cinema's fascination with the car as a domesticating stage of erotic scenes by undertaking the agency of the fantasist, and counteracts the car's usual fetishisation, as seen in Peter Phillip's air-brushed equations of car imagery and extravagant pin-ups.

59. Mirrors (whether depicted or actually painted, like the two car mirrors exhibited at Namur, which reflect back the viewer/artist through their unpainted surfaces amidst the overpainted nudes) and Axell's predilection for the *topos* of mirror-imaging seem one of her strategies of resistance to the objectifying 'male' gaze, which she counters by creating a closed circuit of self- or homo-eroticising female gazes.

60. In *Waves*, 1962, for instance, Rosenquist paints a couple kissing. While we only see the head of the man, a rectangular fantasy screen exposes what is going on in his head: the fetishised legs of a woman.

61. The licking tongue appears in several early paintings by Axell including her self-portrait *La Gourmandise*, 1964, and derives from Magritte, according to Wilson, 'Axell: One + One', p. 25.

62. Food fetishism can be viewed as a more pertinent form of female fetishism that overcomes the limitations of the reversal/appropriation of (male) fetishism as often performed by Axell. For food fetishism as female fetishism see *Female Fetishism*, p. 145.



**Fig. 9.** Axell, *L' Amour Vite*, 1964, oil on canvas, 50 × 60 cm. Mayor Gallery, London. © The Estate of Axell.

Pop's fascination with consumer objects is further radicalised by Axell. Using consumer objects strategically to empower consumer fantasies from the perspective of women, she mingles her proto-feminist laughter with the serious, albeit essentialist, imaging of female desire. Painted ice-cream cones become consumer objects not only of gastronomic but also erotic desire. But unlike Mel Ramos' appeal to male desire by means of branded foods featured by appetising pin-ups, Axell both images and fulfils women's erotic appetite by two quasi-fellatio fantasies of ice-cream licking. Held strongly by a feminine hand, Axell's ice-cream cone (Fig. 10) is lustfully licked first (1964) by a fully seen feminine face enveloped in a quasi-psychedelic formation of red hair and coloured waves of joy and, three years later, (1967) by a bluish close-up of the same girl's hand and mouth only. The Magrittean mouth of autoerotic desire (which became Axell's early signature imaging device of female desire) with its tongue actively thrust out is a powerful proto-feminist statement of female pleasure that resolutely sticks its tongue out at the numerous fetishised smiles (as in most depictions of Marilyn) that haunt Pop art's iconography.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Axell's *Ice-Cream* bears comparison to Marisol's *Love* of 1962, featuring the plaster cast of her face with a real Coca-Cola bottle placed in her mouth. Despite both artists' similar investment of sexual innuendo in an image of consumption, the violence of Marisol's image – with the bottle coming out of a horizontally displayed featureless face hinting both at erotic and marketing violence – differs essentially from Axell's female consumer's activeness and feminist hedonism.<sup>62</sup>

Another seminal work by Axell included in the Namur retrospective is *Valentine* of 1966. *Valentine* features the white silhouette of a soft-porn Venus and a plastic helmet over a Warholian monochromatic golden



Fig. 10. Axell, *Ice Cream*, 1964, oil on canvas, 80 × 70. Private Collection. © The Estate of Axell.

background. This silhouetting of the female figure characterises Axell's representational (or anti-representational) approach to the female nude that ranges from the complete featureless silhouettes of her Matissean nudes from 1966 and on to her own plastic cut-outs of female bodies. Here, however, the immaculate surface of the white outline is disrupted by a zip that, when opened, reveals a hand-painted sexed body, alluding to the voyeuristic pretensions of the nude's representation in art. The inclusion of the zip and the helmet signify her brief exploration of the ready-made as sanctified in the neo-Dadaist form of French Pop, *Nouveau Réalisme*.<sup>63</sup> Both helmet and zip, however, reference the uniform of the first woman astronaut, Valentina Terechkova, turning this combine painting into a pre-feminist homage to a contemporary media heroine by means of a borderline pin-up/nude.

*Valentine* initiated Axell's lasting yet different response to the space race which haunted the imagery of Pop artists, particularly those who were British. It also characterises Axell's response to media and contemporary sociopolitical issues: Axell avoids appropriating pre-existing images, even though she uses iconic references to them. In *Campus*, 1970, a revision of Munch's *Cry* in colours redolent of Pop spectacles, she takes the

63. Her later, more funky, use of materials such as fake-fur, points again to this direction, while also revealing the influence of Raysse's pin-ups of consumer and media culture origins.

64. It remains to be researched whether Axell's *Le joli moi de Mai*, as well as Boty's *Cuba Si* refer obliquely to the political documentaries *Cuba Si*, 1961 and *Le Joli Mai*, 1963 by revolutionary new wave filmmaker Chris Marker.



**Fig. 11.** Axell, *Le Joli Mois de Mai*, 1970, enamel on Plexiglass. Museum of Modern Art by the Sea, Ostend. © The Estate of Axell.

recognisable expression of the unforgettable Kent State University student who witnessed the murder of her friend by the Ohio National Guard, as she appeared on the cover of *Time* on 18 May 1970, without further reference to the widely publicised photos of the event. Even though she converted to Maoism and tried to learn Chinese, Axell was not more politically engaged than Boty. She did, however, experience passionately – despite her position as an older married woman and mother living in Brussels – the sexual revolution and the May 1968 counterrevolution. Her leftist inclinations, thus, were, like Boty's, significantly shaped by Herbert Marcuse's revolutionary sexual/body-politics. It is in this light that one should consider one of her most ambitious political works, the plastic triptych *Le Joli Moi de Mai* of 1970 (Fig. 11)<sup>64</sup>. Her alignment with the sexual revolution's body politics is only hinted at by her title's premature nostalgia for 1960s utopias. A group of long-haired youths of liberating and genderless nudity (or according to Wilson, an equally liberating sapphic harem) is crowned by the emblematic scene of a girl raised on the shoulders of her fellow demonstrators/celebrators, brandishing a red flag which is further emphasised by its exceeding the borders of Axell's surface. Axell insisted on maintaining the colour of this flag despite the request by a potential collector to repaint it blue (the colour of the Belgian liberal party) in order to buy it. Whether Axell's insistence was due to a true commitment to the communist connotations of the red flag or not, the triptych remains a magnificent commemoration of the sexual politics of May 1968 and their personal beauty, a signal of her art's liberation. This central panel is flanked by her signature nude self-portrait as a painter and her portrait of Restany as her guru. Restany had taken part in the anti-institutional art 'strikes' of May 1968 in Paris (as Axell also did in Brussels) but had also defended the sexual revolution during an Axell opening.

The more one talks of Axell's work, the more one moves dangerously away from Pop's revered strategies of appropriation, serial repetition and handless

reproductive devices. It becomes even more difficult to introduce the 'originality' of her work in plastic, with which she had begun experimenting after 1967, originality being a word of diminished value for Pop's post-modernism.<sup>65</sup> Axell first used translucent Clartex in which she inserted cut-outs of canvas or of metallic papers before it dried and solidified and then, after the closing of the factory which produced it, she began using various types of Plexiglas. Indeed, Axell's proto-feminist and Pop erotica of both quasi-academic and magazine-porn nudes, her hedonist gallery of heroically ecstatic Amazons of female desire, which ranges from the refashioned odalisques of Ingres and Botticelli's Venuses to the voluptuous enmeshing of lesbian couples and nudes of autoerotic ecstasy, takes its most spectacular form when materialised in plastic.<sup>66</sup> Axell cuts out transparent – milky, actually – layers of Plexiglas and paints partly both of their sides with bright enamel colours while placing them over painted canvases or synthetic surfaces such as formica (Figs 11, 15 and 16). The resulting image is literally pieced together by a magnificent collaboration of nearly abstract patches of over-painting, under-painting and the muted colour fields seen through the plexi; this effect is further enhanced through a play between the paint's opacity and plastic's translucency, highlighted details and the sprinkling effect of spray-brushed metallic colours.

In these opalescent paintings/reliefs of Axell's hedonist vision of omnipresent desire, 'popness' overwhelms form and content, but is hard to pin down. Plastic is redolent of its industrial origins and its fascinating rôle as the new polyvalent material of the 1960s consumerist utopias and modernity<sup>67</sup>. Cut by her electric saw on the floor and painted over with commercial colours, plastic hints also at commercial art itself. Indeed, some of Axell's work, especially when symbolist type-faces are used, evoke store or bistro's painted windows. But, above all, Axell's plastic reliefs are the result of the organisation and synthesis of superimposed painted surfaces rather than of pure painting. Plastic being the semitransparent vehicle of combined images, it becomes Axell's instrument for the ultimate subversion of painting's purity and psychological depth by means of its inherent material 'coolness', as well as its service to a 'deep' enmeshing of multiple surfaces through its transparency. This distancing effect of layered duplication, enhanced by Axell's Pop colours, that range from saccharine porn pastels and the colours of Biba's design objects to the shrill colours of media or disco connotations, and above all the quasi-photographic effect of the abstract colour shades which flesh out her figures, constitute Axell's quintessential Pop disaffect.<sup>68</sup> At least one critic has commented on what I see as the simulacral, quasi-photographic, effect of Axell's figures' translation of photographic light/dark contrasts into colourful paint, relating them to the media popularity at that time of solarised photography.<sup>69</sup> But it is Sarah Wilson who has pinpointed the 'popness' of this late Axell look: 'The 60s Warholised look was the silk-screen look ... but [it was] transformed by Axell into an eroticised game of Plexiglas shadow play – with a touch of Biba'.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, it is by means of what I would distinguish as Axell's 'feminine posing' that both her nudes and her performative persona acquire their idiosyncratic and feminist 'popness' – and to this respect they relate also to Boty's Pop. Both Axell and Boty pose, often in the nude – Axell mostly within, and Boty mostly with her work.<sup>71</sup> Axell's performativity

65. The plastic 'shadows' of Lourdes Castro and the environments of Nicolas Uriburu provide a useful context for Axell's use of plastic.

66. Two of her most stunning nudes are indeed entitled *Amazone* and *Desire*.

67. See for instance Barthes, 'Plastic,' *Mythologies*, pp. 97–100, Pierre Restany, *Le plastique dans l'art*, (Editions Andre Sauret: Monte Carlo, 1973), and Philippe Decelle, Diane Hennebert and Pierre Loze, (eds), *L'utopie du tout plastique 1960–1973*, (Fondation Pour L'Architecture: Brussels, 1994).

68. Axell's love of Biba is known but Antoine brought to my attention (September 2004) that the form that surrounds Axell's covert self-portrait in *La Petite Marguerite*, 1968 (*From Pop Art To Paradise*, p. 102) was after one of her favourite Biba items, a daisy-shaped table.

69. Marie-Hélène Dumas, 'Evelyne Axell: L'Amazone du pop art', *Ideat*, November–December 2000, pp. 178–81.

70. Wilson, 'Axell: One + One', p. 31.

71. From her participation in the Anti-Ugly Society in 1958/9 to the end of her life, Boty combined the rôles of actress, painter, radio speaker and provocateuse. Apart from her fashioning after Bardot, in *Pop Goes the Easel* she acts and impersonates Shirley Temple. After RCA Boty also considered modelling for a living. She was featured in British *Vogue* in 1963 by none other than the maker of Babe Jane Holzer, David Bailey, while The National Portrait Gallery in London holds a magnificent collection of Boty's photographs by Lewis Morley, Michael Seymour and Michael Ward. In many of them Boty is posing in front of her works mimicking the poses of the depicted women and men. For her daring posing for Morley see note no. 54. Amidst the playmate poses that Boty willingly fashioned for Morley, she posed standing in front of her painting of Belmondo, naked apart from a bouquet of plastic flowers covering her breasts, and on her sofa barefoot and supine, almost like Bardot in the opening scene of *And God Created Woman* in one more impersonation of the star. For a relevant interpretation of women artists' photographic posing with their work see Anna Chave, 'Striking Poses: The absurdist theatrics of Eva Hesse,' in Geraldine A. Johnson, (ed.), *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning The Third Dimension*, (Cambridge University Press: New York, 1998), pp. 166–80.



**Fig. 12.** Jean Antoine, *Axell in her Studio*, 1969, black and white photo. © Jean Antoine.

72. According to an interview with Jean Antoine, Brussels, September 2004. Like Boty, Axell has also posed supine on her bed (From *Pop to Paradise*, p. 15) recalling generic Playboy nudes.

73. See note 70.

74. Boty and Axell have seen photos of themselves in the media and might have felt threatened by their manipulation. Boty enjoyed media exposure already as an RCA student due to her participation in the Anti-Ugly Society but saw her contribution slashed by the media, which focused on her beauty. The cover of the magazine *Scene* (November 8, 1962) featured her posing on her bed with the ambiguous caption: 'Actresses often have tiny brains. Painters often have large beards. Imagine a brainy actress who is also a painter and also a blond and you have Pauline Boty'. Axell became a TV presenter due to her motherhood duties in 1958 and quickly became a celebrity. According to Antoine, she quit because she was turning to a 'smiling puppet'. In letters to him, she expresses an increasing disenchantment with the theatre, which betrays her disappointment as a woman from the world of theatre.

was literalised in the case of the radical performance of a reversed striptease: during the opening of her 1969 exhibition at Galerie Foncke, Ghent, Axell theatrically dressed the wife of one of her collectors who had entered the gallery naked. But most of Axell's work that I already characterised as self-portraying is rather a displacement of her own performative exhibitionism into oil or plastic: many of her nudes were created after photographs of her, taken by her or her husband, or, to put it more emphatically, they are imitations of often pornographic – centrefold-nude or pin-up-like – poses purposefully fashioned by Axell (Figs 12 and 13).<sup>72</sup> There is a comparable element of self-portrayal in Boty's painting, which seems to consummate her fanzine worship by means of her suggestive similarity to the blond stars she represents, be it Marilyn or Vitti. But Boty's truly performative persona is fully realised in her photographic portraits by a series of more or less famous male photographers, in which she often poses in front of her works, in some cases in the nude debatably as Bardot.<sup>73</sup>

Axell's and Boty's artistic penchant for photographic posing retrospectively becomes very interesting in light of established strategies of feminist art, such as masquerade and mimicry, and of their strategic employment by neo-Pop artists such as Cindy Sherman. But it is also redolent of a familiar narcissism, which is highly problematic for the anti-essentialist and anti-pornography camps of feminist critics and has probably cost those artists' greater visibility in feminist art histories. Yet Axell's and Boty's narcissistic masquerades are neither simply naïve nor essentialist responses to the sexual revolution's call to pleasure, nor irrelevant to their Pop endeavours. Beginning from the latter, I would like to point out the crucial difference of Axell and Boty as women Pop artists, which to me defines their Pop projects and distinguishes them from male Pop artists. Both had first-hand, lived experience of Pop culture through their acting careers and their consequent media publicity.<sup>74</sup> One of Pop's ultimate goals has been rightly considered to be the grafting of high and low art, metaphorised by the mythologised passage from commercial art to high art in the case of Pop gods such as Warhol or Rosenquist. Yet for the two women who directly experienced Pop culture's objectification of women, Pop entailed a more challenging bridging than that of high and low art. It entailed the impossible leap from Pop culture's immanent position for women, that of image, to high art's ultimate subject, that of artist – itself a problematic category for women even as late as the 1960s. In this light, Axell's and Boty's narcissism seems both radically proto-feminist as well as Pop: appropriating for themselves Pop culture's positioning of women, by means of stereotypically feminine or exaggeratedly sexy poses, they subvert the already established sexist stereotypes of Pop art by parodically mimicking its nudes and pin-ups but also engage in a strategically narcissistic subversion of woman's object position in both high and pop culture. Adopting and reiterating the rhetoric of the feminine pose, often in its most extreme pornographic versions as in the case of Axell's nudes flashing their vaginas to the audience, Boty and Axell not only rejoice in sexual freedom from a 1960s perspective but above all they expose and subvert the logic of the objectifying male gaze of the artist by grafting their artistic agency to women's immanent image position, thus claiming both their mind and body. Axell's radical posing is further exemplified in her signature self-portrait, which features her nude with paints, brushes and wearing glasses – signs of her trade and mind, along with her sexy body (her full breasts humorously rhyming with her glasses).



**Fig. 13.** Axell, *Le Petit Espace Vert*, 1970, enamel on Plexiglass, synthetic fur. Patrick Derom Gallery, Brussels. © The Estate of Axell.



**Fig. 14.** Michael Ward, *Pauline Boty*, bromide print, 29 October 1963. © Michael Ward/National Portrait Gallery, London.

75. The photo of her biting the necklace, as in her lost painting of Marilyn that is featured behind her, is by John Aston.

76. 'To play with the mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it', Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, 1985), p. 76.

77. Amelia Jones, 'The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hanna Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art', in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (The University of Minnesota Press: London, 1998), pp. 151–97. My reliance on Jones' theorisation of feminist narcissism is rather strategic due to her role in bridging intergenerational feminist conflicts in regard to the representation of the sexual body in the 1990s (see Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls*, pp. 357–60). By expressing what Buszek calls a 'third wave' feminist perspective (despite Jones' continuous renaming of her own), it evokes the historic and discursive necessity for contemporary feminism(s) to embrace (both past and future) positive representations of the female body, sexuality and pleasure. The conflicted (although historically specific and necessitated) attitudes of feminism on the issue of the sexual body and pleasure can only be schematically categorised along intergenerational, geo-cultural, or theoretical lines (as through the dichotomy between essentialist or deconstructionist feminist approaches), since feminist discourse has been always pluralist (compare for instance Kathy Myers, 'Towards a Feminist Erotica', *Camera Work*, no. 24, 1982, pp. 14–6 and 19 with Griselda Pollock, 'What's wrong with Images of Women?', *Screen Education*, no. 24, Autumn 1977, pp. 25–33). See also Buszek, *Pin-Up*

She also dares to print as a cover to one of her exhibition publications a bare-breasted picture of herself in front of one of her painted nudes.

If the insinuation of the artist's own, both intellectual and embodied, subjectivity in the hedonist surfaces of her self-portraying Pop nudes is latent in the case of Axell, it is explicitly acted out by Boty, who poses in front of her work mimicking the poses of her depicted models, from Marilyn biting her necklace suggestively in one of two lost paintings of Marilyn to the girl undressing herself in *Tom's Dream* in a photograph taken by Michael Ward (Fig. 14).<sup>75</sup> As such, not only does she laugh as loud as she can before the prescribed gender roles for women in both art and popular culture (as in Luce Irigaray's theory of mimicry), but she points to her work as its artist/producer at the same time that she adopts the role of the model.<sup>76</sup>

In light of Amelia Jones's theorisation of feminist posing and narcissism, which informs my analysis of Boty's and Axell's bad girl performativity, the 'disinterestedness' of the critic is also exposed by such strategic posing.<sup>77</sup> It is thus interesting to reconsider Axell's narcissistic masquerades together with the limited number of men featured in her work – who often happen to be critics. For her show *Pierre et les Opalines*, 1969, Axell painted a magnificent series of portraits/pin-ups of women – most of them distinguished by nationality (*La Persane*, *La Polonaise*, *La Tchèque* [Fig. 15], etc.). In most of these paintings/reliefs, it is Axell who, in her usual manner, is not only the artist but also the model (as in *Parisienne* [Fig. 16], where she is disguised as a Parisian girl with a blond wig), conducting a quintessential masquerade of femininity by means of ultra-feminine poses that allude to calendar pin-ups. This is a masquerade that not only debunks the naturalness of femininity but parodies men's magazines' orientalisising stereotypes. Moreover, Axell's gallery of exotic beauties is offered as a Pop harem to her friend Restany, whose portrait is juxtaposed with theirs. Featuring him with his fingers accentuated, Axell captures her friend's identity as critic. Despite their friendship, Axell's exhibition attains the importance of a proto-feminist environment that parodically exposes the not-disinterested eye (and phallic fingers) of the eponymous critic by means of a woman artist's play with the rhetoric of the feminine pose.

Like Axell, Boty was also concerned with exposing not only the maleness of the gaze in pop/Pop's fantasies of women, but of art history itself. In her *It's a Man's World II* of 1965–6 (Fig. 17), Boty's quintessential feminist Pop painting, a men's-only wall of calendar and Playboy nudes is inserted between a high art landscape and a life-class model, who is sexed and therefore headless. The latter is Boty's own *Origins of the World*, a frustrated verification of both high and low visual culture as a stage for male fantasies that objectify the body of woman, mutating it either by idealising it or by mutilating it for safe male voyeurism.

Although we might simply attribute the analogies between them to the larger context of the 1960s sexual revolution, the confluence of Axell's and Boty's 'bad' attitudes, manifested alternately by their empowering employment of the pin-up iconography or its performative enactment, may not be purely incidental. After all, Axell, who painted her own multiple Pop versions of the *Origins of the World*, often with the pubic hair represented by colourful fake furs, might have actually been responding to Boty's feminist manifesto *It's a Man's World II* (although dated 1965/6 it was on Boty's easel when Axell's husband filmed her





**Fig. 15.** Axell, *La Tchèche*, 1969, enamel on Plexiglass on aluminium, 67 × 35.5 cm. Private Collection. © The Estate of Axell.

in 1964).<sup>78</sup> And if the brushes that she held in her self-portraits look terribly phallic, or her statement that she painted like men ‘ejaculate’ sounds self-masculinising, the frequently ecstatic poses of her nude body verify her painterly endeavour in Pop as a narcissistic intervention into the men’s world in which she tried to make a place for both women’s art and desire, as well as women’s spectatorship of both.

Conversely, Drexler never really painted the nude, although she has been the inspiration for her husband’s (painter Sherman Drexler) numerous

*Grrrls*, for a thorough review of feminism’s attitudes on this contested issue, even though she does not cover all recent feminist perspectives on corporeal subjectivity. In a sense, Axell’s and Boty’s neglected celebration of female sexuality and pleasure is here offered as a reminder of feminism’s own selective memory in light of its discursive formation and as a rediscovery enabled by sociohistorical circumstances in light of recent (and in hope of future guiltless and more inassimilable by patriarchy) explorations of female pleasures.

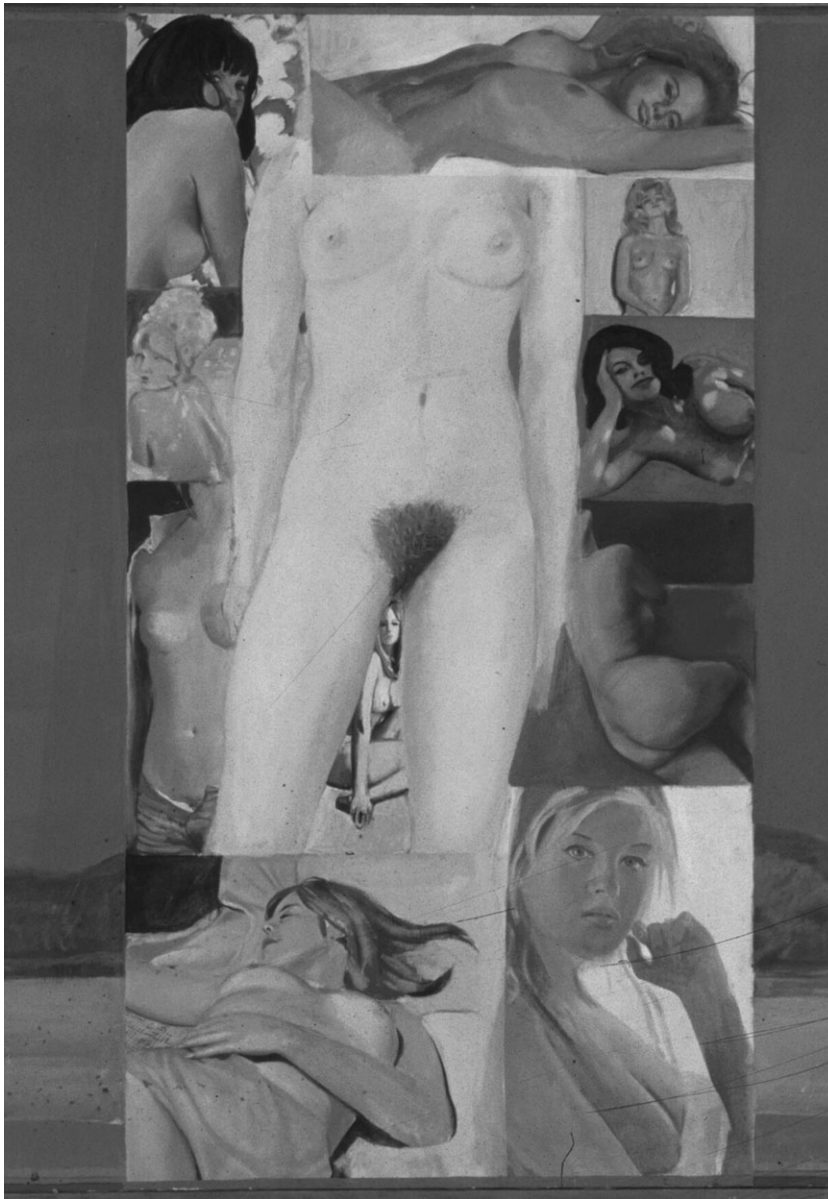
78. If not a different painting, the painting that appears in Antoine’s *Dieu-t-il Pop?* (with the central nude not yet truncated) must be an earlier stage of *It’s a Man’s World II*.

79. 'By changing my hair and wearing heavy make up I assumed a certain attitude . . . I chose the name by flipping through the phone book. I had seen Hollywood B-movies about Mexican Beauties, they were always the hot item . . . Yes, I was a good [wrestler] . . . I was able to do the tricks . . . I never thought it was funny or good – wrestling is a pornographic exhibition for men'. Rosalyn Drexler, Interview by Andrian Dannatt, *The Art Newspaper*, 2000. In most of our conversations, as well as in a taped interview at the Billy Kluver Archives, Drexler discusses female wrestling as both phony and pornographic. Throughout the seventies she also castigated pornography in movies, art and books as a *New York Times*' critic.



**Fig. 16.** Axell, *La Parisienne*, 1969, enamel on Plexiglass on aluminium, 101.5 × 67 cm. Plasticarium, Brussels. © The Estate of Axell.

hauntingly naked apparitions. Largely unaware of the work of Axell and Boty, however, in 1964 she also turned to the pin-up. She transformed an appropriated pin-up – a kinky Playboy-like cut-out – into a stand-in for herself/the woman Pop artist, by simply claiming it as a self-portrait, albeit in quotation marks (Fig. 18). Although Drexler has denounced the feminist meaning of her involvement with wrestling, she has commented on the pornographic position of women in popular culture (in movies and wrestling) as objects/images while also explored and exploded it by means of her impersonation of the lady 'wrestler' Rosa Carlo, *The Mexican Spitfire*.<sup>79</sup>



**Fig. 17.** Pauline Boty, *It's a Man's World II*, 1965–6, oil on canvas, 125 × 125 cm. Private Collection. © The Estate of Pauline Boty. Reproduced courtesy of the Women's Art Library/Make.

Turned parodically upside down, in a pose of soft porn gymnastics (with her head on the floor, seen through the abstract formation of her fallen pink skirt, and her legs up, showing off her suspenders and black stockings), the girl in “*Self-Portrait*” assists Drexler in conducting an inverse or *faux* masquerade, a postscript to her own masquerade as a sexy Mexican wrestler in the 1950s. Striking a feminine pose as pop and as *bad* as those of Axell and Boty, Drexler joins Pop’s bad girls in their performative Pop endeavours.

In ‘Pop Body’, an exhibition curated by Catherine Liu for the Sally Hawkins Gallery in 1992, Liu highlighted ‘pathological narcissism’ as another dimension of the much worshiped Warholian persona in a way that helps us understand further the Pop performativity of the artists discussed

80. Catherine Liu, 'Diary of the Pop Body: Dandy Darlings and New Pop Strategies', *Flash Art*, October 1992, pp. 76–9, 142–3.

81. 'Diary of Pop Body', p. 76.

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**Fig. 18.** Rosalyn Drexler, *Self-Portrait*, 1964, acrylic and paper collage on canvas, 101.3 × 75.9 cm. © 2007 Rosalyn Drexler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Ellen Labenksi. Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York.

here while it also complements Foster's understanding of the Warholian mass subject as the 'subject in shock'.<sup>80</sup> According to Liu (in light of Slavoj Žižek's writings), in dealing with the dilemma of the subject under late capitalism, Warhol played 'the role which was about role playing itself', that of the 'pathological narcissist'. Playing roles and changing masks are concepts usually associated with femininity and homosexuality, Liu reminds us. With role-playing and the body as its arena, Pop's legacy for Liu thus encompasses strategies that were relevant to feminist strategies of 1990s art, even though she acknowledges that Pop and feminism had contradictory agendas in terms of the notion of the subject. Using as a metaphor the attempted murder of Warhol by Valerie Solanas, who, by inflicting a nearly lethal wound infused the fear of death to the mechanical body of Warhol, Liu pointed to the body as the site where 'Pop which represented radical aesthetics [could] meet with radical feminism'.<sup>81</sup> It is,

however, well before this violent moment that the intersection of (proto/pre-) feminism and Pop took place in both the performing and the depicted bodies of Axell, Boty and even Drexler. Their narcissism might differ in principle from the Warholian 'pathological narcissism', but their personae are equally performative as Warhol's, while also being both Pop and proto-feminist.

*This essay was originally written in fall 2004 as a response to a special issue of Artforum on 'Pop After Pop' and to the retrospectives of Rosalyn Drexler in Philadelphia and of Axell in Belgium. An abbreviated version was presented at the Sixteenth Annual Art History Conference of Northwestern University in April 2005, in a panel presided over by Thomas Crow. I am grateful to my advisors, Linda Nochlin for her support of my research and her comments on this article, as well as to Robert Storr for introducing me to the work of Axell. Many thanks to Sid Sachs for our ongoing dialogue on the work of women Pop artists as well as his editorial insight on this article. The preparation of the manuscript would not have been possible without the editorial assistance of Eduardo Cadava and Allison Unruh, as well as the generosity of Jean and Philippe Antoine, Mali Antoine-Funakoshi, Rosalyn Drexler, the staff of the Whitford Fine Art, London and Pace Wildenstein, New York.*