

From Ice-Block Action to Peanut-Butter Floor

Belgian and Dutch Pop Art since the 1960s

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[M A R C H O L T H O F]

During a sit-in at the end of June 1968, the 'Antwerp Free Action Group' (VAGA) demanded that the historic Conscience Square in the centre of Antwerp should be declared a traffic-free zone. The demonstrators had even brought traffic signs with them saying 'Car-Free Zone'. To prevent any further action, the police ordered car drivers to pass through the square. But by doing so they seriously underestimated the activists' creativity. A truck carrying blocks of ice destined for a restaurant drove onto the square. Under the supervision of the artists Hugo Heyrman and Panamarenko, the blocks were stacked on the road. They froze together and formed an insurmountable barrier against traffic. The police was powerless.

The success of the action was celebrated exuberantly on the square with festivities for all: white balloons were handed out and turf laid. But it was not until 1972 that Antwerp city council finally yielded to the demand to make the square car-free. Nowadays you can hardly imagine that this historic square was once dominated by cars.

The *Ice-Block Action* is a celebrated event of Antwerp's alternative scene. It was part of a whole series of 'happenings' and forms of action that were popular in the second half of the 1960s. It may have been a coincidence, but with it Panamarenko repeated – less aesthetically, but in a socially much more effective way – a 'happening' that Allan Kaprow, the American guru of the genre, had carried out a year previously: he built a melting artwork – a wall of blocks of ice – entitled *Fluids*.

Playboy

As his pseudonym Panamarenko suggests, Henri Van Herwegen (Antwerp, 1940) had always been fascinated by American culture. For an exhibition at the Wide White Space gallery in Antwerp two years previously, in 1966, he and his mate Hugo Heyrman (Zwijndrecht, 1942) took inspiration from an issue of *Playboy* magazine devoted to the 'James Bond girls'. Panamarenko made two life-size female figures in felt and expanded polystyrene. One of them, called *Feltra*, now in the collection of the S.M.A.K. in Ghent, is based on a glamour



Above
Panamarenko/Hugo Heyrman,
Ice-Block Action, Antwerp, 1968
© Ensembles MHKA

Left
Panamarenko, *Molly Peters*, 1966.
Collection Agnes & Frits Becht.
Photo by Ernst van Deursen
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photo of Margaret Nolan from the film *Goldfinger*. The second figure, called *Molly Peters*, portrayed a British actress who appeared in *Thunderball*. For the young Panamarenko, these pieces – indisputably pop art – were only a stage in his work, a stepping stone to his later career as the utopian inventor of flying, sailing, driving and diving machines. He explained, 'I felt like sanding down one of those ladies in *Playboy* with my own hands!'

Figuration/defiguration

On 10 July 1964, as chair of the 'Society for the Museum of Contemporary Art' in Ghent, Karel Geirlandt opened the exhibition 'Figuration / Defiguration – The Human Figure since Picasso'. In this exhibition, the work of such American pop artists as Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist, Robert Rauschenberg, and Roy Lichtenstein, and the Englishmen David Hockney and Allen Jones, could be seen in Belgium for the first time. Only one Belgian 'pop' artist was represented: Paul Van Hoeydonck.

In the catalogue of the exhibition, the leading Paris critic Pierre Restany attributed the success of this new and provocative art to the crisis and deterioration of the abstract art that had dominated the post-war art scene. The German painter Sigmar Polke even declared that this post-war abstract art was complicit in suppressing Germany's recent past. As a reaction against this 'conventionalised' abstract art, realistic and figurative trends arose which aimed to reconnect with everyday life or to intervene in it directly - as Panamarenko and Heyrman had done in their happenings.

Raoul De Keyser,
Tap and Hose, 1965
© SABAM Belgium 2017



Amsterdam-The Hague-Brussels

The Dutch art world also discovered pop art. The 'American Pop Art' exhibition opened at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam on 22 June 1964, and 'New Realists' one day later at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. 'American Pop Art' had previously been shown at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. In addition to a large selection of work by Jim Dine and Claes Oldenburg, it also included pieces by George Segal, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Tom Wesselmann.

The Gemeentemuseum in The Hague presented a much wider range, with three sorts of artists: traditional realists; artists of the '*Nouvelle Figuration*', which included mainly French but also Dutch artists such as Woody van Amen, Hans van Eck, Jan Henderikse, and Wim T. Schippers; and lastly pop artists, including all the major Americans and Britons such as Richard Hamilton, R.B. Kitaj, David Hockney, and Allen Jones. Instead of a catalogue, there was a 44-page newspaper. In 1965, a modified version of this exhibition was mounted at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels under the title *Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme, etc.*

The critics, more accustomed to the world of abstract art than the new art forms, were keen to ask rhetorical questions to point out the provocative nature of pop art. For example, in the introduction to his own exhibition, 'Figuration / Defiguration', Karel Geirlandt asked, 'Will this new fetishism have a longer lifespan than the Beatles?'¹ It's hard to imagine today but the Beatles were then seen as a fad that would soon pass!

There was also the ambiguous question 'does this belong in a museum?', which the otherwise enthusiastic critic of *Het Vrije Volk* raised with regard to the exhibition in The Hague.² And things became completely crazy when Wim T. Schippers – an artist who was himself very much influenced by pop art – wrote that 'there is little to be said about this meaningless art'.³ It illustrates how hard it was for the advocates of pop art to persuade the conventional public opinion of the time that the genre was worthwhile. In the early 1960s, a clear difference between high art and low art still existed. Pop art was only the first skirmish in the struggle to demolish that ivory tower.

Moulage

The art historian Carl Jacobs based the catalogue for the 2015 *Pop Art in Belgium!* exhibition at the ING Art Center in Brussels on his PhD thesis.⁴ He wrote that when he started his research he encountered a lot of incredulity: 'Pop in Belgium? What on earth could that be?', his colleagues wondered. Had there been any pop art in Belgium, and in what form? 'However, the story of pop art in Belgium turns out to be a more substantial chapter than one might at first think,' Jacobs wrote. And he brilliantly demonstrated that a series of well-known artists were profoundly influenced by pop art at the beginning of their careers before going their own way. The finest example is undoubtedly Marcel Broodthaers, an artist who is now associated more with conceptual art.

In 1963, the Sonnabend Gallery in Paris exhibited the white plaster casts of human figures in everyday poses made by the American pop artist George Segal. Several major Belgian collectors went to Paris and bought works, and

the Belgian press hesitantly reported on the exhibition. For example, in the magazine *Beaux-Arts* there was a review by the poet and critic Marcel Broodthaers. And he too was equivocal. He wrote, 'Les personnages de Segal sont de vulgaires moulages d'êtres humains surpris dans un mouvement de la vie quotidienne... Ils ne sortent pas d'un atelier d'artiste, mais d'une fabrique.' And yet, having seen Segal's work in Paris, Broodthaers decided to start creating art himself: 'Il y a 18 mois j'ai vu à Paris une exposition de moulages, ceux de Segal: ce fut le point de départ, le choc qui m'entraîna à produire moi-même des œuvres.'⁵ In early 1964, he submitted four works to the Prix de la Jeune Peinture Belge. And in April 1964 he opened his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Saint-Lambert in Brussels, with the provocative title, *Moi aussi je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose et réussir dans la vie.... (I, too, wondered whether I could not sell something and succeed in life ...)*.

Broodthaers's artistic career arose literally out of the shock of seeing pop art. He even claimed 'Je fais du Pop'⁶ – and you might indeed call his 1966 *Grande casserole de moules* the Belgian equivalent of Warhol's 1962 *Campbell's Soup Cans*. But Broodthaers's oeuvre transcended the influence of pop art in order to create his very own poetic world in which what had so fascinated him in Segal's work – the cast, making moulds of reality – continued to play a leading part alongside the legacy of René Magritte and conceptual art.

The death of a pop star

In 2015, Tate Modern in London held the exhibition *The World Goes Pop*. This worldwide survey of pop art included work by just one Belgian artist. Not Marcel Broodthaers, not forerunners as Paul Van Hoeydonck, Vic Gentils or Pol Mara, but Evelyne Axell, who until a few years ago was as good as unknown.

Evelyne Axell was only thirty-seven when she died in a car accident in Zwijsnaarde in 1972: she got out to take over the wheel from her drunken friend and was knocked down. She had been an actress for seven years and then an artist for another seven – partly thanks to her husband, the director Jean Antoine (who made several films about pop art, including *Dieu est-il Pop?* in 1964), and to René Magritte, from whom she received a few lessons. Axell's work was forgotten for thirty years after her death, but is now again the focus of great interest. She was one of the few women in the very male world of pop art. Nowadays, with her erotically charged works on perspex, she is the prime representative of Belgian pop art. And because of her untimely death she never had the opportunity to evolve away from it.



Evelyne Axell, *Ice Cream 2*, 1967. Private Collection. Photo by Paul Louis © SABAM Belgium 2017



Guillaume Bijl, *Giantess* (Festive Sculpture Series), Europaplein, Amsterdam, 2014 © Guillaume Bijl

Confrontation with ordinariness

In a 1966 book on this phenomenon, the critic Geert Bekaert wrote that 'Pop art shows us the mythology of the ordinary'.⁷ Pop art rediscovered the ordinary at the very same moment as the consumer society had gone into overdrive. That explains why the influence of pop art was not limited to the artists already mentioned.

However, in the careers of most Belgian and Dutch artists, pop art was no more than an episode, a stop along the way. This was the case for the Pan-arenko-Heyrman duo and for Broodthaers. Carl Jacobs demonstrates that it was also true of Jef Geys and even of Roger Raveel and Raoul de Keyser, artists you would not normally associate with pop art. You find the same phenomenon in the Netherlands: Daan van Golden was very closely associated with pop art for a time, but then went his own way. Jan Cremer pursued his 'pop art made in Holland' (with lots of cows), but remained best known as the author of controversial bestsellers. The multifaceted oeuvre of Joep van Lieshout is also indebted to pop art, even though he turns the genre inside out and uses it against himself: in his work, the ordinary becomes strange.

The influence of pop art can still be felt in the younger generations. It would also be hard to imagine the work of Van Lieshout, Leo Copers, Wim Delvoye, Guillaume Bijl, Ria Pacqué, Hugo Roelandt or Anne-Mie Van Kerckhoven without the influence of pop art. They repeatedly use everyday images, objects and situations in their work. The happening, in many forms and guises, also crops up in quite a few of these artists' work. This is the case in Ria Pacqué's public performances as a 'madame' and Hugo Roelandt's 'post-performances' with toy cars, model helicopters and windscreen wipers.⁹ The ordinary is again and again confronted with itself.

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Wim Delvoye, *Wim Shop*, Bozar, 2010

© Wim Delvoye



It is also the main theme in the unclassifiable oeuvre of Wim T. Schippers, which ranges from Fluxus-like actions (emptying a bottle of lemonade into the sea), through notorious television programmes in deliberately bad taste (the shows including Fred Haché, Barend Servet and Sjef Van Oekel) to a play such as *Going to the Dogs* (performed by sheepdogs). Schippers 'could have been acknowledged as one of the most important artists of the second half of the twentieth century, but because he prefers to wander winding paths that seem to lead nowhere, his work still arouses irritation' – as the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum warned in 2011 on the occasion of its controversial purchase of his 1962 work *Pindakaasvloer* (*Peanut-Butter Floor*).

Yet what could be more ordinary – in the Netherlands – than peanut butter? Sjarel Ex, the director of the museum, called the 1,100 litres of topping spread over an area of 4 by 14 metres in one of the museum's rooms 'a brazen, unrivalled work'.



Wim T. Schippers, *Peanut-Butter Platform*
© Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2011 (1962).

NOTES

- 1 Karel Geirlandt, introduction to the exhibition *Figuratie/Defiguratie*, catalogue, Ghent, 1964, p.X.
- 2 Paul Van der Put, 'Nieuwe Realisten: Carnavalesk en gruwelijk tijdsbeeld', *Het Vrije Volk*, 27 June 1964.
- 3 Wim T. Schippers, 'Onvolwassen "kunst" in het Haagse gemeentemuseum', *Trouw*, 10 July 1964.
- 4 Carl Jacobs, 'Pop art in Belgium, een/un coup de foudre'. ING Art Center, Brussels, 15 October 2015 - 14 February 2016.
- 5 'Marcel Broodthaers par Marcel Broodthaers', *Beaux-Arts* 1086, 1965, p.5.
- 6 On the invite to the exhibition *Objets de / Voorwerpen van Broodthaers* at Galerie Aujour'hui in Brussels, April 1965.
- 7 Geert Bekaert, 'Pop, het wezen van de kunst'. Leuven, Davidsfonds, 1966.
- 8 See Marc Holthof, 'Hugo Roelandt – Let's expand the sky', Occasional Papers, 2016.