

## Evelyne Axell: *Body Double*



Opening 1 August 2020, Muzeum Susch presents *Body Double*, a solo presentation of the major Pop Art figure, Evelyne Axell (1935-1972). Axell embraced Pop Art in the 1960s, pioneering an original feminist take on the male-dominated genre. Axell ultimately transcended the established economies of Pop Art iconography at the time, her distinct body of work populated by an all-female universe reclaiming the discourse of women's sexuality.

Evelyne Axell's career was tragically cut short by her untimely death in a car accident, aged just 37, meaning her work and contribution to early feminist art and Pop Art was subsequently left out of the dominant narrative of art history, alongside her contemporaries such as Pauline Boty, Rosalind Drexler, Kiki Kogelnik, and Dorothy Iannone, who have only found due recognition in recent years. Co-curated by Anke Kempkes, international curator, art historian and art critic and Krzysztof Kościuczuk, artistic director of Muzeum Susch, this exhibition will present several dozen works across the artist's oeuvre. *Body Double* brings together a selection of collages and painterly objects - often created with novel artificial materials, such as her signature technique of painting plastic with car enamel - as well as rare three-dimensional pieces and works on paper, many of which have not been on view in decades. Following a presentation at Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach in 2011, this will be the largest solo museum retrospective to be staged outside of Axell's native Belgium in decades.

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Born in Belgium in 1935, Axell began her career as a TV presenter under the name of Evelyne Axell, becoming a charismatic and acclaimed theatre and film actress, as well as script writer in the Nouvelle Vague genre. Tutored for by the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte, Axell turned to painting in 1964. Axell filtered the contemporary vocabulary of Pop Art through an own reading of Surrealism. Her daring work was initially met with such derision by male critics that she decided to drop her first name Evelyne to publish professional work under the androgynous 'Axell' in order to escape the associations of her gender.

*Body Double* offers a close reading of Axell's self-articulations and the aesthetic treatment of the meta-autobiographical dimension in her work. The exhibition will also highlight the diverse political themes in Axell's work, situating her iconography in an international perspective of the time. As an active witness of the era of sexual liberation, Axell's explorations focussed on a female body that was both liberated from past painterly conventions of depicting femininity and, ultimately, from the heterosexual and patriarchal matrix of society – both historical and contemporary. Throughout her work, Axell forged a signature iconography of empowered female nudes inhabiting spheres of utopian homosociality. As the artist herself said, "Despite all aggressiveness, my universe abounds above all in an unconditional love for life. My subject is clear: nudity and femininity experiment in the utopia of a bio-botanical freedom, that means a freedom without frustration nor gradual submission, and that tolerates only the limits that it sets itself." (Axell, 1970)

As its title suggests, *Body Double* hones in on the - almost obsessively recurring - motif of 'the double' in Axell's compositions. These range from identical, idealized female nudes, engaged in a dialogue, caught motionless as if in a Greek freeze, or resembling keepers of a portal to an uncharted territory, to psychologically charged double self-portraits, twin females absorbed in an embrace or a kiss, to figures in which the only distinctive feature is their skin colour – resonating with the agendas of anti-colonial politics of the time and the US civil rights movement. The rich iconography of the 'Body Double' culminates in Axell's painting, *La grande sortie dans l'espace* (The Great Journey into Outer Space, 1967) in which cosmonautic nudes float in space in a modern pagan circle dance. Transcending Matisse's purely aesthetic compositions of cut-out nudes, Axell's Arcadian abstraction is a vision of a joyful, non-authoritarian new dimension in which female pleasure can unfold freely.

Another aspect of "the double" in Axell's paintings is the "bio-botanique": with surreal beasts, exotic animals, and tropical vegetation that exist as "bio-cultural companions" to use Paul B. Preciado's term. These include representations of transformed ideal egos, stand-ins for human, or eroticized scenes like the *Le Homard Amoureux* (Lobster in Love, 1967) in whose embrace the female shape dissolves into a human-crustacean hybrid. Even today, Evelyne Axell's work remains highly evocative in its transgressive sexual iconography, proto-feminist agenda and liberalist utopian outlook.

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## Notes to Editors

### Exhibition Dates:

*Evelyne Axell: Body Double* runs 1 August 2020 until 6 December 2020.

**Curated by: Anke Kempkes, Krzysztof Kościuczuk**

### Location:

Muzeum Susch  
Surpunt 78  
CH-7542 Susch  
Switzerland

### Muzeum Susch:

A new kind of 'laboratory', Muzeum Susch opened in January 2019, founded and created by Grażyna Kulczyk, the Polish entrepreneur and long-term supporter of contemporary art whose past flagship ventures have nurtured novel platforms for dialogues in the arts and beyond. The museum is housed in an extraordinary campus located on the site of a 12th century former monastery and brewery in Susch, a remote town on the ancient pilgrim route called Jacob's Trail to Santiago de Compostela in the Engadin valley of the Swiss Alps. The multi-faceted project comprises over 1,500 m<sup>2</sup> of gallery spaces which show both site-specific permanent artworks and a regular programme of curated, temporary exhibitions complemented by the artist's house for residencies and the auditorium.

Muzeum Susch is the Swiss Building of the Year 2019, one of the 'World's Greatest Places' (The Times Magazine), nominated as European Museum of the Year 2020 and as one of the 'Most Stunning Buildings in the World' (Departures magazine).  
<http://www.muzeumsusch.ch/>

### Grażyna Kulczyk:

Grażyna Kulczyk is an entrepreneur and art collector, whose endeavours have made her Poland's most successful businesswoman. She began building her collection while still in law school during the 1970s, graduating from Law Faculty at Adam Mickiewicz University in her hometown of Poznań to continue as judge. From the outset, Ms. Kulczyk has followed her '50-50 philosophy' guideline, where each of her investments is equally informed by a style of doing business and social involvement in promoting culture and art. In 2004, after many years of running activities in art and philanthropy sectors, Ms. Kulczyk set up her flagship venture: Art Stations Foundation, housed in the Stary Browar (Old Brewery) complex in Poznań, Poland. Stary Browar resulted from the purchase and revitalisation of the abandoned 8-hectare Hugger Brewery, turned by Ms. Kulczyk into a dynamic complex for commercial and artistic activity, which has received numerous Polish and international awards. Art Stations Foundation is the largest private cultural institution in Poland to date. Through its activities, Ms. Kulczyk remains committed to the goal of continuously bringing art to the public, providing opportunities for artists to engage with local communities, and supporting innovative developments in culture. In 2017, Ms. Kulczyk set up Art Stations Foundation CH, the body behind the activities of the forthcoming Muzeum Susch.

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Ms. Kulczyk built her fortune over 30 years of changes since 1989 and is the first woman to reside atop the ranking of the wealthiest Poles. Active on the international real estate and development markets, she is known for bold and innovative business projects and her unyielding will in their implementation. Her areas of interest and art commissions combine a number of themes. She is a champion of contemporary art and supporter of avant-garde choreography while also supporting development of new technology and start-ups working to change the world. She is particularly engaged in supporting entrepreneurship among women as well as the equal presence of women in STEM. Since 2012, Ms. Kulczyk supports Tate as a member of the International Council and Russia and the Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee. She joined the board of the Modern Women's Fund Committee of the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2015, and has been a board member of Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw for almost 10 years. Ms. Kulczyk has been recognised as one of the 200 Top Collectors in the world by Art News magazine. Art Stations Foundation CH and Ms. Kulczyk have been awarded as the European Cultural Investor 2019.

## **Evelyne Axell:**

Evelyne Axell (1935, Belgium – 1972, Belgium), née Devaux, engaged with a proto-feminist perspective on Pop Art iconography in the 1960s and early 70s. Before her career as an artist, Axell was an acclaimed theatre and film actress and screenwriter, but was dissatisfied with the machismo of the Paris and Brussels entertainment scenes. In 1964, Axell quit the entertainment industry and enlisted Surrealist painter René Magritte, a family friend, to be her artistic mentor. Axell would become the only pupil of the Surrealist Master.

Initially, Axell's first works were heavily influenced by Pop Art, which had been the subject of three films by her husband, an established art documentary maker. Although her work remained relatively little known, she enjoyed some success among Belgian collectors from 1965 and her talent was first officially recognised through the Young Belgian Painters Awards in 1967. This marked the beginning of a series of exhibitions, including at the Palais Due to the brevity of her life, Axell's work may seem encapsulated in the spirit of the 1960s era but is in fact incredibly contemporary and appreciated by new generations. Evelyne Axell's works are included in major museum collections including Tate Modern (London), Centre Pompidou (Paris), Berardo Museum (Lisbon) and Royal Fine Arts Museum (Brussels) amongst others. Recent exhibitions featuring her work include 2015 *International Pop*, Walker Art Center, Dallas Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, *The World Goes Pop* (Tate Modern, London) in 2015; "RE: Painted", SMAK, Ghent, Belgium, in 2014; "Pop Art Design", Barbican Art Gallery, London, UK in 2013; "GLAM! The performance of Style", Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt and LENTOS Kunstmuseum, Linz in 2013; "POWER UP – Female Pop Art", Kunsthalle, Wien in 2010.

## **Anke Kempkes:**

Anke Kempkes is an international curator, art historian and art critic currently based in Warsaw. Since her studies at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London in 1991/2 she has contributed to international art publications, conferences and magazines such as *Frieze* and *Texte zur Kunst*. In 2004 she held the position of Chief Curator at Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland where she curated the exhibition "Flesh at War with Enigma" reintroducing the work of 1960s sculptor Alina Szapocznikow. From 2005–2017 Kempkes ran an independent curatorial space, research centre and gallery in New York. The programme focused on female avant-garde artists and on New York's experimental music, dance and performance art of the

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1960s and 70s. Since 2017, Kempkes is an independent curator of exhibitions in Europe with a focus on Female (Post)Minimal Art and Queer Performance Art. She has been teaching as an Associate Lecturer at Zurich University of the Arts since 2019.