

KÖNIG LONDON

EVELYNE AXELL

CHEESE | CURATED BY ANGELA STIEF

28 JUNE – 21 JULY 2018

OPENING: 27 JUNE, 6 – 9 PM

“My world, for all its aggressiveness, is brimming with unconditional zest for life. My motif is clear: Nudity and femininity represent the utopia of a bio-botanical freedom – a freedom, which is immune to frustration and gradual repression, a freedom, which tolerates only the limits, it sets for itself.”
Evelyne Axell

Evelyne Axell’s (1935–1972) work has reached cult status. It can be valued as a highlight of pop art – an art form, which only gradually today recognises its female protagonists. Despite international participation in exhibitions at the Center Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Modern in London, the Brooklyn Museum in New York and the Kunsthalle Wien, Axell still belongs to those female representatives of the era, whose potential is only now being acknowledged. In the late 60s and early 70s, the Belgian artist, who worked under the name Axell in order to obscure her gender, developed a subversive imagery that oscillates between female actionism and seduction, and unfolds a protofeminist force. Female figures dominate the expressive universe of the artist, which dealt with both female clichés and age-old role models, while simultaneously correcting established gender relations. By drawing on art history and momentous portraits, such as the *Mona Lisa* by Leonard da Vinci, Axell questions historically sedimented male ideas of femininity that waver somewhere between notions of “saint” and “whore”. The artist uncovered a multifaceted spectrum of feminine perspectives; through the portrayal of everyday life and the use of appropriative techniques, Axell revealed and expanded spheres of action: the famous smile of the *Mona Lisa* – that confident expression of a mysterious woman – was used by the artist in the work *Cheese*, which is the eponymous title of this exhibition. She transcribed the icon into her present-day by utilising innovative materials.

Along with Axell’s numerous self-portraits and the recurring depiction of women, her reappropriation of the female body and nudes have deconstructed dominant rules of authorship. The artist changed sides by moving from the role of the muse to that of the producer, and thereby renegotiated the old regime of seeing and being seen. In *Le peintre* (1971) she confidently inserts herself into a fictive genealogy of self-portraits, demonstrating a natural pleasure in making art.

Art became Axell’s weapon of provocative self-empowerment, resisting the objectification of women in post-war society. Her protofeminist imagery, which draws on pop art’s depiction of reality as heavily mediated and therefore ultimately constructed, seeks the representation of female perspectives and desire. Axell’s lustful impetus will continue to remain important as long as society has not yet achieved true gender equality.

KÖNIG LONDON
259-269 OLD MARYLEBONE ROAD
LONDON NW1 5RA

T +44. 207. 258 3883
LONDON@KOENIGLONDON.CO.UK
KOENIGLONDON.CO.UK

OPENING HOURS
WED – SAT 11 AM – 6 PM
OR BY APPOINTMENT

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Evelyne Axell was born in Namur, Belgium, in 1935. She began her career as an actress, a TV moderator and a screen writer. Before relocating back to Belgium, she lived and worked in Paris. In 1964, she decided to solely focus on making art. As a young artist, she had the privilege of studying under René Magritte for a year. After 1967, Axell began exploring new materials, experimenting with different kinds of synthetic resin and sculpting silhouettes and body fragments using transparent plastic sheets that she layered into reliefs and then painted or lacquered. In her later work, she painted lush, rainbow-coloured landscapes of yearning, in which people – complying with the ideals of the hippie era – are depicted indulging in acts of free love. Between 1964 and 1972, a time span of merely eight years, Axell created a comprehensive oeuvre that was shown in many exhibitions. Her life and career ended prematurely and abruptly when she died in a car accident in September 1972.

Axell's work was shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including the Center Pompidou (Paris, France, in 2009), Kunsthalle (Vienna, Austria, in 2010), Kunstverein (Hamburg, Germany, in 2011), Tate Liverpool (UK, in 2013), the Schirn Kunsthalle (Frankfurt, Germany, in 2013), the LENTOS Art Museum (Linz, Austria, in 2013), the Barbican Art Gallery (London, UK, in 2013), the Dallas Museum of Modern Art (USA, in 2015), the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, USA, in 2015), the Philadelphia Museum of Art (USA, in 2016), the Tate Modern (London, UK), the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art (Poland, in 2017), the KIOSK Art Center (Ghent, Belgium, in 2017) and KÖNIG GALERIE (Berlin, Germany, in 2018).

Her work is represented in the following public collections (selection): Tate Modern (London, UK), Center Pompidou (Paris, France), Pinault Collection (Venice, Italy), Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts (Brussels, Belgium), Museum of Modern Art (Sintra, Portugal), Musée d'Ixelles (Brussels, Belgium), Mu.ZEE - Kunstmuseum aan Zee (Ostend, Belgium), S.M.A.K. - Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, (Ghent, Belgium), ADAM-Art & Design Atomium Museum (Brussels, Belgium).

Text: Angela Stief