

BLACK DRIPS AND DARK  
MATTER—THE LUXURY GAP —  
CONCEPT INDIVIDUEL —  
QUARRY DESERT  
THE INCOMMENSURABLE  
CONTEMPORANEITY OF  
ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW (For B.)

I had been kindly invited to speak about Alina Szapocznikow's "Conceptual" shift in the early 1970s of which not much research has been done to date, due to the fact that the following projects were not yet named as conceptual art works. We are thinking of Szapocznikow's dandy research portfolio for the consumer-critical project *My American Dream*; her text/idea/sound display in Pierre Restany's show "Operazione Vesuvio"; her participation with Roman Cieślewicz in the utopian architecture symposium in Vela Luka, former Yugoslavia; her experimental shift in sculpture in the *Photosculptures* series and the "process piece" *Cendrier D'Ambience*,<sup>1</sup> which was the last stage of her polyester sculptures *The Bachelor's Ashtray*, 1972, a series which Szapocznikow eventually pared down to a simple slab of butter with cigarette butts inserted into it, destined to decay after its initial enactment and therefore permanently existing only in documentation.

Coming back to the previously mentioned early 1970s projects, I first became enthusiastic about discoveries in Szapocznikow's personal archive, where I was conducting research with Piotr Stanisławski (and Dagmara Budzbon) on the retrospective show we had just opened in NYC.

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The work is listed in the sculpture catalogue raisonné as the last piece of the series of the *The Bachelor's Ashtray (Cendrier de Celibataire)*. In a letter to Annette Messager in 1972 we see that she wanted the piece to be titled *Cendrier D'Ambience*. The notion of "ambient" I think might have come from her exchange with US curator Peter Selz, as she proposed to him in 1969 to realize an "environment" as he was then Director of the newly founded Berkeley University Art Museum which was not built yet, so she would have had to wait years to do so.

To my delight, we had sighted an envelope containing fascinating documentation and correspondence initiated by Szapocznikow for the realization of “My American Dream” (1970/1), later on show simply in the form of a text/idea contribution in accordance with the instructions curator Pierre Restany had given out to the participants of the show “Art Concepts from Europe” in NYC. The visual richness of this dossier slumbering in her archive—and the speculative and humorous nature of the collected material—immediately nurtured an impression that these very documents could be identified as a conceptual piece of art in their own right, clearly, one could say, an approach from today’s perspective of aesthetic sensibility and an appreciation for archives and the appeal of the document and text as an art form. However this impulse was not only a retroactive projection after all: upon closer inspection this old folder was waiting to be discovered as an amazingly phantasmal work of art. The material lists pop cultural elements such as magazine ads of Rolls Royce with British-styled models posing, portraits of the dandy inventor of the luxury car Charles Stewart Rolls, catalogues of old-time models from the company, correspondence with potential sponsors such as Hugh Hefner for a double life size marble sculpture that the artist wanted to realize, the fact that the Rolls Royce idea was inspired by Tex Avery cartoons favored by her son Piotr, and documents such as an estimate from the Henreaux quarry workshop for the large piece of marble and its transport (quoting the astronomical figure of 220,000 in today’s dollarsto produce the life size car model), the further demoralizing response from Documenta director Harald Szeemann that a costly piece like this could be realized only with sponsors provided by the artist, along with letters of regret from supporters pointing to “difficult times” (likely referring to the oil crisis). All in all, the material documents an interesting ambiguity between Szapocznikow playful exuberance and her determination to realize this allegedly “extravagant” piece.

Yet, after some deeper considerations I found myself questioning, Was Szapocznikow a Concept Artist? Did she consciously engage in conceptual work as such? I tended to counter with a “No” as all of these projects, however experimental and open, still seem to be strongly rooted in sculpture and Szapocznikow’s language of surreal existentialism, a particular temperament that critic Pierre Restany would term Szapocznikow’s “classicism.”

However this was also only half of the answer. While there are clearly pop and conceptual elements that can be paralleled

and positioned interestingly in the context of other artists’ practices at the time, it seemed more and more questionable to categorize the shifting phases of Szapocznikow’s work along the established notions of style. Consequently, a more general and complex question arose: that of Szapocznikow’s search for artistic identity upon her 1963 arrival in Paris into a highly charged field of new art movements, neo-avant-garde discourse, and new counter-cultural practices, at the forefront of which were the activities of the Nouveaux Réalistes, who were mediated to Szapocznikow by the very initiator of the movement, her friend and supporter, the powerful curator/critic personality of the Parisian post-war art world Pierre Restany. Szapocznikow entered the Parisian scene at its epicenter from the very moment of her arrival. Restany had met her in Poland in 1960 and described her as “rightly recognized in her country, Poland, where she stands as a national celebrity figure.”<sup>2</sup> But despite having been prominently and respectfully contextualized by the influential critic:

—*In Paris in 1967, by the end of a first development—without a doubt slowed down by the weight of psychological obstacles to be overcome—Alina Szapocznikow stands to me in the rare lineage of Cesar and Delahaye, as a major sculptor of the post war second generation.*

Szapocznikow never became part of the Nouveaux Réalistes, not even in a broader public association, and was also later not directly involved in a specific movement or defined in a specific art discourse of her time.

What status do we then ascribe to her highly original experiments and her radical expansion of the notion of sculpture in the late 1960s and early 70s? Was she an artist of a genuine “protean” nature? Was she adjusting to the new fashions in art making that she was confronted with in Paris and the US? Was she searching for new identities as an artist in a changing environment? And why has her specifically new approach and concepts remained marginalized in terms of general recognition and in regard to their status in her work *raisonnés*?

We will see further on that Szapocznikow re-oriented her work in nuances—found directions which were often articulated in semi-private accounts, never as part of a loud movement but in a highly personal yet never idiosyncratic approach. At the same time

2

Pierre Restany, *Alina Szapocznikow par Pierre Restany* (catalogue Galerie Florence Houston-Brown, Paris, 1967), pages not numbered. (Translation from the French by Guillaume Rouchon).

Szapocznikow never betrays her core thinking in sculpture or her legacy of poetic existentialism and surrealism. While she was regarded by her contemporaries as potentially *too* individual, and her vision of the body *too* traumatically inflicted and *too* provocatively sexual to be fully absorbed into new art movements, we can see today that the radicality of her experiments lie in her unique proto-feminist vision, as well as in her precise independence (having been at the center *and* coevally on the margin of recognition) which led her to explore the same astonishing sites of her practice that presided over the visions of pioneers like Robert Smithson, Jean Tinguely, and others. That the cutting-edge status of Szapocznikow's work could not be fully read at the time has numerous reasons and constitutes an art historical cluster with many blank spaces that can only be partially reconstructed. As the discourses of art, taste, and fashion move on and are in constant modification, we can today appreciate and evaluate in Szapocznikow's work the interplay with and fusion of aspects and articulations that made her work to a degree incommensurable at the time. (After *Wack!* premiered at the MOCA in Los Angeles, curated by Connie Butler, there is a new embrace of women artists from the 60s and 70s through collecting activities, museum shows, and gallery representation in the US).

I will furthermore focus on the fine-tuned alliance that the artist had established with the critic Pierre Restany. The dialogue Restany had with women artists at the time is a bit of a fascinating chapter, e.g. the Belgium artist Evelyne Axell had developed an expressive and parodistic devotion to him and made the critic an icon of her revolutionary aesthetic politics. Although Restany evidently projected his own discourse of art's new engagement with reality on Szapocznikow— as we will see later— he at the same time had a unique and sensual understanding of the very moves and steps of her artistic development. However, his repeated notion of a desirable development in her work towards objectivism is clearly lead by his contemporary understanding of the successive progress of the (neo-)Javant garde art practice.

As one might picture, an alliance with an influential critic and friend was an asset for an artist who had just recently immigrated to Paris from a drastically different political and cultural climate in Warsaw. The question of finding an identity that would both transgress her former experience and produce new authentic possibilities must have been a central concern of Szapocznikow's, especially when taking into account her many potentially marginalizing charac-

teristics: being a female artist in the 1960's, an Eastern European immigrant from a communist country during the Cold War, financially uncertain, and a Jew who's family went through the atrocities of the Holocaust... the list goes on...

Some of these conditions were summarized by Virginia Armat, who was obviously directly informed by Szapocznikow, in an unpublished article shortly before her untimely death in 1973:

*—Throughout her Parisian and international career (Yugoslavia, Italy, Germany, Canada...), Alina manages a tour de force remaining independent: alone on the art "market"; since she isn't linked to any gallery, alone in her work at the welding and marble studio in Quercetta, at Henraux's where she enjoys executing almost all of her sculptures while speaking about the trade and materials with the workers.<sup>3</sup>*

At the same time Szapocznikow was, all difficulties aside, an intellectual in her own right, enormously well informed about contemporary art history, and strong minded in regards to the conditions of her artistic production.

### The Turn

In 1967 and 1968 two Szapocznikow catalogues were published, both initiated by Pierre Restany and designed by Roman Cieśliewicz, the celebrated graphic designer and the artists' second husband. **[FIG. 1+2]** The change of look from the first to the latter publication was consciously directed by the artist herself, and the intense observations in the two texts by Restany give a deep insight into the fundamental shift Szapocznikow was going for, and how this shift was both partially recognized while being simultaneously overlooked as a far reaching extended practice that she could have explored more deeply had a stronger supporting context presented itself.

The design of the 1967 catalogue for a show at Galerie Florence Houston-Brown in Paris presents works composed of polyester casts of lips, legs, and faces mounted on organic marble stands, photographed in the convention of the time with dramatized light in isolated settings—only the blackened lip sculptures on the cover give a first clue of some new pop appeal. Pierre Restany opens his text with an air of criticality towards Szapocznikow's ever so slightly traditional "classicism" and her former individual expressionism, a critique continued by tracing a certain weakness of discontinuity between the language of form and object in her combines of translucent polyester

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From an archive manuscript of an unpublished article by Virginia Armat for Cun Press in 1973.

## ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW

par Pierre Restany



FIG.1 / PAGE  
ROMAN CIEŚLEWICZ, COVER OF THE  
CATALOGUE OF THE SHOW AT GALERIE  
FLORENCE HOUSTON - BROWN, PARIS,  
1967

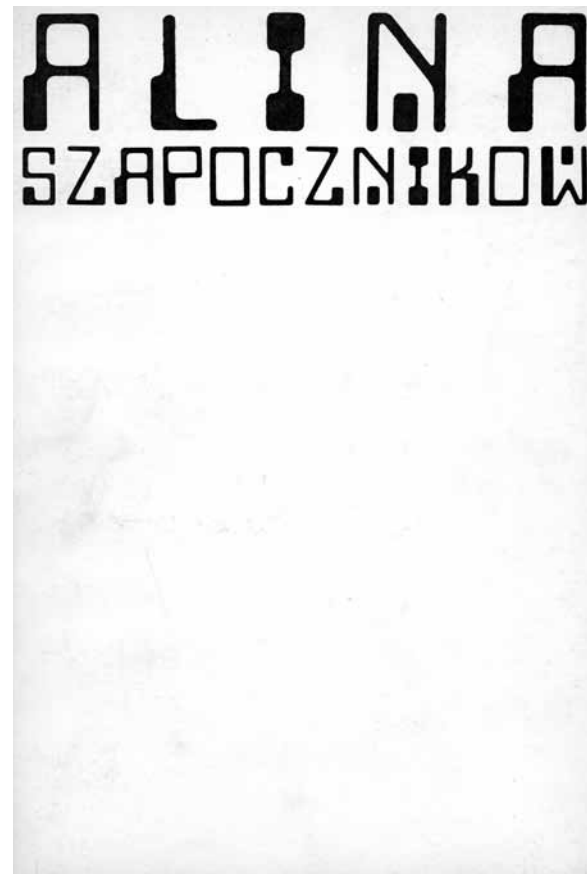


FIG.2 / PAGE ???  
ROMAN CIEŚLEWICZ, COVER OF THE  
CATALOGUE OF THE SHOW AT CAGEIME,  
BRUSSELS, 1968

heads sitting on massive marble stands: *What Alina Szapocznikow represents is before anything a sculptor temperament, an innate gift for the equilibrium of structures and the control of volumes. The immediate counter-part to these gifts is, very obviously, the narcissistic cult of the trade, and an extreme slowness in the formal elaboration.*<sup>4</sup>

At the same time Restany sees her moving on towards a “progressive opening to the real” (we detect his projective language in the context of Nouveaux Realisme). In the critic’s eyes, there is a point of departure in Szapocznikow’s assemblages, which integrate ready-made, found, “impure” objects, exemplified in her legendary *Goldfinger* piece, appreciated by Marcel Duchamp, as Restany speculated, as the legacy of the ready-made.

Restany continues:

—*What game does Alina play? That of objective and technological reality, that of modern, industrial and urban Nature. For a long time, she translated her yearning for direct integration into the real by affirming the dualism between the molded form and the found object. ... In other words, these first combine-sculptures assess (the very same goes for Jasper John’s painting) the complete integration of the ready-made into a predetermined formal context.*<sup>5</sup>

From here, Restany sees Szapocznikow’s former expressionist aesthetic evolve into objectification: the position of the ready-made continued and replaced by body moldings directly taken from the artist’s body — a ready-made of the body.<sup>6</sup> Restany is looking for “objectification,” “schematism,” and “detachment” to replace expressionism and individuality, searching for a new manifestation of the “rationale” in Szapocznikow’s work: “an objective and realistic vein equidistantly located from pure fetishism and baroque decoration.”

And he continues by interpreting her new aesthetic direction as the dawn of a liberation from her biographical background:

—*The artist seemed to escape the long torment of her life, the horror of her past of war and camps: she slowly woke up to a new objective consciousness of the world. (...) This exhibition takes places at the right time: it constitutes the Parisian milestone of an evolutive process in full elaboration. Settled and living in France since 1964, a little more liberated from her personal complexes, the artist makes an attempt, with an increased tenacity, at accommodating the narrow ways of a lucid instinct. Given, it will still take a long time for Alina*

<sup>4</sup> Restany, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Anke Kempkes, “The Bodies’s Ready Made. Alina Szapocznikow”, in *Flesh at war with Enigma*, (Basel: Kunsthalle, 2004), pp. 50–59



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*to rip apart the anguish-ridden sails of her inner world. But the trigger has been pulled, and nothing will ever hinder this process.*<sup>7</sup>

Apparently, Restany also reads what he sees as Szapocznikow’s progress towards objectification as the work of de-traumatization. It is not only here that we see the limits of the critic’s projection and the mode in which he is locked into his discourse while trying to come to terms with Szapocznikow’s shifting artistic identity. Contrary to Restany’s argument, the traumatized body is in a very interesting way deeply imbedded in Szapocznikow’s iconography. This results in new fusions with Pop strategies that lead to possibilities of a broader reading. However in actual fact the subject of trauma remains the underlying subject of most works to follow in this period, if not even more direct than before

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considering the **[SOUVENIRS]** series from 1970s onwards, where Szapocznikow recurrently integrated a photo of a Holocaust victim in the amorphous polyester next to portraits of family, friends, and media personalities such as Twiggy, Monika Vitti, Christian Boltanski and others. One could even say that through new techniques, the “modern nature” of these works allowed her to integrate these elements in a way that balanced disaster with life and hedonism through crass and daring juxtapositions of the desirable pop body with the destroyed decaying body in one genuine artistic maneuver.

We see this dialectic highlighted in the piece **[STELE]** from 1968. This piece represents a perfect fusion of elements in her work at the time, executed prominently in human scale. One finds the eerily framed pop appeal of body casts of her face and legs in skin tone with a drop of black “blood” dripping provocatively and humorously down her equally blackened lips, suggesting the popular motif of the Mummy (an entry in her personal notes even mentions the sculpture as “Mumia”). The shape of the head and body made of black polyurethane, her favorite material of the time, also suggest a schematized noblesse of an ancient princess’s coffin. The darker bottom part of the figure, which seems to strangely mirror the shape of the upright part, extends the lower legs and feet in a boney, skeletal cast, looking as if preserved in lava. This element appears not by accident, as Szapocznikow was fascinated by the gloomy story of Pompeii. In that sense the organic black polyurethane becomes an allegorical material point-

<sup>7</sup>

Restany, op. cit.

ing to the all-consuming lava of a mythological-historical past or the disastrous effect of the atomic bomb. Alluding to the story of “Hiroshima Mon Amour” (and indeed Szapocznikow’s oeuvre of this time parallels the writings of Marguerite Duras in fascinating ways) Pierre Cabanne wrote in 1973: *Alina’s fetishist catalogue mixes eroticism with exorcisms. One never knows if breasts and thighs emerge from a bed destroyed by a lover’s embrace or from the mud of Hiroshima, if they are love or death.*<sup>8</sup>

For Pierre Restany’s project “Operazione Vesuvio” in 1972, Szapocznikow revisits the Pompeii complex. Her contribution to the utopian art project looked like a conceptually presented text, but ultimately her idea is a poetic vision of surreal “entropy”: she suggested an ice-rink inside the crater of the still active volcano where people would skate to the waltz “The Hills of Manchuria” by Ilya Shatrov oblivious to the ever present threat of becoming the victims of a sudden eruption.

Szapocznikow writes in the exhibited text:

*—If one day, during a figure skating competition, some Peggy Fleming will dance her program in a frozen crater and if, stunned by her pirouettes, we the spectators are suddenly trapped by the sudden eruption of lava which will turn us into stone likewise the Pompeians, then the triumph of the moment and the transience of our existence will be complete.*

On a suggestive level and due to her exceptional sculptural sensibility, Szapocznikow’s proposal touches the dimensions of an Earth Art intervention, as the ice would also momentarily form a huge negative cast of the crater. Interestingly, Szapocznikow herself intellectualized the dialectical and ultimately disruptive aspect of the Vesuvio concept by comparing her idea of the ice at the bottom of a crater with the symbolic connotation of the *Broken Obelisk* by Barnett Newman. Newman’s landmark sculpture constitutes an image of power and positivism turned against itself, creating an allegorical monument. In her Vesuvio proposal the artist develops a new kind of trauma-aesthetic that is dynamic and non-retrospective. It almost seems as if Szapocznikow turned her morbid fantasy hedonistically against Restany’s utopian positivist manifesto for the “Operazione Vesuvio” (which he in turn countered judging her contribution again to be too individual in character for the radical countercultural climate of the project). However the connection of death and entropy was made, just as it had been formulated earlier by Jean Tinguely and brought to full conceptual expression by Robert Smithson. I will write more about that later.

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Pierre Cabanne, „Alina. Against All Odds!”, in: *Alina Szapocznikow. Capturing Life, Drawings and Sculptures* (Cracow–Warsaw: IRSA, 2004), p. 126



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EXPANSION (19???)

The closeness of beauty and death in Szapocznikow’s concept also points the way to a classic register of Pop Art, recalling Andy Warhol’s disaster series and his numerous *vanitas* motifs. Szapocznikow employs this strategy in her *Souvenirs*, although in a more personal and biographical manner, however the general structure is comparable. In these works we see Szapocznikow developing a specific form of political European Pop Art, paralleling the work of British artist Pauline Boty (who succumbed to the traumatic social realities of her time) as well as political pop art works by US artist Rosalyn Drexler. On the basis of varying accounts and sensibilities Szapocznikow’s politics do not belong to? the 1960s revolutionary iconography and agenda, and are instead related to the Second World War and the Holocaust, making her seem less contemporary to the Western eye, and her practice more personal in a direct biographical trajectory, while from a Polish perspective the new wave of Anti-Semitism in 1968 was a political disaster of the highest urgency. The in contemporaneity (Ungleichzeitigkeit) of Eastern and Western political and cultural conditions runs straight through Szapocznikow’s work. Her repeated use of the photograph of the Holocaust victim in her sculptures not only would have been in the Warholian sense a shock image of high efficiency in Poland at the time, it also in a wider sense is a disaster image that resonates with the imagery of Hiroshima’s destruction.

Where Szapocznikow is clearly distinguished and highly original is the way in which her proto-feminist strategies go much further than the more hedonist pop art iconography of the time.

In her **[FETISHES]** (1970–1972) of the early 1970s for example, the artist creates drastically ugly monstrous destroyed forms that closely resemble decaying debris—and again we see that Szapocznikow soon develops to a full extreme what Restany had earlier dismissed as a phenomenon to overcome: the “fetishism” of her works.

On the occasion of the second catalogue’s release a year later (for her show at Galerie Cogeime in Brussels in 1968), both authors Restany and Guiseppe Marchiori state that Szapocznikow to date had reached in their opinion the apex of her artistic maturity. Restany writes in his text of a scheme of evolutionary argumentation within Szapocznikow’s new foamy, flexible polyurethane sculptures, called by the artist **[EXPANSIONS]**

, and I look at his text first before I discuss the catalogue



design itself, as the text feels somewhat belated as the artist had already proposed a new site of her work of which Restany only vaguely manages to grasp, albeit rather poetically.

In his mind, Restany dismisses the progression towards open forms and objectification, in the typical manner of this time period, as Szapocznikow's position as a pop artist working from a specific feminist point of view. Body fetishization, subversion of the individual / or personal female narcissism were in fact new potent forms of a cutting-edge artistic strategy.

However Restany stumbles over these notions as aspects to overcome through new techniques that might bring the blessing of a more rational, de-personalized aesthetic of consistency, accumulation and seriality of form, arguing a kind of "Minimal" versus "Maximal" constellation:

*—Alina's narcissistic vision had for long found an incarnation in the casting of her body or that of other women, to her image. But the human body fetishism had never been absent from this dialectic which insisted in making a leg spring out from concrete or crowning a granite block with a forest of mouths. This oppositional discrepancy implied indeed a detachment in "representing". But tamed humor was not devoid of self-indulgence. (Selbstnachiebigkeit).*

*How to overcome this fetishism, if not by objectifying it completely? It is the contemporary plastic technology that brought Alina the solution. The use of polyurethane allowed her to realize the consistency of her language by means of the consistency of matter. The dialectic became synthesis as form, losing its individuality, became object.*

*The cast of a woman's belly with generous curves, edited in hundreds of copies made up the first basic "module" of the quantitative language. Each element, with tendencies to all quantitative combinations (repetition, juxtaposition, etc.) lends itself to an infinity of "compositions": laid out sparsely over an expanding foam carpet; superposed one over the other in totem-like or military post fashion; Spread evenly over a surface, as a repetitive series. The quantitative syntax objectifies the form: this belly only reads as such when isolated and abstracted from its context.<sup>9</sup>*

In 1968 Restany could probably only partially foresee to what a radical degree Szapocznikow would soon develop her language of compositional and representational ruptures, fragmentation, and crass juxtaposition. The bold physical directness of sexual body parts such as the fleshy erect phallus in *Sculpture – lamp VI* (1970), even today



maintain their potential to shock, and must have been rather incommensurable in her times (Piotr even told me that Szapocznikow included the Phallus lamp in a big auction one day in Paris to gauge the reactions. When the piece was carried in and presented to an all male audience, the crowd began booing and whistling. As the asking price went down and no serious bid came up, it was wise of Alina to not attend the event). The very decoration that seems to "tame" these works only enhances their provocation as opposed to rendering them more harmless. Another direction intensified by Szapocznikow in the early 70s (materialized most drastically in her Fetish sculptures) was the use of potential of ugliness, monstrosity and ultimate disjointedness to shock. Restany's argument against "decorativeness" could have been applied more appropriately in regards to Niki de Saint Phalle's *Nanas*—de Saint Phalle's having been the very celebrated female of the Nouveaux Realists. By now, one gets a feeling of how far Szapocznikow was from such a positive, affirmative aesthetic, and how much her less compromising, even abysmal, proto-feminist stance was.

The more humorous sculpture series of *Desserts* from 1970–71 have, apart from the more tough political **[SOUVENIRS]**, probably the strongest Pop appeal in their hedonist counter-exploitation of the female body. But such specific female strategies in Pop Art were at the time not yet articulated (and were not even in feminist art history until recently due to an apparent complicity with the enemy). However these strategies have been strongly practiced since the early 1960s by such artists as the Belgian Evelyne Axell, the British Pauline Boty, the American Rosalyn Drexler, and quite a number of other female artists from different countries. There was a certain degree of acquaintance among them: Axell and Boty met in 1964 when Axell's husband Jean Antoine directed a film about the British Pop scene *Dieu est-t-il Pop* and according to Sarah Wilson, Axell also met Szapocznikow, which is likely as she had traveled to Poland (particularly to Krakow, where she became close with the photographer Konrad Polesz) in the mid 60s and according to her husband loved the coun-

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Restany, „La Nature Moderne est Amour“, in: *Alina Szapocznikow* (catalogue Galerie Coeime, Bruxelles, 1968), pages not numbered, bold added.



FIG. R11 / PAGE???  
EVELYNE AXELL,  
TU ES PIERRE, 1969



ALEX (1922)

try.<sup>10</sup>

While Restany was rigidly unable to recognize Szapocznikow's subversive Pop potential in 1968, he (having been made into an object of devotion by Axell) chanted about what he called "womanpower's art" in Axell, De Saint Phalle, Yayoi Kusama, and Marisol only a year later in 1969:

"These women are living their sexual revolution as real women, with all the direct, unsurprising consequences: the other side is taking the initiative." One can trace the immature nature of this statement in regards to a serious analysis of women artist's interventionism and a certain paternal tone.

In her piece *Pierre et les Opalines* (1969) Axell created a portrait of Restany with the critic's hand monumentally gesturing in front of his face as if with great verve giving impact to his message. **[FIG. R11]** The painting was the center of a series of equally monumental portraits of self-conscious female nudes surrounding the critic like a harem, the most impressive of which are *Portrait of Yaël Dayan* (the daughter of Israeli general Moshe Dayan), and further the more anonymous *La Parsienne*, *La Persane*, *La Tchèque*, *La Polonaise* (given to Sarah Wilson by Jean Antoine), and so forth. It is quite likely that Axell was cleverly hinting on Restany's international reach as maybe the first post-modern, globally traveling critic/curator. Axell may have mildly exploited Restany's portrait as his power as a critic and curator was growing, and he was one of the few male critics who gave female artists recognition at the time (she painted him several times as the guru of her movement). Yet she shows him in his vulnerability, with his awkward but euphorically agitated pose resembling a slightly broken yet

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In the mid 1960s Axell (who fashioned her last name in a gender neutral style) completed a series entitled *Erotomobiles* which "stage a magnificent wedding of the surrealist body and commodity fetishism with Pop's fascination with the luxury consumer product par excellence—the car. ... 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 erotization. ... Soft porn-like, yet empowering fantasies of hetero—and significantly homo- and auto-erotic desire." (Kalliopei Minioudaki, "Pop's Ladies and Bad Girls: Axell, Pauline Boty and Rosalyn Drexler," *Oxford Art Journal* 30, no.3, 2007, pp. 402–430; online publication <http://oaj.oxfordjournals.org/content/30/3/402.full>). It may be that Szapocznikow took part of her inspiration for her marble Rolls Royce with the parodistic phallus figure on the front in "My American Dream" from her knowledge of Axell's earlier work.





FIG. R12  
PAULINE BOTY, WITH LOVE TO JEAN PAUL  
BELMONDO, 1963



FIG. Y7  
POSTCARD TO PIERRE  
RESTANY, AUG 13, 1968  
FROM QUARRY  
“HENREAUX”: QUERCETA  
DI SERAVEZZA, LUCCA,  
ITALY

*across as moral, in a typical post- 1955 British suburban sense; AND the dead hand of male Pop chauvinism can be felt resting heavy on her words. But, equally, it is too easy to retrospectively set up Pauline Boty as a feminist martyr. I think she found a place between Pop and (soft student) politics, which—like so many of those people pre-1966—was in fact more concerned with simple bohemian “fun” than it was with genuine activism/political intellectualism. Boty’s death coincided with a significant shift in the London sub-culture—(the influx of hallucinogens) and I believe she was a product of Pop’s pre-Lapsarian innocence.<sup>12</sup>*

These accounts show even more that the exhibitionist posing of Boty and Axell can not simply be read as an authentic narcissist act (of sexual freedom), rather, we are challenged by this generation of women artists with new conscious image productions and manipulations.

Szapocznikow equally introduced her own body into her production, sometimes as the very origin, and also in an indirect-direct way as she is extremely physically present in her work which is composed by casts of her own body—her face, her breasts, lips, etc.—fragmented body ready-mades (made mainly from the artist herself but sometimes from other women such as actress Julie Christie), disassembled in their single components and offered to the public as “sweets” or mundane domestic objects.

At the same time Szapocznikow engaged the Swedish model Anna Karin to pose naked in her studio among a group of her black polyurethane sculptures for a press article (see: archival photo p. (14)). To pose herself between her body casts would have been logically a redundant act. Nevertheless, Szapocznikow seemed to want to offer the playful pop interpretation of her time. However it does not fully work, as the pin up “act” in her studio turns from her gloomy disparate sculptures into something more sensual and dramatic than soft porn.

#### Quarry Desert

Working on two large marble bellies in the summer of 1968 in the Henreaux workshop at the quarry Querceta di Seravezza in Lucca, Italy, Szapocznikow sent a postcard to Pierre Restany, its front showing an impressive stone desert with workers. [FIG. Y7] She wrote on the back:

—Cher Pierre!

*I am here surrounded by the masses of material: by men working*



FIG. R13  
MICHAEL WARD, PAULINE BOTY (IN FRONT  
OF...), 1963

still phallic figure.

Restany mentions Szapocznikow briefly in context with Axell, but in a euphoric statement about the revolutionary authenticity of woman's new achievement in art he did not list her. It is also funny that Axell chose the not at all dashing, but rather nerdy and studious looking critic Restany as a male icon for her work, while, e.g., Pauline Boty manifested female desire in appropriating media sex icons such as Jean Paul Belmondo (see *With Love to Jean Paul Belmondo*, 1962) [FIG. R12] (next page).

Szapocznikow in her *Souvenirs* often included photographs of her lovers, and even realized a life size "totem" for [ALEX] (Chatelain).

We see through the polyester a not-at-all idealized male nude, showing quote "her man denuded of superfluties." The assembled parts are composed as strange twists and muddles of other photographic torsos which appear as more female than male, the inspiration indeed derived from Coya's *La Maja Desnuda*, a female nude looking somewhat alike *Alex*.

We see mainly a contest of the female body in these women Pop artists' works: either as an appropriation of media or otherwise (sexist) fetishization and consumption, in scenes of violence, or as sites of self-adopted empowerment and pleasure. [FIG. R13]

Another conscious strategy of Pauline Boty and Axell was to become models in their own work, which could on one level be read as a narcissist masquerade. As Kalliopi Minioudaki interestingly describes in her work on women Pop artists, both Boty and Axell appear in their works as performers of their own nudity, they are their own models, as they both also have been actresses, "appropriating for themselves Pop culture's positioning of women"<sup>11</sup>. In that sense the very notion of "work" opened up into the sphere of performativity and lifestyle. Axell is described as quite an adventurer who crossed many boundaries, and her extravaganzas eventually led to her untimely death in a car crash—a pop biography par excellence.

However glamorous in her own life, the Boty case seemed to have been slightly different, as Michael Bracewell states:

—Her "work" in other media crosses really into her identity as a Pop actor/personality/muse—which is a huge subject in itself. At the same time retro-mythic connections to Pauline Boty are problematic. Interestingly, in an interview of Nell Dunn for her book "Talking to Women" in 1966, Pauline Boty does much to suggest that her mood was anything but permissive—rather, she comes

*and by the pneumatic "sound". Marchiori is my guardian angel. The 2 bellies are 2 m high, really formidable. So, please advise Roman to make a "dynamic" catalogue. Je t'embrasse...Alina*

The note seems so casual that one could almost overlook its meaning, would we not see the result later in the visionary art directory of the 1968 catalogue which completely changed both the image of Szapocznikow's work and her artistic identity, knocking on the door of the ultra contemporary.

The first intervention is the cover, with the artist's name surprisingly appearing in a modern "Space Age" font. Only a year prior, the aesthetics of previous publications on her work had still looked quite old fashionably post-1950s, with sculptures domestically isolated and dramatically illuminated in a modest page design. Suddenly we see this cover and feel something is tuning in with the late 60s, and "space age" imagery was of course an ultra-modern fetish in Pop Art.

Niki de Saint Phalle specially designed a white space suit to fashion her image effectively for her documented actions. Axell organized a happening for a show in 1969 by bringing in a woman (the wife of a collector) wearing only an astronaut's helmet, covering her identity. The artist then began to dress her model in a sort of reverse striptease—stockings, panties, bra etc—in a sensual, (homo)erotic act in front of an ecstatic audience.<sup>13</sup>

The second intervention into the '68 catalogue is a series of photos of works in progress, the artist as a worker with a team, and the making of one of her polyurethane pieces. The static representation of her sculptures is given up in favor of a process oriented workshop presentation that highlights the chance effect of the expanding new materials and techniques that Szapocznikow was experimenting with. The scenes contain characteristics of a happening, and the way in which the black liquid foam is poured out is not unlike that of the open, time based gestures of Action Painting.

Again in the mid 1960s there was a move towards post-studio, process-oriented presentation of both an artist's work and themselves.

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"The evening closed with a stormy debate led by Pierre Restany on "The Sexual Revolution in Art". Axell really knew how to set her cher ami on fire... Quoted from Jean Antoine's biography on Axell in: "Evelyne Axell. From Pop Art to Paradise" (Paris 2004), p. 16.

For the brochure of Niki de Saint Phalle's show *She-a-cathedral* at the Modern Museet, Stockholm, in 1966 she and Jean Tinguely pose as the handymen of messy construction work. The images of Szapocznikow's action in 1968 seem to echo this aesthetic, as one can also see that the photos are precisely chosen: at the end of the sequence we even see a floor arrangement of dirty gloves and stained buckets left behind.

Finally, an unlabeled mysterious and stunning black and white photo of a silent, lifeless, bleak quarry landscape appears in the back of the '68 catalogue.

The image seems already allegorically detached/removed from the summer postcard Szapocznikow had sent depicting warm yellow rocks in sunlight and workers contributing a touch of busy life to the photo. The stylized quarry-desert in the catalogue seems apocalyptic, suggesting both a conceptual and a spiritual site.

Over the years Szapocznikow had realized a great deal from her production in quarries and numerous photos in her personal archive give vivid reports of a time spent in the joyful company of fellow workers and artists.

However the archetypal catalogue image of '68 speaks another language entirely. We do not see the man-made units of sculptures, just some iron ropes lying in the water and an abandoned truck. The site looks as if it had been exploited by mankind and left behind for geology to take over again.

In her postcard message to Restany, and in the composition of the catalogue, we can trace Szapocznikow's creation of an aesthetic relation between the sensational site of the quarry and the dark matter of the polyurethane in which she sinks the belly casts, as if it itself becomes a site. Szapocznikow's sculpture now becomes the mannerist end of an experience in the genuinely inspiring landscape of the quarry. It is here, in the Non-Site of her sculpture (to use Robert Smithson's term) that the female body is transfigured towards its traumatic-utopian dissolution, an intensely unique form of feminist Earth Art one could say, echoing in her own way the tension of Smithson Site/Non Site concept.

Restany in his catalogue text in '68 reacts again as puzzled as categorical: *Which style will she adopt? The great flexibility of the material allows any audacity.*

Referring to the “Big Beach” he continues:

*—Double metamorphosis of this magical carpet, it is the night that becomes woman. In the spontaneous line-up of bellies on a foam beach, it is the warm sea sand or the cold lava that become flesh, availability and desire of flesh.*

*The soft foam casts create their own psycho-sensory environment: in this feast for the spirit and the senses, the industrial nature is organically bound to Nature at large. ...*

*Alina Szapocznikow’s vision has elevated to higher dimension, letting go of the decorative aspect in favor of the breath of cosmic energies.<sup>14</sup>*

Restany can only poetically respond to what seems to evolve in Szapocznikow’s new approach as a very inspired concept of the sensationalism of landscape as we find it with American artists such as Smithson, Heizer, and others.

Likewise for Smithson, everything began in the quarry: his New Jersey upbringing shaped his artistic sensibility. He recalls later: “The Patterson area is where I had a lot of my contact with quarries...that somewhat embedded in my psyche.”

In an early, unpublished manuscript “To the Man of Ashes” from the same time as Jean Tinguely’s *Homage to New York* experiment in 1960, Smithson describes a desolate landscape which triggered his imagination and manifested his intellectual concept:

*On the dim landscape.*

*On the desolate mountain.*

*On the parched earth.*

*On the burnt desert.*

*On the dusty ground.*

*On the garbage dump.*

*On the dung heap.*

*On the blasted heath.*

*On the empty plain.*

*This is our inheritance...*

*La Bas: Rocks falling on rocks.*

*Stones falling on stones.*

*Sand falling on sand.*

*Dust falling on dust.*

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Restany, „La Nature Moderne est Amour”, in: *Alina Szapocznikow* (catalogue Galerie Coeime, op.cit.), bold added.

According to Eugenie Tsai:

*—The bleak apocalyptic landscapes described in “To the Man of Ashes” (c. 1961) resemble the disrupted sites he later sought for his Nonsites and Displacements and as locations of his Earthworks. A Quarry in Upper Montclair, New Jersey (1960), a rare early landscape drawing ... suggests that Smithson overlaid his vision of apocalyptic landscapes onto the “entropic” landscapes of the quarries he explored in his youth. In The Crystal Land (1966) Smithson introduces his concept of “entropic” landscape as a natural and cultural phenomenon. Describing an outing to the Great Notch Quarry taken with Judd and others, Smithson observed: “The walls of the quarry did look dangerous. Cracked, broken, shattered; the walls threatened to come crashing down. Fragmentation, corrosion, decomposition, disintegration, rocks creep, debris slides, mud flow, avalanches were everywhere in evidence.”<sup>15</sup>*

The concept of an “entropic” landscape was based on quote “Smithson’s fascination with time on a scale that surpassed the human and encompassed the geological past and science-fiction future.”<sup>16</sup> **[FIG. R14]** (next page)

Does Smithson’s vision of entropy resonate with Szapocznikow’s new notion of the “dynamic” in ‘68?

Was her Vesuvio story a geo-utopian or dystopian fiction? Are the belly casts symbolically handed over to the process of fossilization? Was she creating a surreal mannerism of “entropic sculpture”?

To date we do not know if Szapocznikow knew Smithson’s work. It is quite likely that she was acquainted with it, as her knowledge of contemporary American art was informed through Restany, who had an excellent insight into the US scene. However she also had direct correspondence with the legendary MoMA curator Peter Selz from 1963–70, and to whom she had expressed over the years her strong desire to live in the States as she saw her situation in Poland and Paris worsening by the late 60s. Coming from a Jewish family that immigrated to the US (fleeing from the Nazi regime), Selz had visited Poland several times in the early 60s where he met Szapocznikow and he remained supportive over many years. He helped raise funds for her in the form of US grants and connected the artist with Marcel Duchamp in Paris, as Duchamp was a major voice on the jury of the Copley Foundation, as was Selz himself (Szapocznikow subsequently won the

15

Eugenie Tsai, “Robert Smithson: Plotting a line from Passaic, New Jersey, to Amarillo, Texas,” in *Robert Smithson* (Los Angeles: MOCA, 2004), p.15.

16

*Ibid.*, p. 21

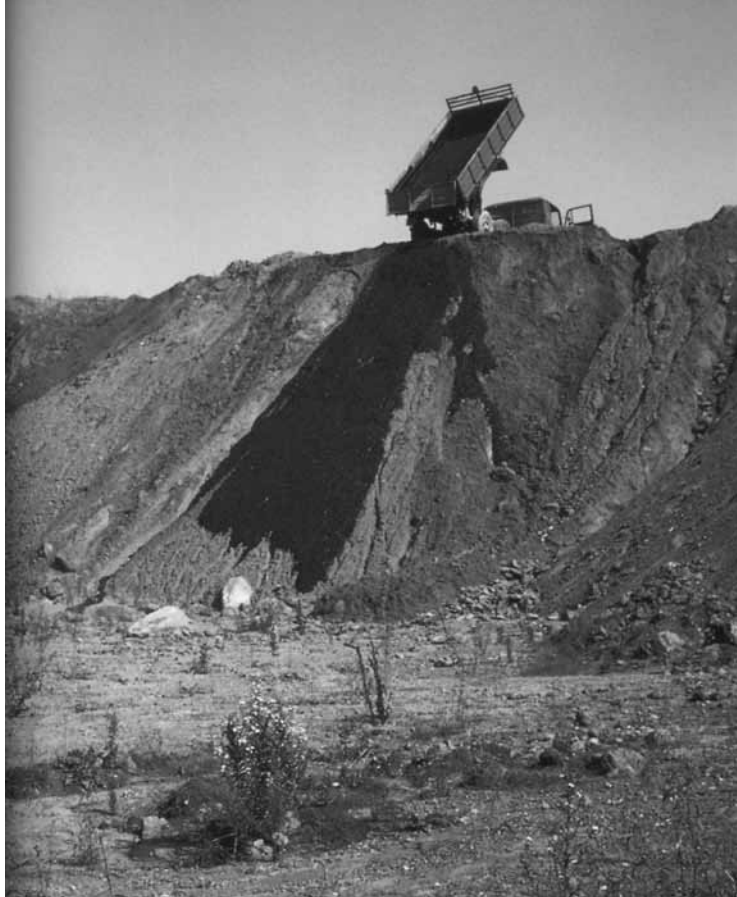


FIG. R14  
ROBERT SMITHSON,  
ASPHALT RUNDOWN, 1969

Foundation's prize in 1965). It was also Peter Selz that initiated Jean Tinguely's now mythic project *Homage to New York*, an auto-destructive art work enacted in the MoMA Sculpture Garden as early as 1960.

What makes the story of *Homage* interesting here is that Tinguely, —so central to the circle of Szapocznikow's time in Paris,— already formulated and practiced ideas which parallel Smithson's entropic concepts of time and site.

Billy Cluver, who assisted Tinguely for his radical MoMA project, wrote a wonderful report on the work's process in his essay "The Garden Party." I quote from his manuscript in the MoMA archive:

*—Jean and I made another trip to the Newark city dump. ... This large dump was Jean's world. He kept finding the oddest objects and and formations. ... Someone had left a complete bedroom set. If he could find a willing girl (which he admitted was difficult) this would be a place where he would like to live. ... He would spend his days in the dump as a completely free man. Out of the debris he would build large, involved constructions. Slowly he would convince the bums, living in small shacks on the dump, that what he was making was important. ... Of course, art was never to be mentioned, and his constructions would never be anything else but part of the dump. It is against the background of the anarchy and chaos of the Newark City dump that I see the growth of his machine. ... L'art éphémère.*

In a manifesto- part of the manuscripts of *Homage*...— Tinguely writes:

*—Let us be transformed! Let us be static! Let us be against stagnation and for the static.*

*Movement is static! Movement is static because it is the only immutable thing—the only certainty, the only unchangeable. The only certainty is that movement, change and metamorphosis exist. That is why movement is static. ... There is no death! Death exists only for those who cannot accept evolution. Death is static. Death is movement.*

Let's recall the last statement from Szapocznikow's Vesuvio text, when lava freezes and buries the beautiful scenario of the ice skaters in the crater, "then the triumph of the moment and the transience of our existence will be complete." We see how her formulation echoes Tinguely's manifesto of the "static movement" even in its morbid existentialist obsession.

Szapocznikow surely could not have taken the same path of artistic anarchy as Tinguely did (as much as she was miles away from the self-promoting ambitious image of the Art Amazon that Saint Phalle so successfully presented).



She let chaos rise in the vision of natural disaster, and her dark expansive polyurethane pieces were the closest she could come to the notion of "dynamic sculpture" a notion of work still materially existent instead of given in completely to the realm of conceptual ideas.

Their black arrested matter is the very expression of "static movement" and "entropic surrealism."