

the jodelle style by pierre sterckx



Tom Wesselmann,
American Nude 1 Cent Life, 1964.

Guy Peellaert,
The Adventures of Jodelle, 1965-66, page 6 (detail).

The work of Tom Wesselmann, renowned for his female nudes whose personality ironically dissolves within splashy compositions, is explicitly referenced in this classic panel from *Jodelle*, which graced the cover of the original American edition of the book, published by Grove Press. Both images share a parodic sensuality derived from American advertising iconography, and exhibit a similar graphic dynamism building on violent contrasts of flat colors, broken up by large areas purposefully left immaculate in a mechanical, stencil-like effect.

Here is the crucial part: No overheated expressionism. Peellaert draws with scorching coldness, his faces and bodies smooth and even.

To each their own individual soundtrack. Indeed, what we have here is *sound* rather than individual notes, *moments* rather than linear narrative. That is how the work should be written about. A theoretic/poetic equivalent to Peellaert's art must be found. And so these words shall be presented as a succession of individual dynamic tableaux, instead of one continuous essay. Let us draw from a cultural multiplicity as varied as Peellaert's own. A patchwork, a Harlequin's coat, ever to be patched and sewn back up. Something along the lines of Picasso plus Warhol (with a zest of Wesselmann and a slice of Flash Gordon on the side).

A handful of words spring to mind: Pop Art, Pop Culture, Pop Philosophy. Peellaert favors the so-called minor arts: advertising, comics, rock, movies, yéyé, neon, jukeboxes, pinball, SF, etc. He blows them up, monumentalizes them, transforms them into great art, which is to say something extreme: He throws the reader into a trance-like mixture of joy and fear that goes beyond mere entertainment. Like other artists of his generation, namely those who have defined modernity from Toulouse-Lautrec and Manet on, Guy Peellaert sees no conflict between minor art and major art. He cheerfully moves from High to Low, and back again. This is what gives his style its extreme density. You pause while reading *Jodelle* and *Pravda* just as you would stop before a painting. You can even turn back, retrace your steps, wander or stumble from panel to panel. There is no end to the discoveries you make as you re-read *Jodelle* or *Pravda*, as with a painting by Picasso or a page by Hemingway. But there is more to Peellaert than there is to a nude by Wesselmann (or Matisse) or a Marilyn series by Warhol — his close relatives. He adds a superabundant baroque quality to the mix. His drawings proliferate, his panels stretch out like the bodies they put on display, and everything is spilling out all over: Peellaert might even be called rococo, a mannerist of the baroque beyond the graphic level. For him the drawing (the form) is directly connected to the references (the content). He is totally, boldly transversal, that is to say, able to cross-connect the most disparate of codes: the Guggenheim museum with an ice cream cone, antique Rome with the Crazy Horse Saloon, François Mauriac with Las Vegas, and so on. One could even describe Peellaert and his countless moves from one universe or one style to another with the term “transduction” as used by scientists—the word referring to the quality of moving from organic or physical individuation to psychic individuation. To achieve this, biologists and

physicians tell us, one must be able to count on the “communicative” role played by mindfulness. And this is exactly how Peellaert operates. His drawings stretch out because he is seeking to move from the feminine to the mechanical to the animal. And he loves fast motorcycles — Pravda’s being a prime example — because they flaunt the same urgency of serial communicational contact.

Peellaert does not mock pop culture. Let us leave irony to those who do not create, who keep both signs and life at arm’s length. He genuinely loves, with the passion of a perpetual child, rock music, crime movies, the lithe charms of Françoise Hardy, and Sylvie Vartan’s carnal roundness. When Chet Baker sang “My Funny Valentine” he did it with love. Yet Peellaert’s love for the idols of his times in no way inhibits him from cheerfully gunning them down. He uses a whip to dust off the old myths that forever encumber us. In that sense, he behaves as Jasper Johns and Jimi Hendrix did toward the American flag: I love you and I abuse you.

In order to keep this subversive cacophony of clichés and repurposed icons coherent and alive, Peellaert has armed himself with a thick, black line worthy of Fernand Léger (much like the leaden framework of stained-glass windows) and a palette of shrill colors. It’s both electric and constructed. All the tones are arbitrary, in the tradition of the Moderns that began with Fauvism. Peellaert has no need for shadows to give texture, relief, and depth to his universe (nor did Hergé). It’s the rhythm of the drawing and the modulation of the colors that create, combined with the framing and the setting, an inextricable density, a paradoxically shallow depth.

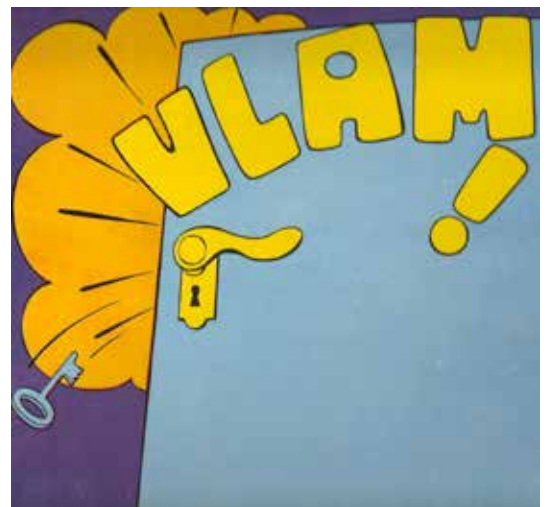
COLORS THAT POP

It had never occurred to any cartoonist... Comic strips had often leaned toward pure, flat tones, but they had never displayed colors and contrasts so extreme that they began to suggest fluorescence. Of course, painting had been in the same boat before Pop Art came along. Even Delaunay and Miró (and Matisse) seem to be working within a moderate chromatic range when compared to Warhol or Frank Stella. And at this point in the history of color, let us not forget kinetic art (Op Art), which made its appearance during the same period. Peellaert grabbed this revolution out of midair. His juxtapositions of pure pinks, greens, turquoises, are essentially fluorescent in effect.



Roy Lichtenstein,
The Kiss, 1961.

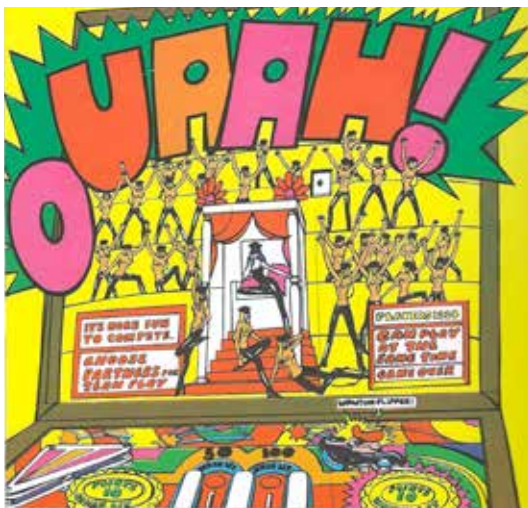
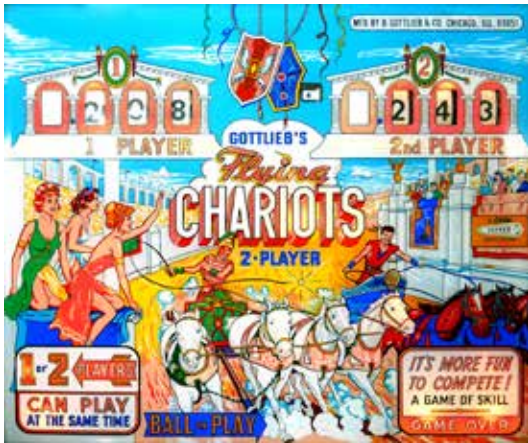
Roy Lichtenstein,
illustration for the cover of *Newsweek*, 1966.



Guy Peellaert,
The Adventures of Jodelle, 1965-66, page 68 (detail).

Even as Lichtenstein was appropriating pictorial resources from popular comics to recreate archetypal qualities isolated from any narrative context, Peellaert indulged in an additional conceptual layer by repurposing Pop Art’s key formal experiments—and above all its core vision of art penetrating everyday life—into a “real” comic strip form, all the while steering clear of an official art market that cynically continued to sell the fetish of a “unique” work of art even as Marcel Duchamp and ultimately Andy Warhol had rendered such an idea obsolete by taking “the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” (as identified by Walter Benjamin as early as 1935) to its conceptual conclusion, forever altering the status of the artist, and indeed the realm of art itself.

What is fluorescence exactly? It is color that produces more photons than it receives. Whereas traditional oil painting takes a certain amount of time to bounce back light, fluorescence reacts immediately, within a nanosecond. Consequently, an artist obsessed with speed like Peellaert could not ignore it. *Jodelle* and *Pravda* are brilliant displays of fluorescence, chromatic lightning bolts, ultra-rapid flashes, neon captured on paper. Peellaert does not light his characters, he turns them into emitters of color-light. And let us praise the shrill match-ups, another way of explaining the phenomenon: moments carved in orange and turquoise, others in eyeball-singeing greenish yellow. And the knowing use of pink! Peellaert is fully aware of the naughty but irresistible virtues of hot pink, this peculiar hue, both artificial and carnal, in which American popular art revels. Peellaert is extremely close to Wesselmann's pink nudes. He is part of an aesthetic that some, lounging by their Louis XV side tables, would dismiss as "bad taste"... But nothing truly significant ever happens outside of the minor arts. Peellaert was and remains an indispensable link moving the perception of beauty forward in the decade from 1960 to 1970 and beyond — a major witness of our Pop culture.



Detail from the "Flying Chariots" pinball machine, Gottlieb, 1963.

Guy Peellaert,
The Adventures of Jodelle, 1965-66, page 1 (detail)

Guy Peellaert,
Pravda, 1966-67, page 14 (detail)

The "beautiful, naïve, vulgar" aesthetic qualities of Gottlieb pinball machines were enthusiastically cited by Peellaert himself as a major source of influence on his 1960s work. A 1963 machine entitled "Flying Chariots"—pictures of which were found in the artist's massive documentation archives after his death—appears to have been a decisive model for *Jodelle*, which opens with a striking panel reprising key elements and colors from that machine's backglass. In the context of Pop Art, a deep-rooted fascination with the triviality of everyday objects and machines is an important common thread helping to bring together highly individual-istic and wide-ranging approaches.

Peellaert's love for Lichtenstein's paintings is easy to explain. Hergé shared it, passionately. Indeed, of all the Pop artists, Lichtenstein was the closest to comics and graphic design, in a sense bringing their plasticity to the fore. His style is a structuralist blow-up of the language of comics that works as a bridge between *Flash Gordon* and Fernand Léger, the latter having declared that the liberating pure colors of his "trapeze artists" had been suggested to him by the electrical billboards of Times Square. Peellaert undertakes the exact same trajectory. In Lichtenstein and Peellaert, contemporary art and modern art found their go-betweens. No need to keep harping on about tired, referential postmodernism. Instead we must deal with this exceptional passage into modernity, an art created by "smugglers." And kiss hierarchies goodbye: the luminous backglass of a 1963 Gottlieb pinball machine is revealed as great art. Peellaert borrowed it for the very first panel of *Jodelle*. He adored pinball art — in his words "*beautiful, naïve, vulgar*" — and even created his own in *Pravda*.

MEGALOPOLIS

For Peellaert, the city is a megalopolis. But even New York and its polymorphous jungle are not enough. He needs far more impenetrable, imaginary cities, with their layered geology, their collages of styles — the Guggenheim Museum transformed into a motel — their insane traffic and absurd disjunctions. Las Vegas is a good example, where you might find the Roman empire + yéyé singers + Pop Art, etc. For the Belgian Peellaert, a citizen of a country characterized by polyvocality, the art of collage is essential. He was among the first (before Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard, both of whom admired his work) to understand that our culture was in the process of turning into a crazy quilt... an unprecedented Babel. The Encyclopedists are swept away in the flow: Welcome to infinite heterogeneity. To chaos, scrambling forth from every corner and leaking from every seam. Instead of trying to impose any kind of hierarchy on such a fecund cultural crossroads, Peellaert dives right

into it. Nowadays everything is simulacra — as in California’s Getty museum. The real and the fake. The beautiful and the ugly. The knowing and the naïve. The good and the bad. But what’s important is taking the plunge and making choices. According to Peellaert, the city is a *Futuropolis*, an *Écho des Savanes* where the *Métal hurlant* rings out (to invoke three French publishers who would turn the world of comics upside down in the decade that followed Peellaert’s visions). Peellaert’s city is a premonitory image of all the megalopolises featured in a new kind of “adult comics”—whose early champion was *Jodelle* publisher Eric Losfeld — that would come of age in the 1970s.

STORIES

So what takes place in *Jodelle*? Conspiracies, kidnappings, fistfights, betrayals, a few nude scenes (with and without sex), chases (on motorcycle and horseback). You couldn’t even attempt to summarize this story as you would an adventure of Tintin. Peellaert has chosen a different narrative mode, one closer to Godard than to Alexandre Dumas — and speaking of Jean-Luc Godard, Peellaert’s wrenchingly discontinuous style and worship of disjunction once inspired the filmmaker to adapt *Pravda* for the screen, a project that never came to fruition. Peellaert’s collage of images builds like a montage of unrelated sequences, inciting the reader to yield to the hypnotic quality of this conglomeration of graphics and narration. By all means, leave your prejudices at the door; you don’t want to impede take-off, or circumscribe the flyovers, as these albums are aircrafts of sorts. Comics have always encouraged this kind of weightlessness, and you might add *Jodelle* and *Pravda* to the list of airborne heroes such as Flash Gordon, Superman, and Spider-Man. These characters’ flight, it should be noted, is often metaphorical. From 1904’s *Little Nemo* onward, the art of comics proceeded through “topological” mutations, the word referring to the mathematical science of twisted and reversible, ever-mutating surfaces. Peellaert is enthralled by this sort of metamorphosis, at any moment playing with forms and contours, with his characters’ silhouettes to experiment with their elasticity. His true story, the real journey is occurring on that level. By stretching his figures, his objects, his backgrounds, the plastic signs indicating motion, he produces wonderful monsters — like the obese, cigar-smoking Femspy-in-Chief in *Jodelle* — and displays a rare talent for anamorphosis, the ancient tradition of the perversion of form, going back to Leonardo da Vinci, El Greco and Hans Holbein which stretches a shape onto a lateral surface from its projection on a frontal surface. But Peellaert’s anamorphosis is unique in that it doesn’t proceed from any kind of stabilized pictorial disjunction, but according to elongations produced by speed. The silhouettes of Sylvie Vartan and Françoise Hardy are marvelously adaptable to this process, for their beauty is all about length. Onto these gracious beauties, calling to mind a Botticelli Venus with a taste for Yves Saint Laurent, Peellaert piles anamorphic extensions of hair and legs (especially legs) of beautiful women. Speed is the transformative force ceaselessly reshaping the body. Peellaert may well be the inventor of speed anamorphosis.



Gene Korman,
Publicity picture for the film *Niagara*, 1953.



Jean-Marie Périer,
Sylvie Vartan et Françoise Hardy, 1966.

Celebrity and its societal significance is a fundamental theme of the Pop sensibility. Working from thousands of photographs in the age of mass media, Peellaert appropriated the likeness of Sylvie Vartan (*Jodelle*) and later Françoise Hardy (*Pravda*), in works aiming to capture the “truth” of their time. By utilizing and effectively subverting the power of projection of iconic personalities, the artist confronts the viewer with celebrity as Simulacra, a postmodern concept that would be theorized by his friend Jean Baudrillard in 1981, after Roland Barthes’ own pioneering interpretation of mass culture products as popular “Myths”. Andy Warhol’s ironical repurposing of a publicity shot of Marilyn Monroe three years before *The Adventures of Jodelle* had opened the door for Peellaert to question his own fascination with the cult of celebrity, a central impetus and a recurring motif throughout his career.

NOISE



Anonymous,
Photograph of a model advertising the opening of Caesars Palace, Las Vegas, August 1966.

The aesthetic of hedonistic excess devised by Peellaert for the world of *Jodelle*, a wildly anachronistic Roman Empire exploding with tawdry American consumer society fetishes (cars, pin-up girls, billboards, neons...) was greatly influenced by the Utopian architecture of Caesars Palace, the first "theme" casino complex in Las Vegas, still under construction when *Jodelle* was published. Enduringly fascinated by the mythology of Sin City, Peellaert would explore its more somber side twenty years later in the collection of portraits he compiled in *Las Vegas: The Big Room*.



Andy Warhol,
Elvis I and II, 1964.

Guy Peellaert,
The Adventures of Jodelle, 1965-66, page 44 (detail)

Peellaert's reliance on an external, mechanical coloring device throughout *Jodelle* marked his most apparent embrace of the resolutely "objective" techniques utilized by Pop artists. However the many panels presenting a machine-like repetition of objects and characters provided another key Pop motif, most famously introduced by Warhol. This seriality is a source of great pictorial dynamism even as it suggests the dissolution of individual identity within an all-conquering mass culture.

Noise is to the musical note what fluorescents are to oil painting. Noise is produced mechanically. It is the Fender guitar, the synthesizer. In classical music, the individual note fears noise. It does everything to maintain a level of tone and volume that respects the score (in French, *la partition*). On the other hand, noise is the ideal of rock. It bears witness to undomesticated sonic matter, music that is savage, untamed. For example, we owe the "Larsen effect" to the guitarist Jeff Beck: an unbearably high note achieved through electrical amplification. Peellaert works side-by-side with Jimi Hendrix. In that sense *Jodelle* and *Pravda*, with their shrill colors, their graphic distortions and the excesses of their storylines, join the rallying cry of an entire generation about to tune in to the 1969 "Star Spangled Banner" as executed by Hendrix in the middle of the Vietnam war. Peellaert adds a soundtrack to his comics with stretched-out, ragged sound effects so loud that they often drown out the copy written in the word balloons. The final panel of *Jodelle* is explicit, depicting a door (the story) slamming shut on the word SLAM (VLAM in the original French). The impact is so powerful that the key comes flying out of the lock. Peellaert added a new, electrified soundtrack to comics. Even Captain Haddock's stream of invective seems like Mozart when compared to this deluge of megadecibels. Yet we should not interpret the booming sonorousness of Peellaert's work as a call for chaos. To the contrary, this sound comprises an architecture, more precisely an architectural framework, a milieu that highlights both emotion and mathematics. *Pravda* and *Jodelle* are creatures granting us access to the cosmic through a "disco" massage of sorts. These comics are very close to Woodstock.

One might therefore wonder why Peellaert chose for his heroines two French singers, Sylvie Vartan (*Jodelle*) and Françoise Hardy (*Pravda*), who were far removed from the macho aesthetic of rock idols from Elvis to the Rolling Stones. But these new pop stars were singing of a seismic shift in the amorous relationships between adolescents. The two singers brought down the curtain on quaint old-time French culture, which had ruled the roost from Tino Rossi and Édith Piaf all the way to Léo Ferré, Gilbert Bécaud, and Charles Aznavour. Suddenly, very young women were seducing a teenage audience, singing of *les garçons et les filles*. They jettisoned the elaborately written songs that had been Trenet and Brassens's strength, in favor of danceable ditties. Peellaert cleverly latched onto the bridge that was building between French youth and Anglo-Saxon culture, and that Peellaert reinforced. His French culture dovetailed with that of the ascendant youth.

REFERENCES

Crafting one's style, building a work of art like a world, is akin to staking out a territory, and it requires heterogeneous materials. No great style can ever be homogeneous or conceived in autarchy. Take Warhol again: the cult of mass consumption, the love for the fun, the bright and the fashionable, the flirtation with erotic transgression, the dilemma of superficiality vs. depth, the fascination

with series and repetition. Flashbulbs, cars, the Velvet Underground, and looming Death. Peellaert is a passionate stakeholder in this American culture. As a Belgian, he does not entertain the slightest Americanophobia, in contradistinction to his French contemporaries. The first French rock record, by Henri Salvador, is a spiteful parody: “Rock Hoquet.” In the same period, Boris Vian wrote, on the subject of the “poor musician” Bill Haley, that rock was “a ridiculous tribal chant intended for a cretinous public.” Peellaert is clearly not on board with this.

What fundamentally opposes French culture to American culture is that the former is homogeneous while the latter is pluralistic. For a long time in France, the “*arts majeurs*” — the traditional artistic disciplines that had been cultivated for centuries, from symphonic music to easel painting — were clearly opposed to popular songs and comics, “*arts mineurs*” which were held in contempt. In the United States, on the contrary, a new music surfaced as early as the 1950s, the result of a multitude of cultural exchanges: blues, country, jazz, swing, black culture and white culture, and so on.

It is this pluralistic, even heterogeneous culture that Peellaert has chosen. The DNA of his work is a double helix that allows him to launch the styles and references that are the most at odds with each other into the same orbit. For example, François Rude’s high-relief on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris (*The Departure of the Volunteers*) is explicitly used in *Jodelle*, while Gericault’s famous *Raft of the Medusa* is ingeniously eroticized in *Pravda*. Richard Avedon’s solarized portraits of the Beatles, Rosenquist’s mural paintings emphasizing consumer society, a photograph of Sylvie Vartan and Françoise Hardy eating ice cream cones: Peellaert exploits all these disparate visions within a cleverly constructed bric-à-brac, in the manner of the paintings of Thomas Hart Benton, which he admired fervently.

Peellaert worships at the altar of modernity, which, if we go by Rimbaud’s phrase “we must be absolutely modern,” can only take shape as an overabundant chaos. But merely taking the plunge is not enough: The trick is to return from chaos, enriched with paradoxes and armed with impertinence. *Jodelle* and *Pravda* are Eurydices rescued from modernity by a new Orpheus.

Anonymous,
Postcard representing Caesars Palace, 1966.

François Rude,
The Departure of the Volunteers, Arc de Triomphe, 1833-36.

Guy Peellaert,
The Adventures of Jodelle, 1965-66, page 51 (detail)

Thomas Hart Benton,
Arts of the West, 1932.

James Rosenquist,
F-111, 1965 (detail)

The collision of “fine” art with “popular” art—and the resulting negation of such obsolete distinctions—is a central theme in Peellaert’s work. During his formal training in “Monumental Art” in the late 1940s, the artist was confronted with masterpieces of classical painting and sculpture, but his most memorable aesthetic shock came from the discovery of American artists Reginald Marsh and Thomas Hart Benton, whose highly composed murals gave a dramatic quality to representations of daily life in America. In *Jodelle*, Peellaert subverted the supposed nobility of traditionally accepted “high art” and integrated Benton’s elaborate composition techniques into splashy panoramas of the modern age, repurposing the comic strip form into a patchwork of fragmented, high-impact “slices of modern life” that may also recall James Rosenquist’s monumental piece *F-111*.

