

Passion Play

Those who control their passions do so because their passions are weak enough to be controlled.

(William Blake)



Ford Madox Brown,
Stages of Cruelty.
1856-1857.
Canvas, 73.3 x 59.9 cm.
Manchester Art Gallery.

'Lots of love and sex to everyone – it makes you happy.' That was a New Year's wish in a Flemish weekly at the end of 2007. But does it really? Around the same time *Stages of Cruelty*, a painting by Ford Madox Brown, was on display in the *British Vision* exhibition at the Fine Arts Museum in Ghent. A young woman is sitting on a low wall. In her left hand she holds some embroidery work, a young man clings to her right arm. He looks very much in love – there is even a hint of moonstruck rapture in his face – whilst the young woman's posture shows nothing but cool indifference. At her feet a small girl is treating an old dog even worse; she lashes him with a bunch of flowers, flowers with an appropriate name – *love-lies-bleeding*. No, that does not make you a happy camper.

A cunt is a cunt is a cunt

In art and literature, love not infrequently means sorrow and misery. Take, for example, unrequited love, 'the loss of something one has never had', as Anton Wachter refers to it in Simon Vestdijk's novel *Back to Ina Damman* (Terug tot Ina Damman, 1934); or the solo sex in the anthology *By Hand. Satisfying Poems* (Met de hand. Bevredigende gedichten, 1992), by Rob Schouten, whose editor admits himself that it confronts the reader with his own 'supposed lack' – 'It is and will always be a rather pathetic business'. Nevertheless, Kees Ouwens still reckoned in one of his poems that it was the final frontier. For him the perception of lust need not and could not really be any more than that: 'It's not clear to me what there is / save your own body that you could perceive. The masturbator / is sufficient unto himself.'



Suicide of two young people, embracing each other while they jump from the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp. From *Le petit journal*, early 20th century. Volkskundemuseum, Antwerp.

Of course, it is not always about pining in vain or solitary climax – there is also fucking galore: straight, uninhibited and very much to the point. There has always been eroticism in literature, but with the exception of the hard-core underground circuit of dirty books it has mainly been mere playful gallantry. And then came the sixties and the attendant sexual revolution. Naughty frankness had to give way to the sexual act in all its glory. Even in the rather more risqué circuit of anonymous song books and much-thumbed novelettes the language had always been more or less shrouded. A vagina was an ace, the trump turned out to be a penis, and they came together in the game of all fours. But the time had come to call a vagina a vagina, or better still a cunt. Unprotected sex at last: from now on fucking would be done without metaphors. Gertrude Stein said as much about her well-known 'A rose is a rose is a rose': 'in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years.' The word had finally been made flesh.

In 1964, *I Jan Cremer* (Ik Jan Cremer; translated by Scottish beatnik Alexander Trocchi and published in English in 1965) caused quite a stir in the Netherlands. This picaresque novel about the life of a working-class boy with his hormones doing overtime contained too much vulgarity for many people, too much violence and, in particular, too many and too explicit sex scenes. The writer had both feet firmly planted – with legs wide apart – in the hedonistic and extremely swinging sixties, but in the meantime the majority of Dutch people were still happily stuck in the fifties. His fellow-countrymen were rudely awakened by vitalistic outpourings like: 'She had the most enormous pair of knockers. When she undid her bra, pink flesh just tumbled out. She had tits like volcanoes, they hung down to her navel. What a mass of flesh! Her nipples were bright red; all her blood flowed into those two points that were like two more volcanoes.' A critic from



the newspaper *Trouw* declared: 'Jan Cremer belongs in a hospital or a detention centre. Those better qualified will have to decide which. (...) That a publishing house has this filth set, printed and put into the shops, that is the worst thing.' A couple of years earlier, when Meulenhoff published Jan Wolker's *Short American* (Kort Amerikaans, 1962), in which the central figure has it off with a plaster torso of the goddess Venus, they got cartloads of letters from readers requesting that they strike this 'foul-mouth' from their list. In Flanders, even the government scented trouble. In late 1968 the Minister of Justice announced that a copy of *Black Venus*, Jef Geeraerts' highly personal chronicle of primal urges and unrestrained sex in the Belgian colony of the Congo, had been removed from a Brussels book shop for 'investigation'. But after two days of close reading the copy was returned to its rightful owner.

You do not have to read *Black Venus* all that closely, though, to come across torrid sex scenes. Nipples jut obliquely up on the first page and a couple of

Jef Lambeaux,
The Human Passions
(detail). 1889.
Horta Pavillion,
Brussels.

pages further the white *missié* in Congo recounts: 'She lay staring up at me with wide eyes and when at last I lay beside her she bent over and skilfully began to lick my scrotum and to suck the tip of my penis, the Libyan slave of the Roman conqueror (...)' . If you read the book today, you are struck mainly by a great hunger for freedom, unfolding on both a stylistic and a moral level. Henry Miller called the novel's English translation (Gangrene, 1974) 'an explosion of color, sound, and primal feelings' in his review in *The Los Angeles Times*. But these days, when readers are hardened to descriptions of coitus in all its aspects and there is even an annual prize awarded for the worst sex scene in Dutch literature, it is all, more than anything, terribly tiresome – the breathless narration as well as the almost endless *sexcapades*. Apparently even Jan Cremer was struck by fatigue now and then: 'In the beginning I fucked Brigitte four or five times each night, and those were wild nights – later, when I fucked her just once, and that with difficulty, she called me a bloody intellectual.'

Hard work

After all, love and especially sex are hard work. 'Only fools fall in love at first sight', the columnist Beatrijs Ritsema once wrote. The real work is learning from your mistakes. And then making more mistakes. And so on. That is strikingly reflected in Peter van Straaten's *Am I Doing it Right* (Doe ik het goed, 1990). Van Straaten records unerringly in word (1 or 2 sentences) and picture (1 drawing) exactly what bungling goes on in bed. You do not even need to see the accompanying picture to know that a statement like 'Didn't I warn you, Peter? That happens sometimes with Mahler's *Symphony of a Thousand*' makes the bedroom a place of humiliation and *tristesse*.

The hard road to sexual satisfaction is paved with blunders, but there are some who think that manuals and books full of handy tips may offer a solution. In the foreword, the Flemish journalist Ilse Nackaerts describes her book *Steamy Sex. From Strawberry to Whip* (Spannende seks. Van aardbei tot zweepee, 2002) as a cookery book. If your sex life is just a bog-standard dish of the day, it is up to you to do something about it. Forget the snack bar, look for ways to do something new with the same ingredients. Nackaerts does not confine herself to the correct way to whip your partner, the pleasant side-effects of anti-dandruff shampoo as a lubricant, or how to locate the most sensitive spots, but gives masses of useful advice like: 'It should, under all circumstances, be possible to dive into bed without wasting a lot of time removing decorative cushions and cuddly toys.' She has also compiled a tear-off calendar with 365 daily tips for exciting sex, in which 99 percent of the days have practical *to-do* tips.

You can find house, garden and cookery advice in Dutch psychologist Pieterneel Dijkstra's book *Increase Your Relationship IQ* (Verhoog je relatie-IQ, 2007). How do you hoist a stagnating relationship out of the doldrums? How do you make sure that disagreements about sex, the in-laws, dirty socks and that hardy perennial, the lost cap of the toothpaste tube, do not finish off your relationship for good? There is practical advice for the reader, 'based on the latest scientific insights'. And for those who prefer watching to reading and who like things a bit more graphic, there is always a notably frank television show like *Spuiten en Slikken* (Shoot and Swallow). Since 2005, this sensational programme from the Dutch broadcaster BNN has tried out drugs and a variety of sexual positions

Frans Masereel,
The Kiss. 1924.
Woodcut, 47 x 33 cm.
Museum voor Schone
Kunsten, Ghent /
© SABAM Belgium
2008.



and toys on and off camera. Santa Claus' sex life, the taste of sperm, where you 'must' have done it and the best ingredients for a loving porn film – they have covered it all, and they start their sixth season in April 2008. But in between times, if you have missed something, or if you would *'rather watch it on your own, without your boyfriend or girlfriend keeping an eye on you'* you can see it on the website. You can find handy facts there too, like the information that between the ages of 15 and 60 the average man ejaculates 34 to 57 litres of semen, and that men sometimes call the vagina the *'vertical smile'*. We already had *'the face that launch'd a thousand ships'*, as Christopher Marlowe wrote about Helen of Troy, but you would do anything for a nice smile too, wouldn't you?

Low Countries, low desires

In the mid-seventeenth century, Mathijs van de Merwede, Master of Clootwijk, wrote of the act in one of his many risqué poems: *'...that a man can no more miss than he can pass a day without a piss...'*. Meanwhile we know from recent British research that women think of sex for an average of 3 hours a day. That is only half an hour less than the average man.

Actually we are all nicely in tune with each other, so we might as well go for it. Cardinal Condoms, a new Dutch product that has launched an attack on the Venerable House of Durex, uses the following slogan: *'the right to enjoy sex without worries is a basic human right'*. According to the people from Cardinal Condoms the competition takes a much too scientific view of sex: *'too sterile, makes for dry sex. We are just into sex, condoms as sex machines.'* Cardinals, gold-coloured and packaged in threes in a posh black pack emblazoned with a golden Gothic C., are extolled as *'The Safest Way To Heaven'*. Sex is fun, or rather, sex *should* and *will* be fun, because *'The Word is Love. Sex is Not a Sin'*. It is all about love and making love is a heavenly experience. What was once the Highway to Hell should now be the Stairway to Heaven.

'Love is all and all is love', we know that already from the old song by Roger Glover that the Dutch Christian-Democratic party (CDA) raked up again as a campaign song to evoke togetherness and conviviality during the 2006 elections. But there is no smoke without fire, no feel-good vibes without a dash of naughtiness. Love may well be everything, but lust is everywhere too. For decades now the Netherlands has had a reputation as the land of sexual freedom & delight. It is after all the country of Xaviera 'The Happy Hooker' Hollander, the secretary of the Dutch consulate in Manhattan who left her job to become a call girl and open her own brothel called the Vertical Whorehouse in New York City. Till well into the seventies a whole lot of Flemings got their porn from the sex shops just over the border in the Netherlands. Sluis, a small Dutch border town in Zeeland Flanders, still has 8 such specialised businesses, and they are certainly not all aimed solely at its 24,680 inhabitants. For tourists in Amsterdam, the Sex Museum on the Damrak or a walk through the Red Light District on the Wallen is as big an attraction as a visit to the Anne Frank House. Travel as an instructive and liberating experience. It was on the poster of the rather 'soft' skin flick *Dutch Treat* in 1977: *'Blow the windmills of (sic) your mind, in the sex capitol (sic) of the world with Chuck and Barney's lustful adventures in the Netherlands'*. Lust even seems to be liberating when it comes to the constraints of spelling.

Amsterdam is not a *'sex capitol'*, but a *'proud enclave of liberalism'*, according to Raphael Kadushin in an article in *The Advocate* (26 October, 2004). He talks of a second Golden Age and describes the Netherlands as *'the world's most proudly secular state'*, a sort of utopia with a *'post-modern sexual majority'*. But for foreigners the Netherlands is not just a place where reason and good sense triumphed over puritanical hysteria. (Apparent) excesses attract attention too. After all, the Netherlands is the country that produced the Party for Neighbourly Love, Freedom and Diversity (PNVD), is it not? A party whose programme includes points like the abolition of the cabinet and the Upper Chamber of Parliament, legalisation of both soft and hard drugs and nudism, as well as lowering the age of consent to 12. The party has even announced on its website that it would like to see everyone over the age of 16 allowed to act in porn films. That the PNVD is also in favour of stricter regulation, and opposes, for example, the policy of tolerance, the statute of limitation for crime and the keeping of firearms at home, and wants harsher penalties for driving under the influence, is less well known. For most people it continues to be the *'paedophile party'*, whose treasurer, with his rather shady past, addressed the media from the trailer park where he lived. The party would have liked to participate in the elections for the Lower House, but on 9 October 2006 it announced that it had not collected sufficient signatures. Earlier in 2006 an application for an injunction



against the party was thrown out by a judge because, according to him, 'moral concern' is not sufficient reason to ban a party. In fact, early in 2008 the PNVD website even announced that a person had been condemned to two weeks imprisonment for threatening all the PNVD party executives. This does not alter the fact, though, that the PNVD is considered a laughing stock by the overwhelming majority and has absolutely no chance of political survival.

Trouble in paradise

But even if the Netherlands has its 'paedophile' party and the oh-so-frivolous French travel to Brussels for paid sex these days, since the otherwise so *Douce France* now imposes severe penalties for frequenting prostitutes, the Low Countries are not, for the time being at least, Sodom and Gomorrah, but merely the Netherlands and Flanders. The fruits of the sexual revolution are still plucked here daily, but that does not mean it is one mad whorehouse. According to PvdA councillor Karina Schaapman, who herself moonlighted in a bar during

The Amsterdam
Sex Museum.

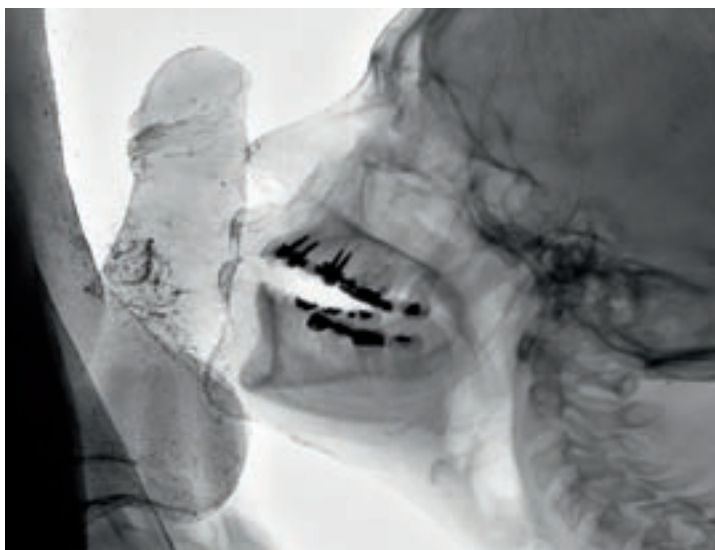


a difficult period in her life, Amsterdam's red light district is not a happy place that shows how free Dutch society is, but 'a cess pit where women are exploited and social disorder reigns'. That ties in completely with the policy that Mayor Job Cohen has been implementing for a while now. It all needs to be more organised and easy to control; and so one third of the area's windows have been vacated in recent months, and it is the council's intention to redevelop and revitalise the whole neighbourhood by centralising prostitution as Antwerp has done. Mariska Majoor, of the Prostitution Information Centre, agrees that the area must be cleared of criminal elements. But you can't turn the clock back by stirring things up: 'People trafficking is a global problem. You will not solve it just by cleaning up Amsterdam's Wallen. That sounds so cold, too, as if it were just a dirty street without any people in it.'

There are other rumblings, too, in the permissive paradise behind the dikes. The COC (the Dutch Association for the Integration of Homosexuality) maintains

a dossier on 'safety and discrimination' on its website. Apparently homosexual men, lesbian women, bisexuals and transsexuals have felt less safe in recent years. On Queen's Day 2005 Chris Crain, editor-in-chief of the American gay newspaper *Washington Blade*, was beaten up by a group of youths in Amsterdam. It was not an isolated incident. Small bands of Moroccan youths provoke gays verbally and physically on the streets. Gay-bashing seems to be steadily increasing – it is estimated that there are between 10 and 25 violent incidents involving homosexuality in Amsterdam every year. A new Dutch word has even been coined – the police are trying to curb aggression against gays by deploying *lokhomo's* or decoy gays. Of course, Amsterdam will never again be the city where, in 1955, a by-law came into force prohibiting standing at a public urinal for more than 5 minutes, but as Crain himself said after his unfortunate walk in Leidsestraat: 'I hope that gays in the Netherlands realise that having gay-friendly laws does not make a country gay-friendly.'

The fine print of the revolution



Wim Delvoye,
Kiss 2. X-ray.
Photo courtesy of
Studio Wim Delvoye.

'Sunny as a doll'.
Photo courtesy of
Sunny Bergman/
www.beperkthoudbaar.info



Laws may not be a universal panacea, then, but Ronald Plasterk, the current Minister for Education, Culture and Science, does believe that guidance can be beneficial. Because according to him sexual freedom has now actually become lack of freedom. In the recent emancipation policy note he opposes the '*sexualisation of society whereby girls and women are portrayed as objects of lust*'. The background to this statement includes lollipop parties where oral skills are tested, 'breezer sex' (girls in their early teens service men in all kinds of ways just for cigarettes, a phone card or a drink), and *loverboys* from Morocco and the Antilles who entice white girls into prostitution. Add to that an unattainable ideal of beauty, whereby porno magazines are even used as a benchmark for ideal vagina looks – you do not laugh vertically just any old how, as Sunny Bergman shows in her much talked-of documentary, *Perishable* (Beperkt Houdbaar), about the dubious blessings of plastic surgery – and, in the words of Plasterk, you might well say there has been a '*brutalisation of sexual conventions*'.

First there was the sexual revolution, and it looks as if we are only now reading the small print of that revolution we were so eager to endorse. Eroticism threatens to erode morals. So now we need to deal with its by-products. Plasterk wants to support parents in specific issues relating to children's upbringing and to make young people more resistant, but he has also announced that he wants to agree a code of conduct with broadcasters, because the media offering needs to be 'safer' for young people. But the opposition party D66, for example, calls it a '*misapprehension*' that the government can control young people with rules and codes. The Dutch centre of expertise on sexuality, the Rutgers Nisso Group, is not happy about the looming spectre of paternalism either. Their opinion is that almost nothing is known about the possible harmful effects of sexualisation in the Netherlands. Detailed long-term research needs to be carried out before any intervention and one should beware of wagging reproving fingers prematurely.

A rollercoaster ride named Desire

Passions undeniably run high when it comes to curbing passion. In a column in the weekly *Elsevier* Plasterk was accused of being excessively patronising and paternalistic: '*The cabinet will make sure that the burden increases and lust decreases (...) Society will certainly not go down the drain without sexual repression by the government.*'

Repression is probably too strong a word. More like keeping things in perspective, keeping things liveable. Seven percent of companies in Flanders have a love policy and in the Netherlands as many as 20 percent of businesses have developed a code of conduct governing love relationships in the workplace. It is a question of not letting lust get too much in the way of profit. Because the couple in love, the solitary paedophile on an online teen chat channel, even the courtly knight from the distant past pining for his faraway lady, all have one thing in common – an all-consuming, completely absorbing devotion. Carried away by the sort of whirlwind in which Dante's lovers find themselves in the second circle of Hell, you can easily do or think strange things. Like sexologist Henry Havelock Ellis, who projected his own urolagnia onto Rembrandt, arguing that the golden tones of the master's paintings were not chosen by accident.

Rembrandt H. van Rijn,
A Urinating Woman
Beneath a Tree. 1631.
Etching, 8.1 x 6.3 cm..





Love's devotion:
 Jan Hessing's mausoleum
 in Agra. Jan Hessing (1740-
 1803) was a Dutch colonel
 in the army of Maharajah
 Dowlut Row Sindiah and
 later on also became the
 governor of Agra. After his
 death his loving wife An
 had this mausoleum erected
 for him. It is inspired by

that other more famous
 testimony of love in Agra, the
 Taj Mahal – with the magnifi-
 cent white marble a more sub-
 dued red sandstone in this case.
 The Sikh Surrendar Bakshi,
 a retired colonel who takes care
 of the monument, likes visitors.
 Not for himself, but for Jan's
 sake: *'He needs company.'*
 Photo by Olga van der Klooster.

Of course, passion does not have to lead to monomania. But love, and by extension lust, does cause us all – you, me, artists, writers, politicians *et les autres* – a lot of headaches. Indeed, the excess of stimuli seems to make more than just policymakers have second thoughts. At the announcement of the most recent edition of Saint Amour, the Flemish literary festival of love & lust, organiser Luc Coorevits stressed that his initiative was about more than just explicit sex. Which is why he wanted to put the accent on tenderness this year, a concept that *'just like screwing, actually, is a remedy for the trials and tribulations of life'*. More heart, less loins then.

But there's no heart without loins and no loins without heart, and we have not even touched on what your head can get up to. Love is a battlefield, lust is a struggle in which your body and soul are at stake, and desire does not necessarily make your life easier, let alone happier. These days, though, it is omnipresent, as Tommy Wieringa declares in his *Dynamics of Desire* (De dynamica van de begeerte, 2007): *'Desire in its raw form is all over our streets. It is a fire that licks at everything around it, and everyone is free to warm himself by it. The element of shame has disappeared. No longer just a prompter whispering from behind the scenes, it has made its way into the bright lights, onto the stage, and has taken the leading role, which it performs with verve.'* It has turned the life of the postmodern sexual majority into one big passion play that is not to be directed by anyone, with a rollercoaster ride through fear and joy, pain and pleasure, seduction and control, disappointment and satisfaction, replacing the classic Way of the Cross – but with a great many resurrections, so that you can die over and over again. ■

Translated by Lindsay Edwards