

COBRA

A Cry for Freedom!

75



European 'experimental' artists in front of the entrance of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1949. Photo Mw. E. Kokkoris-Syriër

'Dotremont wrote, formulated, and organised, while I constantly opposed him and claimed the opposite. We had non-stop discussions and disagreed on almost all issues. But the cooperation was fruitful as long as we were able to keep it up. The point was, we wanted to understand each other in order to agree. This attitude created an inspiring cooperation of an incredibly broad scope.'

Asger Jorn - 1967

COBRA 75

On 8 November 2023 it is exactly 75 years ago that the Cobra movement is founded in Paris. Its members are artists and poets from various European countries and beyond. The joy of complete spiritual and artistic freedom and the spontaneity is their counterbalance to the nightmare of the Second World War.

Cobra caused quite an uproar in the Netherlands. The Dutch press speak of scribble, drivel and splotches. The then so revolutionary Cobra is now anchored in the European art history. In it, Cobra is mainly associated with colourful and expressive-spontaneous painting that still is of influence long after the movement fell apart in 1951.

DANISH EXPERIMENTAL ART

Between 1941 and 1944, a total of twelve issues of the *Helhesten* magazine are published. Topics in the magazine are art theory, non-Western art, literature, poetry, film, architecture and photography. It also included exhibition reviews and portraits of contemporary Danish artists.

The artists rejected any strict or rigid interpretations, like either the German occupiers obsession with 'purity', or the inflexibility of the manifestos of earlier art movements. The painting of the Danish artists is striking because of the expressiveness, the bright colours, a certain spontaneity in painting and the naive appearance of the images. Their work was influenced by, for example, expressionism, dada and surrealism. They stand for a 'living art', an art that is inextricably linked to everyday life and in which play and disruption have an important role.

It was Jorn who got the Danish artists involved in Cobra. As their representative, he signs the founding declaration of Cobra in Paris in November 1948. Two more groups become part of Cobra: the Experimental Group in Holland and the Le Surréalisme Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Surrealists), represented by the Belgian poet Dotremont. The founders' first action is a joint participation in the annual Høst exhibition. The Danes' emphasis on experimental modernism linked to folk art continues in Cobra. Danish artists are on average 10 to 15 years older and are part of a mature art movement. As such, they influence Cobra in a painterly sense.

EXPERIMENTAL GROUP IN HOLLAND

Plans to form a group take concrete form after Appel and Corneille become acquainted with Constant. They visit him after seeing his work at Kunsthandel Santee Landweer in the winter of 1947-1948. In mid-1948 they, together with Brands, Jan Nieuwenhuys (Nederland, 1922-1986), Rooskens and Theo Wolvecamp (Nederland, 1925-1992), establish the Experimental Group in Holland during an unruly meeting. Appel criticized Constant's theories already by then, but that apparently did not prevent the formation. Through Jorn, the group seeks affiliation with Le Surréalisme Révolutionnaire, a group of which Dotremont tries to create an international movement from Brussels.

The Experimental Group published the magazine *Reflex*. Only two issues of the magazine come out. The title refers to the creation of art in an immediate response to reality, without any interference of the mind. Jorn is the only foreigner to contribute to the first issue. For the second issue, Constant writes a manifesto. The ideas in it later also largely apply to Cobra, in which the Experimental

Group would shortly thereafter dissolve. There are two essential points in the manifesto: the rejection of style and any aesthetics, and the striving for a new 'folk art'. The folk art is collective and anti-individualistic. Constant explains:

'We did not believe that you should paint as you were (an individual self-expression), but in such a way that it had so much communality that you could just make something and that one person could work within the work of another.'

And indeed they regularly make works together, certainly shortly afterwards within Cobra.

From the very start of the Experimental Group there is, as would be in Cobra, a certain consensus and desire for cooperation, but at the same time room for individual perspectives and differences. Constant's manifesto, for example, is ultimately not signed by any other Cobra member, according to Constant:

'because the others, although they agreed, did have certain reservations.'

LE SURREALISME RÉVOLUTIONNAIRE

Le Surréalisme Révolutionnaire publish one magazine and organise five lectures in 1948 on the theme of 'What is Revolutionary Surrealism?'. Those evenings eventually become more of a spectacle than a theoretical debate. Some members come with the intention of spreading *le grand désordre* (the disorder). Some speakers are forced to use umbrellas or armour to protect themselves from the objects that are thrown at them. Various subjects are discussed in an absurdist atmosphere.

Within the group, major differences of opinion soon arise. The French become interested in painting developments other than surrealism. Dotremont thinks the French are too focused on theory. He pictures an experimental art that can be of service to a communist society. Jorn and Constant adopt a wait-and-see attitude in the power struggle that follows. Jorn and Dotremont meanwhile make their first *peintures-mots* (word paintings), in which painter and poet work together on the same canvas. This would prove to be a crucial step for Dotremont and for the later Cobra. Dotremont invites Constant to continue the experiment he and Jorn had started. He notices a strong affinity between the Danes, the Dutch and the Belgians in their urge for experimentation and desire for 'living art', far removed from cold and geometric abstraction and theorising.

At a conference in Paris in November 1948, the differences of opinion prove too great and the group disintegrates. Dotremont, the Belgian poet and painter Joseph Noiret (Belgium, 1927-2012), Jorn and the attending members of the Experimental Group in Holland; Constant, Appel and Corneille, leave the meeting and make their way to Café de Nôtre Dame. This is where Dotremont and Constant draft a new declaration that would seal the founding of Cobra.

ASGER JORN

During the Cobra period Jorn further develops his art theories. His views have a major influence on Cobra. In Jorn's view, people as individuals can only give the best of themselves by working without compromise. He sees art as an essential human need to express oneself. Folk art from all eras and from all parts of the world are an important source of inspiration for him. He believes that everyone can make art and that all art is equally valuable.

According to him, painting offers the possibility of unique, personal expression. This offered a counter-balance to the uniformity and mass production that emerged after the Second World War.

Jorn is one of the people responsible for the organisation as well as editor of the *Cobra* magazine. He publishes several texts in which he emphasises the primitive and social aspects of experimental art. His work is shown in the first large Cobra exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1949 and in the second exhibition in Liège in 1951. In the middle of 1951 he was diagnosed to have tuberculosis, just like Dotremont. Both were admitted to the same sanatorium in Silkeborg. Together they gave Alechinsky permission to announce the disbanding of Cobra in the last issue of the magazine. The relationship between Jorn and Dotremont is by then very tense, while Constant and Jorn are no longer on speaking terms.

After his recovery, Jorn becomes active again in European art circles. In 1954, he organises an international ceramics meeting in Italy, in which a number of former Cobra members participate. In 1956 he regains contact with Constant. Jorn co-founds the Internationale Situationniste (Situationist International/SI) in 1957, of which Constant also becomes a member. The SI is an international movement of artists, intellectuals and political scientists seeking a social revolution. They play a major role in the student uprising in Paris in 1968. Meanwhile Jorn continues to paint at his usual intense pace.

CONSTANT

Constant makes several contributions to the *Cobra* magazine. In one instance in 1949, he writes a powerful manifesto in which he rebelliously expresses his desire to break with old habits. He believes that people's creative potential are constantly restricted by the rules of the elite. The artistic revolution that Cobra wants to bring is supposed to initiate a change and activate creativity in all. Constant takes part in both major Cobra exhibitions, in 1949 and 1951. Dotremont criticised Constant when he becomes inspired by social realism, the official art form of the Soviet Union. Constant wanted to redesign the visual language of social realism so it could play a role in the struggle for a socialist society and culture, while Dotremont considers social realism to be a dated form of realism that does not serve the (social) struggle.

Cobra eventually falls apart in 1951. With all the differences of opinion, it took the founders a lot of energy to keep the movement going. Because of Constant's wife's relationship with Jorn, their contact is interrupted for several years. After 1951, Constant continues to be intensely concerned with formulating the meaning of Cobra, which leads to disagreements with Cobra members and art historians. In 1983, for instance, he states:

'There is no Cobra style and no Cobra aesthetics, although people, especially in museum circles, have often tried to carefully select to make it appear so. But that is a consequence of the urge to catalogue everything. The artists of Cobra were not interested in creating in a new art form at all. [...] L'esprit Cobra is the spirit that opposes restrictions, it is the spirit of freedom.'

Artistically, Constant takes an unexpected path after the disbandment of Cobra. The hard cold abstraction of the post-war architecture aroused his interest in abstract art, which he had loathed so much during his Cobra years. The explorations that follows leads him to his world-famous project *New Babylon* (1959–1974), an artistic representation of the city of the future. This city would become the living space of the humans of the future (*homo ludens*), who playfully shape their lives and environment. The considerations held by Constant during Cobra, are still clearly visible in this project.

PIERRE ALECHINSKY

Alechinsky emphasises himself, that as a painter, he matured only after Cobra. There are very few known works by him from that period. Alechinsky's way of working is influenced, among other things, by his interchange with the poet Dotremont. They both become fascinated by the magic of script and by the graceful spontaneity of oriental calligraphy in particular. They also share the same associative and spontaneous attitude when they make art. But whereas Dotremont mainly experiments with combinations of words and images, Alechinsky rather originates from the image. This is clearly visible in Alechinsky's later works.

In the discussion about Cobra's meaning, Alechinsky always supported Dotremont's vision. The crucial aspect of Cobra, they say, can be found in collaborations. Collaborations between painters and poets and in the creation of works in which text and image are brought together. Dotremont names these works 'inter-specialist' art. Just like Dotremont, Alechinsky continues to work on joint projects after the official dissolution of Cobra and works together with Appel, Jorn and, of course, Dotremont himself.

CHRISTIAN DOTREMONT

Dotremont plays as co-founder, theorist, general secretary and editor-in-chief of the *Cobra* magazine, a crucial role within Cobra. The politically driven Dotremont, Constant and Jorn sometimes have heated differences of opinion on the societal application of the artistic experiment. Between 1948-1951, Dotremont works on a number of collaborative publications with Cobra artists and makes together with Jorn a series of 'word paintings' in oil paint (1948-1949). During a visit to Denmark mid-1951, he is diagnosed with tuberculosis and is admitted to the same sanatorium as Jorn. Shortly thereafter, Cobra falls apart.

Dotremont accurately documents the events of 1948-1951 and continues to write about Cobra. The spirit of Cobra, as far as he is concerned, continues to live on and develop itself with the creation of works of art made by several people together. This generally involves collaborations between poets and painters. Dotremont calls these 'anti-specialist' and 'inter-specialist' artworks. He considers these more important than the individually created painterly 'masterpieces' for which Cobra is known today. Dotremont himself continued to make joint works with many artists, including Appel and Alechinsky. He furthermore develops a kind of calligraphic painting (or visual poetry) that he called the logogram.

KAREL APPEL

Appel meets Jorn and the other Danes for the first time in Copenhagen in 1948. The Dutch are invited to participate in an exhibition with the Høst group. The Danish group become part of Cobra, but between Appel and the Danes there is little contact. He is mainly friends

with a number of Dutch and Flemish poets and Cobra co-founder Dotremont. Only later, in the 1970s, he becomes friends with Alechinsky, with whom he worked together on several occasions.

Appel is one of the original Cobra founders, he attends all preliminary meetings and participates in all exhibitions. His contribution to the *Cobra* magazine, however, was relatively modest. He has a strong visual influence on the other Dutch members. The press and the public received his work less favourably. On the occasion of the major Cobra exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the press referred to Appel as an 'incompetent dabbler'. In 1950 Appel decides to go to Paris with Constant and Corneille. Here, he and Corneille set up a studio but very shortly afterwards they have a dispute that meant the end of their friendship. The nature of the conflict is never revealed.

EUGÈNE BRANDS

Brands and the other Cobra members share an appetite for experimentation and have an interest in folk art. They believe that people should open themselves up to the irrational. Inspired by his fellow group members, Brands starts working in a free, abstract way. Nevertheless, he holds an exceptional position within Cobra. He prefers to work alone rather than in a group and also his art is different: his work is softer, more philosophical and less expressive in nature.

Brands' contact with Sandberg is ultimately crucial in the realisation of the illustrious Cobra exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1949). Afterwards, there is a conflict about the distribution of the payment. Appel, Constant and Corneille want to use the money to set up a Cobra house in

Paris, while Brands prefers to distribute the money among the participants. In the end, Brands decides to give up his share and stop any contact with the group. It is only years later that he recognises the importance of Cobra for his career. It has brought him a new freedom of expression and has also helped him make a name for himself.

LUCEBERT AND THE VIJFTIGERS (‘THOSE FROM THE FIFTIES’)

That some poets join the Experimental Group in Holland in 1948 is an important moment in the development of the movement of the *Vijftigers* (‘those from the fifties’). Lucebert, Jan Elburg (Netherlands, 1919-1992) and Gerrit Kouwenaar (Netherlands, 1923-2014) get to know each other better at the Experimental Group, and on the occasion of the Cobra exhibition in 1949, they also come into contact with Remco Campert (Netherlands, 1929-2022), Rudy Kousbroek (Indonesia, 1929 – Netherlands, 2010), Simon Vinkenoog (Netherlands, 1928-2009) en Hans Andreus (Netherlands, 1926-1977). From then on the ‘experimentals’ travel up and down between Amsterdam and Paris, where Vinkenoog lives.

As for the poets, they are attracted to the tremendous vitality, rebelliousness and experimental drive of the young Cobra artists. A number of them contribute to the *Cobra* magazine and there are various collaborations between poets and artists. By 1949, most of the poets left Cobra. The reason is a riot during an evening of readings of experimental poetry at the Cobra exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. The evening is disrupted when Dotremont gives a long speech that causes great commotion and escalates into a fight. The other poets did not get the chance to recite their work after that, but they

did get bad press. This incident is followed by a dispute within Cobra after which Constant demands that Lucebert should leave.

As with the visual artists within Cobra, there are clear contradictions among the experimental poets. Connecting them is the common revolt against the prevailing order. Lucebert says in 1978:

'You have to understand, at the end of the forties society was stuck. We had to break through the established views. Shake things up a bit with a group of friends.'

When things have indeed changed, there is less need for collaboration and more room for individual development.

JACQUES DOUCET

The politically driven Doucet is already a member of the Le Surréalisme Révolutionnaire founded by Dotremont. When the French and Belgian branches of this group split up, he remains involved in the Experimental Group, despite his French background – and later in Cobra. Doucet organises the first exhibition of Corneille and Appel in Paris. He also introduces them to Parisian nightlife and jazz music. Doucet also brings them into contact with the Dutch poet Vinkenoog, who will later become involved in Cobra as well.

Doucet attends Cobra's first major exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 1949, where he loudly demonstrates against opponents of Dotremont. His work is included in both Amsterdam and the final exhibition in Liege in 1951. In his vision of Cobra, he mainly endorses Jorn's theories of a 'living art'. This living art must be

created through irrational spontaneity. That way the source of vitality in each individual can be addressed. Once in contact with this source, the ruling class would no longer have a grip on the individuals, who could now shape their own living environment. After the disbandment of Cobra, Doucet begins to work more abstractly and often in more sober colours.

CORNEILLE

When he returns from Hungary, Corneille and Appel are introduced to Constant and Danish artist Jorn. Thanks to Jorn's encouragement, Appel, Constant and Corneille decide to start a new art group, the Experimental Group in Holland. The formation takes place during a turbulent meeting in the summer of 1948. Corneille becomes the chairman of the group. Alike the other present members, Corneille did not sign the manifesto Constant wrote. The manifesto was however included in their magazine *Reflex*. To this first issue, Corneille contributed two French poems, several lithographs, and made the cover drawing.

Directly after the Experimental Group become part of Cobra, the Dutch Cobra members travel to Denmark for a joint exhibit with the Høst group, and the first founding meeting (November, 1948). It is their first opportunity to see the work of the Danish artists. For the second issue of *Reflex*, Corneille writes a report on this journey, which makes clear that the work of his Danish colleagues had made a deep impression on him. He especially admires the work of Pedersen, with whom he maintains a special relationship.

Within Cobra, Corneille is largely responsible for the organisation of the 1949 exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and for the production of the fourth edition

of the Cobra magazine. During the exhibit, irritations started to arise. Appel, Corneille and Constant attract so much attention that they give the others the feeling of being pushed into the background. After the disbandment of Cobra, the differences in opinion about the group and its meaning become increasingly clear. Corneille continues to defend personal freedom and creativity, and unlike Constant, for example, places much less emphasis on the didactic or social value of art.

CARL-HENNING PEDERSEN

Influenced by Marxism, Pedersen feels that art should be for everyone and should also be made by everyone. The latter would only succeed if people are not guided by fear of failure:

'We must make artists out of all people. Because they are. They just don't know it themselves.'

Jorn introduces Pedersen to Cobra during the annual Høst exhibition in November 1948. Pedersen has not studied art because he believes that the origin of art does not lie in an education, but rather in an inner force that needs to be released. This idea is enthusiastically received by the Cobra members. Within Cobra, Pedersen's main interest is the shared ideology about the artist's personal freedom. French being Cobra's main language may have made it more difficult for him, like most Danish Cobra members, to contribute to the group as they often lack that language. Unlike Jorn, Pedersen will always remain living in Denmark.

After a period in which Pedersen makes abstract works, he switches in 1936 to figurative painting, including masks. This was after meeting the Danish artist Jacobsen, who

later became a part of Cobra. The Cobra members greatly admire Pedersen for his bright, light paintings with simple ornamental shapes. The naivety is rather the result of his love for Scandinavian folk art, myths, sagas and mythical animals. Painting influences include expressionists such as Marc Chagall (Belarus, 1887-France, 1985), Henri Matisse (France, 1869-1954) and Klee. As early as 1948, the Dane Erik Ortvad (1917-2008) exhibited with the Experimental Group and also participates in both major Cobra exhibitions.

A COLOURFUL GROUP

The Dutch Nieuwenhuys, Rooskens and Wolvecamp walk out on Cobra after the riot in the Stedelijk Museum in 1949. Wolvecamp did however take part in the Cobra exhibition in Liège in 1951. Lotti van der Gaag (Netherlands, 1923-1999) is never an official member of Cobra, but works in a closely related 'style'. In Paris she has a studio in the same building as Corneille and Appel. A letter exchange between her and Corneille shows that her participation in a Cobra exhibition is considered at one point. Corneille ensures, for instance, that the work of sculptor Shinkichi Tajiri (U.S.A., 1923-Netherlands, 2009), a young American artist of Japanese origin, is featured in the exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

In Denmark Else Alfelt (1910-1974) becomes a member of Høst and later of Cobra. She mostly paints natural phenomena and in this way differs from the group. Just as Bille, she does, however, participate in the exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. One of the artists influenced by Bille's views is Jorn. A few of Bille's articles on the political significance of art are included in the *Cobra* magazine. Heerup takes part in both major Cobra exhibitions. His simple stone sculptures greatly appealed

to Appel, Constant and Corneille, but he himself sees Cobra primarily as an opportunity to exhibit his work. Mogens Balle (Denmark, 1921-1988) discovers Cobra s after meeting Jorn, who then introduces him to Dotremont. Together with Dotremont he makes several drawings and 'word paintings'. Jacobsen is acquainted with Jorn and other Cobra artists, but never joins Cobra. Sonja Ferlov (Denmark, 1911-France, 1984) is involved in the Cobra movement as a sculptor.

In the United Kingdom, Stephen Gilbert (1910-2007) and William Gear (1915-1997) also have knowledge of Cobra through their introduction to Jorn. Gilbert attends a Cobra meeting in Bregnerød and participates in the first major exhibition in Amsterdam. Later he and Constant work together on formal experiments with painting and architecture. Gear is engaged in the Cobra group through Gilbert, but never becomes a member. Gear does however bring the artist Karl Otto Götz (1914-2017) into contact with Cobra, the first German member of the group.

The Jewish-French artist Jean-Michel Atlan (Algeria, 1913-France, 1960) meets Jorn in 1946 when he was active in the French wing of Le Surréalisme Révolutionnaire. After it falls apart, he supports the Cobra group. His studio becomes a meeting place for like-minded artists. The Belgian George Collignon (1923-2002) is only indirectly involved with Cobra, but did become a member. He takes part in the second Cobra exhibition in Liège in 1951.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON COBRA

Cobra founder and poet Dotremont objects to the idea of a 'Cobra language' and to the idea that Cobra is developed in a perfect straight line from Danish painting. He believes that Cobra stands on its own. According to him, Cobra was distinguished by 'inter-specialist' and 'anti-specialist' works of art, such as the collaborations between poets and artists. Moreover, he sees Cobra as something that still lives on. This earns him criticism from Constant and Jorn, who see the Cobra movement as an experimental exploration that has now ended.

In 1958, Jorn and Constant published a critical article on developments after Cobra. Otherwise, Jorn interfered little with the historiography. It is Constant in particular who, like Dotremont, continues to speak publicly about the meaning of Cobra. He acknowledges that a certain painterly style emerged, but continues to emphasize that the meaning of Cobra cannot be found in this. On the contrary, Cobra resisted the perception of the artist as a uniquely gifted individual who paints masterpieces. Constant sees the meaning of Cobra in the revolutionary intentions that existed within the group. Works of art after 1951 in the style of Cobra could therefore no longer be called experimental or 'Cobra'. Cobra had become fashionable art in which the spirit of absolute freedom could no longer be found. Genuine experimental artists were now working on other things.

In the early 1980s Constant states that if there was such a thing as a 'Cobra style', it was to be found in the joint works, as Dotremont had been stressing. In 1988, Englishman art historian Graham Birtwistle emphasises the enormous importance of the oppositional dynamics

within the Cobra group in an art-historical journal, just as the Danish art historian Troels Andersen had already done in 1961. What makes Cobra so important and unique is the vitality that resulted from these dynamics. From an art historical point of view, too little importance would have been attributed to the contradictions within the group and to the theoretical side, and too much to the material side of paint and canvas.

Now, 75 years after the start of the movement, we can conclude that Cobra is a cry for freedom with multiple voices. This results in divergent, sometimes diametrically opposed perspectives on Cobra, also in historiography. Some voices are heard more than others. In this exhibition, the most important ones are covered.

COLOPHON

This presentation is a slightly modified version of the exhibition *A Multi-headed Snake* curated by Hilde de Bruijn in 2018.

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