

Cobra: A Psychological, Political, and Artistic Response to the Second World War

By

Chloe Hyman

Professor Eric Rosenberg and Professor Jeremy Melius  
Art History Department  
Tufts University

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## Introduction

In 1950, Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys painted *Scorched Earth* (fig. 1). The painting's figures are strewn across a vast, red-orange landscape. The coloration of the earth is not uniform. In the bottom right-hand corner, there are additional coats of red paint layered atop the orange. Towards the horizon line, the red becomes more deeply saturated as well. In places where orange is the predominant hue, the shading is thin and translucent, allowing white patches to shine through. However, rather than lending the landscape a sense of depth, the irregular application of color draws the viewer's attention to the material nature of the painting's surface. He is reminded of the fact that the work is composed of paint, and therefore rooted in reality. Looking at *Scorched Earth* is an experience of oscillating between inhabiting the realm of the painting and the conscious world.

It is also an experience of recognizing symbols and inverting, or modifying them. In the bottom-left corner there is a circular form with spokes that center on a smaller circle. It resembles a wheel, yet the outer circle is incomplete, as if it is broken. There are several hands present in *Scorched Earth* as well. Constant's treatment of arms and fingers is decidedly unaesthetic. Thick black brushstrokes form the outline of the outstretched arm, but the grey 'skin' color leaks out from underneath, surrounding the outline in a halo of grey paint. The tan sky and red earth introduce colors that are not usually associated with these topographical elements in the western understanding of the world. Deeply saturated red is symbolic in its own right. Furthermore, the clouds have not been uniformly colored in, but quickly covered in a swirl

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of charcoal gray lines. The resulting pattern on the clouds is a mass of overlapping, curling lines not typically associated with the surface of clouds.

Lastly, to consume *Scorched Earth* is to experience discomfort. The mass of short, thick, black brushstrokes encroaching on the bottom-right figure's wrinkled face is displeasing to the human eye, which struggles to make sense of this mass of lines. There is a furriness about them due to the flared ends of each brushstroke, and the saturation of their color. Their intrusion on the figure's face—and his apparent distress—suggest their animation. These brushstrokes have the capacity to move, cover, and perhaps even suffocate a live being, but the viewer cannot identify what they are and how they are animate. The concept of an unclassifiable, monstrous being whose ambiguous anatomy is somehow capable of taking another being's life is distressing to the viewer. Other figures in *Scorched Earth* are equally discomfoting. The creature that the mass of brushstrokes is attacking is uncanny in and of itself. There is no clear distinction between where it ends, and the atmosphere/other creatures begin. It is only one interpretation to read the mass of black brushstrokes as a separate entity encroaching on its existence. This mass could be attached to the figure, in which case the figure bears a furry parasite attached to its cheek and jaw—a very unaesthetic feature. There is a semblance of an arm or wing on the creature's left side. I only make that suggestion because the human brain associates forms on the sides of faces as arms and legs. The blue body of the figure converges to a single point, from which a swatch of red paint streaked with blue undulates upward. Is this red-blue form part of the figure's anatomy? Due to its positioning, it could be a tail. Humans associate a single appendage protruding from a torso with a tail, while two appendages suggest legs. And attached still to this red form is a white form that diverges into six, finger-like appendages. Black lines in the center of the form resemble the

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lines of a person's palm. The way the appendages grow from each other, and from subsidiary 'branches,' gives this form the appearance of coral.

This reading of *Scorched Earth* illuminates several important characteristics of Constant Nieuwenhuys's work and the movement it was a part of—Cobra. First, there is the relationship between the subconscious and the conscious in Constant's artistic process. How much of his work is inspired by each realm? Additionally, the visual analysis of *Scorched Earth* reveals an abundance of symbolic iconography and un-aesthetic choices. What purpose did these inverted symbols and untraditional techniques serve? And lastly, this reading pinpointed the discomfort internalized by viewers upon experiencing *Scorched Earth*. Why did Constant want to instill unease in his audience?

The answer to these questions lies in the contextualization of Dutch Cobra. After all, it is impossible to separate the work from its context, especially given its title. The expression 'scorched earth' refers to the wartime practice in which the home front burnt its crops and killed its livestock to prevent invading troops from taking advantage of the resources. This defense maneuver was typical in World War II, and led to horrific devastation in Russia, Germany, and the Netherlands. The Dutch Cobra artists witnessed this devastation for themselves in their own country, and again on a train ride through Germany on their way to Denmark. Constant's creation of a painting entitled *Scorched Earth* demonstrates his psychological connection to the brutality of the policy's enactment in his own country, as well as in both Russia and Germany, where the policy had even more devastating effects. In *Metastructure: Experimental Utopia and Traumatic Memory in Constant's New Babylon*, Tom McDonough writes that the painting "may be read as a reference to Nazi policy in Holland just prior to their evacuation in August 1944,

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when they attempted to leave behind as few usable resources for the Allied armies as possible.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in order to fully comprehend the unique choices Constant made in *Scorched Earth*, it is important to understand the context from which Dutch Cobra emerged.

In 1948, a group of Danish, Belgian, and Dutch artists formed the experimental group, Cobra. Their name was an acronym for the capital cities in the countries from which they hailed—Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. The group only existed for three years, but these years bore witness to the creation of a unique artist’s collective deeply engrained in the socio-political fabric of the time. This thesis explores the emergence of the Cobra Movement in the Netherlands, where the Second World War and the Holocaust devastated the population and political stagnancy created a toxic environment. I explore the causative relationship between society and art while taking into account the contextual nuances that complicate so-called ‘linear’ historical relationships. The seven published Cobra periodicals are a testament to the complex ideology and methodologies that characterized this multi-disciplinary movement.<sup>2</sup> These periodicals, as well as other primary and secondary sources, and visual analyses of key works, help draw a line of causation between politics and art in 20<sup>th</sup> century Amsterdam.

Making a connection between historical context and the emergence of Cobra is an urgent undertaking because much of the current Cobra literature mishandles this relationship. The discussion is divided between those who view the movement as an optimistic outlook on the Post-War years, and those who find in Dutch Cobra’s rough brushstrokes evidence of War trauma. In both schools of thought there is no mention in the Cobra literature of the frustratingly

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<sup>1</sup> Tom McDonough, “Metastructure: Experimental Utopia and Traumatic Memory in Constant’s New Babylon,” *Grey Room*, no. 33 (2008): 91.

<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development of Cobra Art* (Hempstead: The Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, 1985), 43-44.

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stagnant political situation the young Dutch artists—Karel Appel, Constant Nieuwenhuys, and Corneille Beverloo—found themselves in following the War. It is my purpose to contradict the interpretations of Cobra art that deem it cheerfully optimistic in favor of those that utilize trauma theory to demonstrate the dark psychological state from which Dutch Cobra emerged. I will draw on trauma theory to provide psychological evidence for my own interpretation of Dutch Cobra as a spiritual, philosophical, and political response to the Dutch experience of World War II. Critically, this discussion will include a thorough examination of the archaic Dutch social and political system which further fueled the development of Dutch Cobra.

At its core, this thesis will demonstrate how the central goals of Dutch Cobra were a direct response to the Dutch socio-political condition in 1946. These goals were twofold: a spiritual and artistic rebirth, and the systematic restructuring of society through the dissolution of traditional artistic institutions.

Dutch Cobra did not immediately locate the tools to achieve these goals. It was a process that involved a disheartening trip to France, deep immersion in European philosophy, and a chance meeting with a Danish avant-garde painter and Cobra member named Asger Jorn. This process was also complicated by the fact that Cobra's goals were not purely aesthetic. The political views of the Dutch Cobra artists allowed the movement to become much more than an artistic genre. It was a way of thinking about the world; a firm belief in the creativity and kindness of the human spirit, deep down beneath the layers of socialized behaviors that capitalism had engendered. Its members were linked by the Marxian conviction that all people were born creative, but prevented from expressing themselves by bourgeois class culture. Constant expressed this shared belief in the Cobra *Manifesto*, published in 1948. "The

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satisfaction of [the] primitive need for vital expression is the driving force of life..." he wrote, "As such it is the property of all and for this reason every limitation that reduces art to the reserve of a small group of specialists, connoisseurs, and virtuosi must be removed."<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 1 provides a thorough examination of the conditions in the Netherlands following the Second World War. It details the particular effects of the War on the Dutch population, infrastructure, and economy. It then uses Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory to illustrate why attempts at political reform were received negatively by the Dutch people, and how this affected the Dutch artists post-trauma. It is important to situate ourselves in 1946 Amsterdam and understand the psyche of the Dutch Experimentalist painters at this time. Only then will the goals of Dutch Cobra begin to come clear. The firsthand account of Bartholomeus Landheer, Dutch Professor of Sociology and International relations, serves as a major object of inquiry in this thesis. Published in 1947, *The Netherlands in a Changing World* chronicles Landheer's experience in the Netherlands immediately following the War. It illuminates many of the psychological, as well as physical, effects of trauma on the Dutch psyche. Lastly, this chapter will explain how the Dutch artists' psychological state shaped their central goals: rebirth and societal liberation.

A preliminary objective for Dutch Cobra was to explore the existing artistic movements of the day, in hopes that one of these would fulfill the artists' needs. Chapter 2 recounts the early influence of various artists and art movements on the Dutch Experimentalists. Subsequently, this chapter will explain why the Dutch Experimentalists soon rejected these movements, believing them to be inadequate vehicles of expression. These movements include cubism, De Stijl, social

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<sup>3</sup> Kurczynski, Karen. "Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra." *Art History* 39, issue 4 (2016), 680.

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realism, expressionism, art brut, and surrealism. Credit will be given to the aspects of these movements that did find their way into Cobra ideology and methodologies, and to the importance of these movements in defining what Cobra opposed (which consequently helped define what Cobra *was*).

Having distinguished Dutch Cobra from its contemporaries, I turn to the artists' first goal: the achievement of spiritual and artistic rebirth. Chapter 3 then explores the influence of the Danish avant-garde on the foundation of Cobra ideology and methodologies aimed at cleansing the human spirit. The Dutch Cobra artists adopted many concepts from the Danish Experimentalists, including spontaneity, folklore, and masks. They would redefine, narrow down, and expand the parameters of these terms, using them as tools for reaching deeper and deeper into their own souls, where true creativity and kindness lay. The essence of the human spirit was the foil to the brutality capitalism had layered onto man. In accessing the pure, primitive soul, it was thought that this brutality could be somehow *removed*. It would be the ultimate cleansing. Thus, 'rebirth' can be understood as a release from trauma, survivor's guilt, and the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. The desire for rebirth manifested itself not just in the resulting Cobra ideology, but in the work of Dutch Cobra artists Appel, Constant, and Corneille. The process of applying rough, unaesthetic brushstrokes signaled a working through of trauma by actualizing said trauma on the canvas. Furthermore, this process allowed the artist to legitimize his experiences, a part of working through. In communicating and publicizing their trauma on canvas, the Dutch artists were able to partially alleviate it. Thus, Dutch Cobra's process can be read as a form of spiritual cleansing. Once applied, the paint was allowed to dry in clotted clumps, a reminder of the ugliness of mankind after rebirth was achieved.

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To define murkiness as a precursor for cleansing seems contradictory if you employ the contemporary associations with ‘murky’ color—dirtiness and pollution. However, this association exists due to the natural human disinclination towards the unclassifiable. Rebellious against man’s disdain for the ambiguous became a running theme in Dutch Cobra. Within this chapter, Danish and Dutch paintings will be compared in order to demonstrate the incorporation of Danish tools—materiality, spontaneity—into Dutch Cobra for the purposes of artistic and spiritual rebirth.

Chapter 4 examines Dutch Cobra’s second major goal: the restructuring of society through the dissolution of traditional artistic institutions. The social views of the Dutch Experimentalists politicized their art-making. Liberating the masses from the oppressive capitalist institutions that prevented their own art-making was central to Cobra ideology, and informed the group’s methodologies. In this chapter, the philosophical writings of Karl Marx and Gaston Bachelard will be analyzed for their influence on Dutch Cobra political thought. The Danish avant-garde perspective on social and political change will also be explored, as these artists preceded the Dutch in the desire to dissolve artistic institutions. Lastly, the contemporary writings of Hal Foster and Karen Kurczynski are analyzed in-depth, as they illuminate the process by which Dutch Cobra aimed to communicate their political message to the masses. Visual analyses of Dutch Cobra paintings demonstrate group’s political ideology in practice.

In chapter 4, three key Cobra works are visually analyzed, demonstrating the two central goals of Dutch Cobra. These visual analyses contradict the positions put forth by several art historians suggesting that Dutch Cobra was a cheerfully optimistic response to the end of a brutal

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war. They situate Dutch Cobra within the Dutch post-War, post-traumatic condition, illustrating the tormented psychological state from which the movement truly emerged.

By the end of this thesis, Dutch Cobra's desire for rebirth and desire to rebuild society are understood as interconnected goals that reinforced one another. Through the intersubjective and material qualities of painting, the Dutch Cobra artists aimed to heal both society and themselves.

## Chapter 1: The Effects of World War II on the Netherlands

The effects of the Second World War on the Netherlands' population, infrastructure, and economy were devastating. The death toll was massive. 75% of the Dutch Jewish population perished in concentration camps, as well as many members of the Dutch resistance. Anybody who appeared to be helping the resistance was promptly shot.<sup>4</sup> When the Allies liberated Maastricht in late 1944, the Dutch government-in-exile ordered a railway strike to disrupt Nazi movements. This, combined with a German blockade of the western Netherlands, brought the flow of goods into the west to a complete halt. The Dutch Famine, or 'Hongerwinter,' descended upon the Western Netherlands, killing close to 25,000 people.<sup>5</sup> In Amsterdam, the ground was too frozen to dig graves for the dead. Their bodies piled were piled high in the churches around the city.<sup>6</sup> These deaths would have a profound effect on the psyche of the Dutch people.

Infrastructural damages were devastating. The eight months between the liberations of Maastricht and the Western Netherlands was a period of mass destruction at the hands of the Germans.<sup>7</sup> 80,000 houses in the Netherlands were completely destroyed, while 35,000 more were heavily damaged and 270,000 lightly damaged.<sup>8</sup> 90% of electric wiring used for railroads was destroyed, in addition to bridges, railcars and railway stations. Additionally, canals and airfields were decimated, rendering post-war transportation virtually impossible. Communication was

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<sup>4</sup> Sandberg, Willem. "Presentation of Vision '67." *Design Issues* 3, no. 1 (1986): 66.

<sup>5</sup> J.C.H. Blom and E. Lamberts, *History of the Low Countries* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 444.

<sup>6</sup> Margot Welle, "A Young Painter Named Corneille," *Cimaise* 45 (1998): 113, accessed June 24, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Bartholomeus Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World: A Series of Essays* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1947), 79.

<sup>8</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 81.

also extremely limited, due to disrupted postal, telegraph and telephone services.<sup>9</sup> The Dutch coast was destroyed. Tank walls had been constructed by the Nazis along the entire length of beaches, while barbed wire, bunkers, and stockades dotted the coast.<sup>10</sup> Many parts of the Netherlands flooded over the course of the war, but proper funds and equipment to deal with flooding were unavailable.<sup>11</sup>

A badly damaged economy made it difficult for the Dutch government to begin rebuilding infrastructure. A study published in 1945 calculated that 1.25 million Dutch people were living in gruesome conditions, below the poverty line.<sup>12</sup> There were food, clothing, and housing shortages, and the Dutch economy was incapable of providing these goods to the hungry people.<sup>13</sup> Real national income was 40% lower than it had been before the war.<sup>14</sup> The war had damaged labor productivity and capacity, and interfered with foreign investments.<sup>15</sup> Income from the Dutch East Indies had decreased drastically during the War.<sup>16</sup> The War had cost the government 25 billion guilders in damages.<sup>17</sup> Lack of raw materials, coal, and ships made it extraordinarily difficult for the Netherlands to pull itself out of the economic recession.<sup>18</sup>

Given the chaos of the Post-War Netherlands, it comes as no surprise that there were disagreements over how the country should go about reconstruction. In order to understand this

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<sup>9</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 82-83.

<sup>10</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 79.

<sup>12</sup> Piet de Rooy, "The Nation is Divided into Parties 1930: The Pillarized Corporate Order," in *A Tiny Spot on the Earth: The Political Culture of the Netherlands in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*. (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2015), 215.

<sup>13</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 80.

<sup>14</sup> de Rooy, "The Nation is Divided," 215.

<sup>15</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 96-97.

<sup>16</sup> de Rooy, "The Nation is Divided," 215.

<sup>17</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 79.

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debate, we must turn first to the political order of the Netherlands before the War, and examine how it changed during the years 1940-1945.

Before the war, Dutch society had been structured around Catholic, Protestant, Social Democrat, and Liberal pillars, each of which had their own ideologies, social institutions, broadcast stations, and newspapers. In elections, it was expected that members of each pillar would vote for the politician supported by his pillar. Due to contradictory ideologies, it was often difficult for the varying sectors of Dutch society to collaborate on political, social, or economic issues. However, the effects of the Nazi occupation on day-to-day life in the Netherlands engendered a sentiment of solidarity between these groups. Director of the Stedelijk, Willem Sandberg, wrote a poem about this socio-political phenomenon. "Society burst apart at the seams," he wrote, "Political differences lost meaning/age-old barriers disappeared/human contact intensified/man's relation to man/seemed changed forever."<sup>19</sup> This was the state of the Dutch population when the Allied forces freed the Netherlands; ideologically incompatible groups had united.

As a result, re-establishing stability, was the priority of the majority of the population. During the War, the Netherlands had lost its footing in the international economy. Additionally, it was experiencing a population boom. These two factors made establishing a universally high quality of life quite difficult. As a result, each day was uncertain for the exhausted and traumatized population. Landheer returned to the Netherlands in 1946 and described the impact of poverty on the Dutch psyche. He writes in his book, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, "[economic troubles] give an element of insecurity to life which is felt very strongly by a race of

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<sup>19</sup> Sandberg, "Presentation of Vision '67," 72.

people who are as conservative as the Dutch, and makes them try very hard to gain a favourable world which has some aspect of permanence.”<sup>20</sup> The Dutch people sought security and permanence in the familiar pillarized institutions that characterized Dutch society before the War. Their churches, youth groups and newspapers were the only dependable things in their unpredictable lives. Furthermore, these Dutch people were in favour of political and economic policies that promised to stabilize the quality of life in the Netherlands. In elections, they voted for politicians who promised a strong, centralized, and autocratically organized state.<sup>21</sup> One such party was The Anti-Revolutionary party, whose platform advocated for the maintenance of authority and the reinforcement of overseas territories. The platforms of the Christian Historical Union and the Catholic People’s Party also championed a strong centralized government because they believed that God legitimized the government’s authority.<sup>22</sup> These people were also eager to return to their pillarized organizations, because these groups were the most stable elements of their lives.<sup>23</sup> When everything else was uncertain, the existence of their church, their youth group, and their newspaper were things that they could count on, and that brought them the peace they so desperately craved.

In *Writing Trauma, Writing History*, Dominick LaCapra discusses two important and interrelated dichotomies that affect human behavior post-trauma and can be used to further explain the desire of the Dutch majority to return to the pre-War status quo. The first is the dichotomy between loss and absence, and the second is that between historical and structural

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<sup>20</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 56.

<sup>21</sup> Blom, “History of the Low Countries,” 445.

<sup>22</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 73-75.

<sup>23</sup> Blom, “History of the Low Countries,” 445.

trauma. He defines loss as a specific trauma, such as the loss of a parent or friend.<sup>24</sup> A person who has suffered tremendous loss is said to have undergone historical trauma. On the other hand, there is no specific moment in which an absence occurs. Its existence develops in the human brain over time, manifesting itself in structural trauma. “Structural trauma, like absence,” LaCapra writes, “is not an event but an anxiety-producing condition of possibility related to the potential for historical traumatization.”<sup>25</sup> He explains that all people are exposed to structural trauma, and experience the sensation of absence in their lives.<sup>26</sup> Following a tumultuous period of time, loss/historical trauma and absence/structural trauma are often conflated. This results in a multitude of behaviors among differently affected members of society.

Dutch people lost many friends and family members to the Holocaust, the Honger Winter, and the War itself. These specific losses led to the collective experience of historical trauma. However, LaCapra explains that loss experienced on a major scale often engenders the conflation of loss with an overall sensation of absence.<sup>27</sup> In a situation where so many human lives were lost, absence replaces individual people as the subject of mourning.<sup>28</sup> The conflation of loss with absence explains the state of melancholy among the Dutch population following the war. “When loss is converted into...absence,” writes LaCapra, “one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.”<sup>29</sup> This conflation of loss with absence explains why the majority of the Dutch people were uninterested in reform.

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<sup>24</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 80.

<sup>25</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 82.

<sup>26</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 79.

<sup>27</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 68.

<sup>29</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 146.

Their psychological state was too impounded by grief for them to rally for change. Furthermore, they grieved more than just the loss of specific people, but the absence of a way of life. Thus, their adamant wish to maintain the status quo demonstrates the conflation of loss with absence. Resisting reform was a way of coping with absence; their youth groups, churches, and community centers were reminders of their pre-trauma way of life.

Additionally, LaCapra's theory describes another set of interrelated responses to trauma: "acting out" and "working through." He describes acting out as "repetitive compulsion" in which "victims of trauma tend to relive occurrences, or at least find that these occurrences intrude on their present existence."<sup>30</sup> In contrast, working through is "a relation to the past which involves recognizing its difference from the present...thereby allowing for critical judgement and a reinvestment in life, notably social and civic life."<sup>31</sup> Because it has been shown that the majority of the Dutch people conflated loss with absence, and therefore attributed their historical trauma to structural trauma, their response to trauma can be interpreted as acting out. Rather than attempting to "work through" their trauma by approaching it critically and considering ways in which engagement with civic life could prevent further trauma, they remained stuck to the institutional systems that provided them comfort before and after the onset of absence.

Lastly, LaCapra lists two other barriers to working through trauma that impacted Dutch resistance to reform. First, he explains that modern society lacks the "effective rites of passage including rituals or...effective social processes such as mourning" to help people move on.<sup>32</sup> While each pillar of Dutch society was very complex and would have had its own funeral and

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<sup>30</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 143.

<sup>31</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 70.

<sup>32</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 76.

mourning processes, no pillar was prepared for the mass genocide and death that befell the Netherlands in the 1940s. There were no rituals in place to help people grieve absence, and to cope with the overwhelming melancholy that befell Dutch society. And so, “working through”—and its related sociopolitical practices—was not feasible for many people. Secondly, LaCapra explains that a great barrier to working through trauma is the sentiment that one is betraying the trust of a loved one.<sup>33</sup> Rallying for reform, and the destruction of many of the institutions cherished by lost loved ones, would have been seen as an act of betrayal.

Though the general tide was turned towards stability, there were still loud voices protesting the return to the status quo, and their goals can also be understood in conjunction with trauma theory. They belonged to people who found fault with the structure of pre-War Dutch society. They felt that returning to such a system, one that had been complacent during the Nazi invasion and the subsequent Dutch Holocaust, was out of the question.<sup>34</sup> One strong force for change was the People’s Movement. Their platform was one of liberty, patriotism, and resistance to Nazism. They believed that collaboration was needed to transform society after the horrors of war, a century of industrial capitalism, and the loss of Christian morals.<sup>35</sup> Another force for change was the Dutch National Movement, or NVB (Nederlandse Volks Beweging). The NVB also questioned the pillar system and feared its return. It criticized the way capitalism had “created a hard, merciless spirit of individualism, materialism, and hedonism,” as Landheer wrote, “that has caused a decay of deeper spiritual values.”<sup>36</sup> The NVB championed a reform of the party system, limiting the number of parties in the Netherlands and improving

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<sup>33</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 144.

<sup>34</sup> Blom, *History of the Low Countries*, 445.

<sup>35</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 64-65.

<sup>36</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 66.

communication between the executive branch and Parliament. The movement hoped to unify the people under their shared desire to renew authority and re-evaluate their morals after the brutality of war.<sup>37</sup> Both the People's Movement and the NVB advocated for collaboration between political parties. They hoped that collaboration would help foster morality and spirituality within the deeply demoralized population.<sup>38</sup> Radical socialism also experienced an increase in popularity during this turbulent time. In the 1946 election, 10% of the vote went to the Communist Party.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to these structured movements that advocated for change, many intellectuals expressed their dissatisfaction with the pillar system due to its inadequacy at dealing with political and economic issues. As Landheer wrote, "It seems strange that a practical country like Holland shows this penetration of its political life by religious thinking... There is no logical level on which these various ideologies can rest because the differences in thinking can only be explained from political and economic factors."<sup>40</sup> Intellectuals like Landheer felt that the lack of empirical thinking in the pillars, in favour of religious thinking, was a major obstacle to political collaboration.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, they felt that the pillars, which had served their purpose before the War, were now a hindrance to economic and political development. The pillars were needed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to help push for universal suffrage, and educational and labour reforms. But now that the population was more or less universally represented and enfranchised, the old party system would only slow down national development by keeping people stuck to

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<sup>37</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 66-67.

<sup>38</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 66-67.

<sup>39</sup> Blom, *History of the Low Countries*, 445.

<sup>40</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 60.

<sup>41</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 71.

old-fashioned ideologies grounded in religion.<sup>42</sup> According to Landheer and his contemporaries, this era had no space for politics governed by religious thought rather than what was best for the people. The pillars prevented people from thinking for themselves.<sup>43</sup> They were the reason that Dutch society was lacking in high-reaching political ideals and social visions.<sup>44</sup>

With the Post-War division of Dutch political thought in mind, I turn to the actual events of reconstruction. The government acted quickly to rehabilitate Dutch infrastructure, the Dutch economy, and Dutch political life. Though the physical effects of the War were horrific, the Netherlands made considerable progress rebuilding in the first six months after the Liberation. 8,000 tons of food were imported in the first month. Caloric rations, which had been 450 per day, rose to 2,200.<sup>45</sup> Damaged houses were restored within three months, though the destroyed houses would take much longer to be rebuilt due to lumber shortages. Finding clothing and shoes was difficult, because coal and raw materials were needed to jumpstart the Dutch textile industry, but by September textiles and leather were being distributed to those most in need. Canals, airfields, and train tracks, as well as postal, telegraph, and telephone services were repaired at a rapid rate. By 1945, the traffic in the Netherlands was up to 2/3 of its pre-war capacity. Industries had regained 60-70% of their pre-war capacity as well.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the Netherlands did not remain in a state of dystopic destitution for very long. However, obtaining the raw materials and coal needed to rebuild Dutch infrastructure, agriculture, and industry was very costly for the Dutch government. The effects of the war manifested themselves greatly in economic reconstruction.

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<sup>42</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> de Rooy, *The Nation is Divided*, 214.

<sup>44</sup> de Rooy, *The Nation is Divided*, 212.

<sup>45</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 79-80.

<sup>46</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 81-84.

The Dutch government immediately focused its efforts on rebuilding the Dutch economy because a strong economy was needed to pay back the loans the Netherlands had received to achieve the aforementioned infrastructural rehabilitation. There were several other reasons that economic reconstruction was such a priority. It would facilitate the expansion of Dutch commerce once more, helping the Netherlands regain its footing as a hopeful world power, or at least a stable one.<sup>47</sup> The government also hoped that it would quell the growth of national socialism, which often made deep roots in socio-economically damaged places. The sooner the quality of life in the Netherlands could be improved, the more resistant the people would be to communism.<sup>48</sup> Lastly, the government wanted to avoid the return of unrestricted capitalism, as this form of a profit-economy widened the gap between the rich and the poor and did not ensure the financial security of the overall population.<sup>49</sup>

The Dutch government used several strategies to improve the economy. First, in 1945, the government issued a Financial Purge. All currency from the country was withdrawn, and all bank balances were frozen. Both cash and bank balances would slowly be un-frozen over the next few years, reducing note-circulation and maintaining price stability.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, the government attempted to stimulate national income. The agricultural sector was focused on immediately, as it was the only sector that could generate enough money to recover the economy and feed the starving population. However, it was faced with a competitive world market, so tactics such as specialization, mechanization, and land consolidation were employed to maximize efficiency. The government simultaneously worked on promoting industrialization, so that the

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<sup>47</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 96-97.

<sup>48</sup> de Rooy, *The Nation is Divided*, 211.

<sup>49</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 91-92.

<sup>50</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 84-85.

country could begin exporting goods. In order to be competitive, the government kept consumption low and investments high.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, the Dutch understood that foreign trade was a vital component of their economy. Agreements were also made with other countries, such as Great Britain, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, and Czechoslovakia, to stimulate trade.<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, political reconstruction witnessed the failure of radical groups to make change. More conservative groups could not reach a compromise with The People's Movement or the NVB because the conservative pillars were adamant about the importance of religion in solving social issues. Thus, the "Breakthrough" of 1944-1946 failed, and The Netherlands shifted backwards into pillarization.<sup>53</sup> In a later stanza of the previously quoted poem, Willem Sandberg lamented this failure. He continued, "Nothing was impossible/a new world was about to be born/but when peace broke out/the respectable citizens/hastily retreated to prewar positions/looking backward instead of ahead."<sup>54</sup> This backward-thinking prevented any meaningful restructuring of society. Few political reforms were passed. The number of parties decreased from twenty to eleven and the electoral age was lowered to twenty-three.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, the executive branch was given increased power.<sup>56</sup> Maintaining the status quo was extremely beneficial for the Dutch government. The tight-knit communities fostered by the pillar system prevented the spread of communism in the same way that a strong economy did, though

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<sup>51</sup> de Rooy, *The Nation is Divided*, 215-217.

<sup>52</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 88.

<sup>53</sup> de Rooy, *The Nation is Divided*, 227.

<sup>54</sup> Sandberg, "Presentation of Vision '67," 72.

<sup>55</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 72.

<sup>56</sup> Landheer, *The Netherlands in a Changing World*, 55.

it could not be entirely eradicated. A stable political system allowed Dutch politicians to focus on economy reconstruction and the armed conflict in the Dutch East Indies.<sup>57</sup>

And so, after exploring infrastructural, economic, and political reconstruction in the Netherlands, one can clearly see whose desires were fulfilled in the Post-War years. The frightened, exhausted, and war-stricken population, believing stability would bring them prosperity, sought refuge in their pillarized institutions. The majority of the government, whose interests lay in containing communism, waging war in the Indies, and returning the Netherlands to its former glory, were eager to uphold the pillars. But the portion of the population that yearned for change was unsatisfied with the government-regulated economy and the religiously-divided pillar system governing political thought. Some were artists, traumatized by the war and frustrated with the reconstruction. A select group of these artists would become the cultural face of rebellion in the first few years after World War II.

The arts in Holland did not fare well during the War. A Chamber of Culture was set up to police artists, galleries, museums, theatres, concert halls, publishers, authors, and radio stations. Membership to the Chamber was a prerequisite for engagement in the arts. Jews, Slavs, and Degenerate artists and dealers were denied membership. Anyone who made or sold art outside of the Chamber was subject to arrest.<sup>58</sup> A petition to dissolve this Chamber resulted in several deaths.<sup>59</sup> The occupation government successfully intimidated Dutch avant-garde artists—whose work fell under the category of ‘degenerate’—to cease artistic experimentation. Furthermore, German intimidation prevented many art students from attending the Royal Academy, for fear of

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<sup>57</sup> Blom, *History of the Low Countries*, 445.

<sup>58</sup> Ad Peterson and Pieter Brattinga, *Sandberg: een documentaire* (Amsterdam: Kosmos, 1975), 27.

<sup>59</sup> Peterson and Brattinga, *Sandberg*, 27.

being selected for service.<sup>60</sup> This was a constant threat, as the German army routinely hand-picked able-bodied Dutchmen for military and for labour.

The three Dutch Experimentalist painters who later formed the core Dutch contingent of Cobra were Karel Appel, Constant Nieuwenhuys, and Corneille Beverloo. When the German army bombed Rotterdam, Appel had only just entered the Academy.<sup>61</sup> Corneille had spent two years there.<sup>62</sup> The two were good friends. It was not long before their professors and peers began to disappear, and it became too dangerous for them to attend class. Soon after, the artists met Constant Nieuwenhuys, and the three became fast friends. Food shortages prompted the young artists to spend their time cycling through the Netherlands, offering to exchange their landscape paintings for potatoes, raw herring, or sausage.<sup>63</sup> Conditions for the artists worsened when Constant Nieuwenhuys stubbornly refused to register with the Chamber of Culture. Those who did not register were in direct contempt of the law. He was forced to leave Amsterdam to avoid persecution and Appel joined him.<sup>64</sup> Their habit of bartering landscape paintings for food in the countryside became dangerously illegal.

The war was traumatizing for Appel, Constant, and Corneille.<sup>65</sup> When it began, they were teenagers. When the Netherlands was finally liberated, they were young men who had witnessed their friends disappear and their neighbours starve. They'd spent years underground. The war forced them to mature much more quickly than they would have had the trauma never come to

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<sup>60</sup> Welle, "A Young Painter Named Corneille," 113.

<sup>61</sup> Rothmans of Pall Mall Limited, *Appel's Appels* (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal, 1972), 8.

<sup>62</sup> Jean-Clarence Lambert, "The Amsterdam Studio." *AA Files*, no. 44 (2001): 30.

<sup>63</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 73.

<sup>64</sup> Kristine Somerville, "Cobra: Postwar Expressionism in Europe," *The Missouri Review* 38, no. 3 (2015): 55, accessed May 10, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Blom, *History of the Low Countries*, 445.

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Holland.<sup>66</sup> Later, Willhem Sandberg, the Director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and supporter of Cobra, would attribute the closeness of these artists to their shared experiences during the Occupation. “During the war,” he wrote, “there emerged a spirit of comradeship among groups of artists, which only develops under heavy pressure from external circumstances.”<sup>67</sup> The artists emerged from the War psychologically and emotionally traumatized, but inextricably tied together.

Karel, Corneille, and Constant struggled to adjust to post-war living in Amsterdam. Life in the Netherlands was marked by an expansive feeling of cultural emptiness.<sup>68</sup> In the Cobra Manifesto published in Reflex 1, Constant wrote, “The cultural vacuum has never been so strong or widespread as after the last war.”<sup>69</sup> The German occupation had blocked foreign influence, stagnating Dutch creativity through the claustrophobic rules of the Reichskulturkammer. Additionally, the brutality of the war left the artists—and much of the Dutch population—feeling hollow. Corneille responded by destroying all the art he had made during the war years.<sup>70</sup> Eleanor Flomenhaft explains this phenomenon in her book, *The Roots And Development of Cobra*. She writes, “In a proper, structured society, there is an explanation for tragedy. World war II had no explanation. It left a void.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, the emptiness felt by the Dutch artists was rooted in an inability to comprehend *why* the horrors of the Second World War had occurred. In times of tragedy, humans turn to their superiors for an explanation and consolation. Children run

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<sup>66</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Peterson, “Sandberg,” 39.

<sup>68</sup> Constant Nieuwenhuys, “Manifesto,” in *Cobra: 50 år*, ed. Anna Krogh and Holger Reenberg (Ishøj: Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, 1997), 171.

<sup>69</sup> Constant, “Manifesto,” 171.

<sup>70</sup> Jean-Clarence Lambert, *Cobra* (New York, Abbeville Press: 1983), 82

<sup>71</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 7.

to their mothers, and citizens to their governors, presidents, and kings. The Dutch government could offer no such thing. Instead, it focused on reconstructing the economy and infrastructure as quickly as possible, to restore the citizens' faith in its strength and legitimacy. This mollified many Dutch people, who were eager to see their lives return to normal. However, it did not appease everyone.

The Dutch Experimentalists were part of the population that yearned for an explanation for the carnage that would alleviate their trauma. When no explanation was provided nor reform made, the Dutch Experimentalists, who were proponents for political reform, began to lose faith in the usefulness and legitimacy of the Dutch governmental system. Karel Appel, Corneille and Constant viewed the War as the culmination of years of capitalist and imperialist excess finally self-imploding. They were certain that the pillars of Dutch society that had come together during the war would see the error of their ways, and work together to build a new society.<sup>72</sup> However, the radical political movements in the Netherlands failed. The artists were disgusted by the inability of the Dutch government and population to accept responsibility for the atrocities of the War. They were furious that so many Dutchmen were happy to maintain the societal system that had fallen so swiftly to the Nazis, and taken 75% of the Dutch Jewish community with it. Rather than amending its guilty institutions, reconstruction focused on national economic recovery.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, the artists had hoped that the devastating effects of the war would build solidarity amongst the decimated countries in Europe.<sup>74</sup> Instead, fear caused countries to turn their backs on each other. Anti-foreign sentiment proliferated as reconstruction focused on rebuilding the

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<sup>72</sup> Per Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," in *Cobra: 50 år*, ed. Anna Krogh and Holger Reenberg (Ishøj: Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, 1997), 130.

<sup>73</sup> Peterson, "Sandberg," 44.

<sup>74</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 6.

Netherlands in a provincial fashion. As a result of political stagnation, the artists turned their backs on the structures that had engendered the carnage of the Second World War and were refusing to consider reform.<sup>75</sup> The artists were frightened that, if these structures had the capacity to instigate such hatred and violence once, then they could undoubtedly do so again.

Because this radical restructuring did not occur, the Dutch artists were left to deal with their frustrations and concerns alone. Constant feared the repercussions of the Atomic Bomb. He did not believe that an object of such immense evil could be used once without consequences. “The leftover facades of our culture can be blown away by the atom bomb of tomorrow,” he wrote.<sup>76</sup> Appel feared the true nature of man which had been revealed by the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “After two world wars,” he said, “living between old and new systems, atomic explosions... the barbaric tearing apart of human values, man moves like boiling lava over the earth, both destroying and reproducing himself.”<sup>77</sup> In this quote Appel describes how man seems to feed off death, ‘reproducing himself’ as he covers the world in fire. The psychological effects of the War and the stagnant political situation in the Netherlands had a profound impact on the Dutch Experimentalist artists.

Trauma theory helps deepen our understanding of the artists’ psychological states after the War, as well as their artistic and political goals. I previously explained how the conflation of absence and loss led to a transformation from historical trauma into structural trauma for the majority of the Dutch population. They reacted by acting out, rather than working through their

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<sup>75</sup> Dr. H.L.C. Jaffé, Dr. H. Redeker, Dr. C. Doleman, Dr. H. R. Rookmaker, and Dr. J.W.M. van Haaren, “Kerstnummer 1960,” *Drukkersweekblad Autolijn* 52 (1960), 5.

<sup>76</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 17.

<sup>77</sup> Rothmans, *Appel's Appels*, 42.

trauma. Resisting reform was a form of acting out, as it allowed people to maintain a version of their life before the War, an ultimately harmful practice that impeded positive social change. It prevented many people from transcending their trauma because existing social institutions were complicit in the events of World War II, and were therefore psychologically linked to people's trauma. As long as they remained, the Dutch population was stuck reliving the horrors of the past few years.

However, not everyone in the Netherlands experienced this conflation of trauma after the war. Some people, including the Dutch artists, did not experience the conflation of absence and loss, and thus did not transform their very tangible historical trauma into structural trauma. Instead, they attempted to work through their trauma, examining their experiences critically. Critical reflection on trauma and its causes also frequently involves sociopolitical discussion. LaCapra explains the relationship between historical trauma and political involvement. Under conditions of historical trauma, "politics often [become] a question of blank hope in the future, an openness toward a vacuous utopia... And this view very often links up with an apocalyptic politics or perhaps a politics of utopian hope."<sup>78</sup> Thus the frequent engendering of radical political movements by immense loss. In achieving critical distance from loss, an individual is able to pinpoint what he thinks were the institutional causes of his trauma. Thus, achieving sociopolitical change in the form of "a totalitarian social integration" becomes a form of working through the pain.<sup>79</sup> If one can refashion society to prevent further trauma, perhaps one's own suffering will not have been in vain. Adopting idealistic, utopian political goals is therefore a

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<sup>78</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 145.

<sup>79</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 71.

coping mechanism for those suffering from historical trauma. This is exactly what happened with the Dutch Experimentalists. The artists were bound by their mutual desire to create political change that would prevent others from experiencing trauma. Furthermore, they were all willing to take a critical look at their own involvement in the events of the War. They recognized that complacency had led to genocide, and took active steps to redeem themselves of this wrongdoing.

Additionally, LaCapra discusses what he calls transference, the “appropriation of particular traumas by those who did not experience them.”<sup>80</sup> While Appel, Corneille, and Constant did experience historical trauma due to their war experiences, I argue that their empathetic nature as artists led to their transference of historical trauma from Holocaust victims. LaCapra explains that transference is very common between people, and also happens when people study subject matter quite closely.<sup>81</sup> The Dutch Experimentalists’ nature and occupation brought them close to the suffering of Holocaust survivors. As artists, they believed it was their responsibility to respond to the emotional climate of the era. Additionally, their ‘working through’ of their own historical trauma involved understanding the intricacies of the genocide that had befallen the Netherlands. Thus, the artists were ideally situated to experience transference. In addition to bearing the load of their own historical trauma, they absorbed the trauma of Holocaust victims. And so, the artists struggled to cope with both their own trauma and the transferred trauma of genocide survivors. Their motivation to reform Dutch society was intensified by the addition of the latter.

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<sup>80</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 65.

<sup>81</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 142.

Trauma theory and Cobra literature demonstrate how trauma impacted the Dutch Experimentalists in two major ways. First, it motivated them to use their art to make positive change in the Netherlands. Despite the fact that most of the Dutch population was uninterested in reform, the Dutch experimentalist artists still viewed it as their responsibility to rebuild society.<sup>82</sup> Their political views were influenced by Marx, to varying degrees, as will be discussed further in chapter 4. Thus, the socialist political slant of Dutch Cobra can be seen as a result of trauma. Secondly, working through their trauma allowed the artists to examine their institutional complacency in the genocide of the Dutch Jews. Acknowledgment of this fact created a persistent, growing desire within the souls of the Dutch artists for a total spiritual cleansing and redemption. Part of this cleansing involved rejecting all existing rules about art. They felt that these rules were rooted in the oppressive institutions to which they were vehemently opposed. In *Cobra & Het Stedelijk*, Geurt Imanse and Paul Kempers describe this imperative. They explain, “Unable to bear what they had regarded as the impersonality of the evil they had experienced and astounded by the miracle of their own survival, they wished desperately to experience personal and artistic rebirth...they particularly wished to avoid relying on accepted pieties which had so demonstrably failed their generation”<sup>83</sup> Imanse and Kempers use the word ‘rebirth’ to describe the Dutch experimentalists’ immediate objective. Rebirth would allow the artists to represent and validate their trauma, which they believed would bring them peace and cleanse them of evil.<sup>84</sup> They sought a spiritual catharsis through which creativity would heal them.<sup>85</sup> This rebirth was

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<sup>82</sup> Christoph Lindner and Andrew Hussey, “Concepts and Practices of the Underground,” in *Paris-Amsterdam Underground: Essays on Cultural Resistance, Subversion, and Diversion*, ed. Christoph Lindner and Andrew Hussey et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 15.

<sup>83</sup> Geurt Imanse and Paul Kempers, *Cobra & het Stedelijk* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1996), 3.

<sup>84</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 76.

<sup>85</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 17.

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about their own healing, but it was also about renewing art itself. In an interview, Henri Lefebvre, who collaborated with the Dutch Cobra artists, wrote that, “[The Dutch experimentalists] wanted to renew art, and renew the action of art on life.”<sup>86</sup>

And so, two central questions arose from the early post-war meetings of the Dutch Experimentalists that demonstrate the impact of trauma. First: Through what iconography and artistic methodology would the artists be able to properly express and relieve their trauma? And secondly: How could they create art that would, through its construction and ingestion, disrupt and restructure the fabric of Dutch society? This thesis explores the Dutch artists’ quest to answer these questions.

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<sup>86</sup> Henri Lefebvre and Kristin Ross, “Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview.” *October* 79, (1997): 70.

Chapter 2: The Dutch Experimentalists' Exploration and Rejection of Modern European Art

*Modern Art at Home*

The Dutch Experimentalists' exploration began at home, right after the war. An exhibition at the Stedelijk under director Willem Sandberg exposed the artists to the modern art of different European countries. Sandberg exhibited works by Picasso, Matisse, Braque, and Klee in what he later called a "desire to chip away at the formal artistic climate of the Netherlands."<sup>87</sup> In fact, the second big exhibit at the Stedelijk following the Second World War was an overview of art from the past five years which featured these artists prominently.<sup>88</sup> Despite Sandberg's efforts to expose the Dutch people to new forms, De Stijl, magic realism, and expressionism remained the most popular modes of art in the Netherlands post-war.<sup>89</sup> De Stijl remained the reigning style. According to Per Hovendakk, De Stijl became so popular in the 1930s that it prevented surrealism from gaining any recognition in the Netherlands. By the end of the Second World War, it was experiencing a second wind of popularity as Dutch people clung to all things familiar. There were few ongoing debates about the goals of pictorial art in Dutch society.<sup>90</sup> It was not an environment in which many people questioned the institutions of art-making. Dutch people's disinterest in new forms of art mirrored their apathy towards restructuring society. This was very disappointing for Sandberg. He wrote of this phenomenon in a poem, "I was on the lookout/eager to see the answers of the artists/the established painters and

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<sup>87</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 13.

<sup>88</sup> Peterson and Brattinga, *Sandberg*, 7

<sup>89</sup> Jaffé, Redeker, Doleman, Rookmaker, and van Haaren, "Kerstnummer 1960," 5.

<sup>90</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 125.

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sculptors/returned to their easels and clay/as if nothing had happened.”<sup>91</sup> And so, although foreign influence managed to pervade the Netherlands through people like Willem Sandberg, the Dutch Experimentalists needed to leave their country if they were to truly explore new modes of art-making.

### *France*

In 1947, the artists travelled to France, where they encountered Miro, Klee, and Dubuffet.<sup>92</sup> They eagerly anticipated visiting a country that had continued to excel artistically despite the Occupation. Wrote Corneille, “A striking difference between France and Holland was that in France the painters just quietly went on painting. I saw catalogues from 1944. Can you imagine, 1944! That dreadful year in Holland, which was ravaged by famine, at least in the regions north of the Rhine. The hungry winter of 1944 was terrible. It was incredibly cold, we no longer had any means of heating, we shivered, our teeth were chattering. But in Paris, life went on, there were exhibitions whose catalogues I have seen, books were published, the restaurants were packed out, as if there was no war.”<sup>93</sup> The Dutch Experimentalists, who had been deprived of their artistic expression during the Occupation, saw in France the potential for rebirth. These were artists who had been able to continue painting while the Dutch artists hid underground. These were the artists whose work had shocked and excited the Dutch when they were shown at the Stedelijk. They represented the potential of the Dutch avant-garde.

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<sup>91</sup> Sandberg, “Presentation of Vision ’67,” 72.

<sup>92</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 8.

<sup>93</sup> Welle, “A Young Painter Named Corneille,” 115.

However, The Dutch Experimentalists soon realized that Paris could not provide them their artistic rebirth due to the nature of French artistic institutions. In 1960, several Dutch art historians discussed this epiphany in the article *Kerstnummer 1960 (Christmas Edition 1960)*, published in *Drukkersweekblad Autolijn*, which roughly translates to ‘Weekly Graphic Arts Magazine.’ They wrote, “For artists who had lived through the Holocaust, the art world of Paris was pretentious, lacking the honesty and the sense of urgency necessary to create a relevant art.”<sup>94</sup> Its dependence on rigid genre classifications contributed to the city’s ‘irrelevancy’ given what Dutch Cobra deemed to be the contemporary European condition. “There is room for one, or more, ‘isms,’” Appel wrote.<sup>95</sup> In Paris, every group occupied a niche with a defined dogma. Thus, the overall atmosphere in Paris prevented the city from becoming a space in which the artists could achieve their rebirth.

Additionally, there were reasons that the Dutch Experimentalists came to dislike specific movements that were popular in France. There was a variety of art in the art capital. Mondrian, who worked in Paris in the 1930s, was popular in France. He brought formal, non-representational art to the foreground of French art. Kandinsky, too, was popular, and filled these criteria. Dubuffet, Picasso, and Matisse represented a more representational form of modernism.<sup>96</sup> The Dutch Experimentalists separated themselves from Art Brut because Art Brut was so heavily focused on the rejection of aestheticism. The Dutch artists were rather apathetic towards aesthetics; they in no way strove to achieve an aesthetic result, but they were not dogmatically opposed to a work if it turned out to be visually harmonious.<sup>97</sup> The Dutch

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<sup>94</sup> Jaffé, Redeker, Doleman, Rookmaker, and van Haaren, “Kerstnummer 1960,” 29.

<sup>95</sup> Rothmans, *Appel's Appels*, 34.

<sup>96</sup> Jaffé, Redeker, Doleman, Rookmaker, and van Haaren, “Kerstnummer 1960,” 41.

<sup>97</sup> Emily Lowe Gallery, *A Cobra Portfolio*, 4.

Experimentalists also rejected social realism and magic realism, two closely tied movements that used representational imagery to make social commentary. Social realism specifically was tied to the communist party, which expected its followers to expose the perils of capitalism through naturalistic depictions of the different social classes.<sup>98</sup> Though the Dutch Experimentalists had socialist inclinations—each to varying degrees as will be discussed further—they agreed that a rigid political movement was not the framework under which they could achieve a rebirth.

Although the artists appreciated and at times adopted aspects of popular contemporary movements, they found them to be inadequate vehicles for achieving artistic and spiritual rebirth. Furthermore, they believed that these prevailing avant-garde art movements actually supported the institutions of the art world by confining themselves to rules and patterns.<sup>99</sup>

### *Cubism*

A painting by Appel demonstrates his early fascination with Picasso and Leger. The 1946 work *Matrozenmeisje (Sailor Girl)* (fig. 2) exhibits the geometric approximation of simplified forms associated with cubism. Take, for example, the structure of the figure's hair. Straight white lines express the strands on the crown of her head. Three sets of circles illustrate individual curls on the sides of her face. The viewer is provided with the most simple, essential shapes for the articulation of hair. Appel continues this essentialization with the figure's left hand. The orange oval protruding from the figure's arm looks nothing like a hand, but we recognize it as such due to its attachment to the arm and the four black lines separating what must be fingers. This

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<sup>98</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 18.

<sup>99</sup> Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley, ed., *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 34.

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essentialization has none of the joy and whimsy of Picasso's works, which seem to revel in the simplicity of their geometric components. Note the dynamic deconstruction of forms in Picasso's *The Weeping Woman* (1937) (fig. 3). In the process of simplifying the elements that compose the woman's face, the artist simultaneously animates them. Each strand of hair vibrates with color. The upturned slope of the woman's eyebrows indicates distress. Her teeth are delineated by simple stripes of purple paint, but convey the tension of a jaw clenching tightly. In contrast, Appel's cubism feels overly measured. How, he seems to be asking, can one construct a hand that looks nothing like a hand, but will be recognized as such? What is the minimum amount of imagery that can be employed for the brain to make the cognitive leap of recognition? The world inhabited by the figure feels just as measured and cold. The space behind her is broken into registers. The top register is made up of triangles and other shapes, all painted in a cool color palette of purples, blues, and greens. Though it bears the shapes reminiscent of cubism, it lacks cubism's dynamic manipulation of depth. Picasso's handling of geometry and texture allows the surface of *The Weeping Woman* to oscillate between flatness and three-dimensionality. Thick brushstrokes on the yellow background panels create an illusion of depth while simultaneously drawing attention to the surface of the canvas, a flattening technique. The large pools of color in *Sailor Girl* also recall fauvism, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century movement centered in Paris. However, the expanses of color in fauvist works oscillate between flatness and three-dimensionality, calling attention to the spatial capabilities of color. The blocks of color in *Sitting Girl* are constantly flat and ask no questions of their materiality.

It follows, then, that the artists' interest in Picasso, Leger, and the rest of the Parisian art world was only temporary. Appel's foray into cubism demonstrates how the rules set down by

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groups of artists restricted the expressionistic urges of the Dutch Experimental Painters. When Appel attempted to paint in the style of cubism, he became bogged down in its methodology. He could not follow this methodology while also expressing his trauma, anguish, and desire for rebirth. Corneille later said of his first trip to France with Appel, "We were both in thrall to [the artists in France], but that did not last long, believe me."<sup>100</sup>

Additionally, cubism could not be reconciled with the artists' desire for social liberation. They soon discovered that the cubist painting schema subjected itself to formulas that upheld society's obsession with classification. Viewers could expect to see in Picasso's paintings certain manipulations of physical forms. Though abstract and extremely animated, Picasso's paintings were viewed as formulaic by Dutch Cobra because the viewer could anticipate a work's schema. Thus, the viewer was deprived of his active role in interpretation and demoted to the role of passive observer. For Dutch Cobra to achieve its socio-political agenda, viewers needed to have agency in their experience with a work. The intricacies of this relationship are discussed further in chapter 4.

### *De Stijl*

The Dutch Experimentalists also rejected De Stijl, the predominant genre in the Netherlands, because they found its geometric formalism cold.<sup>101</sup> It baffled the Dutch Experimentalists that an artist could stand to paint such rigid, simple shapes after the traumatic events of the last few years. Corneille wrote, "A world which has known horror and blood,

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<sup>100</sup> Welle, "A Young Painter Named Corneille," 116.

<sup>101</sup> Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, *A Cobra Portfolio: A Selection of Abstract Artists in Europe Post World War II: April 21-June 14, 1981*, (Hempstead: Hofstra University, 1981), 4.

violence and corruption, cannot be satisfied by cold abstraction.”<sup>102</sup> For Corneille and the other Dutch Experimentalists, the popularity of De Stijl was the manifestation of “the illusory tranquillity of Dutch society,” as Clarence Lambert put it in *Cobra*.<sup>103</sup> In other words, Dutch people were content to look at primary colours and simple shapes because they had constructed for themselves a false reality in which they were not at all responsible for the carnage of the Holocaust and the War. Furthermore, the art of De Stijl contradicted the Dutch artists’ view of art’s purpose. Unlike De Stijl, the Dutch Cobra artists maintained that art was not supposed to be rational.<sup>104</sup> Once they formed Cobra, the Dutch Experimentalists would publically denounce De Stijl. Constant wrote in their periodical, *Cobra*, “Cobra proclaims its antagonism to the sterile abstractions [of Mondrian] ... to create is always to make what is not yet known, and the unknown frightens those who believe in having something to hold on to. However, we who have nothing to lose but our chains, can well risk striving for adventure.”<sup>105</sup> This last sentence recalls the previously-described sentiment amongst the Dutch Experimentalists that they were bound against their wishes by society’s political and artistic structures. They rejected De Stijl because it was the artistic manifestation of a rigid political system.

An examination of Mondrian’s works contradicts the Dutch Experimentalists’ observations. Their misreading of Mondrian as a non-dynamic, rigid artist reveals more about their own psychological state than the skill of the De Stijl painter. There is great life within the white space of *Lozenge Composition with Two Lines* (1931) (fig. 4). Thick brushstrokes create a vast white expanse while simultaneously creating three-dimensionality. To view *Lozenge*

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<sup>102</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 121.

<sup>103</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 70.

<sup>104</sup> Welle, “A Young Painter Named Corneille,” 116.

<sup>105</sup> Jaffé, Redeker, Doleman, Rookmaker, and van Haaren, “Kerstnummer 1960,” 34.

*Composition* is to oscillate between flatness and depth, as the eye wanders over each grainy, white brushstroke. The Dutch artists misinterpreted Mondrian's paintings as artificially machine-like, despite evidence of the painter's hand in both the white space and the two intersecting black lines. In fact, their misreading of De Stijl demonstrates the extent of the artists' trauma after the War. Numbed by genocide and famine, they were incapable of detecting the nuanced vibrancy of a work like *Lozenge Composition*. Furthermore, it seemed almost an insult to lives lost to paint inanimate, geometric shapes, no matter how dynamic they were. Garish colours and gruesome subjects could more obviously illustrate the carnage of War, and were therefore better tools for actualizing and legitimizing their trauma. The artists also misinterpreted Mondrian's meticulous attention to line as mechanizing *Lozenge Composition*. In their minds, perfect perpendicularity could only be achieved through the exactness of a machine or the careful patience of the artist. In search of renewal, the prospect of painstakingly blending brushstrokes at 90 degree angles sounded torturous. They wanted to grasp humanity by behaving spontaneously and painting quickly and messily. As a result, the fastidiousness of De Stijl came to be seen as the antithesis of their goals. Their own psychological condition and resistance to control prevented them from detecting subtly in Mondrian's work.

The artists also sought social liberation, and they believed that De Stijl was in contempt of this goal. The movement was "accused of propping up the prevailing social order by concealing the uncontrolled world of the psyche," as Benjamin Buchloh explained.<sup>106</sup> Dutch Cobra viewed the psyche as the foil to the capitalist regime; its power could not be controlled by the government. Because the artists believed that the parameters of De Stijl excluded the

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<sup>106</sup> de Zegher and Wigley, "The Activist Drawing," 34.

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subconscious, the movement was seen as an accomplice to capitalism, and promptly rejected.

This misreading says more about Dutch Cobra than De Stijl. The Dutch artists disliked Mondrian more because his style was endorsed by the institutions they eschewed. Discrediting the older artist's work supported Dutch Cobra's desire to undermine the movements complicit with the government.

### *Expressionism and Modigliani*

Another artist prominent in Paris in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Amadeo Modigliani. He is not mentioned in the Cobra literature as an influence or as an artist who the Dutch rejected. However, *Zittend Meisje (Sitting Girl)* (fig. 5) by Appel suggests that the Dutch Experimentalists were temporarily interested in his manneristic style of portraiture. Modigliani's women were often shown with long, slender necks and narrow heads reminiscent of sixteenth-century mannerism. Their lower halves were rarely depicted. Perhaps even more idiosyncratic were Modigliani's depiction of eyes. He often left out the pupil, leaving a murky iris for the viewer to gaze into. This uncanny characteristic of Modigliani's portraits, as well as his penchant for the manneristic, found their way into Appel's 1946 painting, *Sitting Girl*). The figure's neck in *Sitting Girl* is unnaturally thin and her face is bizarrely ovoid. Her broad shoulders contrast with the thinness of her head and neck, emphasizing her strange proportions. The outline of facial features has been drawn over her red complexion. She has no pupils. The body of her eyes are disconcerting ovals of red. It is uncomfortable for the viewer to gaze at her face, as it is impossible to make eye contact with a figure without pupils. And yet, it feels as if she is staring at us nonetheless. The rest of the figure's body is no less ambiguous. Two patches of greenish-

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yellow paint seem to denote her arms, though their application is not uniform. Her right arm is constructed from this putrid color, but her left arm is only partially green-yellow. The rest of her arm still appears to be covered with the blue fabric of her dress. What, then, is skin, and what is fabric? Furthermore, there is no trace of the figure's left hand. In fact, there is no trace of her left forearm whatsoever. It appears as if her arm stops at the elbow, right where her right hand meets it. If we assume this to be true, then the length of her entire right arm is the same as the length of half her left arm. These spatial discontinuities render a figure that cannot exist in our physical world. I would argue that this quality strongly foreshadows the future adventures of Dutch Cobra. The attention paid to materiality is also characteristic of Dutch Cobra. In places where the representation of the human form collapses—such as the figure's arms—the material nature of paint becomes the subject.

Modigliani's style of portraiture allowed Appel certain tremendous freedoms in the depiction of the human form and its relationship with materiality in *Sitting Girl*. However, the space the figure inhabits demonstrates the limits Modigliani's expressionism placed on Appel. She is seated in a blue room in front of a red door that leads to a green room. In the green room, there is a window with a flower pot resting on the windowsill. The evocation of the natural world and the clear boundaries between interior spaces clash with the ambiguous, otherworldly figure. The boundaries of Modigliani's expressionistic portraiture did not allow Appel quite as much freedom as he craved, and would lead the artist to discard the style entirely.

*Surrealism*

The Dutch Experimentalists' relationship with surrealism was complex, because the genre itself was undergoing internal divisions. The movement was split between artists and philosophers who supported Stalin and those who opposed him—the Belgian Surrealists, and the French Surrealists, respectively. Stalin demanded the political involvement of communist intellectuals. André Breton, the original leader of the surrealists, did not want surrealist art and thought to be governed by a political figure. He considered this a frightening form of mind control. Thus, a branch of surrealism—Parisian Surrealism led by Breton—depoliticized itself in 1947.<sup>107</sup> A group of Belgian surrealists remained adamantly pro-Stalin. This group included Christian Dotremont, who would become a star member of Cobra. The Belgian surrealists called themselves the Revolutionary Surrealists. They abided by the rules decided by the Writers' Committee at Leningrad, removing “pleasure, sun, and objects of desire” from their paintings. They replaced these images with dark, menacing ones.<sup>108</sup> The Revolutionary Surrealists were eager to demonstrate their separation from the Parisian Surrealists and matters of more than just politics. Their practice did not emphasize psychic automatism. These artists maintained that consciousness was a prerequisite for performing critical analysis.<sup>109</sup> The Revolutionary Surrealists still utilized experimentation, but only insofar as it furthered the group's political agenda.<sup>110</sup> And so, the Dutch Experimentalists were not exploring one movement, but two very different movements with contradictory political agendas and artistic dogma.

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<sup>107</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 19.

<sup>108</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 19.

<sup>109</sup> Hovendakk, “COBRA in Time,” 130-132.

<sup>110</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 19.

The Dutch Experimentalists were initially interested in surrealists such as André Masson and Joan Miró, who were members of the original, overarching surrealist movement, and later could be considered part of the Parisian surrealist branch.<sup>111</sup> However, the Dutch artists quickly rejected Breton's Parisian group for two central reasons: it was overly intellectual and dogmatic and emphasized psychic automatism. Dutch Cobra vehemently opposed these characteristics, but still found in surrealism certain ideas that they appropriated and manipulated to fit their ideology.

Surrealism was deeply rooted in intellectual theory. Its own leader, André Breton, was not an artist, but a philosopher. Breton's correspondence with Freud formed the backbone of surrealist thought—psychic automatism. Many philosophers, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts were aligned with the surrealist movement, rendering it more of a literary and scientific movement than an artistic movement, in Corneille's eyes.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, Corneille felt that the theoretical dogma governing surrealism prevented its artistic members from expressing themselves freely. He wrote, "Those French Revolutionary Surrealists really believed they were revolutionary, they talked almost like politicians, and their speeches went on for hours. They acted more like intellectuals than like creators. They were very intelligent, very subtle, but they got tangled up in their own theories."<sup>113</sup> The Dutch artists also believed that the French-Surrealists had isolated themselves with their highly intellectual dogma; their movement wasn't accessible to new artists, especially international artists. They had inadvertently provincialized themselves.<sup>114</sup> Belgian artist and future member of Cobra Joseph Noiret described this phenomenon best. "Too much intellectualism, too much theory," he wrote, "generated a sort of

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<sup>111</sup> Jaffé, Redeker, Doleman, Rookmaker, and van Haaren, "Kerstnummer 1960," 130.

<sup>112</sup> Welle, "A Young Painter Named Corneille," 116.

<sup>113</sup> Welle, "A Young Painter Named Corneille," 116.

<sup>114</sup> Emily Lowe Gallery, *A Cobra Portfolio*, 3.

repulsion, like a movement going backwards.”<sup>115</sup> The Dutch Experimentalists were repelled too. They did not want to be part of an artistic movement that was inaccessible to new, international members, and focused more heavily on theory than artistic creation.

The Dutch artists were also repelled by the French Surrealists’ steadfast loyalty to psychic automatism.<sup>116</sup> Psychic automatism is defined as “the accessing of material from the subconscious or unconscious mind as part of the creative process.”<sup>117</sup> In order to access this material, surrealists focused on techniques that would help them achieve a hallucinatory state. The Dutch Experimentalists took issue with this. They believed that one could not express oneself purely psychically. Physicality was integral to self-expression. The importance of materiality in their work expressed this sentiment, as the two are inextricably linked by their tangibility.<sup>118</sup> Additionally, the artists felt that escaping into a hallucinatory dream-world was an excuse for not taking responsibility for the events of the Second World War.<sup>119</sup> As the authors of *Kerstnummer 1960* wrote, “The goal of the Dutch Experimentalists was “to achieve a rapprochement with the existing world.”<sup>120</sup> For the artists to achieve a rebirth, they needed an art movement whose parameters would allow them to grapple with emotions rooted in very present realities. Escaping would only prolong their pain and frustration.

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<sup>115</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 23.

<sup>116</sup> Emily Lowe Gallery, *A Cobra Portfolio*, 4.

<sup>117</sup> “Automatism,” Tate, accessed October 17, 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/a/automatism>

<sup>118</sup> Jaffé, Redeker, Doleman, Rookmaker, and van Haaren, “Kerstnummer 1960,” 17.

<sup>119</sup> Peterson and Brattinga, *Sandberg*, 7.

<sup>120</sup> Jaffé, Redeker, Doleman, Rookmaker, and van Haaren, “Kerstnummer 1960,” 17.

Hal Foster writes in *Creaturely Cobra* that Dutch Cobra appropriated automatism.<sup>121</sup> The literature previously outlined indicates that the artists rejected the concept. Both are true. Though the Dutch artists rejected the escapist, Surrealist use of automatism, they recognized that it could be manipulated to suit their own needs. Dutch Cobra was very interested in the subconscious, a realm opened by the surrealists. However, rather than using automatism to individually interact with one's personal subconscious, Dutch Cobra focused on the collective subconscious.<sup>122</sup> To access the collective subconscious, the Dutch artists utilized a cousin of automatism—spontaneity, though the term 'automatism,' with its new connotations, was never entirely eliminated.<sup>123</sup> Spontaneity, a notion appropriated from the Danish avant-garde, is discussed further in chapter three.

Another aspect of French-Surrealism that the Dutch Experimentalists took issue with was the French Surrealist approach to materiality. Magritte, for instance, created a multiplicity of meaning through the juxtaposition of disparate objects, but paid little attention to the material nature of each.<sup>124</sup> The surrealists also painted in such a way that their brushstrokes were rarely visible. Like Renaissance paintings, the surface of many surrealist works had a 'licked,' finished quality, which indicated both very precise painting and the retroactive application of paint to smooth out imperfections. Dutch Cobra painted wildly, and without post factum painting. "The key difference in approach," Constant said, "is that the surrealists made a clear distinction between the unconscious discovery of an image and the subsequent refining of that image. For

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<sup>121</sup> Hal Foster, "Creaturely Cobra," October 141 (2012): 7, accessed November 10th, 2016

<sup>122</sup> Kurczynski, "Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra," 679-680.

<sup>123</sup> Karen Kurczynski and Nicola Pezolet. "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence: Cobra and Post-Cobra." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 59/60 (2011): 288.

<sup>124</sup> Jean-Clarence Lambert, *Cobra* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), 14.

Cobra, this refinement immediately restored all the disciplinary apparatus of the art world that had rightfully been abandoned...completely [neutralizing] the resulting image politically.”<sup>125</sup>

While Dutch Cobra also sought to discover iconography from the subconscious, the artists rejected the surrealist practice of retroactive refinement. They believed that the political power of the images painted by the surrealists was completely erased by their subsequent socialization. This socialization occurred when the surrealist used his conscious mind—itsself socialized by class culture—to amend the image from the subconscious. As I will discuss in chapter 4, images from the subconscious had political power which Dutch Cobra wished to harness. French Surrealism’s attitude towards materiality contradicted Dutch Cobra’s socio-political goals.

Lastly, it is important to note the ongoing conversation that the surrealists had with Freud. His writings are inextricably tied up in surrealist doctrine. The Dutch Cobra artists did read Freud, and took from him some concepts that made their way into Cobra art. Constant’s childlike desires harkened back to the Freudian mother figure.<sup>126</sup> They also found in his writings some concepts that they rejected, which allowed them to further define their own movement as a reaction to Freudian and surrealist thought. Freud described a historical division between the male and the female. Dutch Cobra instead posited a unification of the genders, and unification of all dichotomies that humans developed subjectively. They strove to unify the technical and natural worlds as well, which they saw as a reflection of the gender binary.<sup>127</sup>

The relationship between the Dutch Experimentalists and Revolutionary Surrealism is more complex, because Christian Dotremont—who would become the leader of Belgian Cobra

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<sup>125</sup> Zegher and Wigley, *The Activist Drawing*,” 45.

<sup>126</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 170.

<sup>127</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 171.

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and the international organizer of Cobra—had founded the movement. He and the other Belgian artists broke away from French Surrealism because they disapproved of the French Surrealist separation from Communism. He preached unity between surrealism and communism.”<sup>128</sup>

“Dialectical materialism” was seen as the governing political method of the Revolutionary Surrealists. Collaboration with the Communist Party was viewed as integral to the breakdown of bourgeois class culture.”<sup>129</sup> The Dutch and Danish Experimentalists did not share identical political beliefs with the Belgians, but they were intrigued by the group’s ideas about experimentation, as these diverged greatly from the psychic automatism of French Surrealism. Cobra was formed on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1948. Right after, Dotremont wrote *La Cause etait Etendue*, the group’s manifesto. “We refuse to subscribe to a theoretical unity which is artificial,” he wrote, referring to the surrealism of Breton.<sup>130</sup>

What is difficult to understand is why the Danish and Dutch artists—who were themselves Marxists but not particularly Communists by this point—were so eager to join forces with the very political Belgian group.<sup>131</sup> As I will explain more in chapter 4, the future Cobra artists would develop a quasi-Marxist understanding of creation and art’s role in social change. For this reason, I argue that the technical political affiliation of the Belgian Revolutionary Surrealists was not pressing to the Anti-Communist Dutch and Danish artists. All three groups were tied by an ideology that existed outside the realm of communism for Jorn and Appel, but within it for Dotremont. In 1949, the artistic agenda of the Communist Party intensified.

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<sup>128</sup> Hovendakk, “COBRA in Time,” 126.

<sup>129</sup> Hovendakk, “COBRA in Time,” 126.

<sup>130</sup> Christian Dotremont, “La Cause Etait Etendue,” in *Cobra: 50 år*, ed. Anna Krogh and Holger Reenberg (Ishøj: Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, 1997), 174.

<sup>131</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 12.

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‘Jdanovism’ emerged after the name of the Communist leader who drafted the new regulations for Communist artists.<sup>132</sup> The Party essentially demanded artists create in the social realist style. This was the last straw for Dotremont. He and the other Belgians left communism in 1950. It was not an amicable departure. “Social realism,” he wrote, “is the suicide of revolutionary content by means of bourgeoisie naturalism.”<sup>133</sup>

And so, the rejection of Revolutionary Surrealism by Dutch Cobra must be understood as a gradual process. Dotremont himself had tossed out the Breton-ists due to political differences. He and his Belgian colleagues were focused on experimentation as a means of promoting a Communist Revolution. When Cobra was founded, the Dutch Experimentalists were not in complete agreement with the Belgians regarding political issues, but their Marxist convictions and pursuit of experimentation tied them together. From this perspective, the ‘rejection’ of revolutionary surrealism should really be seen as an ‘apathy towards’ the movement. They allowed it to exist within their orbit in order to reap the benefits of collaboration with the Belgian Cobra thinkers.

### *Cobra as a Third Force*

The Dutch artists’ rejection of surrealism served as one pillar around which Cobra could be constructed. In *Internationaleries: Collectivism, the Grotesque, and Cold War Functionalism*, Jelena Sojanović proposes that Dutch Cobra viewed experimentation as a third force to break the

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<sup>132</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 45.

<sup>133</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 165-166.

dichotomy between abstraction and social realism.<sup>134</sup> This dichotomy mirrored the ideological struggle between capitalism and communism that was prominent in the 1940s—abstraction representing capitalist values and social realism representing communist ideals. As I established, the Dutch Cobra artists were Marxists but not communists, so the possibility of an art form that suggested a political alternative to capitalism and communism was attractive. They believed that their mode of art-making, which centred around experimentalization, could bring about social change.<sup>135</sup>

### *Implications*

And so, Cubism, De Stijl, Social and Magic Realism, Modigliani's Expressionism, Art Brut, French Surrealism and Revolutionary Surrealism all proved themselves inadequate genres for Dutch expression. This is not to say that the Dutch artists did not appreciate qualities of certain artists' work. Some of these qualities did find their way into Dutch Cobra. Corneille was very influenced by Paul Klee, and drew from Klee's precocious, childlike creativity and playful manipulation of line.<sup>136</sup> Corneille also identified with Klee's belief that childhood held the key to the 'origin of being,' which a prerequisite for art.<sup>137</sup> Constant was enchanted with the harmony of colours in Chagall's paintings. His own use of colour was inspired by Chagall. Constant also spoke highly of Van Gogh's spontaneity, though he disliked the artist's style.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Jelena Sojanović, "Internationaleries: Collectivism, the Grotesque, and Cold War Functionalism," in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, ed. Stimson Blake and Sholette Gregory et al. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 22.

<sup>135</sup> Sojanović, "Internationaleries," 24.

<sup>136</sup> Jaffé, Redeker, Doleman, Rookmaker, and van Haaren, "Kerstnummer 1960," 122-126.

<sup>137</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 83.

<sup>138</sup> Lambert, "The Amsterdam Studio," 30.

Though certain qualities of these movements, such as colour and use of line, did become incorporated into Dutch Cobra, it is safe to conclude that the aforementioned movements as a whole were too focused on their rigid parameters, intellectual dogma and political affiliations to instigate creative expression and spiritual rebirth. The artists realized that the rigidity of these movements was a reflection of the artistic institutions that had rendered art inaccessible in the first place. Thus, the rejection of these institutions and their related art movements played an integral role in the formation of Cobra ideology. The core concept—art without rules, for everybody—was a Marxian response to a set of conditions the artists encountered in the Netherlands and France.

In *Manifesto*, published for the Cobra periodical, Constant described surrealist art as “an art of ideas still marked by the suffering of class culture... The conventions which this culture created in order to survive were not entirely destroyed.”<sup>139</sup> If the Dutch Experimentalists were to increase the accessibility of art while simultaneously cleansing themselves, they had to cleanse themselves of all associations with class culture, including movements like surrealism and the others that they’d explored in Paris. In an interview, Karel Appel summed up this sentiment. “Painting is to destroy the past,” he said. “To destroy systems, ideas, logic, and routines.”<sup>140</sup> With this destruction, the Dutch Experimentalists rejected the prevailing artistic movements of the day. Without the legitimizing power of the public, the structures that governed the art world were meaningless. In rejecting contemporary art movements, the artists hoped to begin the delegitimization of these institutions in favour of a more egalitarian art world.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Nieuwenhuys, “Manifesto,” 168.

<sup>140</sup> Rothmans, *Appel's Appels*, 34.

<sup>141</sup> Emily Lowe Gallery, *A Cobra Portfolio*, 3.

### Chapter 3: The Search for Artistic and Spiritual Rebirth

A chance meeting between Constant Nieuwenhuys and Asger Jorn introduced the Dutch Experimentalists to the first movement that showed promise as a vehicle for rebirth: Danish Experimentalism. The two met at a Miró exhibition at Pierre Loeb's gallery in Paris in 1946.<sup>142</sup> They quickly hit it off, realizing that they shared both reverence for Marx and disdain for Mondrian. Additionally, the notion that the content of all forms was rooted in the imagination was a decisive principle for both artists. This notion led both artists to the conclusion that abstraction was a myth.<sup>143</sup> Jorn shared with Constant his vision of a global movement to confront the Ecole de Paris. He showed Constant some of the works he'd brought to Paris. Jorn needed global artist-friends to internationalize his movement. Constant quickly realized that he needed Jorn to actualize his rebirth. The development of the avant-garde in Denmark had been underway since the 1930s. Conditions in Denmark in the 1930s and 1940s allowed the avant-garde to develop much more quickly there than in the Netherlands. Understanding the course of this development is an important precursor to discussing the characteristics of Danish Experimentalism that the Dutch artists found appealing.

In the 1930s, most Danish artists were impoverished, subsisting off of state benefits and the benevolence of several dedicated collectors. In this environment, artist co-operatives proliferated as an alternative to the gallery system.<sup>144</sup> During this decade of change, a group of Danish artists rose to prominence within Denmark for their journal, Linien. The group would last

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<sup>142</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 11.

<sup>143</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 74.

<sup>144</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 68.

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from 1933-1939, bonded by their shared interest in expression through line and metaphor.<sup>145</sup> For a time, the group associated themselves with the surrealists. Some even considered themselves to be ‘abstract-surrealists.’<sup>146</sup> Many were simultaneously associated with communism. Asger Jorn, the artist who would later meet Constant, was involved with the syndicalist movement, a radical communist offshoot that disparaged both capitalism and industrialization.<sup>147</sup> During his time with the syndicalist movement, Jorn became a follower of Marx, but also became disenchanted with the Left, a group splintered by divisions.<sup>148</sup> He never technically joined the Communist Party due to his aversion to orthodoxy. His time with the syndicalist movement can be explained by his desire to instigate radical, widespread change.<sup>149</sup> When he broke with the syndicalists, he continued to engage in theoretical Marxist discourse. He began to follow the philosophies of Erik Blomberg, who argued that the current Marxist understanding of art and culture was too narrow. Blomberg proposed an expanded version of Marxism in which the explanation of both was not reduced to theories of economics and class struggle. Jorn adopted and expanded upon this idea. Around the same time, Danish Experimentalist Carl-Henning Pedersen was heavily involved with militant communist youth groups.<sup>150</sup> A third prominent Dutch Experimentalist, Egill Jacobson, was also a member of the Danish Communist party.<sup>151</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, Jorn, Pedersen, and Jacobson’s work had veered away from the art of the surrealists, though the Danish artist Ejler Bille was the first of the Danes to officially

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<sup>145</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 23.

<sup>146</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 57.

<sup>147</sup> G. M. Birtwistle, *Living Art: Asger Jorn’s Comprehensive Theory of Art Between Helhesten and Cobra* (Utrecht: reflex, 1986), 11-12.

<sup>148</sup> Birtwistle, *Living Art*, 12.

<sup>149</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 31.

<sup>150</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 49.

<sup>151</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 31.

break with the movement.<sup>152</sup> As Per Hovendakk wrote in *COBRA in Time*, “[The Danish Experimentalists] distanced themselves from the figurative idiom of Dali and the like, and from Breton’s orthodox surrealism, and went in for a more open and experimental line.”<sup>153</sup> From 1937-1938, Jacobson painted *Obhnoning*, which exemplified the Danish focus on the experimental use of line. The painting lit a fuse in the hearts of the Danish Experimentalists who were searching for a new means of expression (though they hadn’t coined the term ‘rebirth,’ as the Dutch would in the 1940s). The painting was a response to the German invasion of Czechoslovakia.<sup>154</sup> It reflected the Danish anxiety about Hitler’s growing power—the presence of Jewish refugees in Denmark foreshadowed the war before German troops ever set foot in Denmark.<sup>155</sup> The forms in *Obhnoning* were neither human nor non-human. They were amorphous, uncanny shapes scratched between thick black lines and dripping red paint. Jacobson was captivated by the tension that arose between colours and forms and the way works as a whole oscillated between ‘implosion and explosion.’<sup>156</sup> The other Danish Experimentalists were inspired by Jacobson’s breakthrough. They continued to experiment along this highly expressive vein, exploring new tensions between line, colour, and form. Then, in 1940, the German Army occupied Denmark.

The occupation was very different in Denmark than it was in the Netherlands. There was very little resistance, and the Danes were rewarded for their compliance. There was minimal conflict and minimal bloodshed.<sup>157</sup> During the War, the Danes even had their own political

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<sup>152</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 9.

<sup>153</sup> Hovendakk, “COBRA in Time,” 120.

<sup>154</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 8.

<sup>155</sup> Hovendakk, “COBRA in Time,” 120.

<sup>156</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 31.

<sup>157</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 23.

entities until 1943, at which time the Germans did take greater control. There was resistance at this time, but it paled in comparison to the resistance and the blood shed during resistance in the Netherlands.<sup>158</sup> Because the occupation was comparatively bearable, art societies were able to flourish in Denmark.<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, Danish artists weren't prohibited from showing abstract art, a surprising fact to many given the destruction Hitler wreaked on 'degenerate' modern art in other occupied countries.<sup>160</sup> During the War, the Danish artists had access to modern art. Dada and surrealist pamphlets made their way to Denmark. These movements had been almost non-existent in the Netherlands before the war, and Hitler's isolation of the country during Occupation solidified the country's cultural ignorance.<sup>161</sup> From 1941-1944, Asger Jorn published a periodical entitled Helhesten, which proposed a return to mythology, psychology, theatre, folklore, and archaeology.<sup>162</sup> Each issue was filled with lithographs and discourse on early folk art. There were articles about the medieval frescos in the parish churches of Denmark and the untouched pureness of children's drawings. Paul Klee was exalted, as were psychology, jazz, and cinema.<sup>163</sup> These multi-disciplinary interests reflected the Danish interest in de-specialization. The Danish Experimentalists believed that all of these subjects were related due to their essential experimental nature. The artists were eager to discover their own means of production that would enable them to achieve the experimental nature of child art and jazz. "Spontaneity, deskilled

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<sup>158</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 121.

<sup>159</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 24.

<sup>160</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 121.

<sup>161</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 10.

<sup>162</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 23.

<sup>163</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 10.

gestural expressions, semi-figural forms, ambiguity, symbolism, and the primitive” stood out as visual techniques to achieve this goal.<sup>164</sup>

On the political front, the 1940s signalled a distancing from orthodox communism as well as surrealism. By the middle of the decade, Jorn considered himself a communist but still did not agree with all of the party’s practices.<sup>165</sup> In 1948, high-ranking Soviet leader Andrei Zhdanov mandated that all members of the Communist Party worldwide create according to Soviet guidelines of aesthetic production.<sup>166</sup> The term ‘Zhdanovism,’ sometimes spelled ‘Jdanovism,’ was used to describe Soviet control over its disciples’ creativity. Zhdanov declared social realism to be the movement all communist artists were to create within. Pedersen left the Communist Party entirely due to “the incompatibility of social realism and experimental art.”<sup>167</sup> Just as the Dutch would find social realism too rigid a framework to achieve an artistic rebirth, Pedersen discovered that the type of art required by the communist party—social realism—was fundamentally opposed to experimentation. Jacobson left the Communist Party due to the rise of Jdanovism as well.<sup>168</sup> Though the Danish Experimentalists reviled Zhdanovism, they agreed that the existing social system was equally as restrictive. They too blamed European political and social structures for engendering mass genocide and doing nothing to address it afterwards.<sup>169</sup> To conclude, the political views of the Danish Experimentalists by the late 1940s were heavily Marxist, though strictly anti-communist/Zhdanovist.

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<sup>164</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, “Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence,” 290.

<sup>165</sup> Birtwistle, *Living Art*, 12.

<sup>166</sup> <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803133445593>

<sup>167</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 57.

<sup>168</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 31.

<sup>169</sup> Foster, “Creaturely Cobra,” 17.

And so, when Constant encountered Jorn on that fateful night in Paris, he and his friends were at a very different level of artistic maturity than Jorn and his colleagues, who were ten years older.<sup>170</sup> The working conditions in Denmark during the Occupation allowed the Danes to reject surrealism and orthodox communism before the Dutch could.<sup>171</sup> By 1945, the Danish Experimentalists had created a coherent movement Asger Jorn deemed important enough to spread globally. Jorn went to Paris because he believed it was time to gain international collaborators to solidify and amplify the Danish Experimentalists' message.<sup>172</sup> He found Constant, who was instantly spellbound by the older artist.

What attracted Constant and the other Dutch Experimentalists to the Danish avant-gardists was a series of concepts that the Danes had been exploring. These included folk art, spontaneity, the subconscious, child art, the mask motif, Danish mythology and traditions, anti-aestheticism, primitivism, de-specialization, and materiality. It was believed that these concepts could be manipulated to become tools for the Dutch artists' own spiritual and artistic rebirth. Each of these concept-tools can be analysed individually for its roots in Danish experimentation, and adaptation by Dutch Cobra for the purposes of spiritual and artistic cleansing. Moreover, visual analyses of both Danish and Dutch works demonstrate how the Dutch artists expanded upon Danish concepts in their work.

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<sup>170</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 119.

<sup>171</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 123.

<sup>172</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 124.

*Danish Folk Art, Mythology, and Aestheticism*

Henry Heerup's 1936 painting *Landscape bij Stensby* (fig. 6) is typical of the Danish avant-garde. Note that the tree in the foreground is painted to emphasize the identifying aspects of a tree, rather than the actual appearance of a tree. When a person normally encounters a tree, he sees more leaf than branch, as the flora obscures the thin branches beneath. However, in *Landscape bij Stensby*, Heerup provides the viewer with both branches and leaves, making the identity of the object—a tree—abundantly clear. Furthermore, he surrounds the leaves and branches with the dark green outline of an evergreen tree. It undulates down the trunk, getting wider with each layer, ending in sharp points all around. This essentialized form recalls that of a Christmas tree. In layering two types of tree motifs—the branches with spotted leaves and the curving lines of a Christmas tree—on one image Heerup demonstrates his interest in the accessibility of folk iconography. There was no doubt that a viewer would recognize one or both of the tree motifs and understand the form to be a tree. Furthermore, by layering folk motifs of the same form, Heerup creates a hybrid tree that is more resonant due to its multiplicity of meanings. Significance itself becomes a form of power.

The rest of the forms in *Landscape bij Stensby* are simplified and amplified as well to promote universal comprehension. Large squares of yellow paint plainly indicate light on a pool of water. A large green triangle in the background suggests the presence of a tree-covered mountain. The forms in Heerup's painting could exist in many different cultures' folk traditions, because they are not overly specified. In line with this idea was Jorn's belief that all folk art was based on common concepts.<sup>173</sup> According to Jorn, the folk art of one place would bear

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<sup>173</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 134.

semblances of the folk art of another place because the human spirit is driven to portray specific ideas based on intrinsic urges. This was underscored by the fact that the Danish artists viewed folk art as a means for representing recognizable concepts, rather than specific scenes. “The bird I paint has nothing to do with the bird which flies in the sky,” wrote Pedersen. “It is more of a concept, like the phoenix... If you think about it, birds which you find in folk art are not birds. They are always the Phoenix in one way or another.”<sup>174</sup> Thus, Pedersen’s birds could be interpreted in any location, because they were not individualized to a specific region.

Related to the admiration of folk art was the interest in Danish mythology that often defies Hellenistic aestheticism. The Danish Experimentalists were very in touch with their pagan origins.<sup>175</sup> They resented the fact that Ancient Greek and Roman art overshadowed the antiquity of Scandinavia.<sup>176</sup> The artists replaced classical imagery and rules about aestheticism with the traditions of Scandinavian mythology, which they saw as the greatest foil to the classical tradition of Greece and Rome.<sup>177</sup> In Carl Henning-Pedersen’s 1939 painting, *Salomon’s Kingdom* (fig. 7), a salmon-like creature recalls a Scandinavian myth in which a salmon spawned three beautiful girls.<sup>178</sup> It is not that the creature bears all the characteristics of a salmon, but the roundness of its head and the placement of its large eye on the side of the face, rather than the front, contribute to a fish-like appearance. Beside the ‘salmon’ is another strange figure that

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<sup>174</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 54.

<sup>175</sup> Flomenhaft, “The Roots and Development,” 30.

<sup>176</sup> Ross, “Reflections on Seeing as they Saw,” 147.

<sup>177</sup> Foster, “Creaturely Cobra,” 9.

<sup>178</sup> Various, *Scandinavian Folk-History: Including Finnish Origins, Ancient Icelandic Folklore, Popular Danish Tales*, (Worcestershire: Read Books Ltd, 2013), accessed January 20, 2017.

resembles either a duck or a rabbit, depending whether one sees the two long shapes above its head as a beak or ears.

The Danish artists' foray into the world of folklore and mythology engendered a new concept, one that would characterize much of their work and interest their Dutch contemporaries: the creaturely. Foster wrote that Jorn's art performed a "programmatically deformation of the classical tableau... primarily through the creaturely."<sup>179</sup> As he suggests, one of the ways that the Danish avant-gardists rejected classical art was by defying classical rules about form and content. His creatures were neither human nor animal, animate nor inanimate, organic nor inorganic. Foster labels this attribute "creaturely." The salmon-like creature exemplifies this characteristic—it exists along the spectrum between alive and dead, human and animal. In *Salomon's Kingdom*, the rabbit-duck calls to mind the famous optical illusion first drawn in 1899 whose psychological purpose was to prove that perception is active, not passive.<sup>180</sup> Its inclusion further supports the idea that Pedersen employed the creaturely in order to encourage active interaction with the work.

Compare for a moment Jorn's *Untitled* and Henry Heerup's 1946 painting *Composition with Cross* (fig. 8). What do these two works have in common? *Untitled* revels in its ugliness, relishing its muddy colour mixing and build-up of paint. Its space is ambiguous, and its surface dense with thick, black brushstrokes. *Composition* divides its space neatly, and fills each quadrant with even layers of paint. Despite their differences, both paintings reflect the disruption of the heliocentric understanding of night and day. This practice reflected a Nordic

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<sup>179</sup> Foster, "Creaturely Cobra," 9.

<sup>180</sup> "Duck or Rabbit? The 100-year-old optical illusion that tells you how creative you are," *The Independent*, accessed April 7, 2017. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/duck-or-rabbit-the-100-year-old-optical-illusion-that-tells-you-how-creative-you-are-a6873106.html>

understanding of a world in which the sun sets at 3:30 in the winter months. Asger Jorn delighted in rejecting classical heliotropism, as it was another means of replacing the heliocentric tradition with that of Scandinavia.<sup>181</sup> *Untitled* exists outside of the diurnal paradigm, in a world where there is no clear dichotomy between light and dark. There is only colour, and masses of it.

Composition also rejects this paradigm, but through a different methodology. In the two quadrants on the viewer's right, a heliotropic vision of daytime is depicted. A blue sky streaked with white clouds looks over a yellow field. However, on the viewer's left, a sky filled with strange shapes, coloured pink, green, and white, is spread over a bright red landscape. These two worlds may be separate, or perhaps they are able to coexist within the same plane, in the realm of the subconscious. They inhabit the same space on this canvas, underlining the Nordic confusion of day and night.

The Danish Experimentalists discovered much of what they knew about Scandinavian mythology from the medieval frescos painted on the parish churches in Jutland, Denmark. Because the creators of these frescos were untouched by modern capitalism and war, it was thought that the frescos contained the origins of authentic expression and imagery.<sup>182</sup> The Helhesten group believed that mythmaking was a necessary practice for early people, for whom understanding the process of the universe was a matter of coexisting with one's environment.<sup>183</sup> They maintained that using myths as a starting point for contemporary creation was not an escape into fantasy. Rather, it was a continuation of pre-historic world-making. For the Danish artists in the 1940s, representing mythology was a means of legitimizing the imagination.<sup>184</sup> The

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<sup>181</sup> Foster, "Creaturely Cobra," 10.

<sup>182</sup> Ross, "Reflections on Seeing as they Saw," 146.

<sup>183</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence," 290.

<sup>184</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence," 290.

subconscious was seen as a space to grapple with conscious issues using a new set of emotional and mental tools.

The Danish legitimization of the subconscious as a tool for use in the conscious world appealed to the Dutch Experimentalists. “It gave us such a sensation,” Corneille wrote, recalling the emotions that arose within him when he first looked upon the Danish works.<sup>185</sup> The Dutch artists were keen to explore the Danish interpretations of these concepts, and turn them into tools for their own use. The Dutch Experimentalists were drawn to the notion that folk art was the result of following one’s spontaneous impulses.<sup>186</sup> Spontaneity as a tool will be discussed shortly. Another important reason that Danish folk art and mythology were so attractive to Dutch Cobra was that they held the potential to provide clues about the primal instincts of man. Accessing because these instincts was a step for the Dutch artists towards rebirth.<sup>187</sup> Anti-aestheticism appealed to them because it involved the active rejection of artistic norms. Rejecting artistic institutions and their rules contributed to the artists’ cleansing because it allowed them to be free of the evil they associated with these institutions.

And so, the Dutch Experimentalists incorporated the anti-aestheticism of Danish folklore and mythology into their ideology and methodologies. The manner in which Constant painted ‘outside the lines’ in *Scorched Earth* is an example of anti-aestheticism because it suggests the existence of color outside of a physical boundary—color simply floating, formless, in mid-air. *Scorched Earth* also reflects the confusion of night and day inspired by Danish folktales. The tan sky, grey clouds, and red-orange earth demonstrate an alternate understanding of the way

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<sup>185</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 122.

<sup>186</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 77.

<sup>187</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 6.

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humans perceive color, one that contradicts our contemporary understanding of matter and space. The strange surface texture of the clouds and the atypical coloration of the sky and ground actively reject socially accepted perceptions of the world supported by traditional artistic genres. Instead, they suggest an alternative, anti-aesthetic interpretation of the world.

Now consider Corneille's *Print* (fig. 9), painted in 1948. In this work, the background is divided into three distinct panels—black, yellow, and blue. The majority of the figures stand on the black panel, which lends it a sense of solidity. It is likely a floor or stretch of ground. The distinction between the yellow and blue 'skies' is less clear. Within the blue sky there is an off-white circle of paint smudged over a black circular outline. Several black lines extend from the circle, suggesting that this celestial body is in motion. Perhaps it is a shooting star or the moon. This vivid night-time scene is disrupted by the curving yellow line that introduces the vivid, yellow panel in the centre of the print. Its bright colouring is reminiscent of the sun, which leads the viewer to associate this panel with daytime. However, a naturalistic daylight sky would be cornflower blue, not yellow. Thus, the final print carries associations of both daytime and night-time. *Print* allows its figures to simultaneously exist within both day and night in the same way that Heerup's *Composition with Cross* represented the coexistence of day and night. Through a complication of time, Corneille incorporated non-Hellenistic, traditional Danish folkloric concepts into his work.

*The Subconscious*

Jacobson proposed that the motifs present in Scandinavian folk-art originated from collective archetypes originating in the subconscious.<sup>188</sup> The Danish artists believed that accessing the subconscious was an important prerequisite for increasing one's knowledge.<sup>189</sup> The potential to increase one's knowledge through exploration of the unknown fed their desire to comprehend what was incomprehensible: the trauma of the Second World War. In addition, let us consider for a moment how surrealism irked the Dutch Experimentalists. They disliked the idea that surrealist painters escaped into their dreamscapes without dealing with their conscious emotions. The Danish perception of the subconscious was quite different from the surrealist view. The Danish artists saw the subconscious as a place where conscious emotions manifested themselves and fought each other; a place where the artist could go to enhance his understanding of his conscious self. "Let us penetrate the great cosmic night," wrote Jacobson to Jorn, "Not to plunge into a deep, dreamless sleep, but to live with small creatures of instinct and desire, which are in this transitional zone between the dream and reality. They move in a rhythm which corresponds to the dreaming state, a rhythm which leads us from the dream towards a richer reality."<sup>190</sup> Thus, the Dutch saw in the Danish understanding of the subconscious an opportunity for all to achieve rebirth through the accessing of one's most authentic being.

Additionally, the imagination was seen by the Danish Experimentalists as 'popular,' meaning that it could be accessed by ordinary people outside of elite social and artistic circles.<sup>191</sup> The motifs dreamed up by the imagination were believed to be comprehensible by the least

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<sup>188</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 8.

<sup>189</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 122.

<sup>190</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 33.

<sup>191</sup> Ross, "Reflections on Seeing as they Saw," 148.

intellectual member of society. Jorn's *Untitled* exemplifies these motifs. The fearsome creatures in the work don't resemble the monsters society tells us to fear, like ghosts or vampires or a rabid King Kong. They are constructed from loose, quick brushstrokes that render them amorphous. What they all have in common are glowing eyes with dark black pupils. They are inspired not by the media, but by the subconscious, which turns shadows into monsters. Because these creatures were born from accessing the subconscious rather than interacting with the media, they were accessible to all viewers. An inclusive, collective understanding of the subconscious appealed to the Dutch artists' Marxist tendencies.

The notion of the collective subconscious was expanded upon as well. As the artists explored the possibilities of the tools they'd acquired from the Danes, they climbed deeper into the depths of their own minds. "From the mask of what unknown clown do I derive the faces I pant," Appel asked, rhetorically, "Buried memories of real faces in life: faces deformed by suffering, laughter, or labors/sometimes mad. And then they become imaginary."<sup>192</sup> This quotation illustrates the programmatic deconstruction of the conscious mind. Appel recognizes a clown in his painting, beneath which there are faces repressed by his conscious mind. He searches within them to understand their emotions. Finally, he realizes that they are imaginary; he is within his subconscious. Dutch Cobra's exploration of the subconscious demonstrates the importance of the Danish avant-gardes for the artists' understanding of their own traumatized psyche. They hoped that these adventures into the unknown would provide them with "wider

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<sup>192</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 77.

perspectives in understanding the secrets of life,” as Constant wrote in the group’s manifesto.<sup>193</sup>

‘The secrets of life’ were appealing to a group desperate for rebirth.

For the painting of *Scorched Earth*, Constant mined his subconscious for symbols. The wheel in the foreground is one of the most central. This motif has been prevalent in the human psyche for thousands of years. It represents continuity and the life cycle. Thus, a broken wheel signifies a break in this cycle. Perhaps the death in *Scorched Earth* was so painful, life cannot possibly be reborn from it. The orange-red color of the earth is also inherently associated with fire, blood, and death. Tom McDonough connects the wheel motif to the painting’s historical context. He writes, “The continuity of the spiral/wheel motif signals precisely the shared genesis of paintings and architectural models in the experience of urban holocaust—both as past trauma and future anxiety, with nuclear fear an ever-present fear in these years”<sup>194</sup> He sees the wheel as an emblem of Holocaust trauma, and its repetition in Constant’s paintings as evidence of the artist’s trauma. McDonough’s reading of the work through the lens of trauma theory supports the idea that Constant was driven by the post-traumatic need for rebirth. Within the subconscious he found buried symbols whose isolation and application to canvas was part of this spiritual process.

*Dode Koeien* “*Dead Cows*,” (fig. 10) painted by Constant in 1951, is also composed of symbols rooted in the artist’s subconscious. The landscape is a dark navy blue, set against a black sky. And yet, the forms glow white from an invisible light source. In such a way, non-Hellenistic ideas of time and light are present here too. These forms give the appearance of being

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<sup>193</sup> Nieuwenhuys, “Manifesto,” 168.

<sup>194</sup> McDonough, “Metastructure,” 91.

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white, though smudges of pink, purple, blue, and yellow lie beneath their exterior. Even without knowledge of the title, the viewer senses an aura of death. Our subconscious minds recognize bones to be symbols of death, and the three holes on the form in the foreground resemble a skull. Furthermore, the white line crossed perpendicularly by six white lines in the center of the painting bears semblance to a spine. Additionally, the association with death lies deeper than in the connection between bones and mortality. The wheel motif to the viewer's left of the central form represents perpetual continuation and the circle of life. Thus, its presence signifies a stage in this cycle.

The amorphous white forms themselves are also subconscious reminders of death because they are manifestations of universal human fears. Their eyes are the epicenter of this fear, as the eyes in Jorn's *Untitled* were as well. In *Untitled*, the monsters' eyes floated above the mass of colors on the canvas, glowing white with dark black pupils. In *Dode Koeien*, the eyes of the figures incite fear because of their utter ghastliness. The figure in the foreground has two gaping holes that resemble eyes, and a larger hole representing a mouth. However, the term 'holes' is complicated by the fact that the color of these holes is a much brighter blue than the color of the navy ground upon which the form lies. If these masses truly are holes, wouldn't they be the same color as the surface behind them? The figure's matter and construction, then, remain ambiguous. The viewer is uncomfortable because he is acutely aware that the figure is watching him, but he cannot understand the mechanism through which the mottled white figure is looking.

Furthermore, the notion of infinite space is associated with death, as the two are both abstract concepts that can never be understood, and are therefore frightening. Additionally, death is often thought to be an infinite stretch of disembodied existence, which ties the two concepts

together further. The front figure's gaping eye and mouth holes are seemingly infinite. Different in color from the ground beneath the figure, these holes are ambiguous in space and matter. How deep are these pools of blue paint, and where do they go? They certainly do not extend to the ground of the painting, or there would be a hint of navy paint in the eye sockets, and there is none. The ambiguity of the space within this figure is unsettling because it reminds the viewer of another abstract, ambiguous entity: death.

The figure on the viewer's top left is also a creature of the subconscious. Its eyes are made up of two, circular patches. Painted in dark blue, they are stacked one on top of each other, as if the figure has twisted its head 180 degrees. Its demon-like contortion and pupil-less eyes incite fear in the viewer because humans instinctively view these features as unnatural and evil. These instincts come from the fact that humans crave the ability to connect with others and identify/classify them. Without pupils, one cannot make these connections and identifications. When the figure stares at the viewer from a contorted angle, it allows the figure to visually consume the viewer, but prevents the viewer from returning its gaze. Thus, the viewer is aware of being watched but cannot make a connection with the voyeur, which discomforts him. This phenomenon is what makes the top left figure so ghastly, and explains why its ability to incite fear is due to its existence within the subconscious.

A reading of these pictures demonstrates that fear of ambiguity and death are natural, interconnected aspects of humanity that exist in their most primitive forms in the human subconscious. It is also important to note that the masses of cross-hatched and scribbled navy blue lines on the canvas have no apparent order. In the world of the subconscious, there need not be a beginning and an end of a line, nor a purpose to its execution. These lines exist in an

ambiguous world, but also exhibit emotional fervor. Their application is rough and messy, and controlled around certain sections of the canvas. One can almost imagine Constant painting in a trance, scribbling lines of color over one another, never questioning his motivation for doing so. Alone, Constant's attention to line resembles surrealist psychic automatism. The lack of reason and order in the execution of these lines supports the irrationality of the subconscious, and the artists' dedication towards representing this irrationality. However, in conjunction with Constant's execution of the gaze, *Untitled* remains rooted in reality and the dialogue between artist and viewer. Constant mines the subconscious for spontaneous, irrational production of line, but also to access iconography recognizable to the conscious viewer.

### *Spontaneity*

The Danes understood spontaneous behaviour as originating “deep within the human soul,” as Pedersen wrote.<sup>195</sup> They believed that their folk ancestors created art spontaneously due to the pureness of their spirits. Pedersen's work reflected what he preached. He never painted with preconceived notions of a final product. He often titled his paintings after he was finished, when he saw forms leap out from the finished work.<sup>196</sup> Painting spontaneously allowed the viewer access into the mind of the painter. It also allowed the artist to discover and utilize the purest aspects of his being.<sup>197</sup> Works by all of the Danish Experimentalists are spontaneous in character. One particular example is an untitled work by Asger Jorn, painted in 1949 (fig. 11). There is no spatial schema to the painting. Some figures are only half visible, the rest of their

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<sup>195</sup> Ross, “Reflections on Seeing as they Saw,” 147.

<sup>196</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 54.

<sup>197</sup> Ross, “Reflections on Seeing as they Saw,” 148.

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bodies extending off the canvas. It is not clear what space is taken up by any given figure, and out of what negative space is composed. Where does organic matter begin and end? There seems to be no rhyme nor reason to the treatment of human-like figures versus inanimate matter. The colours that bleed out from the central anatomy of these figures are just as rough and thickly applied as those that denote their heads. It is unclear whether the mass of red and fuscina brushstrokes that surround the bottom right-hand corner figure are a part of its structure. If they are, what purpose do they serve physiologically? They become creaturely outgrowths attached to unclassifiable beings. And if they aren't part of the figures' anatomy, what does that say about the world of this painting? Free-floating blobs of colour sit tightly, pressed up against one another, in a compressed, material, atmosphere. The surface of the painting feels confused on the subject, with pockets of colour mixing with other colours right on the canvas, further blurring the line between figural and non-figural. There are places where red and green forge a putrid brown. On the viewer's right-hand side, magenta, yellow and green clash in an unaesthetically-pleasing mass. Technically, the choice to order space ambiguously and clash colours could be conscious. Yet the sheer mass of forms, all of which are composed of layers upon layers of murky colours, exudes expressivity. The spontaneity of expression is apparent in every layer of *Untitled*.

The spontaneity in a work like *Untitled* immediately appealed to the Dutch Experimentalists, who believed that creating spontaneously could contribute to their spiritual and artistic rebirth. They associated spontaneity with both folk art and the subconscious. “[Folk art] creates spontaneously according to intuition's natural dictates,” Constant wrote. “Its predominant virtue is that it is an expression of what is unformed, thus leaving the greatest possible arena for

the subconscious to unravel itself.”<sup>198</sup> He hoped that creating spontaneously as early folk artists did would allow him to detach from the layers of socialization affecting his behaviour and embrace the depths of his subconscious.

Spontaneity became a crucial backbone of Cobra ideology. In the Cobra Manifesto, Constant explicitly extolled the importance of spontaneity to the movement. He wrote that spontaneity was “an essential precondition of vital art, and therefore...rejects any a priori principle of composition.”<sup>199</sup> In situating spontaneity so predominantly in the ideology, he took a conscious and very public stance against the movements discussed in chapter 2. Spontaneity was a foil to French modern art, all of which required conscious planning.

Spontaneity was implemented into Dutch Cobra in a variety of ways. The artists constantly experimented with new techniques to reduce the influence of the conscious mind on the execution of a work and access the spontaneous spirit. One way that the artists did this was by changing the manner in which they applied paint to disturb their painterly habits. Sometimes Appel applied mounds of paint to canvas, creating a three-dimensional chunk of solidified color. Other times he used a knife, or let paint drip around the mountains of color he'd just created.<sup>200</sup> He employed his body in the act of painting by dancing.<sup>201</sup> Doing so made his entire body an active player in the creation of a work, allowing the work to become an expression of his entire being, rather than his conscious mind. Appel also liked to paint with both hands. His left hand, controlled by the right side of his brain, created spontaneously, and at times, destructively. His right hand was used for painting and manipulating materials. The left hand was considered the

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<sup>198</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 148.

<sup>199</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 10.

<sup>200</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 85.

<sup>201</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 34.

liberator of the right.<sup>202</sup> Another idea was the practice of a planned accident, aimed at stimulating the senses by creating unpredictable outcomes.<sup>203</sup> There could be no rules if all outcomes were unpredictable.

The resulting works challenged existing artistic norms. Spontaneity yielded experimental perspectives, in which some figures were flattened and others were painted from multiple viewpoints simultaneously.<sup>204</sup> These works contradicted the traditional, two-eyed paradigm that objects could only be understood from one viewpoint at a time. Take Constant's *Cat* (1948) (fig. 12), for example. The essence of the cat has been illustrated on two separate wooden panels that rest on two separate pools of black paint. On the viewer's bottom right, the cat's smiling face rests on a tooth-shaped piece of wood. To assume that this form is, in fact, a face, is wishful thinking. Very few marks designate facial features. Three blue circles form eyes and the circumference of a head. The two sides of the wooden panel extend down, suggesting the appearance of front legs. The other piece of wood is marked by diagonal, blue stripes of paint. Due to the upward slant of this piece of wood and its striped markings, it resembles a cat's tail. The same color paint is the unifier between the two wooden sheets. It is only because the same color has been used that I make the connection between the two parts, and conclude that the cat has been represented in these two parts of the work. The decision to represent the cat in two unconnected places defies the traditional understanding of what a cat is, and how to paint one. Instead, Constant presents the most characteristic features of a cat simplified to the point that it is

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<sup>202</sup> Lambert, "The Amsterdam Studio," 87-88.

<sup>203</sup> Flomenhaft, "The Roots and Development," 15.

<sup>204</sup> Brent Wilson, "Art, Visual Culture, and Child/Adult Collaborative Images: Recognizing the Other-Than," *Visual Arts Research* 33, no. 2 (2007): 6.

almost unrecognizable. The chosen features originate in the subconscious, which identifies creatures with round faces, large eyes, and bushy upright tails as cats.

Spontaneity also generated a less literal, and more emotional, understanding of color. Without the conscious mind dictating the colors of objects based on their colors in the existing world, Dutch Cobra was able to select colors from their imaginations and emotions, which often resulted in atypical choices. Dutch Cobra established the concept of a figure's "essence" and the colors attributed to that, rather than the colors typically associated with the figure itself. "The color has nothing to do with the outside," wrote Appel. "The man's skin is black [but] the climate is color, the music is color, lovely colors, strong red, yellow, orange [and] blue."<sup>205</sup> Thus, Appel's paintings contradict the classical tradition of painting what the eye discerns as color; instead he painted the colors of sound and air. There is evidence of Dutch Cobra's emotional understanding of color in *Cat* as well. The blue coloration of the cat indicates that a different paradigm than reality was utilized to depict its essence.

Furthermore, Corneille believed his colors to be sentient—their ability to interact consciously with one another informed his spontaneous application of color. "I may work with a blue colour underneath a green one, and finally put a red on top of the other two," he wrote. "The red remembers the blue and green under it and makes them stronger and more alive."<sup>206</sup> For Corneille, painting was a process of recording the interactions between colours. Thus, he was always creating spontaneously, because he could never know how the colours would react until

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<sup>205</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 8.

<sup>206</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 131.

they did. Constant, too, experimented with spontaneous colour. His ghastly colours, drawn from the depths of the subconscious, created dynamic tension in many of his works.<sup>207</sup>

### *Children's Art and Masks*

The Danish avant-garde artists believed that children were closer to the true nature of man and more in touch with their imaginations than adults. The Danish artists were inspired by children's art in two ways. First, they encouraged each other to explore their childhood fantasies.<sup>208</sup> These fantasies were seen as manifestations of their true selves, untouched by society's norms and dominant narratives. Secondly, the artists studied the motifs and techniques utilized by young children. Jacobson in particular was drawn to the way children drew faces. They appeared more like masks; a state of facial representation between the animate and the inanimate. Masks would become a major motif in his work.<sup>209</sup> For Jacobson, the mask was a doorway to the depths of his imagination. He found inspiration for his masks in both children's art and tribal art. Half-human gods were prevalent in Egyptian, Persian, Indian, American, and European mythologies.<sup>210</sup> These gods were often depicted with faces that rested between the animate and the inanimate, and between the animal and the human. Jacobson absorbed this quality into his depiction of the mask. He was also influenced by the highly expressive masks of Oceania, as well as Viking ornamentation of dragon heads.<sup>211</sup> His 1947 work *Sea* (fig. 13) is an apt example of his experimentation with children's art and masks. Masks are often characterized

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<sup>207</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 150.

<sup>208</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 29.

<sup>209</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 56.

<sup>210</sup> Foster, "Creaturely Cobra," 15.

<sup>211</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 56.

by their exaggerated features. Here, the figure's face in the top of the painting is constructed from two bulging, orange eyes, an oversized crescent moon mouth, and a skinny line drawn between the eyes that may or may not be a nose. It could also represent the handle of the mask, held by the wearer, as in a masquerade. Children also often essentialize the features of their figures, which is what connects their art to masks. Here, Pedersen seems to have been influenced by both, as his creature's mask-face bears a childlike simplicity and essentialization—it is composed of only two or three facial features. Furthermore, the figure's large orange eyes and wide black pupils stare directly at the viewer, but are curiously devoid of emotion. Such is the nature of a mask; it gives the impression of looking, but due to its existence as a boundary, it prevents any real connection from being made between the viewer and the wearer. Furthermore, a mask allows the wearer to stare at the viewer without being identified himself. Thus, the experience of *Sea* is uncomfortable. The viewer is aware of an unknown voyeur, but cannot return his gaze.

Because masks were so prevalent in the creations of children and early tribes—two groups that Dutch Cobra strove to emulate spiritually—they were an attractive motif to incorporate into Dutch paintings. Many works by Dutch Cobra bear the one-sided voyeurship of the mask. *Cat* feels uncannily mask-like. Its large eyes are clearly looking directly out, but there is no pupil for the viewer to make a connection with. The viewer can only gaze into the bright blue irises filling the white space of the cat's eyes. Appel's *Questioning Children* (1949) (fig. 14) is filled with mask-like figures. All of the figures' faces have been essentialized into eyes and a mouth. Some of the eyes have irises and some do not, but none have pupils, rendering them all

inaccessible, though they stare blatantly at the viewer. *Questioning Children* will be discussed at length in chapter 5.

The Dutch artists were also very intrigued by the Danish foray into children's art. The Dutchman Bert Schierbeek wrote that there was scientific evidence to prove the superior spontaneity of children's brains.<sup>212</sup> Children's art took several forms in the collective. It involved the inclusion of children in the art-making process.<sup>213</sup> It also manifested itself in a sense of play with materials, the way young children enjoy finger painting as a sensory experience in addition to a documentary one.<sup>214</sup> Children's art was also related to the concepts of primitivism and the subconscious, as children were thought to be less affected by capitalist society, and more similar to the primitive nature of the mind. They did not distinguish between 'ugly' and 'beautiful.'<sup>215</sup> They cast no judgements on what they saw and created, and the Cobra artists followed suit.

*Questioning Children* exhibits childlike qualities. The surfaces of the wooden blocks in the work have been painted quickly and unevenly. Note the yellow figure in the viewer's top left corner. Appel has not stopped to fully coat the block in yellow paint. The wood grain is clearly visible in several places, and shows through behind the thin layer of paint. Such is the methodology of the child, whose goal is not to perfectly execute the coloration of a figure, but to communicate the essence of a figure's color. The simple, mask-like faces with essentialized features are also clearly inspired by the simple faces of children's portraits.

Attempting to create spontaneously and nonjudgmentally like children was part of the strong connection between the concept of the child and the Dutch desire for rebirth. Writes Jean-

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<sup>212</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 74-78.

<sup>213</sup> Wilson, "Art, Visual Culture, and Child/Adult Collaborative Images," 12.

<sup>214</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 78.

<sup>215</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 82.

Clarence Lambert in *Cobra*, “Europe at the end of the Forties had become old and childhood was the living possibility, the eternal starting point.”<sup>216</sup> The artists felt that they could return to this starting point and transitively experience rebirth if they adopted the mindset of children. Appel later looked back on this time of rebirth fondly. He wrote, “The Cobra group started new, and first of all we threw away all these things we had known and started afresh, like a child-- fresh and new. Sometimes my work looks very childish... but that was the good thing for me.”<sup>217</sup> Appel recognized that children’s art was a tool to help the artists achieve something far greater—spiritual cleansing. This quotation supports the notion that Dutch Cobra was a psychological response to a specific historical context.

### *Primitivism*

The bodies stacked on top of one another in Constant’s *The War* (1950) (fig. 15) are childlike in their simplicity. The figure closest to the surface of the painting has two white semi-circles for eyes and a rectangular block nose. Another face, in the bottom left corner, emphasizes the path from the brow bone down to the nose, as well as thick, slightly opened, lips. This head is mask-like in its simplification and exaggeration of facial features.

The figures in *The War* are also aggressive in their expressivity. Note how the figure on top of the pile reaches its arm outwards. Its three spread fingers are charged with energy. Lighter white brushstrokes mixed on top of the figure’s brown skin resemble bulging tendons; in reaching its arm, it activates every muscle in its torso. The angle of the figure’s body is animated

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<sup>216</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 78.

<sup>217</sup> Rothmans, “Appel’s Appels,” 15-16.

as well. Its head and outstretched arm lay on the same horizontal line across the canvas. The figure must be contorting itself to achieve such an angle with its body. Given the context of the painting—a torn fence, a pile of rubble, a red sky, and a heap of bodies—the energy within the contorted figure is amplified. Within this context, the figure’s expressivity becomes a result of its situation. Its outstretched arm and bodily tension/contortion are cries of despair and cries for help. The limbs of these figures are what elevate them from childlike interpretations of the human form to charged expressions of man’s anguish.

The combination of childlike simplicity and mature content/aggressive expression are what render *The War* primitive, a characteristic the Dutch also borrowed from the Danes. It is important to distinguish the significance of Cobra Primitivism from the racially-oriented conception of primitivism that is widely known. The mythmakers and fresco-painters of Jutland that Helhesten exalted are defined as primitive not because of their race, but due to their position in the timeline of human development. In fact, these ‘primitive’ people were very often Caucasian, as the Danish artists drew inspiration from their own folk ancestors.<sup>218</sup> Later, the Dutch artists would explore their own ancestral roots. Thus, when the term ‘primitive’ is utilized in relation to either the Danish or Dutch painters, a temporal, rather than a racial, relationship is being expressed. The Cobra artists believed that primitive people lived in a manner closer to the collective essence of humanity than the modern man. The artists associated with the modern man the artistic accoutrements of modernity, such as a civilized society, smooth brushstrokes, and Apollonian beauty. The artists maintained that deep within themselves, beneath the layers of influence society had stacked upon them, was the essential nature of the primitive man. In order

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<sup>218</sup> Emily Lowe Gallery, *A Cobra Portfolio*, 6.

to access one's most primitive self, the artists believed they must negate the features of contemporary painting. They painted instead uncivilized worlds with ugly, rough brushstrokes, focusing on primal emotions rather than specific forms.<sup>219</sup> Primitive tendencies abound in both Danish and Dutch works. *The War* exemplifies the combination of childlike simplicity and mature aggression that composes the primitive instinct. The rough brushstrokes of Jorn's untitled work revel in essentialization and antagonism. Their thick application contrasts with the slick, finished quality of De Stijl, surrealism, and the Renaissance. The lack of desire to 'finish' a painting with a smooth surface suggests a primitive hand, unsoiled by the rules of capitalism and its subsequent control over artistic standards.

The notion that one paints intentionally is itself inherently modern. There is nothing in the human spirit that demands creation be organized. Dutch Cobra discovered primitiveness in jazz, popular music, masks, and wall carvings. It became clear to the artists that the essential, spontaneous, untouched nature of man was hidden beneath the entire world like a thin layer of the earth's crust. In some places—as in jazz music or medieval frescos—one could see it breaking through the surface.<sup>220</sup> When the Dutch Experimentalists met the Danish Experimentalists, this breaking-through became a volcano of primitive expression.

Dutch Cobra continued the nonracial, Danish practice of primitivism, which they sought to unleash from their subconscious.<sup>221</sup> Primitivism offered the possibility of finding 'truth,' and the means of expressing this truth. The abstractness of 'truth' appealed to a group of artists whose goal was to achieve rebirth—a goal whose ends were abstract themselves.<sup>222</sup> According to

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<sup>219</sup> Ross, "Reflections on Seeing as they Saw," 148.

<sup>220</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence," 290.

<sup>221</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence," 289.

<sup>222</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 7.

Karen Kurczynski, Cobra's manipulation of primitivism contributed to a breakdown of the fetishizing quality attached to the term.<sup>223</sup> The artists insisted that primitivism existed in western society, primarily in the human urge for spontaneous expression despite capitalist oppression.<sup>224</sup> What they did value in non-western cultures—"naturalness, communitarianism, sexuality, and spirituality"—they also traced back to pre-capitalist European society.<sup>225</sup> They illustrated primitivism as a socially-determined, rather than racially-determined, quality. For Dutch Cobra, primitivism referred to spontaneity, and can be seen as a result of behaving in a spontaneous manner.<sup>226</sup> It manifested itself in both childlike impulses and more mature, aggressive tendencies.<sup>227</sup> Primitivism can be understood as the combination of those two qualities.

### *Materiality*

Though the Danish avant-garde did create materially vibrant works, there is a stark contrast between their paintings and the works of Dutch Cobra. The surface quality of many paintings by Pedersen is milky. The creaminess of the paint implies a soft appliance of colour, or the scraping of a palette knife over the surface to smoothen the brushstrokes. Milkiness and smoothness lend a work like *Salomon's Kingdom* (1939) (fig. 7) a quality of consciousness that is not present in the Dutch works. It requires consciousness to carve pools of paint in such an aesthetically pleasing manner, and hindsight to go back and smooth out brushstrokes with a

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<sup>223</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence," 301.

<sup>224</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence," 287.

<sup>225</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence," 285.

<sup>226</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, "Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence," 292.

<sup>227</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 77.

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knife. It is not nearly as meticulous as some surrealist paintings, but cannot claim to be as spontaneous as the Dutch works.

Compare *Salomon's Kingdom* to Constant's *Birds' Idyll* (1948) (fig. 16). In the former, the paint is smoothed evenly over the surface of the milky canvas. In contrast, the brushstrokes in *Birds' Idyll* are neither polished nor carefully applied. In the detail in fig. 17, notice how the patches of blue paint never totally fill their designated spaces. The blue oval with two red circles on the top right is outlined by a thick indentation in black paint. However, the blue paint has been washed over it, neither obscuring the blackness beneath it nor coating it uniformly. It seems to rest on top, allowing bits of black to show through here and there. Just as I discussed with children's art, it is as if the essence of a blue oval were depicted, rather than a completely blue oval. In addition to being quick and incomplete, the application of paint in *Birds' Idyll* is also very rough. While the surface texture of *Salomon's Kingdom* is smooth and milky, the paint in *Birds' Idyll* appears to have been removed from the surface in many places through scratching, revealing a different colour underneath. Paint has been allowed to pool and clot in certain areas. Note in fig. 18 how scratch marks on the canvas and three-dimensional clumps of paint form a dynamic surface texture that breathes spontaneity and the aggressive expressivity of primitivism.

In the Cobra *Manifesto*, Constant directly rejected post-painting "clean-up," or any kind of conscious afterthought in art. "Any attempt at making the form more precise spoils the material effect and the suggestion which it evokes," he wrote. "A suggestive art is a material art, because only matter stimulates creativity into activity, whereas gradual appearance of the ideal intended forms means that the activity of the viewer is proportionally reduced... We must strive for as much material and suggestive effect as possible. Seen in this light, the creative spirit is

more important than what is created.”<sup>228</sup> This quotation indicates that retroactively changing a work after creating it reduces its suggestive, interactive capabilities. He is likely referring to surrealism, the movement against which Cobra formed many of its ideals, but it can also be used to position Dutch Cobra against the Danish artists within the group in regards to materiality.

While not all Danish avant-gardists painted with the creamy brushstrokes of Pedersen, his work is indicative of the lesser sense of urgency in Danish painting. The parameters of Danish experimentalism allowed an artist like Pedersen to think aesthetically about the material quality of his paint. Dutch Cobra paintings indicate a strong sense of urgency, in part because their material quality is rough and spontaneous. The differing urgencies of the two movements reflect the radically different war experiences in Denmark and the Netherlands, and the pronounced trauma that impacted the Dutch artists. Their crusade for rebirth was decidedly more pressing, which manifested itself in the materiality of the work.

This quest led the artists to the Experimentalist painters in Denmark. In Danish avant-garde art they found concepts that had the potential to help them achieve their rebirth. This process was multi-faceted. Spontaneity, primitivism, and materiality allowed the artists to translate emotions they themselves couldn't understand onto canvas. They provided a means through which the artists could actualize their abstract feelings. In doing so, they were able to imagine cleansing themselves of their trauma. Thus, it was the action of utilizing the Danish concepts that led to the artists' rebirth, rather than the completion of any single work. The works examined in this chapter demonstrate this process and its effect on the artists' psyche. I turn now to Dutch Cobra's second major goal: the quest for liberation through artistic production.

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<sup>228</sup> Nieuwenhuys, "Manifesto," 170.

#### Chapter 4: The Quest for Liberation Through Artistic Production

##### The Dutch Desire for Liberation

The members of Cobra recognized that the state of capitalist society was very poor. The Dutch, in particular, were facing a politically stagnant government that refused to take action after the atrocities of the Second World War. The artists blamed the entire capitalist system for these atrocities. A different structure of government, they argued, would have been better able to protect its Jewish population and better equipped to fight the Germans. Furthermore, they felt that capitalism had systemically led to the rise of Hitler and allowed fascism to dominate much of Europe, leading to these atrocities. Constant described these conditions, and their impact on the public, in the 1948 Cobra Manifesto. “The general social impotence, the passivity of the masses,” he wrote, “are an indication of the brakes that cultural norms apply to the natural expression of the forces of life. For the satisfaction of this primitive need for vital expression is the driving force of life, the cure for every form of vital weakness. It transforms art into a power for spiritual health. As such it is the property of all and for this reason every limitation that reduces art to the reserve of a small group of specialists, connoisseurs, and virtuosi must be removed.”<sup>229</sup> In this excerpt Constant expresses the sentiment that the public has become passive—how else could 75% of the Dutch population have been murdered, how else could people have turned on their own neighbours? He blames ‘cultural norms’ for suppressing people’s inherent goodness and leaving behind passive shells of human beings who are easily manipulated by greed and authority. These norms include artistic institutions, which are yet

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<sup>229</sup> Kurczynski, “Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra,” 680.

another form of centralized control aimed at suppressing mankind's creative spirit.<sup>230</sup> Why was capitalist society so focused on suppressing people's creative impulses? Aldo van Eyck answered this question after one of Constant's murals was taken down by the city of Amsterdam. "He who chooses the wonder of reality," he wrote, "rather than the banality of illusion...is dangerous to the state."<sup>231</sup> According to van Eyck and the rest of Dutch Cobra, the pillarized system of government created an illusion of peace and comfort, despite the fact that it had engendered genocide. Radicals and avant-garde artists proved a challenge to this system because their art could reach the masses and potentially turn people against their governing bodies. Cobra attempted to do so not just through its exhibitions, but its accompanying periodicals. Though the content of these periodicals was not politically explicit, it was reviled by many for insulting traditional values. The fourth Cobra periodical, for example, featured a picture of Titian's *Venus d'Urbino* with a man's face superimposed over it. The local magistrate demanded that the entire periodical be banned.<sup>232</sup> The public decried Dutch Cobra's masculinization of the feminine *Venus d'Urbino*. Foster explains that the Dutch Experimentalists embraced gender ambiguity as part of one's multifaceted identity.<sup>233</sup> However, the deeply religious Dutch population found it immoral, even sacrilegious. Additionally, the *Venus* represented traditional values of femininity. Desecrating said values was viewed as the first step in a path towards anarchy, and the government hoped to avoid it at all costs.

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<sup>230</sup> Nieuwenhuys, "Manifesto," 167-168.

<sup>231</sup> Peterson and Brattinga, *Sandberg*, 60-61.

<sup>232</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 138.

<sup>233</sup> Foster, "Creaturely Cobra," 7.

Ironically, Constant feared the same outcome. However, he believed that the destruction of society was inevitable if the status quo were *maintained* in the Netherlands.<sup>234</sup> He believed that the situation was dire, and that creativity was of the utmost necessity.<sup>235</sup> The Dutch artists believed that their methodologies and ideology finally had the capacity to wake people up. “Since the [bourgeoisie’s] ideals have proved fictitious,” Constant wrote, “a totally new period is beginning.... a new freedom is being wrested out of the fundamental sources of life.”<sup>236</sup> They also felt that it was their responsibility to guide the rest of the population towards a better life in which everyone could freely create.<sup>237</sup> Their tool for guiding would be art itself, and such was the task of new art.<sup>238</sup> Although the desire for a rebirth was a Dutch motivation, it was Jorn’s idea of a new art in a new society that influenced the Dutch artists and set this concept into motion.<sup>239</sup> As Constant wrote in the 1948 Cobra Manifesto, “Art is...of great psychological importance in the battle fought by mankind for establishing a new social order.”<sup>240</sup> It would become the overarching tool in Cobra’s quasi-socialist liberation. The term liberation is employed rather than revolution, because the movement did not target governmental bodies. It aimed to free people’s hearts.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Nieuwenhuys, “Manifesto,” 167-168.

<sup>235</sup> Hovendakk, “COBRA in Time,” 129.

<sup>236</sup> Flomenhaft, “The Roots and Development,” 147.

<sup>237</sup> Flomenhaft, “The Roots and Development,” 9.

<sup>238</sup> Hovendakk, “COBRA in Time,” 141.

<sup>239</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 78.

<sup>240</sup> Nieuwenhuys, “Manifesto,” 170.

<sup>241</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 78.

### The Influence of Philosophy

The Dutch Cobra artists were well-versed in the writings of Karl Marx.<sup>242</sup> Their interest in Marx was part of what bound the artists together.<sup>243</sup> They had read and immediately connected with Marx's ideas about social revolution. As I have already discussed, the Dutch artists were traumatized following WWII and disenchanted with the present system of government. Marx's writings legitimized their belief that capitalism was oppressive. In *Wage Labor and Capital*, Marx wrote, "The more productive capital grows, the more the division of labour and the application of machinery expands. The more the division of labour and the application of machinery expands, the more competition among workers expands and the more their wages contract."<sup>244</sup> This explanation of capitalism demonstrates how the system disenfranchises workers. Marx goes on to lament the fact that man cannot leave the capitalist system without sacrificing his own existence.<sup>245</sup> Thus, man is stuck in a system which routinely subjugates him. Because capitalism was inherently oppressive, freeing the working class indicated that the creation of a new society was critical for emancipation to be complete.<sup>246</sup> The Dutch Experimentalists resonated with this chain of logic, as it had very real consequences in their lives. The last key aspect of Marx's social revolution that impacted Dutch Cobra was the idea that "of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself."<sup>247</sup> This concept appealed to Dutch Cobra because it returned agency to the people.

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<sup>242</sup> Lambert, "The Amsterdam Studio," 31.

<sup>243</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 53.

<sup>244</sup> Karl Marx, "Wage Labor and Capital," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker et al. (New York: Norton and Company, 1978), 205.

<sup>245</sup> Marx, "Wage Labor and Capital," 216.

<sup>246</sup> Karl Marx, "The Coming Upheaval," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker et al. (New York: Norton and Company, 1978), 218.

<sup>247</sup> Marx, "The Coming Upheaval," 218.

And so, the appeal of social revolution and individual agency in society turned the Dutch Experimentalists into Marxists. As I briefly mentioned in the introduction, the artists viewed it as their responsibility to contribute to the construction of a new society, and to the awakening of the masses. They put this burden on themselves because it seemed as if no one else was interested in their mission or able to achieve it. They viewed other contemporary artists, like Picasso and Mondrian, as supporters of the capitalist system. Secondly, the radical political movements of 1946 and 1947 had been thoroughly squashed. Additionally, it was the prevailing notion that art was the basis of any revolution, if not the revolution itself.<sup>248</sup> And so, it fell to the modern artists of the day to jumpstart the liberation. The Dutch Experimentalists began brainstorming ways in which their art-making could be used to alert the masses to their own state of oppression, and motivate them to liberate themselves.

They found their inspiration as well in the philosopher Gaston Bachelard. A contemporary of the group, he was very involved with Cobra meetings and the artists spoke highly of him. Corneille described him as “filling a void.”<sup>249</sup> One of Bachelard’s central interests was the way humans recognize symbols. He separated images into two categories: the perceived, and the created. The perceived image was what the programmed brain recognized. The created image was the actual object or concept itself, before the process of programming socialized it to mean something specific to capitalist society. In order to access the created image, the perceived image often had to be unravelled first.<sup>250</sup> The idea that the mind could choose to accept one image or systematically take apart an image reflects the agency Bachelard awarded the imagination. He

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<sup>248</sup> de Zegher and Wigley, “The Activist Drawing,” 35.

<sup>249</sup> Welle, “A Young Painter Named Corneille,” 117.

<sup>250</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 17-18.

described an active relationship between the imagination and materialism in which the imagination shaped the way we perceive matter.<sup>251</sup> “Matter itself plays a significant role in the development of imagery,” Bachelard wrote, “and that in return, imaginative imagery shapes our material encounters.”<sup>252</sup> This theory complicated the prevailing notion that all associations with images were socialized. Dutch Cobra established the stance that humans attach meaning to images through a combination of both social and material encounters.<sup>253</sup>

Karen Kurczynski has written extensively about the impact of Bachelard on Dutch Cobra ideology and methodologies. In the article *Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra*, she describes how Marx’s writings introduced the concept of the working class freeing itself, and Bachelard’s writings expanded on the concept, providing a means of freeing oneself through the interpretation of experimental art.<sup>254</sup> According to Kurczynski, the relationship between the imagination and materialism had important implications for Dutch Cobra. First, it indicated that symbols were not fixed. Thus, the hope of alerting ignorant people to their oppression would not be in vain, as there was potential to reshape the way they viewed the world. Second, it finally gave viewers agency, something that class culture had taken from them.<sup>255</sup> And third, recognizing that both social situations and materiality play a part in assigning meaning meant that the artists could use the materiality of their work to interact with viewers’ imaginations—and communicate their socio-political message.

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<sup>251</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 17-18.

<sup>252</sup> Kurczynski, “Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra,” 681.

<sup>253</sup> Kurczynski, “Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra,” 681.

<sup>254</sup> Kurczynski, “Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra,” 680.

<sup>255</sup> Kurczynski, “Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra,” 682.

Kurczynski labels the process through which Dutch Cobra communicated with the masses ‘intersubjectivity.’ She defines the term as “existing between conscious minds, shared by more than one conscious mind.’ Thus, if something is intersubjective, it can be understood by all people.<sup>256</sup> She argues that specific visual choices engender intersubjectivity, such as the decision to present symbols in the process of representation.<sup>257</sup> Because they are incomplete in their journey towards representation, they cannot be fully recognized as a specific object. However, they bear enough semblance to said object that they adopt its associations. In addition, each stage of representation leading up to the final image has its own associations.<sup>258</sup> These a priori symbols help the viewer make sense of the work as a whole, even if its final form is not one already defined and coded by our culture.<sup>259</sup>

Take, for example, *Birds’ Idyll* (fig. 16). The final image is not one that exists in our world. This mass of red, blue, and black shapes and jagged lines does not instantly bring to mind an image or idea. However, elements within the work are recognizable despite their being recorded during the process of representation. An ovoid shape surrounding two small circles is instantly associated with a face. This combination of forms abounds in this work, suggesting that *Birds’ Idyll* is a painting of many faces. One particular face, on the viewer’s left, is distinguished by two upturned corners. The presence of two pointed shapes on top of what has already been deemed a face suggests to the viewer that the figure has ears on top of its head. The viewer’s subconscious then searches for the animal that fits these characteristics and comes up with the

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<sup>256</sup> Kurczynski, “Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra,” 677.

<sup>257</sup> Mark Denaci, “Amsterdam And/as New Babylon: Urban Modernity’s Contested Trajectories,” in *Imagining Global Amsterdam: History, Culture, and Geography in a World City*, ed. Marco de Waard et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 201.

<sup>258</sup> Kurczynski, “Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra,” 682.

<sup>259</sup> Kurczynski, “Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra,” 677.

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cat. This is another a priori symbol—a head with pointed ears on top is associated with the feline. The figure is complicated by six, clumpy rivulets of paint that drip down its face, away from its eyes. Any liquid flowing from eye-like forms instantly suggest tears. The clotted quality of this liquid gives these tears a sense of permanence, and lends the work as a whole a somber tone. Elsewhere throughout the work, symbols are represented in the process of coming into existence. Talons appear everywhere due to the mind's association between three-pronged lines and the feet of birds. A sun may be present in the top of the painting. White lines sprouting from the circumference of a blue circle do not perfectly represent the Hellenistic idea of a sun, but bear enough similar traits to this celestial body that the viewer associates the form with sunshine. These associations provide a starting point for the viewer when he is faced with the convoluted *Birds' Idyll*. He can look at this work and pick out symbols that he understands. In reconciling these symbols, he draws a greater conclusion about the work as a whole. It is here that Dutch Cobra aimed to communicate directly with the masses. Constant presented several creatures in the act of being represented, so that the viewer would be forced to make cognitive connections between matter and his imagination to make sense of their meaning. In doing so, he returned agency to the viewer, awakening him to his artistic and analytical potential. He also communicated to the viewer a powerful message that could only be decoded by the viewer's interaction with the material. This message is emotional—he depicts haunting figures, crying figures, and an uncanny sun peeking out from behind the carnage. He communicates his trauma through the depiction of these figures. Had he depicted a realistic scene of bloodied bodies, the public would have turned away, viscerally affected by the brutality of the scene. People would not have stopped to understand his trauma and its origin. By coding his trauma into collectively

recognizable symbols, Constant led viewers to internalize his trauma without immediately recognizing its source. In unravelling perceived images to reveal created images, people were tricked into empathizing with Constant. By the time they may have made the connection between the work and its context, their subconscious had already recognized and empathized with the raw emotion of the work. Constant hoped that this brutal realization and subsequent empathy would jolt viewers from their passivity and compel them to liberation.

Marx and Bachelard were the two main philosophical influences on Dutch Cobra, but it is worth briefly discussing the other philosophers whose writings found their way into Cobra ideology and methodologies. Henri Lefebvre explored the process by which man could be liberated from capitalist society. He concluded that the best way to do so was through a critique of everyday life, rather than through grand political gestures.<sup>260</sup> In *Critique of Everyday Life*, published in 1947, Lefebvre warned of the dangers of modernization, and the government's control over it. He feared that specialization in the workplace had created passivity amongst the masses.<sup>261</sup> This concept specifically motivated the emphasis on de-specialization in Dutch Cobra. Throughout the entirety of the group's existence, the artists wrote poetry and the poets painted. The sculptors, photographers, and philosophers experimented in every field in addition to their own.<sup>262</sup> The artists reasoned that de-specialization would increase the accessibility of all kinds of art-making. By eliminating the capitalist rules that designated those with specific degrees 'artists' and 'photographers,' the group hoped to provide all people with the means to make art.<sup>263</sup> The Cobra artists took it upon themselves to implement de-specialization as a tool

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<sup>260</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 20.

<sup>261</sup> Sojanović, "Internationaleries," 22-24.

<sup>262</sup> Flomenhaft, "The Roots and Development," 6.

<sup>263</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 157.

whenever possible. In the summer of 1949, the group collaborated at the summer home of a patron in Bregnerod, painting, sculpting, and writing all over the interior of the estate.<sup>264</sup> Collaborative house-painting exemplified Cobra's fervor for de-specialization.<sup>265</sup> All of these practices stemmed from the link Lefebvre drew between specialization and passivity. The philosopher also stressed that changes in his ordinary life were needed in order to motivate him towards liberation. He suggested small changes in the way religion, literature, philosophy, and morality were practiced.<sup>266</sup> Viewed from this lens, Dutch Cobra was one of many changes needed to upend the existing socio-political structures in Amsterdam. It aspired to change the way that people viewed art in their everyday lives.

Many of the ideas that Dutch Cobra borrowed from the Danes also have their roots in Jung's writings. Jung developed the notion of a Jungian collective unconscious that was both primitive and childlike, and erotic and mythological.<sup>267</sup> He also established the link between the subconscious and socialization. He dreamed of "a return to the archetypal images of fantasy thought to lie hidden under the many layers of the human subconscious."<sup>268</sup> The Danes, and then the Dutch, would turn this dream into an artistic-political goal. Jung also explored primitivism. He believed French cave paintings to be the origins of all art on earth. They recorded "the passage from animal to man."<sup>269</sup> However, he held that this passage was not a biological transformation, but a costumed one. He gradually donned the cloak of civilized humanity.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 35.

<sup>265</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 36-37.

<sup>266</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 6.

<sup>267</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 5.

<sup>268</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 53.

<sup>269</sup> Foster, "Creaturely Cobra," 16.

<sup>270</sup> Foster, "Creaturely Cobra," 16.

However, beneath this cloak man is still animalistic, still primitive. Jung's belief in man's primitive nature legitimized Dutch Cobra's desire to access said nature, and fuelled the establishment of Cobra ideology.

Another major influence was the Dutch philosopher and historian Johan Huizinga, whose readings contributed to Dutch Cobra's incorporation of children's art, masks, and mythology into their methodologies. In *Homo Ludens* (1938), he put forth his theory that all true civilizations emerged from play, rather than work.<sup>271</sup> Such a theory supported the Cobra belief that behind the layers of socialized behaviour lay a playful, spontaneous, primitive man. Huizinga spoke of "the terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy, and sacred awe...all inextricably entangled in this strange business of masks and disguises."<sup>272</sup> Dutch Cobra felt that, if these were the characteristics of man's true nature, and the foundation of culture, then they needed to be accessed and utilized. Constant took Huizinga's theory one step further. He pointed out that the concept of play could only be understood in contrast with the concept of work. In his paintings, he aimed to transcend this distinction.<sup>273</sup> Why should certain activities be viewed as work as opposed to play? The distinction existed on a continuum itself established by socialized norms. Dutch Cobra hoped to unravel all dichotomies rooted in capitalist thought.

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<sup>271</sup> Christoph Lindner and Andrew Hussey, "Concepts and Practices of the Underground," in *Paris-Amsterdam Underground: Essays on Cultural Resistance, Subversion, and Diversion*, ed. Christoph Lindner and Andrew Hussey et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 15.

<sup>272</sup> Craig Saper, *Networked Art*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 65.

<sup>273</sup> Denaci, "Amsterdam And/as New Babylon," 215.

### The Danish Desire for Liberation

#### *A Socialist View of Art*

Dutch Cobra's political goals were also influenced by the Danish avant-garde liberation paradigm. Danish interpretations of Marxism were prevalent during the twentieth century, demonstrated by the political leanings of Asger Jorn, Carl-Henning Pedersen and Egill Jacobson. The importance of accessible art and culture, a value derived from Marxist views of equality, manifested itself in Denmark quite early. In the nineteenth century, Nicolai Fred. Sev. Grundtvig conceived of the 'Folk High School,' a school in which farmers could educate themselves about art and culture.<sup>274</sup> Despite the prevalence of bourgeois society and the stratification of capitalism, there remained in Denmark a school of thought that all members of society should be able to reap the benefits of an artistic education. This stemmed from the Utopian belief that an artistic drive was present within every person.<sup>275</sup> The Danish Experimentalists would have been aware of the utopian 'Folk High School.' They built off these ideas with the support of Marx's writings. "Marx said that the capitalist regime is a mortal enemy of art and poetry," wrote Jorn.<sup>276</sup> The dichotomy between capitalism and creativity formed the basis of the Danish artists' political beliefs. The Dutch artists resonated with the emphasis the Danes placed on the human need for creativity. In the publication Reflex 2, Corneille expressed his approval. "The Danes know... that art is not a luxury," he wrote, "but the logical and natural expression of the mind."<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 8.

<sup>275</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 53.

<sup>276</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 78.

<sup>277</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 68.

The Danish Experimentalists believed that it was their duty to shift the social paradigm in which only some people had access to art.<sup>278</sup> They considered this shift to be one step towards the preservation of humanity itself.<sup>279</sup> In fact, Jorn was first motivated to connect with artists from other countries because he believed that social change was a global effort. He was also interested in increasing the prominence of art in social spaces in order to make art more visible.<sup>280</sup> Increased visibility would allow the Danish artists more opportunity to communicate with the general public through art. In order to free the people from the bourgeois class culture restricting their artistic desires, the artists needed to first make the people aware of their confinement, which could be done through the material of paint itself. “We must make all the people artists, because they are artists,” wrote Pedersen in 1944. “It is only that they don’t think so themselves. They believe that art is something for which you have to study and that only special people are able to learn it. They didn’t know that art is within everyone and that it will only come to the surface by man trying to feel his way about, by his playing with stones, colours, words, and sounds.”<sup>281</sup> In this passionate call to action, Pedersen lamented the fact that bourgeois culture had brainwashed people into accepting an elite hierarchy of art. He explained that experimentation would open their eyes to the creativity within their souls, releasing them from the bonds of class culture. Experimentation referred to all of the Danish techniques and influences discussed thus far: folk art, spontaneity, the subconscious, children’s art, the mask motif, Danish mythology and traditions, anti-aestheticism, primitivism, materiality, and de-specialization. By experimenting with these concepts, the individual could access his inner authentic self, thus freeing himself

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<sup>278</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 8.

<sup>279</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, “Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence,” 290.

<sup>280</sup> Hovendakk, “COBRA in Time,” 124.

<sup>281</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 8.

from the chains of society. The Danish artists also believed that, through experimentation, they could telepathically pass along their feelings to the viewer, inciting in the viewer a will to express himself.<sup>282</sup> This was a landmark idea. The Danes revolutionized the notion that art had communicative properties, and that expression could be physically transferred from artist to viewer through the medium of paint. They experimented with this link, utilizing all of the concepts discussed to strengthen it.

One of the most important prerequisites for communicating through art was the devising of a uniform imagery comprehensive to all viewers.<sup>283</sup> Seeing as the artists opposed any movement that defined its iconography, this imagery had to be organic in addition to uniform. The solution to this seemingly contradictory goal was to find a method that would engender a uniform imagery naturally rather than through conscious production of the same images.

Thus, anti-aestheticism, folklore, and the rest of the Danish concepts became tools to break through the layers of socialization and individuality masking the primitive man. Through utilization of these tools, the artist could access the collective subconscious and pull from it uniform imagery native to all human beings. What is absolutely crucial to understand here is that this imagery would be *universally comprehensible*. A Danish Experimentalist sought to access the collective subconscious of all people, rather than his own personal subconscious, through the utilization of the aforementioned concepts. Accessing the collective subconscious would allow the Danish artists to communicate directly with the masses by utilizing images instinctively understood by all people. With the right imagery, then, the people could be made aware of their

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<sup>282</sup> Trine Ross, "Reflections on Seeing as they Saw," in *Cobra: 50 år*, ed. Anna Krogh and Holger Reenberg (Ishøj: Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, 1997), 147.

<sup>283</sup> Ross, "Reflections on Seeing as they Saw," 149.

oppression, and motivated to fight for liberation.<sup>284</sup> It was the quasi-Marxist belief of the Danish artists that revolution started when each individual came to the realization, with the aid of experimental art, that revolution was needed.<sup>285</sup> Therefore, it was in the interest of the Danish Experimentalists to access the subconscious and identify the images that could be used as a mouthpiece for revolution.

The Danish Experimentalists began this process and made some progress, though it would take the collaboration with Belgium and the Netherlands to achieve more significant goals. Jorn discovered that making small changes to a recognizable motif transformed the image without negating its original associations. He then reasoned that the new motif bore both the associations of the original image, and its new form.<sup>286</sup> Furthermore, Jorn drew certain motifs—like knots—from his subconscious, and traced the history of these motifs between different cultures. He gathered that motifs changed slightly as they travelled, accumulating many new iterations and meanings. Thus, a motif was capable of having a multiplicity of meanings, and an idea was capable of having a variety of related forms.<sup>287</sup> This was a vital realization for several reasons. The evidence of knots in different cultures' visual vocabulary supported the notion that there is a collective subconscious from which universal images can be drawn. Secondly, it supported the belief that images contained a multiplicity of meanings and could be used to communicate complex messages to a population who collectively understood these meanings.

The Danish artists took other steps as a group to further their societal agenda. They rejected the notion that their own movement had stylistic parameters. In the second issue of

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<sup>284</sup> Kurczynski, "Materialism and Intersubjectivity in Cobra," 681.

<sup>285</sup> Ross, "Reflections on Seeing as they Saw," 147.

<sup>286</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 41.

<sup>287</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 41.

Helhesten, there was an article entitled *Intime Banaliteter* that demonstrated this position. “Style is the expression of bourgeois contentment,” it read, “and its various nuances are called taste.”<sup>288</sup> It was important for the destruction of class culture that the art movement not utilize the structures of bourgeois art institutions. Additionally, the Danish artists proposed physical reforms that would increase the accessibility of art, such as the opening of art libraries.<sup>289</sup> And lastly, the Danish Experimentalists pledged to support people and groups with similar goals, whose success could lead to success in their quest for artistic liberation. In the 1939 *Linien* catalogue, Jacobson wrote, “As artists, we will collaborate with those who work to make man happier and richer, materially and intellectually. We are not spectators, indifferent to invisible tragedies.”<sup>290</sup>

#### *Hal Foster on the ‘Creaturely’ in Danish Art*

Foster proposes a theory about Danish Experimentalism that explains another way in which the Danes contributed to Dutch Cobra’s artistic-political goals. As discussed, Foster describes Jorn’s figures as ‘creaturely.’ This quality is defined as the state of being between animal and human—and between animate and inanimate. Foster goes on to explain how Jorn’s unclassifiable figures are socially charged due to their inherent rejection of social norms.<sup>291</sup> For example, Foster describes traditional landscapes in which common people are easily recognizable by class, and juxtaposes this norm with the landscapes of the Danish Experimentalists. In the latter, “there is only a mixed condition, a commingling of perverse

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<sup>288</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 36.

<sup>289</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 8.

<sup>290</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 57.

<sup>291</sup> Foster, “Creaturely Cobra,” 16.

hybrids.”<sup>292</sup> In other words, the paintings of the Dutch Experimentalists rejected the traditional depiction of class culture. In *Untitled* and *Salomon’s Kingdom*, the relationships between the figures are ambiguous. Even the space that each figure inhabits is ambiguous; where does one figure end, and the atmosphere begin? The cryptic nature of each figure’s form prevents a rigid hierarchy within each work. Without strong differentiation between figures, they cannot be ordered. In lieu of a social hierarchy these works exhibit the *existence* of creatures. That there need not be a power dynamic between figures exemplifies the rejection of class culture brought about by the creaturely. Jorn considered the rejection of traditional class culture in art to be a good thing. He thought that the creaturely could be used to wedge open the existing cracks in the social order. If these cracks could be split wide enough, the social order would collapse, and a more egalitarian society could be founded.<sup>293</sup> Foster takes care to note that Jorn’s goal was not anarchy. Quasi-Marxist revolution was, to him, a methodical process that would lead to the creation of a structured, lawful society.<sup>294</sup> Lastly, Foster warns that the concept of “the vital source of life” has been idealized by our traditional ideas of aestheticism. He explains that many intellectuals had preconceived notions of the primitive human spirit. The crux of Foster’s argument is that associations are additive, and the journey to discover the vital source of life will unravel these associations.<sup>295</sup>

Foster’s perspective is important to this thesis because it highlights a psychological link between visual art and social change. As I have already explained, the Danish experimentalists believed that imagery from the collective subconscious could be used to communicate to

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<sup>292</sup> Foster, “Creaturely Cobra,” 11.

<sup>293</sup> Foster, “Creaturely Cobra,” 20.

<sup>294</sup> Foster, “Creaturely Cobra,” 11.

<sup>295</sup> Foster, “Creaturely Cobra,” 16.

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viewers, and make them aware of their imprisonment. Foster's theories isolate the psychological process in which the viewer comes to the conclusion that they are imprisoned. Society has conditioned humans to categorize the beings with whom they come into contact. Classification makes animals easier to study, and helps humans find like-minded individuals. It also makes people passive; it is simpler to fit within a group than to strike out on one's own and risk isolation. And so, seeing something unclassifiable makes us as humans extremely uncomfortable. This explains why *Scorched Earth* is viscerally discomfoting to the viewer, as noted in the introduction. The creaturely figures—faces attached to arms and large, bulbous hands—bore some semblance to recognizable beings, but resisted classification. What the paintings of the Danish Experimentalists did—as Foster points out—was to force the viewer to ask themselves, “Why am I uncomfortable?” Thus, the process of realization begins. It dawns on them that what they are seeing doesn't fit their perspective of normal. And why is that such a bad thing? Following a period of dehumanization and genocide, presenting unclassifiable, ‘threatening’ creatures was an open criticism of xenophobia. Dutch Cobra displayed creatures they knew would disgust. In the process, they caught viewers in the act of rejecting images purely because they couldn't understand them, and subsequently, feared them. This trap mirrored the dehumanization of Jews and other ‘degenerate’ races during the Holocaust, who were labelled as such because of so-called biological differences. The creaturely jolted people out of their passivity by calling attention to their inherent biases and propensity for xenophobia. This psychological link between the creaturely and the emergence from passivity is key to understanding the Dutch Experimentalists' adaptation of Danish ideas. It illustrates the means

through which telepathic mobilization of the masses supported the Dutch avant-garde social agenda.

The creaturely took on new importance for the Dutch contingent of Cobra, for whom destroying rules and boundaries was a political goal. It depicted a world where there were no rules or limits.<sup>296</sup> In “disrupting the classical tableau,” the artists hope to call attention to the rigidity of these rules, and enlighten the masses to the possibility of a liberated world.<sup>297</sup> Cobra creatures were partially formed and constantly changing in weight and mass. They bore the traits of different animals, and the names of both generic and mythological beasts.<sup>298</sup> A multiplicity of traits allowed the animals to bear multiple associations, becoming intersubjective. For example, the ability of the white, amorphous form in *Scorched Earth* to bear associations with both the human form and underwater coral reefs demonstrates the intersubjective nature of Constant’s imagery. Allowing forms to have a multiplicity of meanings meant that more people could recognize the images and engage in the dialogue proposed by the artist. After all, whether a person recognized the white mass as human or coral, he would make the assumption that the white mass was *alive*. Its animation—not its specific identity—was what made the figure as a whole uncanny. Through the creaturely illustration of this figure and its intersubjective nature, Constant hoped to disrupt the viewer and force him to confront his own perceptions of what art is supposed to be, and how the world is meant to look.

Dotremont summarizes the impact the Danish artists had on the younger Belgian and Dutch artists. “The Danes showed us what was left to do for those who consider art as a weapon

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<sup>296</sup> Foster, “Creaturely Cobra,” 7.

<sup>297</sup> Foster, “Creaturely Cobra,” 10.

<sup>298</sup> Foster, “Creaturely Cobra,” 14.

of the spirit, as a tool for the construction and the transformation of the world, and the artist as a good worker who subordinates all his activities to the common task and who does not seek to be great but useful.”<sup>299</sup> The Danish artists provided their contemporaries with a model of art as a tool for societal change. This was the rebirth that the Dutch Experimentalists had been searching for. As a result, in 1948, the Dutch Experimentalists and the Danish Experimentalist Group Host exhibited together for the first time.<sup>300</sup> It was the beginning of a transformative relationship.

### The Ideology of Liberation

From Marx, Dutch Cobra first learned about the socialist revolution and its relevance in their own lives. From Bachelard, the artists first explored the relationship between the imagination and matter, and discovered that this relationship could be used to help the artists communicate their message to the masses. Lefebvre, Jung, and Huizinga contributed to Dutch Cobra’s understanding of the ordinary man, and how best to reach him and awaken him. The question of how specifically to reach the ordinary man was half of the key to understanding Dutch Cobra’s ideology, the other half being the desire for rebirth. “It is not enough to say that everybody is an artist,” wrote Constant. “What is important is to figure out how his creativity, this sleeping creativity, can be woken up. That is not only by artistic or cultural means, but also by social means, by the means of the production of life, so that means a social turnover, a

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<sup>299</sup> Stokvis, *An International Movement*, 54.

<sup>300</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 29.

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revolution.”<sup>301</sup> Bachelard, Lefebvre, Jung, and Huizinga provided some insight into the way in which Dutch Cobra could communicate with the people and alert them to their condition. The Danish artists provided additional inspiration.

From the Danish avant-gardes, Dutch Cobra borrowed ideas about the subconscious, universally comprehensible imagery, the creaturely, folklore, masks, and materiality to formulate Cobra ideology. The Dutch artists explored the depths of the collective subconscious, pulling from it images that people all over the world could understand. Dutch Cobra art featured many uncanny, suggestive creatures whose intersubjective nature allowed them to be interpreted by all viewers.<sup>302</sup>

Folklore, as discussed, contributed to Dutch Cobra’s rebirth. It also played a role in bringing about liberation. In the first Cobra periodical, it is written that the artists recognized folklore as a universal phenomenon, rather than a provincial one. They painted many figures they saw as “emanating from the shadowy region of mankind’s universal heritage.”<sup>303</sup> This concept explained why folk art from different regions with little to no communication produced similar artwork.<sup>304</sup> Thus, images pulled from folklore would be universally comprehensible, and well-suited for the socio-political goals of the group. Intersubjective works inspired by folklore had the capacity to act as a mediator between artist/material and viewer/imagination. Thus, aspects of folklore utilized in Dutch Cobra works served a dual purpose: to help the artists achieve rebirth and to help them communicate with viewers.

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<sup>301</sup> de Zegher and Wigley, “The Activist Drawing,” 25.

<sup>302</sup> Emily Lowe Gallery, *A Cobra Portfolio*, 3.

<sup>303</sup> Flomenhaft, “The Roots and Development,” 5.

<sup>304</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 107.

The concept of the mask was useful as well. The mask paradox fascinated Dutch Cobra, and became a key Cobra motif.<sup>305</sup> The ambiguity of the mask allowed the Dutch artists to express themselves without anecdotal details clogging up the significance of their message. It allowed them to mediate their emotions and experiences for the viewer without framing these feelings within the confines of an individual face.<sup>306</sup> Skin and eye colour, as well as the unique character of a person's eyes would attribute the associations in the painting to a specific person. In utilizing the mask, the artists avoided personalizing their figures, which made them more accessible to diverse viewers. This would be very beneficial to their second motive: the creation of universal iconography from the collective subconscious. The depersonalized nature of masks made them universal icons.

And lastly, the attention to materiality itself was drawn from the initial Danish interest in matter. The materiality of Dutch Cobra works was so important because Cobra ideology was heavily focused on the activity of creation and what it signified. The artists believed that a good painting demonstrated the process of creation.<sup>307</sup> Only then could it bear a multiplicity of intersubjective symbols, and create a space for the artist to communicate directly with the viewer. Additionally, if a work was too polished, its symbols too fixed, then there could be no cognitive journey for the viewer to go on, and no subsequent liberation.

All of the Dutch Cobra works discussed thus far exemplify Cobra political ideology in practice. Corneille's *Print* (fig. 9) is a particularly good example. In chapter 3, I demonstrated how Corneille's simultaneous depiction of a night sky and a swath of burning yellow light in this

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<sup>305</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 122.

<sup>306</sup> Hovendakk, "COBRA in Time," 124.

<sup>307</sup> Nieuwenhuys, "Manifesto," 170.

work suggests a different understanding of time and space—one that was anti-aesthetic and non-heliocentric. I explained how it contributed to the artist's personal rebirth. This perception, rooted in Danish folklore, also played a part in the ideology of liberation. Since folklore had been shown to contain universally comprehensible symbols, it follows that a view of night and day alternative to heliocentrism was actually rooted deep in the collective subconscious. Thus, the uncanny juxtaposition of night and day on the same plane was meant to disturb the socialized human mind. It did so by presenting a concept recognizable to parts of the brain buried deep below the socialized layers.

The mask-like appearances of the figures in *Print* are also drawn from the collective subconscious, and serve to disrupt and unravel the viewer's emotional state. Masks have been shown to be emblematic of primitive people and young children, both demographics that live closer to the primitive state of man. Here, mask-like qualities can be attributed to all of the figures. The simplified forms on a mask allow a figure to be universally comprehensible, while still hiding his intentions. The figure in the viewer's top left hangs upside down by some invisible mechanism. Its eyes are painted as two round, purple dots. The viewer registers these to be eyes because they exist within the circumference of a proportional geometric shape. The figure at the bottom of the print is shown in profile, with only one visible eye. Its eye is a splash of purple paint one only recognizes as an eye because of the increased saturation towards the center, suggesting an iris or a pupil. Furthermore, these figures bear other traits that associate them with living things. Even if the viewer didn't recognize this patch of paint as an eye, he would likely recognize the round circles on the figure's body as breasts, or the thin lines on either side of the figure's body as arms. Most of these figures bear traits that associate them with

living beings. Most have a semblance of arms and/or legs, and a mid-section composed of some combination of geometric shapes. These figures are predominantly upright, which the subconscious associates with humans due to the fact that humans walk upright on two legs.

The uncanniest figure is the creature second from the viewer's right, with a triangular head and a singular eye within. This figure's face is a creamy grey, outlined by thin stripes of purple gouache. Its eye is painted from the same purple hue, with a splash of yellow within the white of the eye. Thick, irregular eyelashes distend from the circumference of the eyeball on all sides. Rather than a pupil, there is an enlarged purple iris. This iris stares directly at the viewer, but without any pupil, or reflection on the surface of the iris, the viewer is unable to return the figure's gaze. Such is the experience of looking at a masked figure. Being looked at without being able to confront the voyeur registers in the viewer's mind as deeply uncomfortable.

The second way in which Corneille disrupts and discomforts the viewer is through the utilization of the creaturely. Note how these figures all resemble humans because of the essential characteristics they draw from the subconscious, such as an eye, breasts, and arms. Yet their representation never crosses enough into the realm of the human for us to categorize them as such. The one-eyed figure has several rows of triangles distending from its torso. The angle, when attached to what the eye perceives as a body, attempts to reconcile these shapes as arms. The first instinct is to describe the arms as being bent. When a person puts his or her hand on their hip, a triangle is formed as well. However, there are several rows of triangles here, which distorts this interpretation. Are there multiple rows of arms? If we agree with the logic that the triangles attached to a body are arms, then all of the triangles ought to be arms, which is unhuman. If we reject the logic that the triangles attached to a body are arms, then the figure

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remains ambiguous and unhuman. And so, Corneille's intentional failure to represent the human form through geometric symbols renders this work uncanny and creaturely—somewhat human, but not quite. The other figures are just as ambiguous. The figure at the bottom of the work has two accentuated breasts and a rounded midsection that extends to its pubic area. What these circles do is draw attention to the question of gender. The typical understanding of human, female anatomy would suggest that this is a female figure. And yet, there is nothing human about this figure's unnaturally long and skinny neck. The head atop it appears to be on the brink of sliding off it. This head is also completely a-gendered, without any hair on its head or specific facial characteristics at all. And yet it is attached to the overly gendered torso. What we are left to make sense of is a figure that is both very female and very asexual; very human, and very unhuman. It is decidedly creaturely. Lastly, the figure hanging from the sky is composed of many shapes, and also has human-like arms coming out from his torso in the shape of skinny lines. The first instinct is to categorize him as a person, and yet, we are given no explanation as to how he is existing in this world, upside-down. There are no shapes on his body we take to be wings. And so, believing him a human leaves the viewer uncomfortable. If we take the opposite stance, that he is not a person, then we have no further explanation as to what this scene portrays. All of these creaturely figures exist in an unexplainable state, watching us attempt in vain to classify them.

It was Corneille's intention to create ambiguity through the use of both masks and the creaturely. Doing so disrupted the viewer and forced him to confront his own discomfort. Corneille believed that man was inherently good beneath layers of socialization, and that underneath those layers, man was deeply troubled by Dutch complacency in WWII and the

Holocaust. By drawing images and ideas directly from the collective subconscious, he hoped to crack a hole in these layers of socialization. Corneille recognized that the public would remain idle if it were not confronted with the truth. When asked why most people did not understand poetry anymore, he responded, “perhaps because we are no longer confronted with poetry.”<sup>308</sup>

And so, he took the same approach to his artwork. It was both confrontational and methodical, as it jumpstarted a cognitive process in the viewer’s unwitting mind. He anticipated that a viewer would look at this print and feel uncomfortable, and feel curious about his discomfort. Was it the eye staring directly at him with no escape that made him uneasy? What was the figure accusing him of with that pointed stare? Had he something to feel guilty about? Perhaps he did have something to feel guilty about—could he have acted differently during the war? Was he in some way complicit in the events of the Holocaust? Corneille hoped to awaken the population’s collective guilt, buried underneath layers of socialization and trauma, and in doing so, alleviate his own. The objective was for a chain reaction to go off in the viewer’s head, and for him to unravel every subconscious symbol in a work until his brain could connect the associations of each symbol. The viewer’s ability to feel guilt was the result.

Within the greater context of social liberation, this kind of chain reaction played a strong role. In realizing one’s complacency in the War, one could then think freely about the reasons that war and genocide had been allowed to occur in the country. They would then have the agency to question the capitalist institutions governing both art and society as a whole.

Disrupting the socialized psyche was the first step in awakening people to their oppression and motivating them to liberate themselves.

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<sup>308</sup> Welle, “A Young Painter Named Corneille,” 118.

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In sum, the second Dutch Cobra goal—the liberation of the masses—was achieved through a psychological process inspired by both philosophy and Danish avant-garde methodologies. This process involved the communication between artist and viewer through the surface of Cobra paintings. It was thought that this dialogue would alert people to the oppressive nature of artistic institutions, and motivate them to detach from these institutions. On a grander level, these institutions were emblematic of capitalism as a whole. Thus, the dialogue between viewer, artist, imagination, and matter had the potential to construct an entirely new society.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>309</sup>Hovendakk, “COBRA in Time,” 125-126.

Chapter 5: Cobra in Practice

Cobra was officially founded in November 1948, when the artists met in Paris.<sup>310</sup> The artists created together for three years before dissolving in 1951. This thesis has traced the emergence of Dutch Cobra from the post-war Dutch socio-political atmosphere, to the rejection of existing modern art movements, to the influence of philosophy and Danish avant-garde art. It has narrowed down the essential goals of Dutch Cobra to the desire for rebirth and the desire for societal liberation, and explored the means by which the artists arrived at these goals, and attempted to satisfy them. What remains to be done is to refute those who paint Dutch Cobra as an optimistic movement in their analyses of Dutch works through specific references to Cobra literature and detailed visual analysis of three major Dutch Cobra works.

Eleanor Flomenhaft, early Cobra art historian and author of *The Roots and Development of Cobra*, is a strong proponent of this school of thought. In her book, she speaks of a sense of responsibility that the artists felt to create optimism for viewers.<sup>311</sup> Her reasoning is not for lack of contextualization. On the contrary, she believes that Dutch Cobra's context is what made for its optimism. "The Cobra artists looked at the end of World War II in a positive sense," she writes, "seeing it as the possibility of a fresh start in which their art would embody a regenerative life force to spiritually nourish and energize the war-weary public. Such optimism, even when tempered with an undercurrent of tension and uneasiness, helps account for the unabashed zest, physical power, and pervasive sense of humour found in the paintings."<sup>312</sup> Jean-Clarence

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<sup>310</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 33.

<sup>311</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 6.

<sup>312</sup> Emily Lowe Gallery, *A Cobra Portfolio*, 6.

Lambert, author of *Cobra*, shares a similar sentiment in his book about the artists. “Corneille was always a fundamental optimist,” he wrote, “searching for well-being through experimentation.”<sup>313</sup> Lastly, Karen Kurczynski also illustrates Dutch Cobra in an optimistic light. Though she makes many important points that have been cited in this thesis, I disagree with this aspect of her Dutch Cobra interpretation. In *Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence* she writes, “The exuberance of Cobra artwork was a conscious choice to look forward rather than revisit the traumas of the war.”<sup>314</sup> For evidence she points to the bright colours and childlike forms that abound in Cobra art. And yet, she simultaneously states that the exuberance and simplicity of Dutch Cobra situated the movement in the historical moment.

The fact that all three art historians use historical context to support their claim that Dutch Cobra was a cheerful, optimistic movement suggests a lack of research into both trauma theory and the political situation in Amsterdam following WWII. LaCapra demonstrates the tendency of those working through historical trauma to think critically about the socio-political structures that engendered the trauma. This critical thinking comes not from a place of optimism but desperate need for redemption through political activism. Furthermore, LaCapra’s text situates Dutch Cobra within a frame of transference that allowed the artists to adopt the psychology of Holocaust victims, a mind-set that was decidedly *not* optimistic. I have also shown, through both excerpts from the Cobra periodicals and visual analyses of Cobra works, that the political situation in Amsterdam left the artists feeling demoralized, rather than cheerfully optimistic. One of their central goals was to restructure the socio-political system. The

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<sup>313</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 137.

<sup>314</sup> Kurczynski and Pezolet, “Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence,” 288.

desire for liberation does not stem from contentedness, but from frustration. Furthermore, the bright colours and childlike forms that Kurczynski uses to support her optimistic interpretation of Dutch Cobra can also be read as garish and uncanny. The following three visual analyses will be conducted to refute these art historians' claims in favour of the perspective that Dutch Cobra was born from a moment of desperation and trauma.

*Questioning Children*, by Karel Appel

In 1949, Karel Appel created *Questioning Children* (fig. 14) on a block of wood. He nailed small blocks of wood to a large wooden panel and painted them with primary colours.<sup>315</sup> The blocks form the bodies of the titular children. Some figures have a block for a head and a separate block for a torso. Other figures are painted entirely on one block. The faces of all the figures are delineated with circles, dots, and splotches of colour. These markings construct two eyes and a mouth, but no other identifying features. The figures' expressions vary. Some have mouths composed of straight lines, which lends them the appearance of sadness. More rounded mouths suggest speech, surprise, or fear. The eyes of the figures are also of interest. They either lack pupils or are a mass of colour unidentifiable as an iris or a pupil. Without the narrow focus that an iris provides, these eyes appear vacant, even ominous. Eleanor Flomenhaft likened the figures' eyes to "a nest full of light bulbs."<sup>316</sup> The figures' arms are constructed from horizontal stripes of paint that extend sideways from their torsos. The uniform positioning of the figures'

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<sup>315</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 80.

<sup>316</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 77.

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arms sideways emphasizes the significance of the gesture. It reads as a cry for help, and a desire to be noticed. The figures literally step into the viewers' space by extending out from the wall, and their outstretched arms push them further into the viewer's space. This lends *Questioning Children* a sense of outward momentum.

There is also a wheel motif on the viewer's right. Appel was inspired to create this work after seeing hundreds of begging children out the window of his train in Germany. The wheel motif is likely emblematic of the train that separated him from these children. However, the wheel has not been placed at the foreground of the work. Such a placement would have demonstrated the physical space between Appel's train-car and the children beyond it. Instead, the wheel sits several inches above the centre of the work. The figures are placed both above and below the wheel. Thus, there is no boundary between the train-car and the children. The space between Appel and the questioning children has been flattened. This flattening is representative of the psychological space between him and the children which, as Dominick LaCapra's trauma theories indicate, was foreshortened through transference. As I have discussed, the proximity of the Dutch Experimentalists to the Holocaust allowed them resulted in their appropriation of what they felt to be Holocaust victims' trauma. Thus, the physical representation of the wheel on the same plane as the children suggests the emotional closeness Appel felt to these victims.

The children's simplified forms hark back to the primitive and childlike. Its garish, simplified faces are childlike in their basic interpretation of the human form and human emotions. To a child, wide eyes, gaping mouths, and outstretched arms are the basic units of a 'fearful' body. Short slashes of colour on the figures' limbs resemble the scarifications on

primitive masks.<sup>317</sup> There is almost humour to the way Appel takes primary coloured squares—the foundation of Mondrian’s painting—and turned them into figures—the antithesis of Mondrian.<sup>318</sup> Appel’s decision to employ these tools indicates his desire to paint with universally comprehensible iconography. The simple, brutal treatment of forms expresses the emotion of the figures without padding them with anecdotal detail that could distract from this emotion. Without an anecdotal shield between viewer and figure, the former is confronted by this emotion, an emotion that literally reaches out to him by means of three-dimensional wooden blocks.

The ambiguity of the creatures’ eyes is particularly significant, as it recalls the power of the mask. Without a focused gaze, it is impossible for the viewer to return eye contact. And yet, the viewer is uncomfortably aware that the eyes—regardless of their peculiar anatomy—are staring pointedly at him. Thus, the mask begins the process of disrupting the socialized psyche, allowing the viewer’s subconscious emotions and associations to take over. Once aware of his discomfort, the viewer searches for an explanation to his discomfort, and dredges up the guilt and pain wedged beneath layers of socialized behaviour. Appel aimed to awaken these emotions, and make them rise to the surface of the Dutch consciousness by means of intersubjective symbols. Gaping mouths, outstretched arms, and wide eyes were universal representations of fear. Wheels were also heavily charged symbols. Trains were used to deport Jews to the death camps, and railroad blockades led to the Hunger Winter that killed thousands. Furthermore, on a psychological level, wheels signified continuation, and the cycle of life. Their presence in a work indicated a particular stage in this cycle. With the context in mind, the viewer would likely have

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<sup>317</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*,” 80.

<sup>318</sup> Emily Lowe Gallery, *A Cobra Portfolio*, 4.

indicated ‘death’ to be the stage in question. Appel aimed to create a link in the viewer’s mind between the children and the trains—Dutch complacency during the War.

The use of intersubjective symbols, primitivism, children’s art and masks allowed Appel to make this link. On one level, the viewer recognizes these children as the destitute survivors of the War and the Holocaust. Perhaps recognizing who they are forces him to think critically about people’s livelihoods during reconstruction. Yet on another level, seeing these de-individualized characters stare so frankly at him tugs at an even more deeply hidden sentiment—his own survivor’s guilt and responsibility for the events of the Second World War. This understanding presents the questioning children as representatives of humanity. Their situation is hopeless; they are bits of wood nailed to a board. And yet, they focus all their energy on the viewer. The children’s confrontation with the viewer motivates a chain of cognitive leaps that encourage the viewer to confront his own complacency. This entire process was instigated by Appel’s use of primitivism, child art, and masks. These tools allowed him to communicate directly with the viewer, and engender this cognitive process.

In *Questioning Children*, I have identified primitivism, children’s art, and masks as tools used to instigate dialogue between the artist and the viewer. These interconnected tools also served Appel’s personal quest for spiritual and artistic rebirth. As I discussed in chapter 3, these three tools allowed the Dutch artists to transcend their trauma through a systematic rejection of western artistic norms and the accession of one’s most primitive self.

Primitivism was shown to be the most essential form of man, composed of both childlike and aggressive impulses. *Questioning Children* demonstrates both. Its essentialized figures bear only the most essential features needed for the brain to associate them with human beings. Their

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masklike faces are composed of eyes and a mouth alone. The masklike essentialization of figures in *Questioning Children* stages a child's interpretation of the human form. Additionally, the hasty application of paint resembles a child's impulsive artistic drive. Rather than filling in the face of a figure uniformly, spreading the paint evenly, Appel covers the bare minimum of the surface with paint to suggest the coloration of a figure. Aggression manifests itself in the rough application of paint on the corroborated wood surface. The outstretched arms of the figures, as well as the confrontational nature of the figures' gazes, is also quite hostile.

The essentialization of forms, and the suggestion of color rather than its depiction are concepts antithetical to traditional, western, notions of painting. Nonexistent was the Renaissance work that depicted nose-less figures and faces only semi-filled in with color. Even contemporary works, such as that of Picasso and Mondrian, maintained control and 'finish' in a way that Appel rejected. Thus, the utilization of these concepts was an act of rebellion against traditional modes of painting, and a means for renewal. Dutch Cobra viewed traditional modes of painting as manifestations of the institutions that were complacent during genocide. In rejecting artistic norms, the artists made a political statement against the complicit Dutch government and cleansed themselves of deep-seeded guilt.

I have shown that Appel's *Questioning Children* demonstrates LaCapra's theory of transference. I have also shown that the work illustrates Dutch Cobra's two central goals: societal liberation and rebirth. These goals refute Flomenhaft, Kurcaynski, and Lambert's statements that Dutch Cobra was an optimistic response to the Dutch condition because they posit themselves on the fact that the Dutch condition *warranted* social change and spiritual cleansing. If the artists were so optimistic after the war, organizing a quasi-Marxist social

liberation and actively seeking rebirth would have been unnecessary. Thus, the successful illustration of Dutch Cobra's central goals discredits the belief that the movement was born from optimism.

Appel's own statements further discredit this belief. He is quoted saying that "art became a visual rebellion against war, accepted trends of painting, against hypocrisy."<sup>319</sup> he also describes his work as "a virtual war, a body in a duel with paint...and red was clearly blood."<sup>320</sup> These excerpts describe aggressive adjectives and ideas—rebellion, hypocrisy, war, and blood. These are not words humans associate with optimism and hope. These are expressions of anger and acting out one's anger. *Questioning Children* is not optimistic. It is desperate.

*Concentration Camp*, by Constant Nieuwenhuys

Another painting, this time by Constant Nieuwenhuys demonstrates, the relationship between socio-political context, trauma, and the emergence of Dutch Cobra. *Concentration Camp* (1950) (fig. 19) illustrates Dutch Cobra's central goals while situating the movement firmly within the socio-political atmosphere in Amsterdam following the Second World War, and in the post-traumatic psyche of the Dutch Experimentalist painters.

*Concentration Camp* exhibits the primitivism that Dutch Cobra believed could help them achieve rebirth. The aggressive application of paint to the canvas feels like an explosion of expression. Suppressed for many years beneath layers of socialization, this expression became

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<sup>319</sup> Rothmans, "Appel's Appels," 8.

<sup>320</sup> Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 85.

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pressurized, like air in a small container. Once Constant liberated his primitive spirit, it burst free with energy and exploded onto the canvas. This energy is manifested in the way Constant attacked the canvas. The figure at right is covered with black cross-hatched lines that have been marked over and over again. This painterly “overkill” demonstrates Constant’s aggressive mental state. The relationship between the two figures also reads as aggressive. One figure reclines, its eyes closed and arms indiscernible. In such a position, it is defenseless. The other figure leans diagonally towards the reclining figure, encroaching on its space with amorphous limbs. Constant has painted the figures at the moment before the lunging figure makes contact with the reclining figure, creating tension between the forms. Constant completes the utilization of primitivism with the use of childlike application of paint. The incorporation of the childlike tempers the aggression of the painting, and allows the work to encapsulate the primitive spirit. The childlike can be found in the application of paint at the top of the work, in what can be interpreted as the sky. Similar to *Questioning Children* and *Scorched Earth*, the sky in *Concentration Camp* only suggests the color of the sky, rather than explicitly depicting it. Streaky blue brushstrokes allow white to shine through, while sections of the canvas are more deeply saturated than others. Constant is not saying that the sky is made of blue and white stripes, even in the realm of the subconscious. He is using a child’s style of communicating color by mixing together the blue of the sky and the white from clouds and mashing them together in a mass of lines that suggest, rather than dictate, appearance. Constant’s utilization of primitivism helped him achieve rebirth because it allowed him to access a part of himself that was not governed by the socialization. In stripping himself of socialized ideas about how the world exists and how it ought to be painted, he simultaneously rinsed himself clean of evil. Furthermore, he

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acted out this rinsing in the aggressive application of paint. The act of crossing lines one over the other, over and over again, mirrors the repetitive motion of cleaning.

*Concertation Camp* is another example of the creaturely being used to disrupt one's viewing experience and jumpstart a cognitive process unraveling socialization. None of the depicted figures can be clearly classified as human or animal. Furthermore, the distinctions between one figure and the next are ambiguous as well. The most isolated figure is that at the viewer's right, whose outline appears to be an undulating line of beige paint. This figure can only be read as a figure because certain aspects are associated with living beings. The rounded 'head' atop a larger body is the first indication that this figure is animate. The brain then wants to associate lines on this head with facial features, and Constant makes it simple to do so. There is a straight, smudged line to represent a mouth. An apostrophe-like tick of paint at the bottom of a slope in the beige paint indicates a nose. A straight black line converging on a somewhat perpendicular black line give the appearance of an eye, but only because the mind expects to see an eye above a nose, And lastly, the large black loop below the eye is next associated with an ear, because such is the placement of an ear on many animate beings. The rest of the figure's body bears little semblance to a human form, save for a protrusion from its 'chest' that resembles a breast. The rest of the creature's torso is heavily marked with cross-hatching black lines, lines that exhibit Constant's primitive, spontaneous urges. These markings further obfuscate the creature's identity, creating an extra layer of indiscernible anatomy that proves frustrating for the viewer attempting to classify it. Beneath the layers of cross-hatching there is a swirl of thick black paint. It undulates left and then curls back under in a thin tendril. This line contrasts greatly with the rough, straight lines it distends from. It bears associations with both waves and serpents

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due to its curving nature. The combination of human and serpent forms, as well as inanimate, material brushstrokes, makes for a creature that is both human and animal, animate and inanimate. It is decidedly creaturely.

The figure at left may or may not be one creature. There is an amorphous black creature encroaching on the reclined figure at right. It bears semblance to living beings due to its two front ‘legs’ and a snout-like distension from a rounded ‘head.’ However, the creature extends leftward off the canvas, so the viewer cannot see its entire structure and make a judgement about its animate status. Layered on top of the black creature is another amorphous shape in the same color as the reclining figure, beige. It, too, originates off the canvas leftward, but is attached to the black mass by vertical black brushstrokes painted on top of it at the base. The beige form thins out as it moves to the viewer’s right, and then suddenly opens up and becomes oblong. Within the oval there are several black markings, all curling and U-shaped. The form is a muddy beige, which resembles a skin tone. Its length and protrusion could easily be an arm and hand. Even the black marks could be a palm and fingers. And so, for a human searching to classify the ambiguous form at left, the association with a living being’s arm and hand would be a natural conclusion. However, finding in the black and beige masses elements of animation does not rid them of their ambiguity and uncanniness. If anything, it is even more confusing for the viewer, because he recognizes in these figures human-like qualities, but cannot classify them as such. They remain in his mind unclassifiable, which is deeply discomfoting.

Thus, the two or three figures—depending how one sees *Concentration Camp*—strongly evoke the creaturely. A viewer confronted with this painting would try in vain to make sense of

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the figures but would instead find himself increasingly agitated. This agitation was the first step in unraveling one's perceptions about painting and the world.

Related to the creaturely was Constant's employment of the intersubjective. The ability the swirling line on the reclined figure to evoke both waves and serpents demonstrates intersubjectivity at work. That is, the form is able to bear a multiplicity of meanings which allow for more widespread comprehension of the work. Whether one interprets the swirling line as a wave or a serpent is no matter. Either interpretation contradicts the human elements on the figure, allowing the figure to exhibit the creaturely. The intersubjective is also employed to add additionally significance where meaning is already attached. The white dashes that dot *Concentration Camp* very obviously evoke the barbed wire fences surrounding concentration camps. The title of the work indicates this. However, gazing at this evocation of barbed wire produces a multitude of additional meanings from both the subconscious and one's socialized experience. The wire begins to take on the appearance of tears, white flecks of salty water descending down the surface of the painting. Their layout in a grid with curving lines suggests a net, as nets are flexible and able to stretch in the wind and water. Blue paint and the aforementioned presence of wave-like forms aid the viewer in making the connection with nets, as these are utilized in oceans. Both nets and fences symbolize entrapment, here the subject of the work as a whole. Thus, the sense of entrapment is multiplied by the use of intersubjective symbols.

While other paintings by Dutch Cobra were aimed at producing empathy from an apathetic population, *Concentration Camp* starts with the assumption that all viewers are acutely aware of its significance. It would be impossible not to feel something while gazing upon a

painting about the Holocaust. And yet, the visual techniques utilized in the work—children’s art, the creaturely, the intersubjective—support the same goals I have discussed throughout this thesis. *Concentration Camp* was still a part of Constant’s rebirth, and a vehicle through which he could communicate the ideology of liberation, despite the fact that this work instilled emotion through its title alone. *Concentration Camp* represents the ultimate transcendence of, albeit transferred, trauma. The act of depicting genocide legitimized his experiences and allowed him to work through them. At the same time, his own guilt (for surviving, when so many others didn’t) could be redeemed through what he considered his penance—documentation of tragedy, and fighting for societal liberation.

Constant hoped to capitalize on the intersubjective nature of his painting, using the strength of a multiplicity of meanings to summon a larger emotional response from his audience. By digging deep into people’s subconscious’, and attaching to an already emotional subject the strength of these symbols, Constant aimed to make a statement so powerful it would awaken people to their own condition: entrapment.

This begs the question of how ethical it is for non-victims to depict the horrors of the Holocaust. There is a strong argument against artists like Constant who paint what they have not personally experienced. In *The Holocaust’s Ghost: Writings on Art, Politics, Law and Education*, Stephen Feinstein writes, “Survivors share a special vision of having been survivors of the Holocaust. Non-survivors cannot possess the same vision.”<sup>321</sup> The logic follows that it is morally incorrect for non-survivors to pretend to understand the experiences of victims by assuming the role of victim in a work of art. Furthermore, others take the position that any representation of

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<sup>321</sup> *The Holocaust’s Ghost*, 109

the Holocaust is inappropriate. They feel that, regardless of whether the artist is a victim or not, because any representation will be inadequate, and propagate a watered-down version of the horrific reality.<sup>322</sup> In contrast, those that support artistic responses to the Holocaust do so because they believe art is a powerful tool for communication. In *In an Era of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah*, Shoshana Felman writes, “the historian is there to embody, to give flesh and blood to, the dead author of the diary.”<sup>323</sup> Felman believes that the historian has a responsibility to carry on the legacy of victims. This parallels Dutch Cobra’s own conviction that it was their duty to use their art to reshape society. In this context, Dutch Cobra takes on the role Felman defines as the historian. Constant would have felt justified in his portrayal of the Holocaust because of his perspective of the artist’s role in society. Furthermore, it was previously established that the members of Dutch Cobra transferred trauma from Holocaust victims. Having felt what he believed to be Holocaust trauma, Constant would have felt doubly justified.

The contextualization of both *Questioning Children* and *Concentration Camp* refutes the conventional wisdom that Dutch Cobra was an optimistic response to the Dutch condition. Appel was motivated to create *Questioning Children* after riding a train through desolate Germany on his way to Denmark after the War. The children he carved from wood and painted with giant, looking eyes were impressions of the faces he saw from his train window. Witnessing the destroyed landscape for himself also deepened the effect of traumatic transference. Dotremont wrote extensively on the subject. “It is hard to be in Stalingrad in winter...with so many machine

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<sup>322</sup> Yad Vashem

<sup>323</sup> Shoah, 50

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guns applauding death,” he wrote. “But hard too to be Stalingrad itself, to be occupied and...driven against the wall...well man is less the approaching SS, the one soldier who defends himself...than this town itself where hope hides despair, where the sky really is a cover. He is less a soldier than a battlefield...it is us, the scorched earth.”<sup>324</sup> In this excerpt, Dotremont illustrates the extent to which Dutch Cobra absorbed the trauma of others. Not only does he describe absorbing the victimology of Russian people, but the trauma inflicted on the earth itself. He empathizes with the city, the town, and the land itself.

*Concentration Camp* refers to the camps to which Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, disabled people, and other ‘undesirables’ were sent to be executed during World War II. Its subject matter alone should refute any claims that Constant’s work was positive or optimistic. Lambert offers supporting evidence of this in *Cobra*. “It is important to recognize,” he writes, “that this demand to go the Palaeolithic condition of human existence was directly linked to the actual historical political conditions that artists were facing after the Second World War and after the Holocaust.”<sup>325</sup> In this excerpt he draws a connection between Dutch Cobra’s desire to access the primitive spirit and the conditions in the Netherlands after the War. He emphasizes that one cannot examine and celebrate this primitivism without taking a hard look at the difficult conditions that engendered its necessity. Constant himself has been quoted many times emphasizing the importance of the Dutch condition after the War on his artistic output. “Yes the subjects are political,” he wrote, “but how could it be otherwise? what inspire me are the day’s newspapers, photos, TV. Today one drama, tomorrow another.”<sup>326</sup> Since war was what filled the

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<sup>324</sup> Lambert, *Cobra*, 176.

<sup>325</sup> de Zegher and Wigley, “The Activist Drawing,” 16.

<sup>326</sup> McDonough, “Metastructure,” 87.

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media and affected his daily life, war subjects became a major theme of his art.<sup>327</sup> Following the War, Constant did not look to the future with a hopeful grin, as several art historians have suggested. He is quoted saying, “We cannot think of Cobra without thinking of the situations we were in after the war, the situation of complete emptiness.”<sup>328</sup> It was from this state of mind that Constant created *Concentration Camp*. And although his paintings appeared at times to be playful, as in the unorthodox treatment of paint in this work, he maintained that this spontaneity had political purpose. His use of child art and spontaneity were part of a process that would “become the foundation of the most serious transformation of society.”<sup>329</sup> And so, *Concentration Camp* was a part of this process because the tools it employed allowed Constant to start a political dialogue with viewers through its intersubjective symbols.

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<sup>327</sup>Hovendakk, “COBRA in Time,” 125.

<sup>328</sup>de Zegher and Wigley, “The Activist Drawing,” 15.

<sup>329</sup>de Zegher and Wigley, “The Activist Drawing,” 35.

## Conclusion

Dutch Cobra has been shown to be a direct psychological, political, and artistic response to both trauma and the socio-political atmosphere in Amsterdam following the Second World War. Its major goals—spiritual and artistic rebirth, and the social liberation of the Dutch people—stemmed from this emotional response. When Karel Appel, Constant Nieuwenhuys, and Corneille Beverloo failed to find adequate vehicles for these goals in the French modern art scene they turned to two alternate sources for inspiration: the philosophy of thinkers such as Marx and Bachelard, and the Danish avant-garde. Through these sources, Dutch Cobra founded a movement with an ideology and set of methodologies designed to achieve rebirth and societal liberation. Their methodologies included the use of child art, masks, spontaneity, primitivism, and the subconscious, among other tools adapted from the Danish tradition. They also incorporated Bachelardian ideas about the way people process symbols to inform the way they presented symbols to the viewer. The use of intersubjective symbols allowed them to communicate directly with the viewer, and instigate a series of cognitive steps through these symbols that would begin the process of de-socialization. Only then could the viewer be made aware of his oppression, and motivate him to rally for social change.

Visual analyses of works such as *Questioning Children* and *Concentration Camp* exemplify the implementation of Dutch Cobra's goals through the use of philosophy and the Danish avant-garde tradition. They also strongly situate the movement within the post-traumatic socio-political atmosphere in Amsterdam in 1946. Their condition, and the art it engendered, refute any claims that Dutch Cobra offered an optimistic outlook on the future.

This condition also explains why Dutch Cobra was so poorly received by the public for the first few years of its existence. In 1949, the director of the Stedelijk, Willem Sandberg, organized the first Cobra exhibition in Amsterdam. In one room, pages were torn from poetry books and the words “this is the form of poetry we wish to abolish” was scrawled over them.<sup>330</sup> In the others, art was hung low to the floor and high to the ceiling. At times, it was even shown flat on platforms, disrupting the usual flow of traffic in a museum space.<sup>331</sup> The works displayed were typical Cobra fare—primitive, spontaneous, and confrontational. The public response was violently negative. Headlines the next day blasted the exhibition. One headline declared, “insanity extolled as art!”<sup>332</sup> Others read, “Inarticulate Art. Heydeys of Nihilism in the Stedelijk Museum,” “Unnecessary and Unwanted,” “Scratching, Blathering, and Daubing in the Stedelijk Museum,” and “Madness Elevated to Art.”<sup>333</sup> Critics lambasted Cobra’s focus on spontaneity, insisting that “control and command” were necessary for the creation of proper art.<sup>334</sup> The dearth of control in Cobra artwork was indicative of the artists’ lack of vision, according to critic *Algemeen Handelsblad*. He lauded the artist who nurtured his talent and attempted to demonstrate his talent in “the best possible manner.”<sup>335</sup> He felt that the artists threw away their talents when they painted spontaneously, and only did so because they lacked artistic vision. Other critics respected the true expressiveness of child art, but did not think that Cobra had any business

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<sup>330</sup>Flomenhaft, *The Roots and Development*, 39.

<sup>331</sup>Lambert, *Cobra*, 138-139.

<sup>332</sup>Peterson and Brattinga, *Sandberg*, Page

<sup>333</sup>Nico Laan, “The Making of a Reputation: The Case of Cobra.” In *Avante-Garde and Criticism*, vol. 21, ed. Klaus Beekman and Jan de Vries. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 95-96.

<sup>334</sup>Laan, “The Making of a Reputation,” 97.

<sup>335</sup>Laan, “The Making of a Reputation,” 96.

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engaging in it. “Children can express themselves like children and adults will never be able to enter that paradise again,” it was written in newspaper, *Het Parool*.<sup>336</sup>

The response to Cobra was so overwhelmingly negative for the same reason that radical political movements failed to gain traction in the Netherlands after World War II: people were traumatized by loss. They conflated this loss with absence, which in turn made it difficult for them to view change as feasible or necessary. Overwhelmed by the absence felt in their day-to-day lives, they were consumed with self-pity for the losses they’d experienced. It was nearly impossible for them to feel enough empathy to consider socio-political change. They experienced trauma in this way because the capitalist system had taught them to. It dictated that they trust their government, and the institutions set up by their government to help the country run smoothly. Thus, when loss occurred on a grand scale—in the form of war and genocide—they had no capacity to deal with this loss, and it turned slowly to absence. Their socialization prevented them from seeing the government as complicit in the murder of Dutch Jews. However, guilt and shame did exist beneath layers of socialized behaviour. These feelings arose because, beneath these layers, the primitive man lay dormant, reacting to the world around him without ever truly being able to express himself. For the average Dutch person, radical change was therefore out of the question, and radical art posed the same threat.

The unclassifiable images in Dutch Cobra work made people uncomfortable because they couldn’t understand them. Thus, they were seen as a threat. Furthermore, the dialogue Dutch Cobra aimed to instigate using these creaturely, intersubjective images began the process of disruption they were intended to. This frightened many viewers. They did not want their feelings

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<sup>336</sup> Laan, “The Making of a Reputation,” 97.

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of guilt to rise as they stared at evocative paintings of concentration camps and burning piles of bodies. They didn't want to question their discomfort, and wonder why certain forms made them uneasy. The entire process of social liberation was halted before it could really begin, because the public experienced the first step—disruption—and responded with fear.

And so, due to trauma and the socio-political situation in the Netherlands following the Second World War, the majority of the population rejected Dutch Cobra. The artists were unable to complete their social liberation. But did they experience rebirth? In attempting to cleanse themselves spiritually and artistically, Dutch Cobra shed themselves of the influence of artistic institutions that represented the evils of capitalism. They spontaneously splattered, dripped, and coated their canvases in vivid colours, painting the world as their inner selves believed it to be. Though they'd never totally liberate the minds of their peers, their intention to do so completed their process of personal rebirth. In selflessly seeking the betterment of society, Dutch Cobra transcended its own trauma.

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Images



Figure 1: Constant Nieuwenhuys, Scorched Earth (1951)

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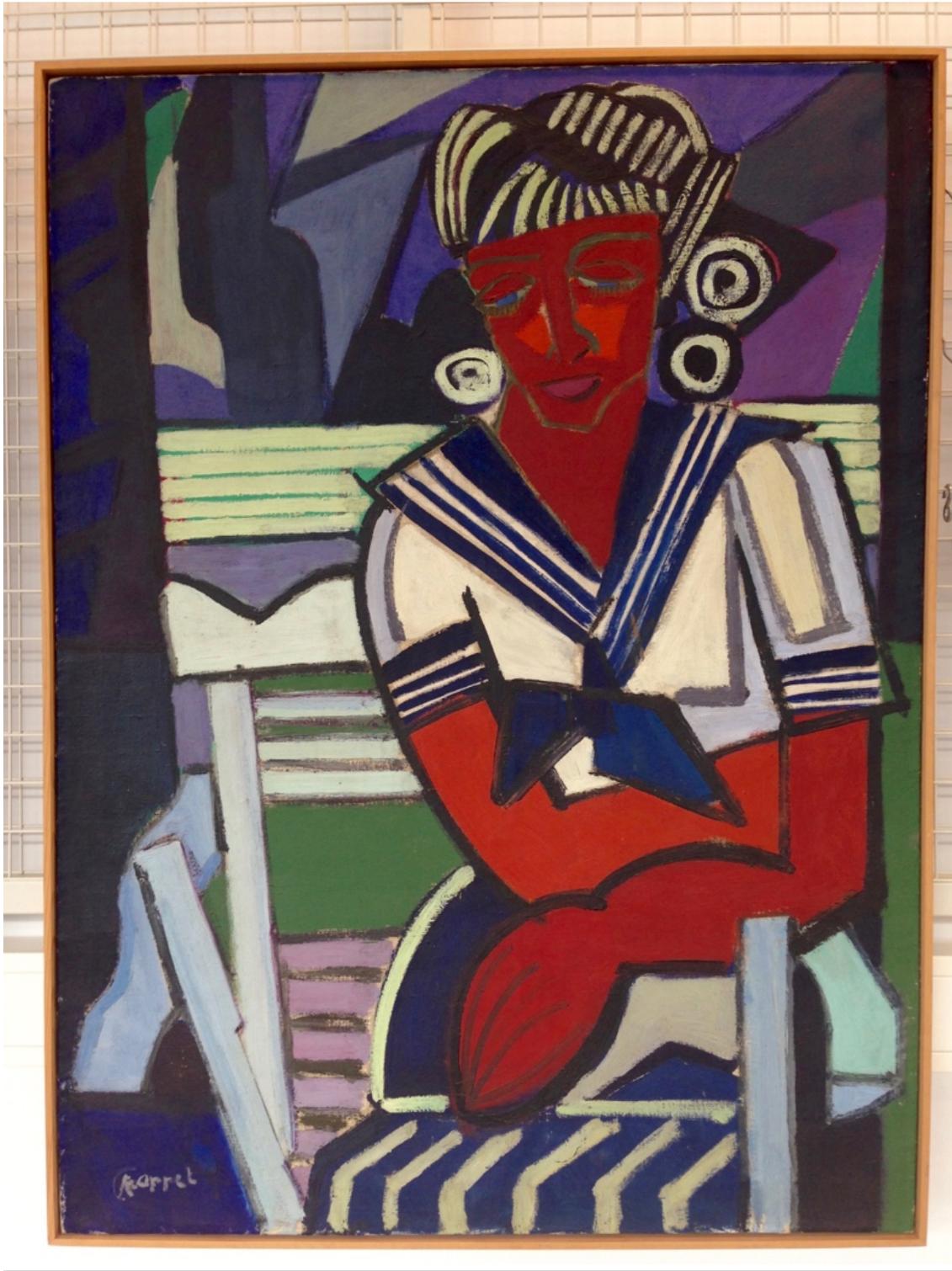


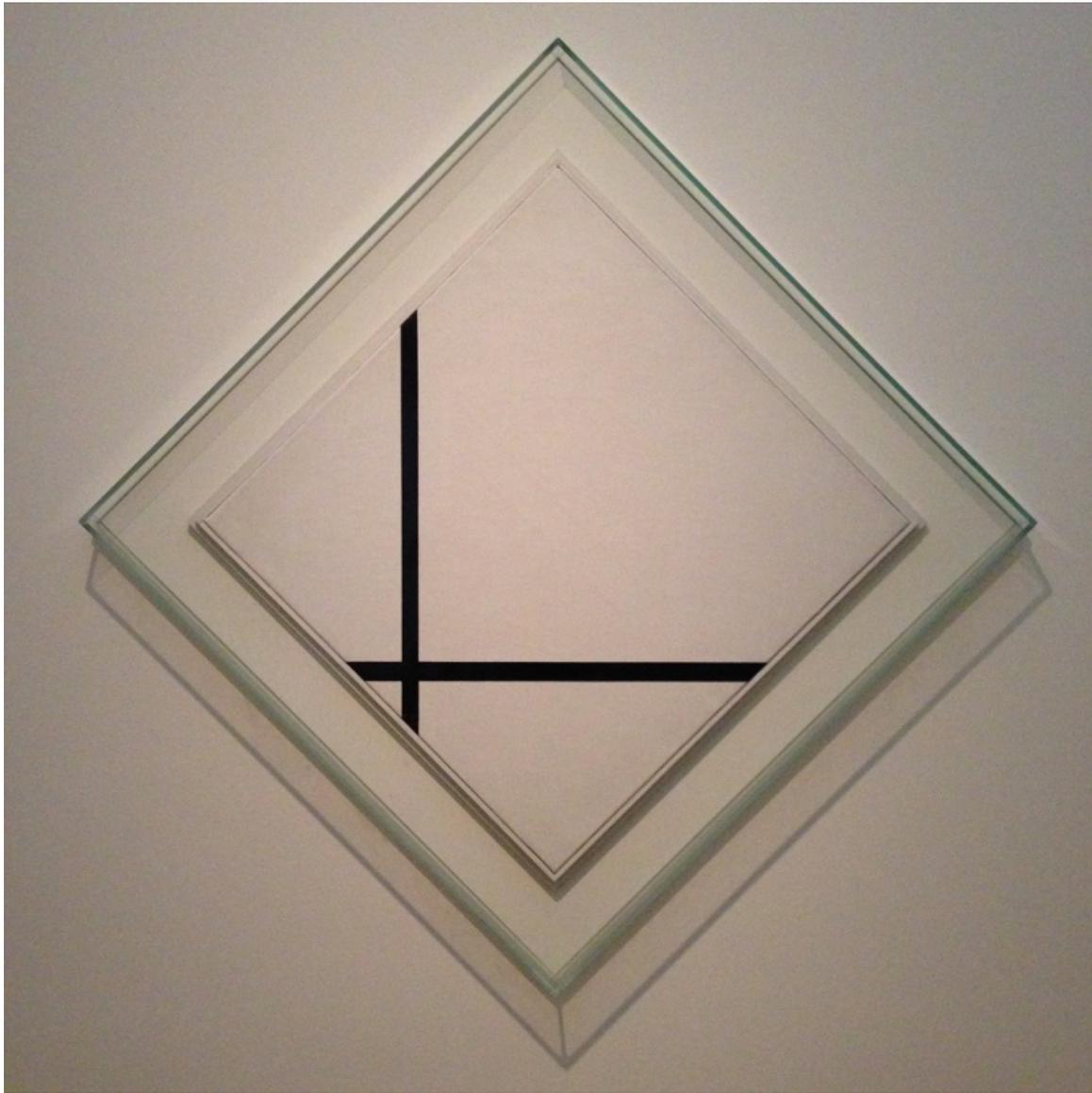
Figure 2: Karel Appel, *Sailor Girl* (1946)



Figure 3: Pablo Picasso, *The Weeping Woman* (1937)

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*Figure 4: Piet Mondrian, Lozenge Composition with Two Lines (1931)*

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Figure 5: Karel Appel, *Sitting Girl* (1946)

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Figure 6: Henry Heerup, *Landscape bij Stensby* (1936)

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Figure 7: Carl Henning-Pedersen, *Salomon's Kingdom* (1939)

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Figure 8: Henry Heerup, *Composition with Cross* (1946)

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Figure 9: Corneille Beverloo, Print (1948)

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Figure 10: Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Dode Koeien* (1951)

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Figure 11: Asger Jorn, *Untitled* (1949)

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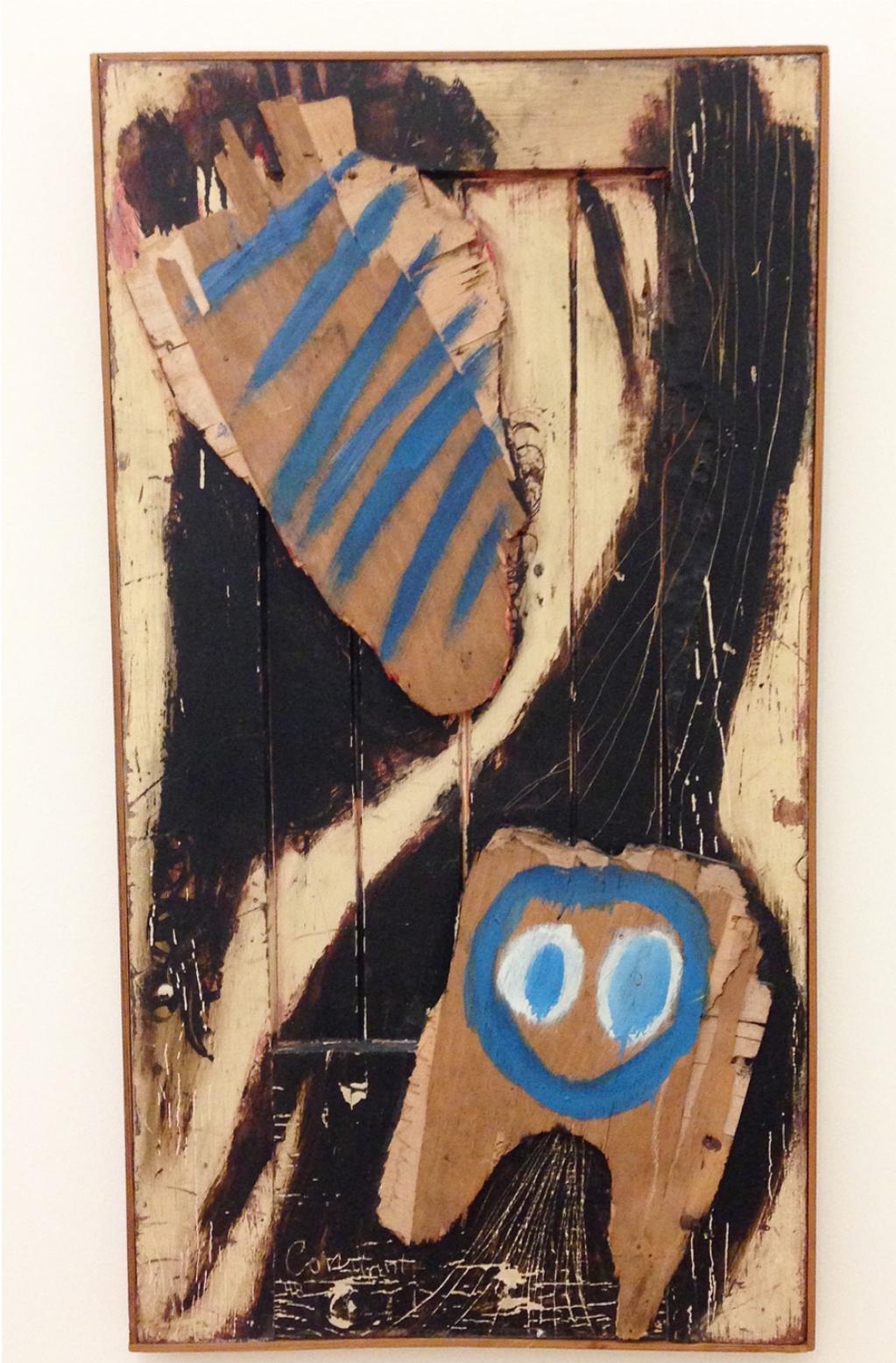


Figure 12: Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Cat* (1948)

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Figure 13: Egill Jacobsen, Sea ( 1947)

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Figure 14: Karel Appel, *Questioning Children* (1949)

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Figure 15: Constant Nieuwenhuys, *The War* (1950)

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Figure 16: Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Birds' Idyll* (1948)

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Figure 17: Detail: Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Birds' Idyll* (1948)

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Figure 18: Detail: Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Birds' Idyll* (1948)

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Figure 19: Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Concentration Camp* (1950)

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