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Karel Appel: new apparitions

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1. The eye of an animal

«I'd really like to have the eye of an animal who'd taken it into its head to paint the human world»¹.

Karel Appel, 1977.

There is a restless energy in Karel Appel's paintings, a struggle to come to terms with the inchoate world, a desire to express the vitality of the human soul and the essence of ordinary things. Seeing is for him an essential key to the soul, a way of preserving the freshness of life in the face of stultifying routine. «It's difficult for us to get off the rails of routine. We stop seeing the world. Our gaze seems fixed, the world grinds to a halt. It's death closing in»². In order to live fully the eye must remain «alert like a radar»³, sensitive not only to the surface of things but to what lies beyond the surface. Appel believes that the movement of thought and feeling can be perceived and translated through dynamic forms of expression.

«By kinetic thought I mean something very simple: the attempt to grasp movement in all its spontaneity, right in the middle of a living reality fertilized by the imagination. A painting, the very act of painting has to make the speed and the life of this movement felt. Which is to say that it is more than an act of "perception"! I'd rather talk of a leap that you take right into the native depth of things»⁴.

What alerts the eye of an animal is movement. Similarly the eye of an artist such as Karel Appel is captivated by the shifting surfaces of life. Not only does the artist respond to the movement surrounding him, he has a role to play in animating things. «The function of artists... is to set things in motion again, so as to discover what is hidden, what is emergent»⁵. The movement of a brush-stroke can bring something that is dormant or latent to life. «In my painting I try to capture the movement that whirls perpetually in things and in the mind»⁶. Paradoxically in Appel's painting, the creative urge can also be a destructive one. His painting is characterized by the energy with which he attacks the canvas. The primal instinct of an animal is savage, often destructive, and the analogy is one that Appel himself often uses.

«To paint is to destroy what preceded. I never try to make a painting, but a chunk of life. It is a scream; it is at night; it is like a child; it is a tiger behind bars»⁷.

The very word Cobra (the group with which Appel was associated at the start of his artistic career) suggests the potent, sometimes destructive power of the animal world. The artists from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam who formed that group after the second World War felt an urge to break away from the sophistications and the elegant academicism which they felt characterized the School of Paris. Their urge to destroy was a creative one.

«A few of us got together: Corneille, Alechinsky, Constant. With the big cataclysm behind us, we were full of revolt and tension. We needed a new form of expression, we needed it desperately, violently. We wanted to get to grips with painting, do something different. For that we had to destroy all we'd learned, get rid of all the culture accumulated through school and academy, even forget the very history of Europe!. But it was when I came across the self-destructive forms of Picasso that I got a real shock! They made me feel our whole civilization was in the process of blowing up»⁸.

What emerged was the intense burst of activity during the Cobra years of 1948-51, when the primitive urgency of Appel's paintings began to be recognized. In the first monograph on Karel Appel in 1962, Herbert Read referred to this connection with animal life:

«Such art is not classical, for it has no measure of containment, no sweetness or rest. It is the agitated art of the Gothic, of the North, which was always preoccupied with movement, with boundless space, with infinity. It was also preoccupied with animal vitality...»⁹.

Another aspect of the Cobra artists was the child-like simplicity of their forms and the inspiration they drew from children's paintings with their spontaneous, uninhibited splashes of bright colour and their crude shapes. Karel Appel's series of three reliefs entitled *Questioning children*, 1948, marks a crucial stage in the evolution of his style. The rough, irregular wooden surfaces, the primary colours and the bright quizzical expressions on the faces of the children, have the freshness and hope of a generation that has not had to live through the war. Not only did Appel find a new vitality in children's paintings, he also recognized in their questioning faces his own perpetual questioning as an artist, his constant quest for new forms of expression, and his creative revolt against the established order of things and the tyranny of routine.

«When I stand back and take a look at my work, it seems to me that what I've been doing is to shout out my love of freedom. To say "no" to the established order, that's the function of art»¹⁰.

2. New apparitions

*«And when with my hand holding the paint and my eyes seeing the form, I touch the canvas, it trembles, it comes to life. The struggle begins, to harmonize canvas, eye, hand, forms. New apparitions stalk the earth»*¹¹.

Karel Appel, 1977.

After thirty years the spirit of Cobra still pervades Appel's work but the forms are being constantly renewed, his imagery transformed by his vision of the world as it is, and by his prophetic and apocalyptic vision of the world as it is becoming. To leap from the years of Cobra to the 1980s is to leap from the aftermath of one war to the threat of another. To both situations Appel has responded in an urgent, allusive but none the less relevant way. The concern he shows, in his paintings of the 1980s, with poverty and oppression, crime and the disintegration of our cities is partly inspired by his experience of living in New York, where he moved in 1957.

«When I've been back in New York for a week, - he has said, - the life of the city grabs me and I take no interest in light any more, but I paint the "crimes", that belong to the

aggressiveness of the city»¹².

The New York paintings express the violence, darkness and poverty of city life.

«I feel the violence, the emotion in the city, the wildness of the dreadful pounding heart, I react, I feel I belong there»¹³.

The painting *Crime I*, 1980, is one of a series of paintings in which the horror of the scene is depicted in the violent tension of the brushstrokes, and where the dramatic stylization of the figures reflects the influence of Picasso's depiction of violence, in paintings such as *Guernica* and in the post-war painting *War*. In these paintings of Appel, the controlled meshes of tightly-knit brushstrokes, inspired by van Gogh's technique of hatched strokes, reaches its ultimate expression. The patterns of short parallel brushstrokes characterizing Appel's paintings from 1974 give way around 1980 to a freer, more expressive use of line and a more organic rhythm. The painting *Nude*, 1980 and *Chair*, 1980, reveal the transition very clearly. What develops is the concern with figurative form. The years of disciplined focussing on detail in his paintings of still-lives, leads to a new humanist vision rich in incident and detail, but possessing a greater scope and intensity. The unbridled vigour of the Cobra years returns, as the artist discovers subjects of universal human interest, and begins to paint again in a visionary manner and on an epic scale.

Three paintings in particular reveal a concern with the plight of the down-and-out in New York, *Street scene*, 1981, *The beggar*, 1983 and *Winter in New York*, 1983. The mask-like whiteness of the child's face in *Street scene*, the haunted intensity of the mother's look, and the empty begging bowl, are painted with a passion that comes from a sense of pity and indignation. In *The beggar*, the outstretched leg, the despairing face are painted with thick impasto against the backdrop of a burning building. Shelley's words «Hell is a city much like London» are true today of New York and other cities, in which not only is the human spirit crushed, but the fabric of the city itself also appears to be disintegrating. *Walking through the fallen city*, 1982, expresses this sense of urban decay. The city appears as a tangled, fragmentary, transitory place in which human beings are trapped, and from which only the bird symbolically escapes. In *Black clouds over city*, 1984¹⁴, the clouds hover ominously over the city that could represent either Old Amsterdam with its tall warehouses, or New Amsterdam (New York) with its skyscrapers. The elemental forces of nature seem to threaten the vulnerable city.

War and hunger, originally entitled *Questioning*, is more explicit in its symbolism, connecting the prevalence of war and the spread of arms with the fact of hunger. This is perhaps Appel's most overtly polemical painting; a statement of compassion at a worldwide problem; an indictment of the expenditure on arms and their sale to Third World countries, which helps to create rather than to alleviate hunger. There is an almost prophetic warning in this fierce painting made in 1983, before the famine in Ethiopia assumed catastrophic dimensions, and the third panel of the triptych with its barren, desert landscape is a disturbing image of desolation. Equally disturbing, although more ambiguous, is the series of apocalyptic cloud paintings which follow in a cluster in 1984. In *Sky with clouds I* and *Boat with clouds*, the bright colours make the paintings appear more radiant and optimistic. Appel's enthusiasm is evident in a statement made in 1984:

«Look, a clouded sky, like it's never been painted before in Western Culture. Van Gogh, Goya, no landscape painter has ever done it like that. Once again, it appeared completely out of the blue. I keep looking, thinking and then suddenly it happens: Hey clouds! and what clouds!¹⁵... And I go on probing. I'm always doing it. I've already painted ten large works like this. As you can see: red clouds green sky a woman in the sky. And here a ship

in the heavens. A memory of my mother, who told me shortly before she died that she had seen a ship in the sky. One of the three marvels of her life»¹⁶.

The clouds have a visionary quality, appearing as a subject for Appel's painting out of his subconscious as well as his memory. They begin, like the birds in earlier paintings, as symbols of freedom, expressions of new forms, sculpted by the wind and unfurling like an apocalyptic scroll over a diminutive landscape, dotted with windmills, trees or houses. By contrast with the dense jungle of his Cobra paintings or his recent city paintings, a sense of infinite space is created by the aerial perspective and the light. These skies recall the paintings of Nolde with their vivid orange, yellow or purple colour, or the restless skies of van Gogh's later paintings, swirling with lines of energy. One of the main differences is of scale. Appel's clouds are conjured up with immense swathes of paint applied with a mastery of handling that makes the surfaces tactile, luminous and full of motion. Combined with their overwhelming scale is their bright colour. In *Sky with clouds I*, the clouds swirl over a yellow and green horizon, just as in *Boat with clouds* the clouds with the ship hover over an orange horizon. The clouds consist of various colours, red, blue, green, black, shot through with streaks of turquoise and purple like lightning. The paint mixed with egg tempera to give it luminosity and fluency is applied wet on wet so that colours merge or are superimposed in layers. The subject of clouds is one that has obsessed northern painters such as Nolde and Munch, but Appel has added another dimension to this tradition. Within this tradition clouds often take on a psychological role, reflecting the mood and anxiety of the artist or the mood of the scene depicted. The stylized whorl of clouds in Munch's *The scream* reflects the anguish of the figure in the foreground isolated within the landscape. Appel's clouds have similar lines of energy, as well as possessing the saturated colour of Nolde's luminous expanses of cloud, hovering over the flat landscape. They are alive with the electrical energy of a thunderstorm about to break, and are laden with foreboding; the colours seem almost radio-active in their lurid intensity. This might seem too literal a reading in the light of recent events, but several of these recent paintings have the hallucinatory character of a premonition. One painting, entitled *Before the catastrophe*, 1985, shows two warlike, almost mythological figures contending with the elements and creating chaos. Another painting, entitled *The deluge*, 1984, shows the aftermath of a catastrophe with the human forms in the foreground being swept away by the torrents pouring down from the sky and mountain-sides. Appel's New York paintings of the 1980s are characterized not only by a renewed energy and confidence but by a startling relevance to critical areas of concern and debate; crime, poverty, hunger, nuclear disaster and the threat of war. The paintings embody some of these areas of concern, but their strength lies in their direct, authentic vision of the world. Inspiration is the vital, motivating force in Appel's work, and can lead him to transcend the conscious mind:

«Look at the clouds on that canvas. A low horizon. Typical Dutch landscape painter. All the same I wasn't thinking of Holland when I painted it. *Ce dépasse la nature. Ce dépasse ma jeunesse; ce dépasse toute ma vie.* That's my work»¹⁷.

As a counterpoint to some of his more threatening landscapes, there are also the visionary landscapes, such as *Floating windmills*, 1984, which with its glowing colours, its sense of freedom, symbolized by the wind passing through the sails of the windmills, and its evocation of the past, conveys a warmth of feeling that derives from both memory and imagination. Appel's painting is so full of vitality that it would be misleading to present him as a harbinger of doom. The subjects in these works can be painful but they can be interpreted in positive as well as negative ways, and the essential vision of these works is not pessimistic. There may be a tragic intensity, a reconciliation of opposites, a cry of anger, but it is this that shocks us into an awareness of all that we might lose; our

humanity and hope. In the painting entitled *Encounter with God*, 1981, Appel portrays a meeting between man and God against an animated white background. The outstretched arms of the figure on the right imply an acceptance and reconciliation, far different from the loneliness and isolation of the figures depicted in the disintegrating cities of other recent paintings.

Another side of Appel's work can be seen in the calmer, lighter paintings made in the South of France where he spends the summer each year. In his series of window paintings the light of the South creates a more harmonious vision, a counterbalance to the fierceness of the New York paintings. The most recent painting in this exhibition was painted in the South, and is called *La résurrection de la femme*, 1985. Beneath a tranquil sky, between two outcrops of rock, a figure with outstretched hand hovers above the dormant body of a woman. The woman murdered in *Crime* is restored to life and dignity in a serene, uncomplicated painting full of light and harmony.

3. An expression of my era

«The atmosphere I inhale and make tangible by my paint is an expression of my era».

Karel Appel, 1950.

The new painting of Karel Appel in the 1980s coincides with a resurgence of an expressionist style of painting which draws some of its inspiration from German Expressionism as well as from a reassessment of the importance of Cobra. It would be easy, but misleading, to associate Appel's recent work with the work of the younger generation of European painters such as Georg Baselitz, A. R. Penck, Enzo Cucchi and Anselm Kiefer. Whilst there are certain similarities in the uninhibited handling of paint, and the expressive use of line and colour, these are coincidences that are symptomatic of the anxious and turbulent Eighties. Several times in the past Appel has commented on the way in which artists can develop apparently similar styles and yet be ignorant of each other's work.

«It wasn't until 1957, in New York, that I saw the revolutionary canvases that Pollock had painted during the war. They really were close to the spirit of Cobra, at least on the imaginative side. I also saw the work of De Kooning. It's not the first time that men of the same period, though widely apart, have shared the same mentality and arrived at the same conclusions. It's kind of reassuring!»¹⁸.

Paradoxically Appel's expressionist style of painting derives from the Post-Impressionist work of van Gogh, and not from German Expressionism. This is perhaps one of the crucial differences between Appel's recent paintings and those of his contemporaries. His concern is with the transforming alchemy of paint, transcending the material and creating an immaterial vision of light and form. A painter such as Anselm Kiefer depicts a more sombre, burnt landscape. Appel has himself commented on Kiefer's work:

«There is a great sentiment, a great feeling in his painting. A sense of something smouldering, of something that is burnt out but is still smelling. A burnt out world where nothing grows»¹⁹.

Kiefer's relationship with history is also radically different. Whereas Appel has survived and assimilated the World War and creates «a movement to the future», Kiefer is concerned to reconcile himself and his native culture to a past from which he has been dislocated by the same war. His attempt to retrieve lost areas of Germany's history and mythological past, spuriously appropriated

by the Nazi ideology, is a brave and heroic endeavour to build a new basis for painting in his country. Appel, by contrast, has always been something of an exile and a nomad, the influence of his native land coming more from its paintings than from its landscape or history. Whereas Kiefer's approach was born out of his conceptual works of the 1970s, and shows a sophisticated sense of irony, Appel's concern is with pure painting and with an innocence of vision which allows him to develop ideas in a spontaneous, painterly way. Herbert Read wrote that «Appel is not a conceptual artist, *un peintre raisonnable*. His control of design is as instinctive as a child's»²⁰. Each artist provides us with an equally strong and valid vision for the 1980s, but the differences between them are more revealing than any ostensible similarities in style.

Appel has spoken over a period of time about the satisfaction of pure painting. In 1950 he wrote:

«Painting is a tangible, sensual experiencing, intensely moved by joy and the tragedy of man. A spatial experiencing, fed by instinct, becomes a living shape. The atmosphere I inhale and make tangible by my paint is an expression of my era»²¹.

This is as true of his painting now as it was of his painting during the Cobra period. In 1976 he wrote:

«Painting is a living substance which transmits human warmth, a spiritual glow, a genuine warmth. It is the most social means of expression, because it is visible to all and can be felt by everyone. It responds to the social traits inherent in each human being, for everyone is creative»²².

Painting for Karel Appel may be a very personal struggle, but it is also the «most social means of expression», a way of communicating fresh images of the familiar world, or surprising visions of the unknown, and the new paintings of the 1980s provide an often disturbing, but ultimately invigorating insight into the contradictions of the human soul.

(from catalogue of exhibition at Galleria Arnolfini, Bristol 1986).

¹ Interview with Frederick de Towarnicki, Paris, May 1977, published in Alfred Frankenstein, *Karel Appel*, Harry N. Abrams, New York 1980, p. 157.

² *Ibid.*, p. 160.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Quoted in Hugo Claus, *Karel Appel*, A.J.G. Strengtholt's Publishing Company, Amsterdam 1962, p. 63.

⁸ Interview with Frederick de Towarnicki, op. cit., p. 163.

⁹ Herbert Read, in Claus, *Karel Appel*, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁰ Interview with Frederick de Towarnicki, op. cit., p. 157.

¹¹ Claus, *Karel Appel*, op. cit., pp. 140-41.

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- ¹² Quoted in Wim Beeren, *The New Work of Karel Appel. Paintings 1979-1981*, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam 1982, p. 4.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- ¹⁴ In «The New Reality of Karel Appel», *Dutch Art and Architecture Today*, no. 16, Eindhoven, December 1984, p. 4, Gijs van Tuyl writes: «In *Black clouds over city*, he first made a painstakingly accurate painting of this exceptional form of veduta. He then painted it over "like a gust of wind", sweeping away the realistic view with shades of grey and black, leaving a few traces of green».
- ¹⁵ Interview with Ischa Meijer, *Vrij Nederland*, 28 April 1984. Quoted in *Karel Appel*, catalogue, Listasafri Islands, June 1984, p. 18.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Frederick Towarnicki, op. cit., p. 49.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Rasaad Jamie, «Appel Now», *Artscribe*, no. 45, February-April 1984, p. 43.
- ²⁰ Herbert Read, in Claus, *Karel Appel*, op. cit., p. 8.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 106.