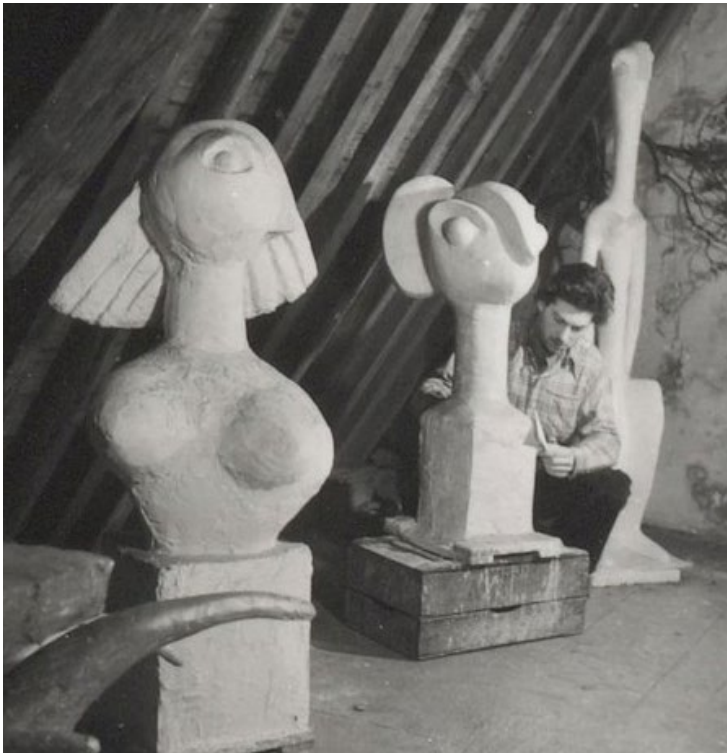


Object Paintings Although Karel Appel was primarily a painter, throughout his long artistic career he also created sculptures whose special charm lies precisely in the fact that they are based on a painterly rather than sculptural approach: they apply painterly thinking to the three-dimensional, which is why Appel's sculptures are called 'object paintings'.

In the beginning, before Cobra that is, his excursions into the third dimension were imposed by necessity. After the war, having returned to Amsterdam from his hiding place in the provinces, he was restricted to what was accessible – not expensive canvases and oil paints, but rather found objects and sometimes plaster. Already in these early works, somewhere between relief and sculpture, a characteristic of his painterly thinking as applied to physical objects manifested itself: he let a found object trigger his imagination, and in turn unleashed his imagination on the object. By means of assemblage, as well as adding or removing material or colour, he let interactions between his imagination and the material's inherent properties develop until both became one. Soon, Appel's sources of inspiration were complemented by more characteristic Cobra imagery.

An exception to this approach are the ceramics that Appel created in 1954. On a visit to his former Cobra buddies Asger Jorn and Constant in a ceramic studio in Albisola, Northern Italy, he experimented with ceramic mass – in the spirit of his new interest in painting with thickened paint mass, his 'matter painting', which in this respect related to paintings by Fautrier, Dubuffet or Tapiès. Except that the Albisola ceramics are paintings with pure matter – without much colour (pp. 109–113).

An almost symmetrical counterpart to these ceramics in terms of colour is offered by a group of works from the early 1960s, which could be summarised as 'painting in space': On the southern French estate of Appel's Parisian gallerist, Jean Larcade, an olive grove had been destroyed in a fire. Larcade had the centuries-old roots dug up and cleaned, and Appel worked on them, firstly by taking away material and then by overpainting in order to reveal pictorial ideas engendered by a dialogue with the object in the course of its transformation (p. 117).



Appel's most famous object paintings are his at times monumental metal sculptures of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their characteristic appearance is a result of the artist's working method in creating the models: he cut out flat cardboard forms – using the same shapes that appear in his paintings of the period – assembled them into three-dimensional figures and painted them. The Berlin exhibition presented a group of cardboard maquettes (pp. 121–129), which were later executed in steel (p. 94).

At the same time, Appel worked on object paintings that he called 'street art': 'I've been grubbing around garbage cans for over thirty years, but nowadays I find a different kind of material. This automatically makes for a change in artistic creation.' He gathered this new material mainly on his forays through the streets of New York. Here Appel used the same approach as on the olive tree roots, but now applied to pieces of plastic and polystyrene that he had found (pp. 118/119).

The spectacular assemblages of his late work, called 'hybrids', seem to be quite different at first glance, as they are made from visually diverse objects and figures which he found in studios for carnival parades, at flea markets or at house clearances in Europe, the US and across the world. Detached from their original context, these objects and figures became valuable material which opened up new relationships and led to pictorial inventions. In a 1994 interview with Donald Kuspit, Appel called this his style of 'hybrid deconstruction'.

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