The essence of landscape

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This exhibit at the Poggiali Gallery celebrates Karel Appel's Tuscan period with a collection of breathtaking pieces. By 1990, Appel had established three studios, each playing a crucial role in his creative output: the first in 1983, on 18th Street nestled between 6th and 7th Avenue in Manhattan, NYC; another in Mercatale, close to San Casciano in Tuscany, where Appel acquired Villa Licia in 1988; and a third in Darien, Connecticut (USA), where he built his home-studio[1]. Over the next decade, these locales became anchor points where Appel could consistently produce work, each site influencing his creations in uniquely different ways. This dedication to his three studios is particularly significant given Appel's history as a globe-trotting artist who, early in his career, often struggled to find a studio that truly matched his dynamic working style. Initially facing a sense of displacement and restlessness due to financial constraints, Appel frequently moved his workspace to accommodate specific artistic endeavours, especially his large-scale projects.

Starting in 1950, this era was marked by the creation of massive murals, notably those gracing the foyer of the *Stedelijk Museum* in Amsterdam. Another significant mural entitled "The Wall of Energy" was crafted by the artist in 1955 at the Rotterdam port, spanning a 100-meter-long brick wall. Following this, he created additional murals in prestigious venues, including the UNESCO building in Paris (1958). During this period, his visual language compellingly explored the interplay between iconograms set in abstract shapes and bold colours. He moved away from the dominant polarization between abstraction and realism at the time, moving beyond this dichotomy to establish a personal blend of image and abstract colours. Open and enthusiastic about exploring the expressive possibilities with other artists, he actively collaborated and worked in the studios of foreign artists. (In 1957, he spent time in Sam Francis's New York studio; earlier, he had created a series of ceramics with Asger Jorn near Genoa. From 1971, he worked in Manhattan in Richard Lindner's apartment/studio, and in 1976, he joined forces with Pierre Alechinsky on a painting project in Bougival, near Paris). In 1964, Karel Appel crossed paths with Francis Bacon in London, and they decided to collaborate on a painting project together. Sadly, this collaboration never saw the light of day.

The desire to experiment was something inherent in Karel Appel. A prime example of his adventurous spirit was a painting experiment in

[1] For a chronology of Karel Appel's works, see Franz W. Kaiser's catalogue in the "Karel Appel" from the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, 2016, pages 188 and following (which also provides the biographical details mentioned in this text).

1958, where he splashed paint onto a laid on the ground from a helicopter flying overhead, creating a kind of "drip painting" from several meters up in the air.

Observing his work after 1957, particularly through the lens of Jan Vrijman's film from that year, reveals a profound transformation in Appel's approach to painting. He transitioned from using "formal elements" with flat colours to a more rhythmic and expressive style that covered the entire canvas. Appel energetically hurled paint at the canvas, employing sticks, brushes, brooms, and various other implements with intense physical effort. Transitioning from a style marked by "formal elements" and subdued palettes, Appel ventured into a territory that was both rhythmic and expressive, enveloping the entire surface of his canvases. With a dynamic physicality, he would cast paint across the canvas using an array of tools, from sticks and brushes to brooms. Amid this apparent chaos, the artist's deliberate touch is unmistakable, allowing one to appreciate both the fluid elegance of the colours and the creator's captivating power. This act of applying paint becomes a performance, "like a dance of forces around a centre where a profound intention lies quietly dormant"[2]. This unyielding passion for his work links Karel Appel with Arnulf Rainer. While Rainer meticulously layers his images, gradually concealing them beneath successive veils of paint, Appel constructs a foundational layer that later becomes the backdrop for further imagery or enhancements. His works, such as the "Nudes" series (1961-62, the artist's inaugural collection of nudes) and "Visage-Paysage" (1976-77, 13 paintings, all uniformly sized at 200 x 200 cm) continue to be his key subjects. Despite his adventurous experimentation with the medium, Appel remains dedicated to the traditional roles of painting.

"*Painting is fundamentally about stripping away, simplifying. That's why I've always believed that artists are the only ones who can transform chaos into something positive. They begin with chaos and guide it towards a positive outcome by simplifying and subtracting. This process also involves destruction, the tearing down of what we've previously built.*"[3]

In 1976, Karel Appel was able to bring a significant project to life in Villa El Salvador, near Lima, Peru, by working together with children. This monumental piece of art, which integrates children's drawings into its style, showcases him as an artist deeply intertwined with modernist ideals[4].

For Appel, it's not just about bridging abstraction and realism on equal terms, but also about tapping into the creative potential of children and their ways of expressing themselves, similar to his focus on the expressive forms found in psychopathology.

[2] Rainer Maria Rilke, La Pantera, 1903
[3] K A Chaos in: Appel on Appel
[4] Wassily Kandinsky - Franz Marc Almanach der Blaue Reiter 1911, Piper Verlag Munich

Furthermore, his work has been profoundly influenced by other forms of art, especially jazz, which has become an integral part of his creative expression. His openness to the tunes of Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughan, and Count Basie, coupled with his personal connections to these musicians, shaped several collaborative projects. For instance, he worked with Dizzy Gillespie to compose the soundtrack for Jan Vrijman's film about his art, "The Reality of Karel Appel."

These natural collaborations with other artists helped him keep pace with the leading artistic trends of the time. During his first trip to New York in 1957, he had the opportunity to meet with notable figures like Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Franz Kline. At that time, expressive painting was experiencing a decline in the eyes of critics, while conceptual art forms were gaining increasing attention, and the upcoming advent of pop art was announced. Karel Appel, enriched by his experience with mural works and his knack for translating images into monumental scales, was able to adopt a more concise approach to creation. For the *Documenta III* exhibition (1964), held in Kassel, a logistical hiccup prevented Appel's designated painting from being cleared through customs in time. Undeterred, Appel, over the course of a single night, he repainted a massive four-part work measuring 270 x 680 cm from scratch. This last-minute masterpiece was displayed alongside the original piece it was meant to replace[5]. His mastery in crafting large-scale paintings was unmistakable, and his integration of "found objects" into his works felt as intuitive as his creative assemblies of reclaimed items, painting a picture of harmony and ingenuity. This natural blend of elements sparked curiosity amongst his expressionist peers and the circle of artists he admired; whispers began to circulate that Karel might be subtly courting the pop art movement. It wasn't just the everyday objects, the castoffs of daily life like the plastic toys he wove into his 1963 paintings, nor solely the monumental size echoing the grandeur of billboard advertising, that signaled Karel Appel's shift towards pop art. His engagement with "found objects" drew him closer to the ethos of the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, a group then gathering momentum in Paris. Intriguingly, the year of the *Documenta III* exhibition (1964) also saw significant art showcases elsewhere: the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York presented "Van Gogh and Expressionism," and Berlin's Akademie der Künste played host to "New Realists & Pop Art," exhibitions that also counted Karel Appel amongst their participants. In the same year, Robert Rauschenberg won the "Golden Lion" in Venice, thus sealing pop art's victory, a triumph that would be fully celebrated at the *Documenta IV* (1968) exhibition, marking its undisputed success. Throughout his

[5] Currently, the work is in the collection at the National Gallery in Berlin.

extensive career as a painter, Karel Appel consistently stood out with his unexpected twists and turns. His art remained impactful, navigating through the ever-shifting tides of styles, trends, and artistic expressions that seamlessly came and went, proving his enduring relevance and ingenuity in the ever-evolving world of art.

Since 1965, Appel maintained close contact for years with pop art painter and graphic artist Richard Lindner and was able to work in his studio until the '70s in New York. The changing locations and close contacts with fellow artists he made along the way left an indelible mark on his work. Appel developed such a close bond with the places he found himself working in, as well as with the artists he collaborated with and the cities and landscapes he was in, that he found himself using multiple different expressive forms at once, each perfectly capturing the essence of his current project or environment. Through it all, Appel had a unique ability to tap into the pulse of the artistic scene, sensitively recording the movements and shifts that characterised the ever-changing world of art.
In summary, it's clear that over the years, Karel Appel, working through various cultural and spatial environments, developed a unique and diverse expressive language that stands out for several reasons:

- Its expressiveness,
- The simplification of colour application to large, flat areas of colour,
- A connection to the raw creativity found in children's artistry (but also to that of a psychopath),
- The clever use of "found objects" as references to the real world,
- The rhythm and energy of jazz.

Finally, in 1987, Karel Appel further expanded his artistic spectrum by embracing a new expressive medium. In collaboration with dancer and choreographer Min Tanaka and composer Dao, he created the ballet "Can We Dance a Landscape?[6]. This work brought to life the dynamic and temporal aspects that had always been essential to his art, once again showing his ability to push boundaries and explore new territories.

"In Italy, everything always works out for me." Karel Appel[7]

The works featured in this exhibition date back to the period when the artist was active in Tuscany (between 1990 and 2000, before parting ways with Villa Licia). They are large-scale landscapes in which the rolling hills are depicted in all their majesty and vastness, offering the viewer a close-up view of the branches of bushes and the canopies of trees. The pieces, entitled "Horizon of Tuscany," "Birth of a Landscape," or simply "Nature" and "Study of Trees," showcase the breathtaking beauty and intricate detail of the Tuscan landscape, inviting viewers into a world where nature's grandeur is magnificently captured. In addition to these landscapes, the artist also experimented with assemblages and sculptures, incorporating "found objects" from the Tuscan landscape into his works, either by painting them or transforming them into bronze sculptures.

"We are one with nature. The tree and man himself are one and the same. To destroy nature is to destroy ourselves. From this realisation emerged the idea of painting nature, the landscape, as though they have a face. I showcase the colours of nature and then I add the face to it."[8]

By replacing the word "nature" with "landscape" and "man" with "body," we uncover the two primary modes of figurative representation. One approach utilises a two-dimensional, horizontal surface to depict sprawling landscapes, while the other employs an upright, bodily figure to sculpt the human form. It's important to note that these frameworks are not rigid rules but flexible guidelines that accommodate artistic expression and innovation. The ability to subvert established norms within art is vividly illustrated by the significant contributions from Florence to the history of art. Around 1290, Giotto di Bondone masterfully captured the crucified body of Christ, a predominantly sculptural theme, on a complex, cruciform pictorial surface, thereby transforming a three-dimensional figure into a two-dimensional representation. Similarly, between 1425 and 1452, Lorenzo Ghiberti ingeniously condensed theatrical scenes into a landscape format in the panels of the Gates of Paradise at the Baptistery of St. John. This approach created a convincing illusion of depth and space, despite the panels' minimal actual depth. Through these works, Ghiberti demonstrated how figurative scenes could be seamlessly integrated into landscapes, creating a sense of depth that extends beyond the physical limitations of the medium. Giambologna redefined the expressive possibilities of the Renaissance relief sculpture, bringing landscapes to life in a manner that blurred the lines between sculpture and painting. At the other end of the sculptural spectrum, his *Colosso dell'Appennino* (Colossus of the Apennines) (1580), situated in the park of Villa Demidoff near Pratolino, stands as a monumental figure at eleven meters tall. Designed as the centrepiece of a landscape painting, it seamlessly blends with the landscape it aims to depict.

During his "Tuscan period," Appel consistently worked across these two modes of representation, balancing his time between sculpture and painting. In the 1990s, he masterfully merged the expressive power of sculpture with that of painting, leading to the creation of a fresh series of landscape artworks. This innovative

[6] Debuted in 1987 at the Opéra Comique in Paris, in Brooklyn, and in Amsterdam
[7] K.A. Interview with Rudi Fuchs (K.A. I wish I were a bird 1990/91, p. 158)
[8] Karel Appel in conversation with R.H. Fuchs (1990 see note VII)

collection features assemblies painted in vivid colours, especially showcasing captivating, large-scale landscapes imbued with a strong sense of physical presence. In 1986, in a move that seemed to anticipate his later Tuscan landscapes, Appel created "Lying Nude No. 2" (see pag. 163). Here, a landscape transforms into the contour of a woman lying down with her luminous form mirroring the rolling Tuscan hills set against a dark contrasting backdrop. In this work, the body and landscape blend seamlessly, embodying Appel's philosophy that "Man and nature are one." This concept resonates with the harmonious integration observed in the *Colosso dell'Appenni*no (Colossus of the Apennines) amidst the Tuscan landscape. It reminds oneself of Giorgione and Titian's Venere (Venus)[9] from 1510, who, though she reclines on cloths, remains fully exposed against the backdrop of nature. This motif was propelled by Édouard Manet in his *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass) (1862/63), that would then take on a life of its own, notably in the creations of artists such as Cézanne and Matisse. The German Expressionists of the Die Brücke Movement then infused their landscapes with nude figures bathing, dancing, or simply relaxing in the open air.

However, the uniqueness of Karel Appel's representation is evident in the sheer majesty of this painting, measuring approximately 180 x 425 cm. Upon viewing it, a panel painting of this scale has a completely different effect compared to a life-size work or one of even smaller dimensions. The scale of the piece doesn't just make it something to be seen, but experienced. In this context, the application of colour carries a distinct weight, transforming each segment of colour into a powerhouse of expression, especially where it plays across the contours of a body. This magnitude gives the painting an unparalleled an impact that is not just visual but almost physical in nature. Its commanding presence ensures that the painting is not merely seen, but felt, holding the viewer in a deep and captivating embrace. Viewing from afar, like glancing at a miniature version in a book, simply cannot compare to the experience of seeing the original artwork up close. When you're right there in front of it, every brushstroke, the play of the palette knife, and the intricate layering of colours come alive. The closer one gets, the more the details start to blur, becoming less identifiable as part of a body. Instead, what emerges is an abstract figure with striking chromatic intensity. As these once distinct elements blend together, no longer recognisable by their specific identities, the image of a body or a landscape comes to life. This close, the dynamic dance of the painting process is unmistakable: *"My tube of colour is like a rocket, carving out its own space."*[10]

[9] The Gemäldegalerie, Dresden
[10] Appel on Appel, see note VII, p. 85

Glancing at its image in a catalogue, you might nearly mistake the 1995 painting "Horizon of Tuscany No. 19" (see pag. 173) for a conventional landscape piece, if not for its grand scale, spanning 300 cm in width. The painting captures the viewer's attention with a vivid red swath of land that stretches across its full width, crafted from layers of bold, vibrant horizontal strokes. These are sporadically crossed by vertical black lines that ascend like dark stems, bringing to mind images of the silhouettes of Tuscany's iconic cypress trees. This interplay of light and colour bathes the landscape in a dreamlike glow, as if surrounded by a radiant aura.

Included in the "Tuscan series" are "Walking Figure in Landscape No. 1," (see pag. 91) "Standing Figure in Landscape No. 3," (see pag. 93) and "Running Through a Landscape," (see pag. 169) all from 1990. A common theme amongst these titles is the depiction of the dynamic interaction between the human body and movement within the landscape. "Dancing a Landscape" presents a scene that plays out both in front of and behind the painting's intense black surface. On one side of the canvas, the landscape bursts into life through bold brush strokes against a deep black backdrop. On the other side, a large shape emerges, almost popping out from the darkness, making a striking appearance against the landscape's backdrop. Trees, field earth, and the distant rolling hills are captured in stripes of yellow-green, red, and blue respectively, applied with thick, textured strokes. This approach to using colour brings a sense of harmony to the entire scene. The uniformity of paint application stands out, regardless of whether it's applied straight from the tube, brushed on, or applied with other tools, the effect remains remarkably consistent. This technique unifies the trio of paintings, yet in "Walking Figure in Landscape," the trees are depicted with more intricacy, and the field seems to emerge from a dance of flowing beams. It's fascinating to observe how Karel Appel both adopted and broadened the esteemed legacy of the defining brushstroke. A century prior, it was Vincent van Gogh who had incorporated the fundamental painting elements of line and colour into a novel expressive mode, creating his own unique style.

"Birth of a Landscape" is another series of smaller paintings, crafted in 1996. In No. 14, the black emerges from a web of fine lines, fusing into a dark energy that suggests the powerful essence of animals, not through their physical likeness but through the vivid energy they exude. In No. 21 (see pag. 161), "Birth of a Landscape," the artist blends a vibrant array of coloured surfaces, drawing them towards a central fracture in the canvas. He then introduces an additional layer with white and black lines directly from the tube, adding depth. These are

not mere lines but textured surfaces, filaments created by long, sweeping strokes that rise, twist, and eventually spiral or form sharp angles, echoing architectural structures. In this way, "Nature No. 4" (1994) (see pag. 149) employs these elements to build the dynamic structure of a landscape, turning it into something that resembles a living organism with its own pulse.

"At this point in my life, I have the liberty to pursue whatever I find joy in and what fulfils me." This comment sheds light on the varied and rich visual vocabulary he used to express himself during that era. Insights from an artist who has devoted a lifetime to mastering their craft go beyond simple narrative. "The history of art is rich with discussions on the later creations of great artists such as Titian, Rembrandt, Goya, Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso – works belonging to a period in their lives when they fully immersed themselves into their art, freed from the pressures of fame, discovering the peace and concentration necessary to make strides towards the grand, towards the sublime." (Rudi Fuchs)[11]

[11] K.A. "Ich bin die Erde, der alles entspringt", Kärntner Landesgalerie, Klagenfurt 1995/96, pag. 5

Toscana, Galleria Poggiali, Firenze, 2024