

*Karel Appel in Italy*

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A Karel Appel exhibition in a Florentine gallery cannot dispense with bringing up the artist's studio cum villa in San Casciano-Mercatale, nearby Florence. He used it during the last decade of the past century, when he, together with his wife Harriet, spent there every summer, whereas during wintertime they stayed in New York or Darien, Connecticut. He then was an aging artist in his 70ies. Nevertheless, the new surroundings inspired him, as always, and triggered his creativity. His production there was prolific, and so it seemed only natural to show in this exhibition some works selected from those created in Mercatale. The exhibition project moreover provided a welcome occasion for a conversation with Harriet about their time spent in Tuscany, the transcription of which is published elsewhere in this catalogue, as well as for addressing the larger picture of Karel Appel's extensive history with Italy.

For the catalogue's list of exhibitions only those, which were staged in Italy (solo and group shows), have been selected from the artist's long and replete international history<sup>1</sup>, and this will serve here as a guideline. It starts with the year 1954 – three years after the demise of CoBrA, and the year of Appel's first show in New York –, when he participated in four group

exhibitions in Venice, Rome and Milan – quite a spectacular debut in Italy for a then 33-year-old Dutch artist. This early success was made possible partly thanks to Michel Tapié, the Parisian art impresario, who was a key figure for Appel's international breakthrough. Tapié had for instance introduced him to the very important Milanese collector Carlo Frua de Angeli<sup>2</sup>, for whom he worked as an advisor; and he had linked up an international network of galleries, among which the Galleria di Spazio in Rome, where he curated in 1954 the group exhibition *Caratteri della pittura d'oggi*<sup>3</sup>. The other reason for Appel's early presence in Italy originated from Asger Jorn, the Danish avant-garde painter and activist initiator of international avant-garde groups, like CoBrA, of which both had been founding members. After CoBrA, and an interruption forced upon him by tuberculosis, Jorn had just founded his M.I.B.I. ('Mouvement international pour un Bauhaus imaginiste' – a sort of experimental anti-Bauhaus), the first project of which was to be the *Incontro Internazionale della Ceramica di Albisola* in 1954<sup>4</sup>: He invited some of his artist friends to the ceramics workshop of Giuseppe Mazzotti in Albisola in order to collectively explore this medium – and the first one he contacted was Karel Appel.

<sup>1</sup> For an extensive exhibition history see: <https://karelappelfoundation.com/karel-appel/exhibitions>, consulted on February 28 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Carlo Frua de Angeli (Milan, 1895 – Milan, 1969), heir to a very powerful Milanese family, was one of the most important art collectors in Italy. He bore the names of both his father, Giuseppe Frua, the founder, in 1896, of a large Italian textile industry, and his mother, Anna De Angeli, sister of Ernesto De Angeli, one of the founders of the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.

<sup>3</sup> Juliette Evezard, « Un art autre » - *Le rêve de Michel Tapié* (Les presses du réel : Dijon, 2023), pp 160-162.

<sup>4</sup> Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus, „*Incontro internazionale della ceramica*”, *Albisola, Sommer 1954* (Campisano Editore: Rome, 2007), p 9.

Appel had already worked with ceramics in 1948, before CoBrA that is, but at that time he had merely painted over molds of basic commodities like plates, cups, or vases. Six years later, his hitting with iron bars on chunks of clay as a manner of sculpting was an entirely different matter. He had come earlier to Albisola than the others, so what happened there was a strenuous dialogue between him and Jorn, both inspired by Lucio Fontana, who since the late 1930ies had been working time and again at Mazzotti's. Appel's and Jorn's resulting works can best be described as exemplifying a move from CoBrA to Informel, certainly for Appel<sup>5</sup>. It was thanks to Fontana that the yield of the *Incontro Internazionale della Ceramica di Albisola* was shown at the *Decima Triennale di Milano* in November 1954. But the impact of this presentation was disappointing for Jorn to the extent that he believed for a moment that it as the end of MIBI<sup>6</sup>. He tried to counter this with an exhibition of the ceramics of Appel, Corneille, Matta and himself at Mazzotti's open-air gallery in Albisola the following year<sup>7</sup>. Seen with today's evaluation criteria, such a thing would seem marginal and totally irrelevant. Nevertheless, it has gone down into History.

Appel's first personal show in Italy was in 1956 at Galleria dell'Ariete in Milan. The gallery was part of Tapié's international network, and Carlo Frua de Angeli's hometown was Milan – likely

explanations to this early link. Another Milanese collector important for Appel was Paolo Marinotti. His father Franco, one of the most significant Italian industrialists of the post war era, had acquired the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 1951. He had adapted the building and founded there the International Center of Art and Costume (C.I.A.C.), which staged between 1951 and 1958 important art and costume exhibitions. When in 1959 the C.I.A.C. and the Palazzo Grassi passed into the hands of Paolo, he shifted the program's focus to contemporary art, starting that same year with the group exhibition *Vitalità Nell'Arte*, a co-production with the Kunsthalle Recklinghausen and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. On this occasion, he bought from Appel his monumental painting *Rencontre des Mondes*, the story of which is the stuff legends are made of: Appel had painted it the year before, after he had returned from his first visit to New York, in the Parisian studio of his friend Sam Francis. He had painted it simultaneously with another painting of exactly the same monumental size, *Rencontre au Printemps*, a commission for the new UNESCO headquarters to be inaugurated in Paris in 1959. Ten years later, Paolo Marinotti donated *Rencontre des Mondes* to the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, on the occasion of the inauguration of its Mies van der Rohe building. One may thus assume that it had been hanging in the Palazzo Grassi for the intermediate ten years, were it not for

the year 1964, when it was selected for *Documenta III*.<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously with his participation in *Vitalità Nell'Arte*, which may best be described as an international Art Informel exhibition, Appel had a personal show at Palazzo Grassi, *Dipingere coi tessuti*, which was more in line with the original concept of the C.I.A.C., because for this show he 'painted' with fabrics, in situ. Asger Jorn, who also participated in *Vitalità Nell'Arte*, became cross when he discovered the massive presence of Appel at Palazzo Grassi.<sup>9</sup> Both shows inaugurated a series of many contemporary art exhibitions there under the auspices of Paolo Marinotti, stretching almost over a decade. Appel participated in *Visione Colore* (1963) and in *Campo Vitale* (1967). The latter one 'dared' to put the European Informel in dialogue with American Pop art – an unsuccessful enterprise, because meanwhile painting as an artistic form of expression was considered outdated in the world of contemporary art. It should just be noted here that fifteen years later painting came back – but this pertains to another story.

Looking at the history of Karel Appel exhibitions in Italy since 1954, it is astounding to realize that it is as continuous as distributed: He has been participating in many group exhibitions, and he has had many solo exhibitions in public institutions and in many different galleries:

Galleria dell'Ariete, Milan (1956,1961), Galleria La Tartaruga, Rome (1957), Galleria Lorenzelli, Bergamo (1960), La Medusa Studio d'arte contemporaneo, Rome (1961,1963, 1970, 1974), Galleria Blu, Milan (1964), Galleria Falchi, Milan (1970), L'Arco – Studio Internazionale d'Arte Grafica, Rome (1970), Galleria Schubert, Milan (1971), Galleria D'Arte Rinaldo Rotta, Milan (1971), Galleria D'Arte Il Fiorino, Florence (1973), Galleria Bergamini, Milan (1994), Galleria Rinaldo Rotta, Genoa (1994), Galleria Spazia, Bologna (1994), and Galleria Arte 92, Milan (2005, 2008, 2011). That he had less institutional monographic exhibitions may be due to the scarcity and comparatively late arrival of modern art establishments in Italy, as he had many of such shows in other European countries and in the United States from early on. In Italy, it started only in 1985, after the return of painting, with an exhibition in Palazzo Medici Riccardi in Florence, and two years later with a concise retrospective at the Castello di Rivoli. And during the 1990ies, when he was sharing his time between Mercatale and New York, he had two further institutional exhibitions, focusing on his contemporary production: In 1996, the Fondazione Ambrosetti Arte Contemporanea staged an overview of works created on both sides of the Atlantic at the Abbazia Olivetana di Rodengo Saiano near Brescia, and two years later, a group of works selected by Johannes Gachnang were shown at the Villa Medici,

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp 227, 228.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp 230, 231.

<sup>8</sup> See for a more detailed account of this story, in which a third, even more monumental painting played a spectacular part: Franz W. Kaiser, 'Paris / New York' and 'Encounter in Spring and what follows' in: *Karel Appel – Four Exhibitions* (Galerie Max Hetzler, Holzwarth Publications: Berlin, Paris, London, 2023), pp. pp21-22 and 41-43.

<sup>9</sup> <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/exhibition-history-and-the-institution-as-a-medium/>, consulted on February 28 2024.

Rome, as the last of a series of exhibitions to take place in the former studio of Balthus, who had been the director of the Académie de France in the Villa. The catalogue text was written by Achille Bonito Oliva.<sup>10</sup>

The conversation with Harriet Appel gives a more detailed first-hand account of the last period of a long artistic career. Once more, he realized works in a local ceramics workshop; Giulio Baruffaldi, another Italian industrialist, helped him to realize a completely new series of sculptures; Mario Pieroni and Dora Stiefelmeier, former owners of a conceptual art gallery in Rome, and in the 1990ies artistic directors of the Tuscan Centro Civico per l'Arte Contemporanea in Serre di Rapolano, asked him to participate in their program. And last but not least, the magnificent views of the Tuscan landscape that Appel could contemplate from his studio inspired him to a spectacular new series of paintings. Approaching his 80ies birthday he kept on reinventing himself – independently and far removed from established tracks of the mainstream.

<sup>10</sup> Achille Bonito Oliva, 'Karel Appel' in: *Atelier del Bosco di Villa Medici – Accardi, Kounellis, Förg, Pistoletto, Appel (Zerynthia / Edizioni Charta: Rome, Milan)*, pp. 57-61.

