

The Elusive Karel Appel

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2 First of all, please excuse my absence from this conference dedicated to Karel Appel, but my physical state did not allow me to travel.

I warmly thank the organizers of this exciting symposium, in particular Chrisje Loman, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Franz Kaiser, Karel Appel Foundation.

3 The doors on Paris opened for Appel in Amsterdam in 1945, in the small studio of his friend Corneille, whom he had met in 1943 when they both were students at the National Academy of Fine Arts in Amsterdam. There he discovered a large portfolio, the catalog of the exhibition *Cinq peintres d'aujourd'hui* (Five Painters of Today) organized in October 1943 at the Galerie de France, rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris. Works by Gishia, Estève, Pignon, Beaudin and Borès are reproduced: modern painters with non-figurative tendencies.

This catalog awakened an irresistible desire to discover and perhaps conquer Paris.

4 A year later, while visiting Brussels, Appel made another discovery: a book reproducing a selection of works by Picasso. From that moment on, he entered into furious and prolific competition with Picasso, against whom he would never cease to measure himself, even secretly seeking to surpass him. Like Picasso, Appel's ease with which he moved from one style to another made it difficult for art critics in Paris to classify him.

Here are a few examples of newspaper clippings that Karel Appel has carefully preserved in his archives concerning Picasso.

5 In his letter dated June 22, 1947, he wrote to Corneille that with Cubism he had found a purpose. In autumn 1947, Karel Appel finally set off with Corneille for Paris in order to follow in the master's footsteps! There he discovered Chagall, Bonnard, Pignon, Magnelli, Dubuffet... On December 2, 1947, he wrote to Corneille:

"I'm now doing primitive painting, powerful, more powerful than Primitivism art and Picasso. Why do you ask? Because I'm continuing into the twentieth century. From Picasso comes vivid color. I've broken through the wall of abstract surrealism. My work integrates everything."

Paris was his revelation!

He returned to Paris twice before settling there permanently: the first time in November 1948 for attending the colloquium of the Centre International de Documentation sur l'art d'avant-garde – which formalized the birth of Cobra – and then in 1949 for the *Appel, Constant et Corneille* exhibition organized at the Galerie Colette Allendy. Appel settled in Paris from 1950 until 1976. But what really happened there, during his long stay?

6 When Franz Kaiser asked Michel Ragon about Karel Appel after Cobra, Ragon replied: "At some point, he disappeared to the United States."

Franz Kaiser rightly asks: How can we explain that Appel, who lived in Paris between 1950 and 1976, should have disappeared from the Parisian art scene at a time when France was experiencing its 'thirty glorious years', and at a time when, he pointed out, Appel was in his prime?

This question is so crucial that it became the starting point for my research. It was supported by the Karel Appel Foundation, to whom I would like to express my

warmest gratitude.

- 7 Karel Appel's name has been entered in the foreigners' register at the Paris Prefecture Archives starting with December 12, 1950, but this does not mean that he arrived in Paris at that time. He arrived earlier, in September of the same year.

But his name does not appear on the recently compiled inventory of famous foreigners who lived in Paris in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Isn't Karel Appel a 'famous' artist in French eyes? Why is that?

- 8 In France, art lovers know Appel, of course, but mainly as a Cobra artist. Would Parisians have held it against him to have participated in a group of artists who had built themselves up against the École de Paris? His later work is too often described as Cobra. Cobra only lasted from 1948 to 1951, while Karel Appel lived from 1921 to 2006. He was a painter, both before and after Cobra. How could the factitious longevity of Cobra, "that spark that never stops dying" as Ragon put it, obscure the eclecticism of the artist's long creative career? Was it the facile way in which art history sometimes lapses, combined with the art market's need to canonize groups of artists, enabling it, by a ripple effect, to use the fame of one to enhance the value of others, that sealed Karel Appel's fate in France for a long time to come?

- 9 My research revealed that this was obviously not the only answer to explain Appel's 'eclipse'.

For two and a half years I have been conducting my research on Karel Appel in Paris and I have been asked to complete a manuscript reporting on this research. These 20-30 minutes of intervention are of course too short to expose everything, but I will try to open some tracks of reflection, accomplished or yet to be explored.

For this symposium, I will focus exclusively on Karel Appel's first 10 years in Paris, revealing the causes of his eclipse in Paris.

If Paris was the grail for most artists of that generation, was it really for Appel? Hadn't Appel realized earlier than the others that the title 'Capital of the Arts' had already passed into the hands of New York, the real stake for the contemporary painters to whom he belonged?

In fact, if we group together Karel Appel's solo exhibitions and the group shows in which Appel was included, from 1950 to 1970, we observe that 25 percent of them were organized in Parisian galleries, as opposed to 49 percent concentrated at the Martha Jackson Gallery... The figures prove Michel Ragon right.

And if we analyze the registers of Karel Appel collectors compiled by Martha Jackson from 1960 to 1963, which include, as we might expect, since they are both associated, that of Michel Tapié in Europe, we understand that the majority of Karel Appel collectors lived in the United States.

- 10 Karel Appel attended the first exhibition organized in Studio Facchetti, in October 1951: the exhibition of Alfonso Ossorio's paintings. Here we see two pages from the exhibition visitors book and Appel's signature highlighted in yellow in the 2nd image. His presence at this exhibition, as at others organized at the Galerie Colette Allendy, where he had already been exhibited, or at the Galerie de France, shows that he was precisely targeting the galleries where he intended to make a name for himself. Perhaps Appel was aware of the importance of the address book already built up by Michel Tapié, artistic advisor to the new Studio Facchetti gallery.

- 11 Tapié had come a long way since his debut in 1947 at the Galerie René Drouin. At the age of 43, he was already a major figure on the Paris art scene. Karel Appel certainly didn't come to him without being aware of what he meant to younger artists. After

helping Georges Mathieu organizing several high-profile exhibitions to promote 'Abstraction Lyrique' in a landscape dominated by geometric abstraction, he became the herald of 'Art Informel'. He was constantly on the lookout for new talents to integrate into his international constellation of artists. The hard core of the lyrical abstraction, the 'Art Informel' constellation was made up of artists such as Mathieu, Dubuffet (whether he liked it or not), Bryen, Fautrier, Michaux and Riopelle, and to these already recognized names were added Giuseppe Capogrossi, Dova and Vedova for the Italians, and the American artists Pollock, Lee Krasner and De Kooning, Mark Tobey. Tapié had what it takes to attract the attention of the young Karel Appel. But the two men didn't actually meet until six months later, on Sunday April 20, 1952, under well-known circumstances. When Karel Appel met Michel Tapié, the latter immediately chose four of the artist's paintings and four of his collage-gouaches, specifying on his agenda: "I will try to take care of them".

Taking care of them meant first of all phishing the collectors he worked for. So, he introduces him to his second employer, the great Milanese collector Frua de Angeli, with whom he works in a side business to Studio Facchetti, in an office located in the Paris apartment made available by the collector, who becomes his partner, on the 7th floor of 33 quai Voltaire in Paris (in Saint Germain des Prés). Frua de Angeli booked two Appel works before leaving for Milan. Numerous other meetings followed, and Michel Tapié noted on April 29 that he had "seen many very interesting works by Appel".

- 12 Karel Appel was soon included in the art advisor's group exhibitions, giving him access to his network. In December 1952, Karel Appel took part in *Peintures non abstraites* and subsequent exhibitions, up to *Un Art Autre*, the gallery's fourth group show. The success of this event was due above all to the book Michel Tapié wrote during the 1952 Venice Biennale. On its 123 pages, it brought together 87 works by 41 artists of 13 different nationalities. This book enabled Karel Appel, presented alongside Pollock, Ossorio, Tobey, De Kooning, Rothko, Francis, Mathieu, Dubuffet, Hartung... to enter an international dimension.

Obviously, the vagueness surrounding Tapié's "informal" terminology and its definition is such that it allows Appel to feel free, although his paintings corresponded to the floating criteria established by Tapié: he defied form; his works were expressive and testified to total freedom of formal means. Finally, Appel unleashed "the fury of the self-righteous"...

Karel Appel now belonged to an international constellation of artists which enabled him to forge links, privileging his friendships with American painters such as Sam Francis and Paul Jenkins. Foreign collectors and art dealers, particularly Americans, were well aware of Appel's importance! Such was the case with Otto Seligman, director of the Seattle gallery of the same name. 1953 promised to become a sumptuous year for the artist: he had his first major solo exhibition at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels; he was featured at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in the international exhibition *Younger European Painters*; and he took part in the Second *Sao Paulo Biennial*.

And while Tapié's business in Paris was going badly – he closed 33 Quai Voltaire and his relations with the Facchetti were very strained – Appel became "his major asset", which he used to woo the architect Luigi Moretti, whom he had met the previous year at the Venice Biennial. The architect was planning to open a gallery, and Tapié was

already imagining himself as Moretti's artistic advisor. In Tapié's scenario, Moretti would allow him to build up a down payment on which to propose a contract to Karel Appel, who then had only a partial contract with the Facchetti studio.

- 13 In fact, Appel hadn't even had time to establish his reputation in Paris before he was already spearheading the informal abroad! For Appel, Paris was the antechamber where the foreign world would come to him without him even having to go to it. It was from Paris that Karel Appel met Beatrice Monti, director of the Milan gallery dell Ariete, and it was also from Paris, in his studio on rue Brézin, that one fine day in August 1956, Tominaga Soichi, art critic and research director of the Faculty of Letters at Gakushuin University, paid him a visit.
- A photograph by Tony Vaccaro immortalizes this meeting. Michel Tapié on your left standing next to Tominaga Soichi, then Karel Appel and Ruth Francken. Appel was preparing his *Portraits* exhibition at Galerie Rive Droite in his studio on rue Brézin.
- 14 It was also in Paris that Karel Appel met New York gallerist Martha Jackson during his first solo show in Paris, held at Studio Facchetti from May 28 to June 17, 1954. While traveling in Europe, she wanted to develop ties with artists and gallery owners. Two months later, she signed a contract with Appel, giving her exclusivity for the United States for a renewable two-year period.
- 15 And in the meantime, as he left the Studio Facchetti for the Galerie Rive Droite, Jackson organized a solo show for Appel in December 1954 and sold one of his works to the American curator Alfred Barr: *Child with Birds* entered the collections of the Moma! And the gallery owner struggled to maintain exclusive rights to Appel's work, which was increasingly in demand, notably from Samuel Kootz, who, while focusing American artists, was not inclined to leaving the most gifted artists from the Old World to Parisian dealers. But would Samuel Kootz, who promised no exclusivity contracts, have been more interesting than Martha Jackson, who envisaged a long-term strategy? Samuel Kootz went so far as to try to bribe Tapié, to whom he sent cigars to obtain his support in convincing Appel to leave the Martha Jackson Gallery. It wouldn't work - Tapié knew where his own interests were, and so did Appel! But Karel Appel's place extended beyond Paris!
- Martha Jackson reassured Appel, who was understandably impatient... "You can be very famous here." She continues: "Thousands of people who have never heard of Mathieu will know your name." She knew full well that this argument would hit a nerve with Karel Appel!
- 16 Karel Appel had every reason to envy Georges Mathieu's meteoric rise to fame in the United States. But for Appel, the context was very different. American dealers and collectors were quick to realize the value of rallying behind their compatriot artists and were in no hurry to buy works by European artists. Already in 1952, Kootz confessed to Tapié that he was reserving his "most important efforts for making American painters known", and that this approach prevented him from "venturing to establish contracts with 'lesser known' Europeans". At the time, he still didn't know Appel but had already begun to make contact with Mathieu. Appel's success was already on the doorsteps of the United States, but he was timid about setting up shop there. And Martha Jackson was working on this.
- 17 Putting the progress of Karel Appel, a foreigner in Paris, into perspective with that of Mathieu, a Parisian, in the mid-50s, allows us to understand to a certain extent what was at stake for Appel in Paris.
- From the outset, Appel looked across the Atlantic. He may have felt that it might have

been possible, being a foreign painter in France, to make a name there before the war, but after the war, being a foreign painter and, what was more, coming from Amsterdam (thus devoid, in the collective imagination, of the exoticism of a far-off land), meant having to contend with critics who had become very chauvinistic in the face of the challenges represented by the Americans. How strong were the disillusionments of countless American artists who discovered that in Paris, the idea of freedom offered by the bohemian, cosmopolitan environment was more a matter of indifference than of real tolerance – and how important solidarity was among Americans, who had built up real networks enabling them to bounce back. But who could Appel count on? He was practically the only Dutch artist in Paris...

- 18 1957 was devoted to the United States. He went there at the invitation of Martha Jackson. From this point on, immersed in Expressionism, Appel embarked on a truly free abstraction which, Franz Kaiser admits, would find its almost cartoonish expression in Jan Virjman's film *Karel Appel's Reality*, shot in 1961. Appel thus became an Abstract Expressionist in Paris, the city of the Informel... and no gallery seemed to take the measure of his shift or accept it. His last solo show at the Galerie Stadler, mainly nudes, held in the spring of 1957, received little press attention – apart from a positive review by his friend Julien Alvard, whose portrait he had painted a year earlier. His first exhibition organized by Galerie Rive Droite had already taken place the previous year, and the next one would not take place for another three years. In the meantime, Jean Larcade, who no longer worked with Tapié, now at Stadler, presented Fautrier's informal works and showed a program more oriented towards a certain figuration; Dubuffet, Bacon... no room, then, for Appel, who was experimenting with the new American abstraction. Karel Appel was moving too fast for these Parisian gallery owners. In barely 5 years, he spent only a short time at Facchetti's before moving on to Larcade, then Stadler's gallery, then Claude Bernard Gallery, before knocking on the door of Iris Clert and then Mathias Fels' Gallery.
- 19 In her diary, Iris Clert comments: "In July, I'll do a hanging of my other foals, the ones that were selling." Karel Appel was among them in the micro-salon organized in the summer of 1958. The gallerist invented a new exhibition format, the aim of which was to display as many works in the smallest format as possible by various artists, both known and unknown, in a reduced space (her first gallery was tiny). Appel was thus presented alongside Arman, Alechinsky, Enrico Baj, César, Fautrier, Fontana, Jorn, Matta and many others, and would thus be considered by Iris Clert as one of her foals... Clert understood that Appel could not be reduced to the Informel and deserved his place among those who opened the door to something else!
- 20 And she was right! Appel continued to explore the imprint of gesture in the thick matter of paint, the expression of tragic heads and nudes, the birth of which Von Tetterode showed at the rue Brézin studio in Paris, in his 1960 film *Appel à Paris*.
- 21 At the same time as he was developing these expressionist forms, he introduced collage into his work as early as 1957 and intensified this technique in 1958 with *Décoration artistique*.

With this work, based on a Lefranc color-maker's label stuck in the center of the composition, Appel was perhaps once again exploring Picasso's synthetic cubism in his mature years. But he may also have seen the exhibition *Loi du 29 juillet 1881 ou le Lyrisme à la sauvette* at Galerie Colette Allendy, the first show of torn posters by Hains and Villeglé. But Karel Appel soon went further. While his collages were initially

characterized by the inclusion of labels, torn pieces of posters and shreds of newspaper articles, he then moved on to introduce advertising elements and erotic, kitsch imagery.

Karel Appel's works from the first three years of the 60s bear witness to genuine experimentation in both content and form, ranging from figuration to gesturalism pushed to the limit.

- 22 The bodily metamorphoses that give rise to creatures that are always hybrid and sometimes distressing, oscillating between humor and tragedy, passive victims or active executioners of orgies played out in strange places, recall the "interzones" of the nightmarish novel *The Naked Feast* by the American author of the Beat Generation, William S. Burroughs, reorganized by his friend Allen Ginsberg and published in English in Paris in 1959, banned in the U.S. until 1962 for obscenity, then translated into French in 1964! Karel Appel may well have read this work, the publication of which caused quite a stir. Perhaps Appel understood it as a reflection on modern mores, morality and culture?

Whether he has read it or not, the new works of Appel, who still lived in Paris, were more rooted in American counterculture than in the 'proto-sixty-eight' Parisian landscape.

In 1966, when Appel considered a collaboration with a writer for publication, he wrote to Martha Jackson: "What do you think of Allen Ginsberg?" It is certainly more in Paris than in New York that Karel Appel was able to discover and appropriate this culture where the writers of the Beat generation met at the Beat Hotel between 1958 and 1963.

Karel Appel, an American in Paris?

- 23 Is Appel a Parisian, an American, a figurative, an abstract, an informal, an affichiste, an abstract expressionist, an all-over expressionist, a pop artist, a Nouveau Réaliste? Since his early days in Paris, he has never enjoyed the "Nouvelle Ecole de Paris" label to which he might have, for a time, aspired? Neither Herta Wescher nor Michel Ragon thought of mentioning Appel in the conference about the New School of Paris organized by Galerie Rive Droite in 1954, at the very time when Appel was showing there...

My research on Appel and France was of the utmost importance to me, since it enabled me to understand that, while Paris may not have been a privileged setting for Appel, who was confronted with the chauvinistic indifference of protectionist critics, it did in fact prove to be the antechamber he used intelligently, understanding, or at least sensing, earlier than others, the new geography of artistic poles that was taking shape and the new axes of international artistic exchange that were emerging.

Paris, in fact, could no longer contain and promote the creative force of Karel Appel, who was never rooted in any one trend, which could only lose the Parisian galleries who needed to associate an artist with a trend, an artist with a gallery, thus building up their customer loyalty. In Paris, would he have needed a Leo Castelli instead? In a word, Karel Appel, who always saw beyond, was elusive to them.

If Karel Appel was so successful in the U.S. during the 'trente glorieuses', where gallery owners vied with each other to try, in vain, to win him over, what was his trajectory on the other side of the Atlantic? A number of avenues were emerging, notably with the writers of the Beat Generation, who took him far beyond the boundaries of informality.

What's surprising, however, are the choices made by Martha Jackson, who, in her 1960 exhibition, did not reveal Karel Appel's highly innovative new direction, even though she invited Larry Rivers, whom she would have liked to represent. Was this due to Michel Tapié's prior selection, which obscured his new experiments that went beyond him, or was it the desire of a New York dealer to respect the classifications established in the mid-50s: a European is an Informel? This choice is all the more troubling as she advises Tapié to go and see what's going on at Virginia Dwan's gallery, a West Coast Leo Castelli taking a pop, land art, minimalist and conceptual direction. Martha Jackson is also moving in this direction, with an exhibition entitled New Forms, New Media, featuring works by Chamberlain, Cornell, Dan Flavin, Bob Indiana, Allan Kaprow, Yves Klein and Jasper Johns, heralding a new turning point for the gallery... and one from which Appel will be absent, even though many of his collages would have fit right in!