

# Karel Appel, *Le cheval mourant*, 1956



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**BILBOKO ARTE  
EDERREN MUSEOA  
MUSEO DE BELLAS  
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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## 1.

Force, violence, chance, dynamism, exaggeration, excess, chaos, cruelty, unexpected, spontaneous, unforeseen and irrational: all are words that can fairly be applied to the work of Karel Appel (1921–2006), and not least to *Le cheval mourant* (1956) [fig. 1]<sup>1</sup>. Of course, such labels also apply equally to many other Expressionist painters, not just Karel Appel, being pertinent to the works of Jorn, Constant, Corneille and, in general, to members of the CoBrA group of which Appel was a part. They are no less appropriate for abstract Expressionists in the US and some Spanish artists, like Antonio Saura. Terms such as these profile a particular kind of modern artist set against established, proper art, tradition and conventionality. Some critics made of this canon a model for a specific type of art and artist: according to Greenberg's tenets, Pollock fulfilled most of the conditions.

All these words were used by critics and artists alike. Appel himself declared: "Dans ma peinture, c'est l'élan, la force, la vitesse, la manière de faire"<sup>2</sup>; and in the same interview: "La création, elle, est comme un volcan qui entre en éruption [...] Je crois que le point de départ de tout art est le *chaos*"<sup>3</sup>. In a 1958 manifesto written for the *Experimentele Groep in Holland*, which was in fact rejected, he insisted on the need to avoid intellectual theory, emphasizing that art was an intuitive, psychic operation<sup>4</sup>. Many of the photographs of him at work capture his expressive energy, his use of unusual tools like knives, and his dynamic way with the paint straight from the tube. In his description of the artist's studio, with the artist present, R. H. Fuchs draws attention to the chaos, the bohemian wildness, the exuberance he found in this particular place (Appel had three studios), the excess of paints, objects, utensils of all kinds. However, despite this first impression, he

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1 The Bilbao Fine Arts Museum acquired *Le cheval mourant* in March 2007 from the André Simoens gallery, Knokke-Heist (Belgium), which had just displayed it at its stand at the Arco '07 Madrid Art Fair from 15 to 19 February. Previously, it was in Bertie and Gigi Urvater's collection in Belgium, who must have bought it around 1959. The couple, both involved in the diamond trade, commissioned architect André Jacquain to design a mansion in Brussels, which was built between 1959 and 1960, with a gallery to exhibit their artworks. Although the gallery only had space for some 140 works, the collection actually numbered nearly one thousand, by the leading artists of the 20th century. However, problems in the diamond trade forced the Urvater family gradually to sell off an essential part of the collection from 1962 on. From that point, all we know about *Le cheval mourant* is that it was part of the Onzea-Govaerts collection in the early 1990s. See The Hague 1956, cat. 88; Basel 1959: Claus... [et al.] 1958, p. 249; Ostend, 1991, pp. 78, 90, w/no.; Saragossa 2008, pp. 346, 358, no. 223.

2 Appel/Verdet/Towarnicki 1985, p. 78.

3 Ibid., pp. 86 and 151.

4 Quoted by Ragon 1988, p. 375.



1. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Le cheval mourant*, 1956  
Oil on canvas, 130 x 195 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 07/7

2. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Nu barbare*, 1957  
 Oil on canvas, 195 x 130 cm  
 Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Gent, Belgium



adds that Appel "is a classical painter who lives much less in the 'madding' crowd and far more in the quiet of his studios"<sup>5</sup>.

It's not hard to accept these rather clichéd touches. A quick glance at his works brings many to light, some of which he actually signals in the title: *Nu barbare* (1957) [fig. 2], an exceptional work of no little size that encapsulates many of the features of painting at the time.

But the important thing is not so much to accept such words, although they certainly suit him, as to analyze what there is in them in pictorial terms. Put another way, we need to see how these verbal attributions translate in painterly terms and how the process led to *Le cheval mourant*. Otherwise, all these concepts are little more than an ideological screen, when not simply rhetorical and pseudoliterary: while purporting to lay painting bare, they actually cover it up, keeping us from us, putting generic descriptions in its place.

## 2.

Popular urban culture and primitive art are in the origins of Appel's career. Born in a district of Amsterdam, from his youth the artist came into contact, according to Peter Bellew, with the sculpture of Dutch New Guinea, a good example of which is to be found in the collection of the Colonial Museum (today the Tropenmuseum)<sup>6</sup>. Appel himself told Simon Vinkenoog that all his work was popular, in that it came from the

<sup>5</sup> Fuchs 1991, p. 102. Exhibition curated by R. H. Fuchs and F. W. Kaiser.

<sup>6</sup> Bellew 1968, pp. 1-2.





3. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Vue sur la Ville de Oorschot*, 1942  
 Oil on canvas, 50 x 70 cm  
 Karel Appel Estate Foundation

people<sup>7</sup>, adding that it wasn't "folk" popular, but more the kind of popular found in an industrial, incipiently consumerist society, with high waste levels, like the Amsterdam of his youth, a popularity from which neither violence nor a certain degree of chaos are exempt.

His earliest paintings, from the 1935–1942 period, were landscapes and portraits in which, while one may appreciate the skill of the young artist, still little more than a boy, there are few interesting features, with the possible exception of the importance he gives to colour. His chromatic intensity could have sprung from his interest in Van Gogh, an artist who would remain a benchmark throughout Appel's life. But in any case, as one would expect from someone his age, it's a very moderate and as yet pretty elementary Van Gogh. Figurations are conventional, but the use of colour in landscapes like *Vue sur la Ville de Oorschot* (1942) [fig. 3] veers heavily in favour of yellows, ochres and blacks.

In 1942 the influence of Matisse can be appreciated in Appel's treatment of colour, as he introduced reds, blues and yellows to his palette, precisely the range associated with Matisse—style *joie de vivre*. The influence of Matisse, another constant feature of Appel's work, would intensify in 1945, when he appears to have become acquainted with the German Expressionists and, in particular, Paul Klee, an artist who would have a decisive influence on his entire oeuvre. Appel enjoyed painting trees and produced some that remind us unmistakably of Klee's painting.

Appel was 24 when World War II ended. To judge from subsequent declarations, he was well aware that the world had changed and, with it, art (or, if it hadn't, that it needed to). Although he's actually talking

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Ragon 1988, p. 101.

about CoBrA, what Appel says in the following quote suggests his state of mind at that time: "Or la rupture que s'était produite avec l'expérience de la guerre et la naissance d'une société nouvelle, nous sommait de trouver une autre écriture, et cela s'imposait à nous comme une nécessité intérieure", he told Frédéric de Towarnicki<sup>8</sup>. What Appel is pointing to here is that the avant-garde movements of between the wars had run out of steam. There was a pressing need to "start from scratch".

The immediate post-war period, from 1946 to 1948, were key years in his artistic development. During that time, he profiled and shaped the mould for some of the defining features of his painting, which would eventually lead, in 1956 and 1957, to *Le cheval mourant*. Superficially, we can actually reconstruct how things happened<sup>9</sup>. Appel discovered Dubuffet's *Art brut*, the art produced by children and the mentally ill, what the Nazis classed as "degenerate" art; enthralled by the Dadaists, especially Schwitters, he read *Les Chants de Maldoror*, came into contact with Klee's oeuvre at a 1948 exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, became familiar with Picasso's output, understood the importance of material and the potential of collage, and was involved in the journal *Reflex* (1948), mouthpiece of the *Experimentele Groep in Holland*, which published his drawings, alongside those of Constant and Corneille, even though, as noted above, the group actually rejected the manifesto Appel wrote (it did however publish a manifesto written by Constant). It was during this period that he defined his iconographic repertoire and the essential elements of his idiom as a painter.

This iconographic repertoire consisted of two major motifs: the figures of children and the figures of animals. Animals already featured prominently in many of the works he produced in 1947, gouaches and coloured-pencil drawings for the most part, although they did appear in oil paintings too. Appel executed a great many small works on paper in an obsessive exploration of the possibilities of the motif. Occasionally, the animals in question remain undefined, but it's usually clear what they are: fish, birds or cats, among others. It's fair to say that, at this point, the artist limited himself to representing figures of animals. However, over time, the animal motif would take on another dimension, becoming one of the key factors in his painting and the way he conceived art.

"L'animal, c'est pour moi quelque chose de stupéfiant, dont je ne cesse de m'étonner", he told André Verdet<sup>10</sup>. From amazement, he would pass to a more ambitious approach: "J'aurais voulu avoir le regard d'un animal qui, pour la première fois, se mettrait à peindre le monde humain!", he declared in the Frédéric de Towarnicki interview<sup>11</sup>. This consideration took Appel way beyond what might have been expected: besides the "beastliness" attributed to the beast, with all the associated attributes of irrationality and violence, everything connected with its *natural* character, the animal's gaze, which replaces the human perspective, also implies ingenuousness, the discovery of reality from a new, unexpected, completely different viewpoint, one that doesn't hold to the established rules. This aspiration, the gaze of the animal, is a radical form of metamorphosis. (I don't think it is too much to suggest this gaze is associated with the way Gregor Samsa

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8 Appel/Verdet/Towarnicki 1985, pp. 77-78. Appel's painting in the forties and part of the fifties is usually interpreted in the context of the post-war period. Sam Hunter is a good example: "A quell'epoca, si sentiva obbligato ad utilizzare la sua arte come un'arma per modellare e purgare una società, quella del dopoguerra, che non era ancora capace di comprendere, o di scartare, gli orrori della guerra e l'atmosfera di violenza degradante sorta dalle guerre freda", in Hunter 1987, p. 26.

9 In this brief, necessarily provisional reconstruction, I have used information obtained from the existing bibliography, particularly abundant in Michel Ragon's work quoted above, and in the analysis of the surviving works from that time.

10 Appel/Verdet/Towarnicki 1985, p. 19.

11 Ibid., p. 62. This conception is a constant feature of Appel's thinking. In the final paragraphs of the interview, which can be read as a summary of his position, he returns to the subject: "Toute ma vie, j'ai essayé de peindre l'homme dans la dimension de l'animal et l'animal dans la dimension de l'homme, avec, à l'arrière-plan, l'idée confuse d'une réalité mythologique, paradisiaque. Avec le souvenir de quelque dimension harmonieuse, oubliée, enfouie dans la mémoire, ou voilée. Parfois, je me suis même senti comme un animal qui aurait peint l'homme. Imaginez qu'un animal parvienne à nous peindre, à nous *montrer*. Voilà qui serait vraiment nouveau et qui révolutionnerait pour de bon la planète!" (pp. 185-186).



4. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Personnages*, 1950  
 Oil on canvas, 65 x 80 cm  
 Private collection, Holland

looks at his family in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and with the kind of looks seen, years later, on the faces of so many of Francis Bacon's human/beast characters). A deranged, inhuman viewpoint, if you like, but one that, as such, affects everything seen/represented/painted. Indeed, in some later works it is difficult to say whether the characters shown are humans or animals: see, for instance, *Personnages* (1950) [fig. 4].

The second motif, children, centres on a persistent theme: "les enfants interrogateurs". Some of his better-known works date from this time: *Enfants interrogateurs* (1948) [fig. 5] and *Les enfants interrogateurs* (1948) [fig. 6]. The series led to the mural for the Amsterdam City Council, *Les enfants interrogateurs* (1949) [fig. 7], where he simplifies much of his iconographic repertoire, composition and chromatic values, all in response to the ornamental, mural nature of the painting.

Although this motif appears time and again in his works, we shouldn't think of the relationship to childish, or child-like painting only in iconographic terms. It also affects formal aspects: the way children draw, the way they understand the relation with the support and the space the support actually is, are factors that Appel kept very much in mind when working, ones that affected the definition of his visual idiom.

### 3.

*Enfants interrogateurs* was a robust inauguration for Appel's new ways of doing things. Roughly joined wooden panels, some superimposed, were used as support, the "children" being painted on them in bright colours. Bringing to mind the kind of waste material Schwitters used for his collages, the support is employed to remarkably expressive effect. Unlike other artists working immediately after him, Appel did not work on the wood to bring out any intrinsic beauty it might have had, preferring to leave it in its really rough state, as if it were material trouv  , bits and pieces. The use of brilliant, apparently casually applied colours, helps to further underscores this effect.





5. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Enfants interrogeants*, 1948  
 Oil on panel, 105 x 67 x 17.5 cm  
 Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam  
 Inv. no. BA 481



6. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Les enfants interrogeants*, 1948  
 Oil on panel, 85 x 56 cm  
 Centre Pompidou, Paris. Musée national d'art moderne,  
 Centre de création industrielle  
 Inv. no. 1985-128



7. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Les enfants interrogeants*, 1949  
 Mural for Amsterdam City Council  
 Now in the restaurant of the Sofitel Amsterdam The Grand Hotel

By joining panels with little apparent care, juxtaposing some and superimposing others, Appel obtained a rough painting surface of extreme material density that affected everything painted on it. However, as Fuchs has noted, it's a static rather than a dynamic surface: it dominates the relationship between the figures and the background, and the one created between the figures themselves, while also governing the planes and signs juxtaposed "clear and solemn like a first reading-book"<sup>12</sup>. One can't help feeling there's something visually orphaned about these figures; it's in the way they're placed as if they were in the support of a catalogue or an inventory. The structuring of solemnity, in the head-on icon, and waste, in the rough exposed panels so coarsely joined, produces a contradictory effect that accentuates the presumably desired impression, of provocative ugliness. As Fuchs notes, this may be a programmatic attitude produced by the widespread sensation of angst and stupor following the Second World War.

Appel's work with panels is limited, and not easy to compare with what he did in painting on canvas or in his drawings. However, the panels do give us an insight into the kind of problems with the painted surface that we find in his oeuvre. The way the panels are placed, those devil-may-care joints, create a surface that Fuchs considers static, but which hint at a dynamic surface created from the actual paste used in painting, from the actual material nature of the surface as painted. The static nature of some of the paintings from this period brings them into line with the panels of "les enfants". Others, however, signpost a rather different path.

*Hip, Hip, Hourra!* (1949) [fig. 8] is one of the finest works he produced in this period. The figures stand out from the black background surface (a black we will need to come back to) in a lively movement and colouring I would go so far as to call sumptuous. Fuchs talks about this work in the following terms: "The painting is as flat as a kaleidoscope. It is a coloured drawing on black, a dark box with colours stuck on like butterflies in a glass case"<sup>13</sup>. Fuchs contrasts it with another rather less amiable-looking, slightly later work, *Volons ensemble* (1950) [fig. 9]: "This work is definitely not a set of figures that have settled quietly in a painting; what we have is a confusion of more or less figurative movement: a composition without quietude. In *Volons ensemble* Appel created, in 1950, the model for a structure that would be fundamental for the rest of his oeuvre"<sup>14</sup>.

Although this "model for a structure", which has definitively abandoned stillness, is to be found at the core of *Le cheval mourant*, as the analysis of the painting suggests, other elements besides the dynamic structure of the painted surface are needed. Rhythm, a non-traditional relationship between drawing and background, is required, while playing with the chromatic diversity (not only through the diversity and thickness of the paint mass) of the background and actually conceives a different sense of the drawing, executed, successively, with lines, brushstrokes and its actual "materiality".

I'll start with the last of these features. The use of thickly drawn abstract or figurative pictorial signs (painted more than drawn) is closely related to Klee's work, although the sense, to put it mildly, is rather different now, being violent and brutal, which is not something we find in Klee, always much more restrained, even in the final moments. To me it's not strictly a question of calligraphy; it suggests a new approach to the relation between figure and background, while offering a more powerful image of the problems deriving from front-on-ness. If in paintings like *Hip, Hip, Hourra!*, this frontality is decisive in the way the figures are distributed and

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12 Fuchs 1991, p. 104.

13 Ibid., p. 104.

14 "... by adding and more adding, you soon get such an accumulation of colour material that the painting eventually acquires a heavy, febrile surface. The danger is of such a thick, abundant, heavy surface seeming dull and sluggish to the eye, because in that case it would lose the mobility, which, for Appel, is the essential quality of all surfaces. Painting blinds painting, like mud and clay blocks a pool. A painting's entire choreography, caught in tension, can collapse in an instant. And it's in that instant when Appel the draughtsman gets to work, and the open play of the lines of the drawing is the right medium to blow new life into the painting." Ibid., p. 106.



8. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Hip, Hip, Hourra!*, 1949  
 Oil on canvas, 81.7 x 127 cm  
 Tate, London  
 Inv. no. T05077



9. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Volons ensemble*, 1950  
 Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm  
 Karel Appel Estate Foundation





10. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Portrait of Geert van Bruaene*, 1948  
 Oil on canvas, 80 x 49 cm  
 Private collection, Belgium

in the fascinating benevolence or gentleness of the painting as a whole (involving a clear, precise frontality, based on the sumptuous black), now the use of a thick line for drawing/painting destroys the clarity and the sumptuousness: figure and background intermesh and on many occasions the signs that create the (abstract or figurative) motif function as a sort of "grid" in respect of the background. (Although this is not the case with *Le cheval mourant*, there is a feature that "announces", albeit in a most elementary way, what happens in the painting: the drawing from *Portrait of Geert van Bruaene* (1948) [fig. 10] is done with paint, so that surface, foreground and background seem to merge into one another, or, to put it another, more precise way, they cancel each other out as such surface and background).

Another feature is the recourse to a broad chromatic variety in the background: there's no reason why the background should be profiled from a single colour. Unlike what he did in *Hip, Hip, Hourra!*, in *Les animaux* (1948) [fig. 11] he makes use of the drawing studied by Fuchs, but the background is not an homogeneous chromatic surface, nor is it a surface bearing a range of *tones*; in fact, it displays a variety of colours: the background yellow moves with the dynamism of the brushstrokes and the colour variations, which do not respect (why on earth should they?) either the distribution or the limits of the figures. This would become a standard procedure for Appel in subsequent years, one that on occasions he structured through the play of the thick colour pastes.





11. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Les animaux*, 1948  
 Oil on canvas, 96 x 126 cm  
 Karel Appel Estate Foundation

This is not the only characteristic worth mentioning at this point. The drawing also merits attention: the lines of the figures do not "enclose" the chromatic forms or blurs, so they don't have to adapt to any particular precision of the motifs. They can spill over, break out, and they may also "shrink". Line and colour in Appel's painting behave at this time just as line and colour do in children's drawings: they don't coincide, they boil over, they don't quite reach, they don't fit (...), and this is what, in part, their beauty, and the beauty of the artist's paintings, is founded on.

Appel relinquished the resources and practices that traditionally help to give stability and unity to a painting, the conventions established to achieve those ends, the conventions that allow the spectator to look at and enjoy an artwork, to gain pleasure from the idiom and understand "what it says" (although the artist himself would surely have loathed the expression, "what it says"). The gaze of someone who looks at a picture is "tranquillized", as it were, when an artist makes use of such conventions: what we see tells us we are on familiar, known ground; otherwise, the predominant feeling is one of insecurity: we don't *know* where the background is, what its relation to the figures is, what function the profiling plays in the drawing, and so forth. The relation between the surface and the background, between the lines of the contours and the volumes of colour, the actual linearity of the drawing, the difference between the pictorial nature of the support and the figure drawn, the stability of the background: these are just some of the conventions that, with Appel, go by the board. But the artist needs resources that function as equivalents of the conventions rejected, resources that replace them to achieve, in their stead, a different effect. The starting point for this search is to be found

in the 1949 and 1950 paintings mentioned above, and the conclusion is reached in 1956, in paintings like *Le cheval mourant*. In these works, what strikes us is Appel's mastery of his idiom, the growing complexity, his ability to create features that define a poetic of painting markedly different from what one normally finds. Of these features, the first, perhaps the most necessary but certainly not the only one, is rhythm.

The structure of *Le cheval mourant* infringes all the standard conventions and does so, moreover, precisely in the way noted above. However, it gives a central role to the rhythm of the force-lines of the drawing, chromatism and paint texture in respect of a dynamic background, by means of the structuring of different masses of colour (which here also have a sentimental effect). The ample rhythm of the curves that are repeated horizontally, folding back on themselves without actually closing, from the horse's hindquarters to its head—and from the head to the hindquarters—unifies the variety of resources violated and adds drama consistent with the motif: the curves tense as they move from one end to the other, rearing back, writhing.

We perceive the different parts of the horse, its head, body mass, hindquarters, legs, hooves, and we note the complexity of its posture: an icon of tension in the curved horizontal and the verticals that are "thrown"—the animal itself, like a scream—towards the upper part of the image.

A step further: the drawing in question is not, in any conventional sense, a drawing (although there are drawings in it), it is not just a mark on a surface, since the mark is now itself pictorial material. The drawing is of paint material (with linearity integrated) and so is therefore the rhythm, which means we can't in fact talk about a mark on a surface (although we can't discard it either); you could almost say we are faced with a "pictorial artefact" (one that never ceases to be a painting), such is the visual force of the figure, a genuine object that imposes itself on our vision. This artefact, the horse painted in colour, material and drawing, shapes a centrifugal rhythm, as if it didn't fit within the confines of the painting but, at the same time, reduced to those confines, which powerfully accentuates the high drama.

The lines of the drawing, the marks, move in the rhythmic direction signposted and although the actual painting material also moves in the same direction, it's as if it wanted to "hang about", to linger, to catch its breath before moving on again with renewed energy and vigour. This happens to the ochres of the animal's body, with the clear tones of the head and of what we assume to be the belly. It also occurs with the red stain-line profiling the nape to the mouth. The hallucinatory eye is delineated with a doodle that turns into an almost straight, energetic, precise contour, in the tension generated by form seeking to establish itself clearly and encountering resistance: I can imagine Appel painting this in such a way that his hand, in the midst of difficulties and hesitations that are all registered in the painting, stumbles across the right direction (from the nape to the edge of the head), a direction in which the difficulties and hesitations are to be found, as the movement that resolves them (the movement created by Appel's hand: his hand being the protagonist of those difficulties and hesitations and of the energy involved) is part of it.

One major factor in the creation of the dramatic effect is the colour range. In the lower part of the painting, and of the figure, obscure, dense, changing ochres predominate in juxtaposed, interlocking masses. Immediately above, they become clearer, white takes the leading role, although the ochre doesn't disappear, and we find two new colours: red, already noted, and blue in some touches in the background that "penetrate" the image of the horse (the red, which the artist originally referred to as "blood", simultaneously possesses here a constructive and a symbolic function). In this way, Appel creates a figure full of light, one which, in its apparent improvisation, draws on resources used traditionally in Dutch painting. The figure *rests* on the horizontal "ground" and lightens up as it goes higher, accentuating clarity and dynamism. The dynamic, mobile composition, that Fuchs talks about à propos of the paintings of 1949 and 1950, here achieves a remarkable level of perfection, intensity and it should be said, rigour.

In all this, we need to be aware that the material elements traditionally used as support for figures or significant motifs, but not significant in themselves, now take this role as well (without relinquishing their original purpose, as they are still supports). This leads to a rather singular conception of representation. Certainly, Appel always insisted on how evident, how unconcealed, his painting was: it was figurative; and was only abstract for a few years after the period we're looking at here, during part of his time in New York.

Traditionally, painting represented a particular space in which a motif was placed. The space was a likeness of the real world and the motif, the specific anecdote that took place in the "world". Whether painted, engraved, suggested on paper or any other support, the space constructed was the frame for any interpretation, this was where the anecdote (which might involve, for instance, action, figures, landscapes or objects) was placed and determined the viewpoint from which the anecdote in question, whatever it actually was, was painted/interpreted. From the point of view it establishes, the frame Appel created is dislocated, to the extent that it will in turn dislocate any motif painted within it. Besides affecting figure, action, object or landscape, this dislocation affects the frame in which they are visually possible: these are the notes of the grotesque, the dramatic grotesque in *Le cheval mourant*. However, this painting goes way beyond the ones from 1949 and 1950. Back then, there was a hint of change, but the evidence of *Le cheval mourant* indicates that between the earlier moment and 1956 Appel's pictorial idiom was considerably enhanced and enriched. What happened? How did he get to *Le cheval mourant* and the watershed it signified?

#### 4.

On 21 September 1950 an exhibition of *Art psychopathologique* was inaugurated at the Centre Psychiatrique Sainte-Anne, Paris. The exhibition included around two thousand works by some three hundred and fifty patients with some quite severe mental disorders selected by twenty-five psychiatrists from a range of countries. Held to mark the International Congress of Psychiatry, the exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue, *Psychopathological art*, in several languages. Karel Appel had been deeply interested in the paintings and drawings of the mentally ill since his discovery of Dubuffet's *Art brut*. As he explained years later, he had had access to this type of work in Holland, Belgium and Paris. However, it was the 1950 exhibition that opened his eyes definitively and enabled him to shake off European classicism<sup>15</sup>.

Apart from visiting the exhibition, Appel got hold of the catalogue and "illustrated" it his way, without actually showing it to the public until years later. He did the original "illustration" in 1950, and subsequently added drawings he had done previously, in 1948 and 1949 (which is why the edition is of the "carnet 1948-1950"). What I want to point up here is that, although the Sainte-Anne exhibition was crucial for his understanding of such paintings, he had already made his own excursions into "psychopathological art".

Interest in the plastic activity of the mentally ill was awakened in the 1920s and 1930s. The Surrealists were concerned with these visual outpourings; the Nazis included them in their "degenerate art" category, exhibiting them with works by the European avant-garde. After the war, largely as a result of Dubuffet's activities, the interest in art produced by people suffering from mental illness actually increased, such art generally being considered an immediate expression of the psychology of the author, a feature it shared with much art produced in the forties and fifties: a free, untrammelled expression of subjectivity. At the same time, an ideological and clinical debate began about the condition of mental illness and its place in our society.

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<sup>15</sup> "Conversation entre Donald..." 1997, p. 22.

*Art psychopathologique* has indeed always been presented in this context<sup>16</sup>. Contrasting the conception of reality proper to the mentally ill with the conception held by "normal" people<sup>17</sup>, Donald Kuspit notes that the plastic expressions of the former are not bound by the prejudices and limitations imposed by normality, but are free expressions, like the artist's own paintings and drawings:

Par leur extraordinaire spontanéité, les oeuvres d'Appel nous rapprochent d'une certaine façon de la folie. En effet, elles nous font pénétrer dans un univers psychique déstructuré, le monde de la pensée dans sa plus grande fluidité et pureté originelle, en un élan sans obstacles, un monde sans règles, excepté les siennes propres. Les figures et les visages d'Appel échappent rapidement à la logique de leur apparence conventionnelle pour se dissoudre en un flux irrationnel de gestes et de couleurs dont le mouvement suit une tout autre logique, celle des sens et des sentiments<sup>18</sup>.

The ideological debate, which in my view is today far less urgent and attractive than it seemed at that time<sup>19</sup>, was the symptom of a wider debate on the use of instrumental reason, the condition of irrationality, its repression, and so on. Although this is neither the time nor the place to go into more detail about either debate, I do think we may ask ourselves how it is that Appel's psychopathologic drawings and paintings, originally produced in that rather remote context, have lost none of their relevance today.

To answer the question, we need to address, however briefly, the visual nature of all these works. Appel painted on the pages of the catalogue, occasionally taking up the entire page (or double page), the sketch covering up any text (pages 16, 17, etc.); some times he stuck fragments of paper with drawings on the pages, as a sort of collage (pages 14, 15, etc.). On a number of pages he covered the printed text with gouache, although some of the text can still be made out beneath the colours (pages 18, 19, etc.). But there are also some pages on which the artist left the printed text, or part of it, as it was (enough to be able to read it) and the painted image works as a sort of illustration: this happens, for instance, on pages 38 and 50 [figs. 12 and 13]. On the first of these two pages, the printed text explains the case of a 23-year-old catatonic schizophrenic who had undergone ECT electroconvulsive therapy; the other tells of the case of a 31-year-old male paranoid schizophrenic, a dangerous psychopath with homicidal intentions towards his mother.

We don't know, and Appel certainly never explained, what his motives were for going about things in such a variety of ways. Unfortunately, nor do we have access to the works produced by the mental patients (so we can't compare them to the ones Appel did), which means we can only speculate.

We may, without taking things too far, consider Appel's intervention ironic, aware of the *case/image* duality. Neither is it too far-fetched to think that he was looking to establish a deep connection between the "freedom" of mental patients and his own: he too was free, though without being mentally ill. All of this seems fairly straightforward to me, but it is little more than stating the obvious. However, a comment by Rudi Fuchs in the presentation of *Art psychopathologique* opens a different door. Fuchs said individuals that are mentally ill found a means of distraction when they made their drawings, because they were completely enclosed in their obsession<sup>20</sup>. The patient is enclosed in his obsession, the artist sees the world as an hermetic world that needs to be blown wide open—despite being necessary, this is in fact impossible to do—to let the fresh, prejudice-free air blow in and through. The awareness of the world being closed and the need to open

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16 Reproduced in Karel Appel... 1997.

17 Kuspit 1997, p. 11.

18 Ibid., p. 14.

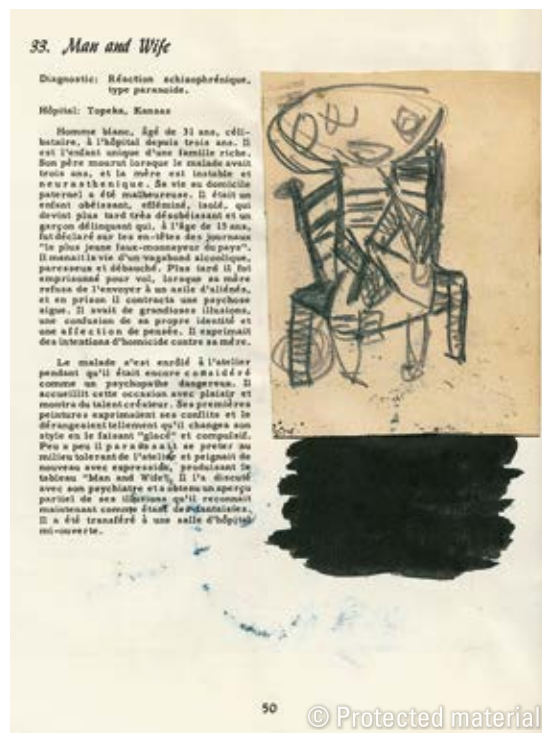
19 The ideological debate may lack urgency today, but many of the arguments put forward in that debate have lost none of their force, and now may, indeed should be re-examined in a different context.

20 Fuchs 1997, p. 10.





12. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Art psychopathologique. Carnet 1948-1950*  
 (page 38)  
 Karel Appel Estate Foundation



13. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Art psychopathologique. Carnet 1948-1950*  
 (page 50)  
 Karel Appel Estate Foundation

it are factors in the grotesque image. And yet, precisely because the world is closed, the grotesque image takes on a dramatic rather than a comic physiognomy. The drama would later become independent of the art of the mentally ill (and the dialogue with this art), which stands as a sort of a period piece, and would become autonomous and morph into painting in 1956 and 1957, in *Le cheval mourant*.

In painting on the *cases*, by "illustrating" the cases of schizophrenics and psychopaths, Appel establishes something more than a mere parallel between the healthy world and the diseased world, the normal and the pathological world: he in fact establishes a deep connection between the two. The *gouaches* and drawings made on the pages of the exhibition catalogue that recount *cases* create the metaphor of one part in respect of another, a metaphor that highlights the truth of one part by painting the other. Appel's drawings give *information* about the cases, and the cases *inform* on the drawings: continuity stands unbroken. The drawings are superimposed on the printed text and the text becomes superimposed on the drawings, so that the support is enhanced from its condition as mere support into a significant aesthetic feature. The deformation and unhinged quality of the cases frame the dramatic deformation and unhinged quality of the figures.

## 5.

A pertinent title for this section might be "From CoBrA to 'An alternative kind of art'", the last step prior to the 1956 and 1957 paintings. Art critics and historians agree that this last step marks the end of one phase and the start of a new one, when the artist left for New York and Mexico and discovered American abstract Expressionism (and met some of the artists involved in the movement).



14. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Petite fille aux oiseaux*, 1950  
 Oil on canvas, 100.4 x 101 cm  
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
 Mr and Mrs William B. Jaffe Fund  
 Inv. no. 327.1955



15. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*L'enfant à la balle verte*, 1951  
 Oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm  
 Private collection, Germany





16. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Hommage à Rosenberg, 1953*  
 Oil on canvas, 142.5 x 110 cm  
 Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Holland



17. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Jeune fille en pleurs, 1953*  
 Oil on canvas, 116 x 89 cm  
 Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, Holland  
 On loan from a private collection

Just how intimately Appel was involved with CoBrA remains an unsolved issue in the existing bibliography. He was indeed a member of CoBrA, but the extent of his participation in the group has still to be fully clarified. Michel Ragon draws attention to several illustrations published in the *COBRA* journal, particularly number 4 (1949), but adds that there is nothing in writing, despite the artist having produced poems since 1941<sup>21</sup>, and quotes Appel himself: "Cobra n'est pas qu'une période très courte dans ma vie"<sup>22</sup>. However that may be, few changes in his painting may reasonably be attributed to his participation in CoBrA, although his work does become cleaner and more balanced. When, in 1952, French critic Michel Tapié organized the *Significations de l'informel. Un art autre* exhibition, Appel was the only CoBrA artist invited. Many think the invitation was largely due to issues of quality; however, although this is undoubtedly true, I tend more to the opinion that Tapié was more interested in style and, specifically, the treatment of the actual pictorial materials, a factor that distinguished and distanced Appel from an artist of similarly high quality like Asger Jorn.

Throughout this period, Appel insisted on several aspects mentioned previously. "Composition" became sharper and more balanced, as evidenced in *Petite fille aux oiseaux* (1950) [fig. 14], which has the kind of formality usually found in friezes, and *Les oiseaux de la nuit* (oil on canvas, 65 x 90 cm. Nova Spectra gallery, The Hague); the metamorphosis affecting the characters is more noticeable, to the point where, for instance, we can't actually tell if the characters in *Personnages* are human beings, animals or some kind of phantasmagoria; colour, even the most sumptuous, is more precisely worked, as we may appreciate from the reds, ochres, greens and blacks of the latter painting or from *L'enfant à la balle verte* (1951) [fig. 15]. I would in

21 Appel 1982 (recoge poemas escritos desde 1941). Appel 1982 (collects poems written from 1941 on).

22 Ragon 1988, p. 380. Ragon 1988, p. 380.



18. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Ubu roi*, 1953  
 Oil on canvas, 116 x 89 cm  
 Collection Omer T'Kindt, Belgium

fact go so far as to say (contrary to some of the artist's own opinions about his having freed himself of that tradition), that at this point, as at others already suggested, he is heir to the Dutch painting from which, he says, he is looking to set himself free, against which he is in revolt. "Il y a un noir froid, un noir chaud, un noir noir, un noir cassé [...] Pour obtenir un noir plus noir, je mélange le noir au bleu de Prusse, ce bleu très dense, froid et profond. Ou bien je mêle au noir une ombre brûlée et j'obtiens un noir chaud ...", Appel confided to André Verdet<sup>23</sup>. His blacks, which recall those of Hals, vary with backgrounds and figures, just as the way he structures his reds and greens, occasionally using them as visual echoes, reminds us of Paul Klee.

No less important, in my view, is his ability to intensify the iconic nature of his motifs, whether in the vertical or the horizontal plane. Although the intensity of the iconic mode is quite pronounced in *L'enfant à la balle verte*, it is particularly noticeable in *Hommage à Rosenberg* (1953) [fig. 16] and *Jeune fille en pleurs* (1953) [fig. 17], two of the artist's most dramatic paintings. Here he takes to the limit the sheer intensity of the dehumanization of the Rosenbergs, figures stripped of their humanity (the couple, readers will remember, were charged and found guilty of spying for the USSR and executed in the USA), converted into monsters, the little girl being exasperated, like a character from Picasso's *Guernica*, her raised arms rounded off by energetic fists: exasperation and dehumanization to close off the world.

<sup>23</sup> Appel/Verdet/Towarnicki 1985, p. 35.





19. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Femme et oiseau*, 1953  
 Oil on canvas, 97 x 130 cm  
 Centre Pompidou, Paris. Musée national d'art moderne, Centre de création industrielle  
 Inv. no. AM 1981-90

Another unforgettable picture, *Ubu roi* (1953) [fig. 18], a complement of the previous ones, features a different kind of iconic mode, a declaration of principles almost: a solemn figure is a doll and a doll is a solemn figure, pretty much in line with what Jarry wanted for his *hero*: head up, legs firm, like some of the buffoons portrayed by Velázquez, an impressive trunk, where the figure's verticality rivals its monumental motionlessness, in sharp contrast to the dynamism of the actual painting. *Ubu* was to have its tragic continuation in *Nu barbare* (1957) [fig. 2], a female figure with sexual features on view and a face practically gone, but which retains the same kind of savage, grotesque solemnity found in its predecessor.

*Nu barbare* is a painting that nudges my visual memory towards Rembrandt's woman getting into the bath. Here, the edge of the painting plays for her legs the same role as the water in Rembrandt's painting, and we immediately think of the Dutch master's own trademarks, that Appel, with Van Gogh, so often referenced: the materiality of the body and the work of time. These were the years when, to some extent perhaps as a result of his contacts with Tapiè, Appel worked harder on the actual pictorial material. As an illustration of this, one might mention *Femme et oiseau* (1953) [fig. 19], a work that points ahead to *Le cheval mourant*. These were also the years when the face, the entire human head, underscored the effects of decrepitude (as if he were anticipating the Picasso's late self-portraits): *L'homme au masque de fer* (1953) [fig. 20], *Tête tragique* (1953) [fig. 21] and *Tête* (1953) [fig. 22].

Appel is in a somewhat peculiar situation as regards the frame of *Art of Another Kind*. While he is interested in the mass of paint and the indeterminateness of the informal, he never entirely lets go of figuration: you



20. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*L'homme au masque de fer*, 1953  
 Oil on canvas, 142 x 110 cm  
 Private collection, Germany



21. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Tête tragique*, 1953  
 Oil on canvas, 77 x 56 cm  
 Stéphane Janssen Collection, Arizona, United States



22. Karel Appel (1921-2006)  
*Tête*, 1953  
 Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 72.5 cm  
 Martha Jackson Gallery, New York

might say his informalism, his lack of form, is limited. A certain tension is generated between the line of the figures and the intensity and visual weight of the material, as if this wanted to break through or out of the limits the line imposes, as if such limits—the profiles—were looking in turn to impose themselves on the sheer weight of the materiality, to take possession of it. Not that he gets carried away by the pleasant, agreeable beauty of the materiality of the mass of paint, which acquires, as in *Le cheval mourant*, a dramatic, even tragic sense, features heavily nuanced in his subsequent development, without ever being completely eliminated. *Le cheval mourant* could not have been painted without Appel's experience in *Art of Another Kind*, without the work on the actual material used in painting, its protagonism, density and expressiveness (necessary conditions for the appearance of tension in the actual nature of the painting, rather than in a specific tale or representation), but Appel's iconic figurative mode imposes limits on this resource: the paint material is added to a figure, at a rhythm of tension designed to create a dramatic figure we find on view before us in all its intensity. What world does this *cheval* belong in, what tradition has it been conjured from?

## 6.

*Le cheval mourant* is not a work in isolation. It belongs to a stock of horses recognisably the same as the ones that transport Kafka's *country doctor*. It could easily come from that lineage, companion to the ones Kubin drew to illustrate Kafka's tale. Kafka and Kubin, a pair inevitably namechecked whenever one talks about Appel: all three are repositories, executors, of the *other part*.

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