Snake Charm

THE ART OF THE NORTHERN EUROPEAN AVANT-GARDE GROUP COBRA CAN BE SEEN MORE CLEARLY TODAY THAN 50 YEARS AGO, WHEN POLITICS CLOUDED THE PICTURE. BY JONATHAN LOPEZ

Visitors at the CoBrA Museum in Amstelveen, the Netherlands.

COBRA MUSEUM VOOR MODERNE KUNST AMSTELVEEN

IN NOVEMBER 1949 an exhibition of experimental artwork by the newly formed CoBrA movement—named for its principal members' home cities, Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam—opened at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum to angry public protests and almost unanimously scathing press coverage. "They were accused of being Communists," says Katja Weitering, artistic director of the CoBrA Museum (established 1995) in Amstelveen, just outside the Dutch capital. Given the openly Marxist orientation of CoBrA's associated publications—the eponymous *CoBrA* magazine and a loosely affiliated journal called *Reflex*—the charge of Communism was reasonably credible, but discerning a coherent political message in the bright colors and naïve forms of the group's paintings and sculptures was no simple task.

"Il y a plus de choses dans la terre d'un tableau que dans le ciel de la théorie esthétique" ("There are more things in the earth of a painting than in the heavens of aesthetic theory"), announced the twisty handwriting of *Peinture-mot 1949,* a painted poem or "logogram" by Danish artist Asger Jorn and Belgian writer Christian Dotremont, perhaps intimating that a well-crafted artwork's earthy materialism possesses an inner truth mere bourgeois aesthetics could never hope to comprehend...or something along those lines. Among the many exhibition visitors who found such sentiments impossible to

COLL. COBRA MUSEUM VOOR MODERNE KUNST AMSTELVEEN. AANGEKOCHT MET STEUN VAN DE BANKGIRO LOTERIJ EN HET AANKOOPFONDS VAN DE GEMEENTE AMSTELVEEN © PICTORIGHT AMSTERDAM

endorse was the art critic from *De Waarheid,* the daily newspaper of the Dutch Communist party. "These experimentalists are not yet ready to aid the worker class with its struggle because they simply do not understand that class or its concerns," *De Waarheid* intoned, sternly adding that the CoBrA artists appeared to be little more than dilettantes or "Trotskyites"—a very strong term of abuse coming from a staunchly Stalinist publication.

Walking through the pristine white galleries of the CoBrA Museum, where luscious paintings by Karel Appel and whimsical assembly sculptures by Henry Heerup preside today in haute-bohemian majesty, such arguments seem like quaint Cold War relics. The Soviet Union has long since collapsed, *De Waarheid* ceased publication decades ago and most people under the age of 20 would be hard pressed to remember who Leon Trotsky was. But by virtue of sheer quirky aplomb the febrile art of CoBrA has managed to transcend the specious claims and counter-claims that attended its birth and now rightly garners attention on the basis of its enduring aesthetic merit. "The CoBrA artists wanted a new world and a new society," says Weitering, "but the main thing was their search for new ways of expressing themselves."

Cobra was founded in 1948 as the result of a fairly obscure disagreement in the emerging postwar European art world. That year, artists from across the Continent convened in Paris to attend a meeting at the Centre International de Documentation sur l'Art d'Avant-garde, organized by members of the Surréalisme Révolutionnaire—a diverse splin-

From top: Lucebert, *Dorfsscene,* 1962, oil on canvas, 130 x 200 cm; CoBrA artists at a party in the 1950s.

From top: Karel Appel, *Women, Children, Animals,* 1951, oil on burlap, 170 x 280 cm; exterior view of the CoBrA Museum.

ter group vexed by the overbearing André Breton and his French Surrealists—in order to work out a system of international collaboration. This meeting, as the first CoBrA manifesto put it, "led to nothing." But Dotremont, Jorn, Appel, Constant Nieuwenhuijs and Corneille (Guillaume Cornelis Beverloo) got to know each other, and after discovering that they shared similar outlooks decided to launch CoBrA as a protest against the leadership of Paris and the elaborate bureaucratic tendencies of the Surrealist group in general. Having recently suffered through the nightmare of Nazi occupation, these young Dutch, Belgian and Danish idealists saw no reason to endure a postwar existence in which their careers would be dominated by the fussy dictates of foreign art Pooh-Bahs, and so they opted to be free.

These core CoBrA artists and compatriots including Anton Rooskens, Egill Jacobsen, Carl-Henning Pedersen, and Lucebert (Lubertus Jacobus Swaanswijk) sought to bridge the gap between art and life through a spontaneous, expressive visual vocabulary of formidable emotional resonance; predominantly Romantic and anti-Classical in character, their work recalls both the innocent appeal of children's drawings and the tortured dreamscape of Nordic mythology, replete with bizarre beasts and untamed daemons. The folkloric undertones were initially most notable among the group's Danish contingent, whose homegrown avant-garde had been toying with Scandinavian archaeology and ethnic traditions since the mid-1930s—the cross-border influence of German Expressionism, especially Die Brücke, may have played some role in this—but the tendency spread among all the CoBrA artists to become one of their signature conceits. Standing before the Dutchman Lucebert's magisterial *Dorfsscène* (1962), for instance, one encounters a diverse array of motifs—lurking eyes, shadowy skeletons,

COLL. COBRA MUSEUM VOOR MODERNE KUNST AMSTELVEEN. AANGEKOCHT MET STEUN VAN HET AANKOOPFONDS VAN DE GEMEENTE AMSTELVEEN © PICTORIGHT AMSTERDAM

COLL. COBRA MUSEUM VOOR MODERNE KUNST AMSTELVEEN, VERWORVEN UIT DE COLLECTIE VAN HANS EN ALICE DE JONG, AANGEKOCHT MET STEUN VAN DE BANKGIRO LOTERIJ, HET TITUS FONDS VAN DE VERENIGING REMBRANDT, DE MONDRIAAN STICHTING, HET VSB FONDS EN HET AANKOOPFONDS VAN DE GEMEENTE AMSTELVEEN © PICTORIGHT AMSTERDAM; COLL. COBRA MUSEUM VOOR MODERNE KUNST AMSTELVEEN © MEVR. R. ROOSKENS, AMSTERDAM; COLL. COBRA MUSEUM VOOR MODERNE KUNST AMSTELVEEN, AANGEKOCHT MET STEUN VAN DE BANKGIRO LOTERIJ EN HET AANKOOPFONDS VAN DE GEMEENTE AMSTELVEEN © PICTORIGHT AMSTERDAM

skeins of pulsing aqua and cerulean hues—unified by an expansive network of interlocking corpuscles. "It's one of our newest stars," says Weitering with justifiable pride, noting that the museum acquired *Dorfsscène* in May 2007 at Sotheby's Amsterdam for €132,000, a record price for the artist.

As a group CoBrA existed for only three years, but the fruitful collaborations of that era acted as a formative influence on its members, who despite their spirited individualism remained identifiable as CoBrA artists throughout their long careers. The balloon-headed cats and "questioning children" of Appel's earliest CoBrA paintings have since achieved an iconic status; their boldly drawn profiles and gap-toothed mouths are utterly unforgettable once seen and have become veritable emblems of the movement. Similar features crop up in the work of Constant, whose spare, stage-set canvases teem with strange floating animals and madly gesticulating human figures. Corneille's bright, cheerful compositions of flowers, sailboats, masks and fish appear broadly reminiscent of Paul Klee's work and share elements of the jaunty geometric equipoise that characterized Joan Miró's mid-career abstractions. Egill Jacobsen likewise employed large, simple shapes and subtly calibrated color harmonies, but his countryman Jorn tended to produce work of a more macabre and menacing character, in which madly grinning faces and violently sprained figures populate bare landscapes that hearken back to Picasso's Surrealist compositions of the 1930s—a crucial influence on the Danish avant-garde was *Guernica,* which was displayed in Copenhagen in 1937—while also anticipating, to some extent, the late figurative work of Philip Guston.

If CoBrA remains less well known today, especially in Anglo-Saxon circles, than certain other artistic trends of roughly the same era, such as Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, the situation may have less to do with the vehemence of CoBrA's early detractors than with the bewildering statements of its most persistent champions, some of whom—largely, one suspects, for ideological reasons—lack a sense of perspective about the movement. In 1994, for instance, Marxist art historian T.J. Clark declared Asger Jorn "the greatest artist of the 1950s" in the pages of the postmodernist journal of ideas *October* (whose name alludes to the 1917 October Revolution in Russia). During the 1950s, Picasso

Clockwise from top: Constant Nieuwenhuijs, *Fauna,* 1949, water-based paint on canvas, 75 x 85 cm; Anton Rooskens, *Figure and animal,*1949, gouache, 46 x 36 cm; Henry Heerup, Napo*leon,* 1944, granite, limestone and paint, 56 x 17 x 24 cm.

From top: Asger Jorn, *Legetøjsbillede (Toy Painting),* 1945, oil on canvas, 72 x 100 cm; Corneille, *L'homme dans la ville,* 1952, oil on canvas, 88 x 115 cm

and Matisse—surely the greatest artists of the 20th century—were still alive and working; such younger eminences as Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and Adolf Gottlieb were enjoying the most productive periods of their respective careers; and still younger figures like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg produced the stunning breakthroughs that launched them on the road to fame and fortune. It is hardly an insult to Asger Jorn to suggest he might face formidable competition in such company. But wishing to see Jorn as the herald of a triumphant revolution that might still, any day now, shake the world and bring capitalism to its knees, Clark—something of a museum piece himself at this point—talks a blue streak and blinds himself to the very quality that makes CoBrA so appealing to thoughtful observers: the underdog charm of these free-spirited provincial upstarts who merrily thumbed their noses at the tides of history and taste in a bid to be masters of their own fates and nobody else's.

In coming years, the CoBrA Museum hopes to win new admirers for the movement's idiosyncratic achievements. "We'd like to bring CoBrA to America," says Weitering, noting that the museum is currently exploring partnerships with major U.S. institutions for a traveling exhibition in 2015. When the CoBrA invasion arrives on these shores, one suspects it will receive a far warmer welcome than it got in the pages of *De Waarheid* in 1949—and rightly so.

COLL. COBRA MUSEUM VOOR MODERNE KUNST AMSTELVEEN. AANGEKOCHT MET STEUN VAN DE BANKGIRO LOTERIJ EN HET AANKOOPFONDS VAN DE GEMEENTE AMSTELVEEN © PICTORIGHT AMSTERDAM; COLL. COBRA MUSEUM VOOR MODERNE KUNST AMSTELVEEN, GIFT OF THE ARTIST © PICTORIGHT AMSTERDAM