

In terms of art history, the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s marks a radical break in two respects: the orthodoxy of abstraction, which dominated the “international style” on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1950s, was elbowed out by a new realism of various types; New York replaced Paris as the international capital of modern art. On October 27, 1960, the *Nouveaux Réalistes* group was founded in Yves Klein’s Paris apartment—the last avant-garde to originate in Paris and find international recognition.¹ In fact, the realism in the group’s name is hardly evident in its members’ works, just as little as any other stylistic common denominator: Klein’s monochrome blue canvases, Tinguely’s machines, César’s compressions, Hains’s and Villeglé’s torn off billboard posters, for instance, appear quite different from one another in character. So the conceptual unity of the group, devised by the theoretician Pierre Restany, can be detected in a more profane,² direct approach to the artistic means used in each case—found, banal materials employed as is—rather than in some style of painting. Restany had recognized analogous traits in works by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, the two predecessors of American Pop Art, who had already had their first shows in Europe, then still under the label Neo-Dada.

Jean Larcade, proprietor of Galerie Rive Droite and Appel’s Paris dealer, had also taken note of the two Americans and had already given Johns a one-man show the previous year.³ In June 1961, Restany curated *Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York* for the gallery, where his French New Realists were confronted with Americans, including Rauschenberg and Johns.⁴ Sidney Janis, the New York dealer of the 1950s New York School, was impressed by this show and suggested to Restany that it travel to New York the following year. When it was eventually opened in November 1962 under the title *New Realists*, its composition had changed in a revealing way. In the meantime, a new generation of American artists, including commercial artists such as James Rosenquist and Andy Warhol, had been launched in a series of shows orchestrated by Leo Castelli at several galleries, starting a trend that would soon be dubbed Pop Art. Obviously, these artists could not be excluded from the show at Sidney Janis, and when Restany saw it in New York, he immediately noticed the inequality of the confrontation: three meters of Warhol, two meters of Lichtenstein, four meters of Rosenquist, in the slick and efficient “knock-em down” style of advertising. The comparatively small-format, shabby, Schwitters-inspired assemblages of the New Realists didn’t have a chance. The gallery’s older artists, including Philip Guston, Robert Motherwell, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko, felt just as unfairly treated: they collectively withdrew from the gallery that had made their name.⁵

So much for the immediate historical context within which the collages of Karel Appel, published here, emerged, and which, we may assume, inspired them in some way. Since many of the collaged fragments of paper have been torn, they recall the *Lacérations* (torn billboards) of François Dufrêne, Raymond Hains, and Jacques de la Villeglé (cf. fig. 01, p. 52 and p. 14). Or would the link be merely read into the imagery? After all, Appel belonged to CoBrA, one of the avant-garde groups of the 1950s against which the New Realists wanted to stand out. That the link cannot be denied by thinking in terms of art historical pigeonholes is indicated by Appel’s participation in one of the two historical exhibitions which brought the New Realists and Pop artists alike their breakthrough in Europe: *Nieuwe Realisten*, mounted in the summer of 1964 by Wim Beeren at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague.⁶ The exhibition traveled to the Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts in Vienna,

whose director Werner Hofmann rechristened it *Pop etc.* in recognition of the meteoric rise of the new American style in Western Europe. After that it went on to Berlin, where it was shown at the Akademie der Künste, again under a new title, *Neue Realisten & Pop Art*. Astonishingly, the front and back cover of the Berlin catalog featured a diptych by Appel: *Melancholic Gangster and Another One*, 1963 (fig. 02, p. 52).⁷ This belonged to a group of works done in the early 1960s, characterized by the inclusion of kitschy objects, for the most part plastic toys. Though the recourse to found objects was not new for Appel, the conspicuous choice of things from the realm of kitsch suggests some proximity to Nouveau Réalisme for this group of works as well—one is reminded of certain pictorial structures by Martial Raysse (fig. 03, p. 52). This series remained comparatively small, and only a few of the assemblages have survived in their original state. The diptych was auctioned most recently in 2010 at Sotheby’s in New York; *Woman with Flowers no. 1* (fig. 04, p. 52) is now in the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., and *Woman with Flowers no. 4* (fig. 05, p. 52) in the Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris. The plastic objects frequently detached themselves from the canvases, which may be one of the reasons Appel soon stopped using them. A few of the assemblages from which they fell off, were reworked, this time quite traditionally, using paint (figs. 06–09, p. 52).

On the last iteration of the exhibition *Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme, etc...* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Appel, and with him Willem de Kooning, the other artist working along the borderline between abstraction and figuration and generally associated with the 1950s avant-garde, were no longer included.⁸ One might think that the competition between the European and American versions of New Realism, which ultimately ended in favor of the latter, was reflected in the transformations this exhibition underwent in its travels through Europe.

Karel Appel was born in 1921, making him one of the youngest artists in the 1950s generation when he achieved his international breakthrough from his base in Paris. The fact that he did this not as a member of CoBrA—the group had dissolved after three years in 1951—but in the orbit of the Parisian art critic, impresario, and exhibition curator Michel Tapié, who coined the term *Informel*, is often overlooked. In the 1950s, Tapié organized a series of important international exhibitions in various galleries and at the studio of the fashion photographer Paul Facchetti, including a Pollock show, his historic group exhibition *Un art autre*, in which Appel also participated, and a monographic Appel exhibition. He established contacts between Appel and the New York dealer Martha Jackson, at whose gallery he had his first U.S. show as early as 1954, as well as other dealers, museum people, and private collectors.

Restany must have known Appel, too, early in the 1950s, because he invited him to his group show *Le Poème Objet*, that brought together painters and poets, and which he curated in the summer of 1955 for Galerie de Beaune in Paris.⁹ Even beyond his grand appearance with the Nouveaux Réalistes, Restany remained in contact with Appel, as indicated among other things by his publication *Street Art, Le Second Souffle de Karel Appel*, Éditions Galilée, Paris, 1982.¹⁰ Having grown up in Casablanca and studied in Italy and Ireland, Restany spoke several foreign languages and had international contacts—a rather rare competence in the Parisian art milieu of the 1950s, also shared by Tapié and Appel. This was very helpful in building an international network, which, for Restany, included Germany. He established contacts with Düsseldorf artists as early as the mid-1950s, and in 1956 mediated their show *Cinq Abstraits Rhénans* at Facchetti’s studio. It was through them that Restany got to know Alfred Schmela, who would prove to be very important for the success of the New Realists in Germany.¹¹

Another founding member of the Nouveaux Réalistes, whom Appel knew from an early date, was the sculptor César, with whom he had a two-man show at Galerie Rive Droite in 1955.¹² Like Appel, César was born in 1921—the other members of the group were five to fifteen years younger—, and his early sculptures of welded scrap iron certainly suggest analogies between their approaches. Appel even made two portraits of César at that time: a drawing in 1955 and an oil painting in 1956 (figs. 10–11, p. 52–53). On the occasion of an oeuvre show at the Stedelijk Museum in late 1955, Appel even tried to convince its director Willem Sandberg to hold a César exhibition in parallel—however in vain: Sandberg had already planned a show of iron sculptures by the Danish sculptor Robert Jacobsen.¹³

In other words, Appel was part of the same networks as Restany and César from the mid-1950s onwards, yet when it came to the founding of the New Realists in 1960, he was not present, and in the summer of 1961, when Restany's *Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York* was held at Larcade's Galerie Rive Droite in Paris, Appel was staying at Larcade's estate near Nice, Abbaye De Roseland, where he worked on a unique group of paintings on olive tree roots (*L'Homme hibou no. 1*, Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, fig. 12, p. 53). The fact that Appel, after moving on from CoBrA to the Nouvelle École de Paris, did not join the New Realists, may have been due in part to the age difference—Restany was ten years younger—, yet above all, around 1960 Appel was already an internationally recognized artist, and his work was connotated accordingly. Nevertheless, he figured in the traveling *Neue Realisten* exhibition and even appeared on the cover of the Berlin catalog. This may be primarily due to the fact that, though he belonged to the 1950s generation, he was, like de Kooning, not a purely abstract painter, and that a show setting out to launch a new movement was well advised to include a few predecessors to undergird its credibility. To be precise, however, Appel was still experimenting with free abstraction around 1960: prompted by his first visit to New York in 1957, on the occasion of his second show with Martha Jackson, Appel went through his most abstract phase. Back then he made the acquaintance of abstract painters of the New York School, of course including de Kooning. This phase reached a conclusion with the 1961 film by Jan Vrijman, *De werkelijkheid van Karel Appel (The Reality of Karel Appel)*, which—much like Hans Namuth's film on Jackson Pollock made ten years previously—shows Appel painting like an abstract expressionist (fig. 13, p. 53).¹⁴ Though rather than a radical break, this should be interpreted as an experiment triggered by encounters with New York artists.

Secondly, Appel's prominent role in the European New Realism project can be explained in terms of his testing of the discoveries of the younger avant-garde. "Appel says loudly and clearly that he hates repetition, and in his art and life he constantly calls into question everything routine,"¹⁵ Restany characterized a consistent, typical motif in the artist's approach to life and art, and in order to avoid routine of any kind he again and again sought an involvement with his immediate surroundings. This might be children's drawings, the art of the mentally ill, or simply the art of other artists. Yet it could also be found objects or the material nature of the artistic means employed—including the classical ones of paint and canvas. The resulting choice of subject was by no means arbitrary; rather, it was invariably determined by the context of his own work, and thus its results were always characterized by Appel's personal touch. Correspondingly, the circumstance that the found, kitschy objects the artist used in works like *Melancholic Gangster and Another One* were almost always toys, probably owes to his roots in the CoBrA period, when children's drawings formed a key source of inspiration (*Vragende kinderen no. 1*, 1950, fig. 14, p. 53; *Kind met speelgoed*, 1952, fig. 15, p. 53).

If we now consider the group of works to which the present publication is devoted for the first time, we soon realize that, despite all the analogies with the New Realists, significant differences exist. Even the collage *Figures*, early 1960, the year of the founding of the New Realists, which was cited in comparison with the torn posters of Dufrêne, Hains, and Villeglé, exhibits clear if minimal incursions designed to emphasize the pictorial idea found in the random torn material. The Nouveaux Réalistes' "torn-offs", in contrast, were more motivated by Duchamp's idea of the ready-made, according to which a found or selected object could stand by and for itself, requiring no creative incursions whatsoever. A comparable aesthetic proximity to their found and torn imagery as with *Figures* is found only in the collage *Two Heads*, 1964 (fig. p. 121), although here, too, collaged elements, are added to the torn ones in order to elicit the impression of two faces. Otherwise, the collages tend to be assembled by employing torn or cut-out fragments of imagery—very similar to those of the classical avant-gardists Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, or Kurt Schwitters—, whereby in Appel's case these are not only printed *objets trouvés* but appear to have been gleaned from the studio floor, including pieces of paper with random paint traces as if this paper had been used to protect the floor. And where press imagery is concerned, it tends to clearly convey the atmosphere of the sexual liberation of the 1960s—comparable in this respect with the collages of Richard Hamilton. The great majority of the works in this group, however, are distinguished by Appel's essential difference from the New Realists' art: they are extensively reworked by means of drawing and painting.

As with all of his involvements, even confrontations with his immediate environment, pictorial ideas emerged, from which Appel selected some for conversion into his principal medium, painting. A few examples can be identified in this group of works which he later carried out in oil on canvas (fig. 16, p. 53, p. 87; fig. 17, p. 53, p. 97; fig. 18, p. 53, p. 34). Although some of the inspiration for a few works in the group may well have come from the current avant-garde in the early 1960s, all of the works evince Appel's characteristic touch. Like his comrades-in-arms of the 1950s, he now no longer belonged to the avant-garde. Yet he lived long enough to witness the disappearance of all avant-gardes and the return of painting in the 1980s and to enjoy this in many respects.

- 1 Jean-Paul Améline/Nathalie Ernoul/Franz W. Kaiser, "1951–1960," in Franz W. Kaiser (ed.), *Parijs, Stad van de moderne kunst*, exh. cat. Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Antwerp/The Hague, 2011, p. 199.
- 2 Perhaps with the exception of Yves Klein.
- 3 Catherine Dossin, "To Drip or to Pop? The European Triumph of American Art," *ARTL@S BULLETIN*, vol. 3, no. 1, spring 2014, p. 91; <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol3/iss1/8/> [accessed March 31, 2021].
- 4 The French artists were Arman, César, Raymond Hains, Yves Klein, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Jean Tinguely; the Americans Lee Bontecou, Chryssa, Richard Chamberlain, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Richard Stankiewicz. The catalog of the Rive Droite exhibition, *Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York*, 1961, is available online at <https://mouvements-ruevisconti.com/documents/659-restany-pierre-rive-droite.html> [accessed March 31, 2021].
- 5 Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s–1980s*, London/New York, 2017, pp. 75, 160f. James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, Chicago/London, 1993, pp. 427–29.
- 6 This was shown from June 23 to August 30, 1964 (Haags Gemeentearchief, DSK/Haags Gemeentemuseum 1951–1998, inv. no. 1304). The other exhibition was the one opened by Pontus Hultén in February of that same year in Stockholm, *Amerikanisk Pop Art*, which the new director of the Stedelijk Museum, Edy de Wilde, brought to Amsterdam despite his own preferences because he had heard of the Hague project. Cf. Hayden Herrera, "Postwar American Art in Europe," in Rudolf Herman Fuchs (ed.), *Views from Abroad: European Perspectives on American Art 1*, New York, 1995, p. 46, note 18.

- 7 There is a copy of the exhibition catalog with an introduction by Werner Hofmann in the archives of the Karel Appel Foundation in Amsterdam.
- 8 The archives of the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, include a copy of the exhibition catalog.
- 9 There is also a copy of the flyer issued for this exhibition by the gallery, including a text by Restany, in the archives of the Karel Appel Foundation, Amsterdam.
- 10 Pierre Restany, *Street Art: Le Second Souffle de Karel Appel*, Paris, 1982. Three years later, an expanded version of his essay was published in English in *Karel Appel: Street Art, Ceramics, Sculptures, Wood Reliefs, Tapestries, Murals, Villa el Salvador*, New York, 1985.
- 11 Dossin, 2017, pp. 58, 73.
- 12 This ran from October 3 to 31, 1955. A flyer published for this show, with a text by Emmanuel Looten, is likewise in the archives of the Karel Appel Foundation.
- 13 Cathérine van Houts, *Karel Appel: De biografie*, Amsterdam/Antwerp, 2000, p. 220. Jacobsen was living in Paris at the time, and—unlike César—already had a name as an artist of the Nouvelle École de Paris. The relevant correspondence between Appel and Sandberg is preserved in the archives of the Stedelijk Museum.
- 14 This phase of the oeuvre was the focus of the 2008 exhibition, *Karel Appel: Jazz 1958–1962*, curated by Jan Hein Sassen at the Cobra Museum, Amstelveen.
- 15 Restany, 1985, p. 7.



01
Jacques de la Villeglé, *Avenue de la Liberté (Charenton)*, 1961, paper on canvas, 159×229 cm



04
Karel Appel, *Woman with Flowers no. 1*, 1963, plastic flowers and oil on canvas, 115×90 cm



05
Karel Appel, *Woman with Flowers no. 4*, 1963, plastic flowers and oil on canvas, 115×89 cm

02
Exhibition catalog *Neue Realisten & Pop Art*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 1964–65, Karel Appel, *Melancholic Gangster and Another One*, 1963



03
Martial Raysse, *Simple and Quiet Painting*, 1965, oil on canvas, photograph on cardboard, and plastic, 130×195 cm



04
Karel Appel, *Woman with Flowers no. 1*, 1963, plastic flowers and oil on canvas, 115×90 cm



05
Karel Appel, *Woman with Flowers no. 4*, 1963, plastic flowers and oil on canvas, 115×89 cm



06
Karel Appel, *La famille*, 1963, first state with plastic toys, 69×98 cm



07
Karel Appel, *La famille*, 1963, collage on paper, 69×98 cm



08
Karel Appel, *Untitled*, 1963, first state with plastic toys, 70×100 cm



09
Karel Appel, *Untitled*, 1963, gouache, color crayon, and collage on paper, 70×100 cm



10
Karel Appel, *Portrait de César*, 1955, color crayon on paper, 36×27 cm



11
Karel Appel, *Portrait de César*, 1956, oil on canvas, 159×115,5 cm



12
Karel Appel, *L'homme hibou no. 1*, 1960, acrylic on olive tree stump, 157×90×52 cm



13
Film still of *De werkelijkheid van Karel Appel (The Reality of Karel Appel)* by Jan Vrijman, 1961



14
Karel Appel, *Vragende kinderen no. 1 (Questioning Children no. 1)*, 1950, wax crayon on paper, 24×32 cm



15
Karel Appel, *Kind met speelgoed (Child with Toy)*, 1952, oil on canvas, 116×89 cm



16
Karel Appel, *Couple*, 1965, oil on canvas, 195×260 cm



17
Karel Appel, *Couple with Dog*, 1966, oil on canvas, 190×230 cm



18
Karel Appel, *Man*, 1968, oil on canvas, 200×200 cm



19
Karel Appel, *Mangeur d'annonces*, 1961, gouache and collage on paper, 64×50 cm



20
Karel Appel, *Dans la matinee*, 1961, mixed media
and collage on paper, 65.1 × 49.8 cm

Mangeur d’annonces. Zwischen Materiallust und Malerei
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Mangeur d’annonces: Between a Reveling in Materials and Painting
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