

HAMPSHIRE

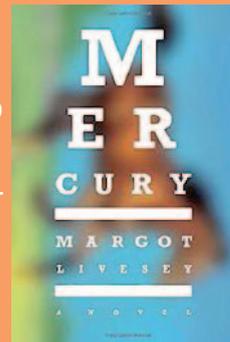
L I F E

Arts, Entertainment
& Living in the
Pioneer Valley

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Karen Kurczynski | Art Historian, curator

Karen Kurczynski, of Amherst, who teaches modern and contemporary art history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, is a leading scholar of Danish artist Asger Jorn (1914-1973), and represents a new generation of art historians specializing in the Cobra movement (1948-51), which Jorn co-founded.

Cobra was a group of painters and poets in Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam who shared an optimistic determination to start over after World War II.

Kurczynski is now at work on a book about Cobra. Much of what she has learned about the movement, she says, has come from her work as the curator of an exhibit, "Human Animals: The Art of Cobra," at the University Museum of Contemporary Art in the UMass Fine Arts Center.

"I've been working on the show for four years, and in the process have realized how little the movement is studied in the United States and how relevant its work is for contemporary art — both for its artworks based on recognizable imagery depicted in unexpected ways, but also the group's diversity, experimental spirit, and interdisciplinary explorations.

Kurczynski says she never expected to be working on a little-known group of mostly male artists. (As a graduate student, she was very interested in feminist art and gender politics.) However, she says, one of the movements she first loved while growing up studying art history and going to museums was Surrealism.

"Cobra comes directly out of Surrealism and is part of its legacy in the post-World War II period," she said. "But where the Surrealists were interested in the unconscious, Cobra was interested in the anonymous, collective traditions of popular and folk art."

Hampshire Life: What about the Cobra movement fascinates you so?



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Karen Kurczynski: Cobra fascinates me for its unique combination of collective and personal interests — the artists developed their own particular approach to artistic expression, but in an explicitly political and collective context. They were fully aware that no art is created in a vacuum. A supportive community is necessary to foster any really vital ideas.

H.L.: In your work as a curator, did you have any "Eureka!" moments?

K.K.: My Eureka moments as a historian involve connections between unexpected things that I hadn't noticed — and feel that no one has ever really noticed. For example, I had read that the artist Albert Oehlen was interested in Asger Jorn, but no one had set their work side by side before in an exhibition or explored what connected their art work in more detail. When I saw Oehlen's

work together with the earlier Cobra work, I felt like my intuitions were entirely justified about this connection.

H.L.: How do you know you're on the right track?

K.K.: When other people see the connections that I see in the work. If they can't see it, then I question whether they're really there.

H.L.: How do you know when the work is done?

K.K.: The historian's work is never done. The past changes continually as the present evolves.

H.L.: What makes Cobra so interesting for contemporary art today?

K.K.: Cobra was a movement defined by interdisciplinary experiment as well as an interest in connecting artistic expression to politics — meaning both the politics of the art world itself (and its institutional exclusions) as well as the larger society. As a movement of artists from three smaller European countries, including expat artists from the U.S. (Shinkichi Tajiri) and Africa (Ernest Mancoba), it suggests the importance of looking beyond what we think of as the central artists in a given time period, and recognizing that the center is defined by what's excluded.

— Kathleen Mellen

"Human Animals: The Art of Cobra and its Legacy" will be on view through Nov. 20 at the UMCA. For information, visit www.umass.edu/umca.

