

Human Animals: The Art of Cobra

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Organized by NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale;

Guest-curated by Karen Kurczynski, UMass Art History Assistant Professor

In 1948, the Belgian poets Christian Dotremont (1922–1979) and Joseph Noiret (1927–2012) along with the Danish artist Asger Jorn (1914–1973) and the Dutch painters Constant (1920–2005), Corneille (1922–2010), and Karel Appel (1921–2006) signed a short manifesto in a Paris café, thus founding the Cobra movement. Cobra was an interdisciplinary European avant-garde movement named after the cities Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. It paradoxically combined European Communist politics with an interest in creating a new, spontaneous art based on free expression and popular imagery. Cobra artworks, often collaborations between artists and poets in which each tried their hand at both, emphasized the physical materiality of art and language. The artists and poets were inspired by prewar avant-garde movements such as Surrealism, as well as children's art and outsider art. In their attempt to rebuild the international avant-garde after the tragedies of the Second World War, they created multiple new networks. In a time of rapid social and technological change, their works recognized the new power of images to shape postwar society. Their works often depict figures transforming into animal and human creatures, evoking symbolic and often political relationships between humans, humans and animals, or humans and the natural environment. Jorn used the term "human animal" to describe the savage as well as playful and spontaneous aspects of human nature.

Cobra: Contemporary Legacy

A simultaneous but separate exhibition explores Cobra's legacy into the 21st century, setting the art of Cobra into direct dialogue with work by renowned contemporary artists. The legacy of Cobra spirals out around the installation's central "Poets' Cage," a tribute to the original Cobra construction of 1949. The pairing of Cobra works with contemporary art by the ex-Situationist Jacqueline de Jong (Dutch, b. 1939), African-American artist Herbert Gentry (1919–2003), German painter Albert Oehlen (b. 1954), American painter Nicole Eisenman (b. 1965), German artist Axel Heil (b. 1965), and Danish artist Tal R (b. 1967) suggests the vitality and continuing relevance of Cobra's artistic experiments today.

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Becoming Cobra

COBRA'S MAJOR ARTISTIC THEMES, including the primary importance of childlike, spontaneous expression in an overly regimented culture, were shaped by several earlier movements and the artists' experiences during the Second World War when the Cobra capitals of Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam, as well as Paris, were occupied by the Nazis. Prior to the official formation of Cobra in 1948, key artistic movements such as Linien (The Line, 1934–1939) and Helhesten (The Hell Horse, 1941–1944) in Denmark, Reflex in the Netherlands (1948), and Revolutionary Surrealism in Brussels (1947–1948) helped shape Cobra's groundbreaking artistic themes. The works of art included in "Becoming Cobra" make visible the development of Cobra aesthetics with elements inspired by Symbolism, modernist abstraction, Surrealism, and German Expressionism. Helhesten celebrated "mythmaking" as a creative response to static mythologies imposed on a people by ideologies such as Fascism. The Danish artists developed a particular interest in what they called "spontaneous abstraction," an abstract art that playfully transforms popular symbols such as humans and animals from folktales, children's stories, Nordic mythology, and world literature. The vibrant, colorful forms of Cobra's predecessors reject both naturalism and "pure" or geometric abstraction in favor of symbolic expressions that would lay the groundwork for the art of Cobra.

Human Animals: Cobra 1948–1951

COBRA ARTWORK FOREGROUNDS the earlier interests in spontaneity, myth, and folk traditions with more explicit references to collective experiments, animalistic themes, and outsider art. The Cobra artists used Communist politics as a framework for their exploration of personal expression in a collective context. They rejected all disciplinary specialization and the modern cult of artistic genius, exploring instead the creative potential of outsiders. The bestial painting and experimental sculpture and poetry that dominated Cobra reflect Asger Jorn's concept of the "human animal," underscoring the social significance of the irrational and uncultured aspects of human behavior. In a decade marked by decolonization, Cobra rejected the colonial legacy of dividing the world into "civilized" and "primitive" cultures, searching instead for elements of the instinctual, spontaneous, playful and savage within their own traditions. Cobra's utopian ideals are embodied not only in the symbolic abstract art of Asger Jorn and his colleagues, but also in its more ephemeral engagements. The group photographs featured in the slide show emphasize the youthful energy and collective interests of the artists. They also showcase some of the many mural experiments made during the Cobra period and afterwards, including those made collectively by the Cobra artists and their children in the Danish Architecture Academy's summer house at Bregnerød, outside Copenhagen, in 1949. These projects were monumental statements about the importance of artistic expression as well as social experience, activating viewers by transforming architectural environments into spaces of spontaneous play.

Poets' Cage

THE ORIGINAL POETS' CAGE was a narrow open frame structure designed by Dutch architect Aldo Van Eyck (1918–1999) for the first Cobra exhibition in 1949 at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, as a performative space for the Cobra poets. “Word-paintings” by the Cobra poet and painter Lucebert were hung on the cage, as well as lines of poetry and political quotations. At the exhibition opening, the poets stood inside it and shouted poetic slogans at passersby, who were forced past the cage in order to enter the rest of the exhibition. Its central placement here gives a spatial presence to the importance of poetry within Cobra, emphasizing the movement’s interdisciplinary experiments and oppositional spirit. Rejecting the traditions of academic training as well as the modernist celebration of artistic talent, the Cobra painters made poetry, and the poets painted. Many artists wrote essays, made wall paintings, and produced ceramics. These experiments made Cobra an interdisciplinary avant-garde movement from the beginning, and lay the groundwork for later movements such as the Situationist International (1957–1972) and Constant’s “New Babylon” project (1956–1974) that responded to it.

Cobra's Contemporary Legacy

IN THE FACE OF new economic and social challenges, the contemporary art featured here demonstrates the ongoing relevance of artistic experimentation and creativity in an increasingly technophilic and entertainment-driven global capitalist culture. Either directly inspired by or in active dialogue with the artists of Cobra these contemporary artists foreground art's active role in society as a catalyst for political and social reform. Often humorous, political, and inspired by popular art or mass culture, their work speaks to the continued interest in the perils and potential of the human animal. This work maintains Cobra's rejection of either pure abstraction or figurative naturalism, developing imagery in transformation that invites multiple interpretations among a diverse audience. Working in a variety of media, these contemporary artists imbue their interpretations of social experience with a defiant spirit and material intensity comparable to the art of Cobra. As humans are increasingly confronted with radical social inequalities and the necessity of responding productively to social and environmental disasters, Cobra suggests new approaches and fresh starts. Albert Oehlen (German, b. 1954) presents a monumental exploration of the aesthetic clash of painting with mass culture and kitsch. In *Test Animal*, the reference to animal experiments re-frames Cobra's emphasis on creative experimentation in a much more sinister light, suggesting a moral quandary that leaves the viewer hovering uncertainly between abject pity and utter cynicism.

Great Beasts

THE LARGE-SCALE COLORFUL, spectacular, and expressive paintings made by mature ex-Cobra artists such as Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Constant, Corneille, and Asger Jorn in the late 1950s and early 1960s manifest animalistic or aggressively abstract imagery. In the work of Alechinsky and Christian Dotremont, writing seems to come to life or transform into dramatic figures. Dotremont's calligraphic poem-paintings which he called "Logograms" break down the separation of painting, drawing, and writing, making calligraphic marks into something more aleatory and spontaneous. Artistic collaborations and multi-figure compositions relate to Cobra's collective interests, suggesting a cultural critique of the drama of the "human animal." Appel's intensely physical paintings and Jorn's mischievous satires of abstract expressionism keep company with playful sculptural monsters by Dutch artist Reinoud. These larger expressive works made the ex-Cobra artists prominent in the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Contemporary Legacy: Jacqueline de Jong

JACQUELINE DE JONG (Dutch, b. 1939) was one of the first women to participate in the avant-garde Situationist International movement following World War II, and was the founder of *The Situationist Times* (1961–1967), a radical journal devoted to the exploration of topology. She is a key link between the Cobra and Situationist movements and their contemporary legacy. Her dramatic renderings of political violence present the lasting legacy and resonance of the Situationist message, critical of the spectacle of politics and infotainment that continue to numb audiences to the real human impact of wars around the globe. De Jong's recent "War" series commemorates World War I through the lens of an artist whose childhood was marked by the chaos of the Second World War. These images capture the terror and tenuousness of human existence in a world where humans are capable of turning technology toward total destruction. Her art has served witness not only to humanity's vices and violence, but also its playfulness and generosity, through the present day. Humanoid and animalistic creatures interact in de Jong's apocalyptic landscapes, which directly respond to Asger Jorn – her former inspiration and longtime confidant – and his concept of the "human animal."

Jorn and de Jong: A Creative Dialogue

JACQUELINE DE JONG was a young artist living in Amsterdam when she met Asger Jorn in London in 1959. She became involved in the Situationist International in 1960. Equally interested in painting and experimental writing, the two began a personal and creative dialogue that lasted more than ten years. Jorn's extensive experience and network of contacts helped de Jong publish her notable artistic journal *The Situationist Times* when she left the Situationist International in 1962 in protest against its exclusion of all artists in 1961. Jorn and de Jong collaborated not only on the early issues of de Jong's publication but also on numerous other projects. Together they searched flea markets, street posters, and libraries for visual materials for their art works and publications, and toured around Europe taking photographs of old monuments representing the Nordic presence on the continent for Jorn's "Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism" (1961–64). While their artistic careers developed mostly independently, the intimate experiences, artistic inspirations, and intellectual conversations they shared profoundly informed each artist's work.

Contemporary Legacy: Herbert Gentry

HERBERT GENTRY (American, 1919–2000) believed in the social nature of art, represented through the expressive, multi-figure imagery of his painted canvases. Community and interpersonal connection were central to Gentry's art and his life. In 1947, he traveled to Paris as part of the first wave of GI Bill art students and found a new community among the African-American expats and international artists there. The following year he opened Chez Honey, a jazz club and art gallery in Montparnasse, named for his wife at the time, a cabaret singer. The improvisational nature of jazz inspired many abstract artists at the time, including Gentry himself. His painting developed in new directions after he met the Cobra artists, such as Karel Appel and Corneille, who frequented his club. He moved to Scandinavia from Paris in the late 1950s, at first renting the studio of Danish Cobra artist Ejler Bille in Copenhagen, and ultimately settling in Sweden. Gentry's incorporation of the abstract-surrealist visual language championed by Cobra, such as floating eyes and organic forms often inspired by masks, aided him in creating a living art. He considered his paintings an exploration of his own African heritage as well as the contemporary and political insights of Cobra.

Contemporary Legacy: Nicole Eisenman

RECALLING THE COBRA artists' response to profound social and cultural changes in postwar Europe, the figural paintings of Nicole Eisenman (American, b. 1965) foreground the interconnectedness of contemporary experience and social identity. Her work combines depictions of everyday activities and bodily experiences with specific references to art-history, political cartoons, and popular culture. Imbuing her figures with a psychological complexity, she parodies traditional heroic imagery and explores a more fallible side of humanity. Her biting critiques of masculine representations in particular confront outdated gender tropes associated with specific compositions, stories, or myths. Eisenman's grotesque and comedic male figures could be read as a response to the objectification of women by some Cobra artists, such as Corneille. Corneille's *Herbes (Grass)* prints show elaborately stylized women, often lying languidly on the ground gazing upwards, paired with exotic birds. Eisenman explicitly parodies this type of objectification and literally flips this old stereotype on its head in an untitled woodcut from 2012, where a wide-eyed man lying on the ground sketches and gazes skyward as breast-like forms, weeping heavy droplets, loom overhead.

Contemporary Legacy: Tal R

USING BOLD, UNMIXED, vivid colors, Danish artist Tal R (b. Tel Aviv 1967) critiques the academic palette and elitist tradition of painting in a contemporary dialogue with ex-Cobra artist Asger Jorn. His painting *The Slime* (2010) depicts an amphibious creature posed at its easel, surrounded by mysterious beings in a studio space with canvases, seemingly in progress, hung on the walls. Tal R hangs simple, amorphous drip forms in bright colors all over the composition, parodying postwar stereotypes of the “genius” artist even more explicitly than Cobra. His recent “Scholars” series of raku-fired ceramics pushes the “human animal” idea in a new direction by turning kitsch animal forms into lumpen abstractions. In this series, inspired by a Chinese fairy tale about a monkey king that was born out of a rock, the artist applies Japanese ceramic casting methods to contemporary found objects. The resulting sculptures suggest the Chinese tradition of scholar’s rocks, hollowed stones formed by natural processes – often aided by human intervention – traditionally revered for showcasing the dynamic transformations of nature. Tal R’s ceramics acquire their vacant centers and undulating forms through a complex operation on a modern childhood icon: the teddy bear. The artist roughly covers the bears with clay, and casts them at high temperatures that burn away the remains of the stuffed toys. Transforming comforting plush toys into strangely poetic forms, Tal R suggests the complexity that always lies behind seemingly spontaneous expression, and recalls the experimentation of Cobra artists who skillfully mined the territory between “high” art and popular culture. The late sculpture of Asger Jorn, made by playfully molding clay and casting it in bronze, seems perfectly at home among the absent animal forms of these works, in an impish reversal of the animate and the inanimate.

Contemporary Legacy: Axel Heil

GERMAN ARTIST AXEL HEIL takes on multiple roles as artist, author, teacher, writer, and creator of artistic networks, in the tradition of Cobra artist Asger Jorn. He has researched the Cobra movement in depth through interviews and archival research around Europe, and curated exhibitions such as *Cobra International: Momente einer Utopie* (Museum für Aktuelle Kunst, Sammlung Hurrle in Durbach, 2012). Heil uses multimedia techniques including painting, found objects, video, graphic art, kitsch, and the occasional living plant to produce playful and experimental works that engage with humor the lineage of postwar expressionism, 60s counter-culture, and contemporary installation art. His art suggests spontaneous material, social, and conceptual connections among its varied elements. In the expansive spirit of Cobra, Heil's work encompasses everything from found natural forms to the most mundane aspects of mass culture. Its surprising juxtapositions re-frame preexisting ideas of refinement and vulgarity, revealing the way these distinctions shift according to context.

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Social Animals

THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL (1957–1972) and Constant’s “New Babylon” project (1956–1974) were two essential interpretations of the legacy of Cobra. Each drew in its own way on the most experimental aspects of the movement, even as it directly criticized the institutionalization of Cobra as just an art movement. Asger Jorn and Constant were co-founders of the Situationist International in Italy, where Jorn had invited his Cobra and Surrealist friends to take part in “International Ceramics Encounters” in the 1950s. The Situationists favored counter-culture experiments and actions such as the May 1968 occupation of the Sorbonne (in which they were directly involved). The Situationists invented the concepts of the “society of the Spectacle”; *détournement* or the “subversion” of preexisting texts and images into a newly critical statement; and the *dérive* or “drift”, wanderings through city space that revealed the inequalities inherent in urban design. Constant developed his “New Babylon” project in the 1960s through lectures, slide shows, publications, and exhibitions. His visionary designs aimed to counter the rational planning of postwar reconstruction in Europe with a celebration of spontaneity and continual migration. Both movements rejected painting outright in favor of collective explorations of architectural and urban space, creating new ways out of the “cage” of conventional stability and into a more unpredictable engagement with life on the street.