"THIS CRAZY JOYFUL SCREAM"



APPEL Two Figures 1977

THIS CRAZY JOYFUL SCREAM

- an essay on Karel Appel and his Art.

Michael Hennessy

N.C.A.D. Degree in Painting 1983.



APPEL
Personnage et Animal 1960

BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

192I	Born April 25, in Amsterdam.
I940-43	Studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Amsterdam.
1946	First one-man exhibition at Beerenhuis in Groningen,
	Netherlands; later the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam
	includes Appel in the exhibition "Young Artists";
	Appel meets Corneille, Louis Van Lint, and Marc Mendel-
	son, and eventually the group of young Belgian painters.
I948	With Constant and Corneille, Appel helps to found the
	Dutch experimental artist's group, REFLEX, in Amsterdam;
	this merges with the international group, COBRA.
1949	The mural 'Questioning Children' is commissioned for
	the cafeteria of the City Hall of Amsterdam. After
	a public uproar and despite the strong protests of
	younger artists and their supporters, the City Council
	orders the mural covered over with whitewash.
1950	Moves permanently to Paris, taking quarters in the
	Rue Santeuil, over a tannery. Met and later married
	Machteld Van der Groen.
1951	Elly Claus introduces Appel to the avant-garde art
	critic, Michel Tapié, and the door of international
	attention begins to open.
1953	The Palais de-Beaux-Arts in Brussels gives the first
	important one-man exhibition.
I953-54	For the first time, Appel's works are included in an
	important international exhibtion.
1954	The UNESCO prize is awarded to Appel at the twenty-
	seventh Biennale in Venice; Michel Tapié organizes a
	one-man exhibition at Studio Facchetti in Paris; and
	Martha Jackson presents the first American one-man

exhibition in her new gallery in New York.

1956 The Stedelijl Museum of Amsterdam commissions a mural for its new restaurant.

First trip to America and Mexico; Lissone, Italy, awards
Appel the major prize for non-figurative painting at
the exhibition "IOth Premio Lissone". A lithograph by
Appel wins the international prize for graphics at the
Ljubljana Biennale (Yugoslavia).

The Netherlands' committee for the Guggenheim International Award awards Appel \$1000 and first place
among the Dutch artists' group. In New York, Appel's
painting 'Vroun met Struisvogel' (Woman with Ostrich)
is awarded the \$10,000 first prize of the Guggenheim
International Exhibition. Appel is the youngest artist
ever to have received this award.

1962 Harry N. Abrams, Inc. publishes the first important monograph on Appel, with texts by Hugo Claus, Willem Sandberg and Sir Herbert Read.

I966-67 The Chateau de Molesnies (near Auxerre) is aquired and substantially renovateu, providing several large studios.

1968-69 Four important European museums exhibit'Appel's very large new sculptures, wall reliefs and paintings.

I970 The Central Museum of Utrecht presents sixty works from Appel's own collection.

Appel's wife, Machteld dies in hospital after a long illness. She was thirty five years old.

Appel's foremost achievement in words, a book, titled in Dutch 'Appel on Appel' is published in Amsterdam.

It is essentially an autobiography.

1971 Appel undertakes, in America, the creation of a first series of large-scale sculptures in polychrome alluminium.

1971-72	A retrospective exhibit is prepared for all the important
	museums in Canada and four in the United States.
1974	Allied Arts Commission, Huntington Beach, California,
	chooses Appel as one of the three semi-finalists for
	its international invitational competition.
1976	Appel participates in painting murals in shanty-towns
	near Lima, Peru.
	Appel starts to change his style, using only brushstrokes
	as well as creating new images and colour mixtures.
1979	Major Retrospective Exhibition tours six Scandinavian
	museums.
1979-80	Major Retrospective exhibitions in Vienna and Bonn,
	West Germany.

INTRODUCTION



KAREL APPEL Amorous Dance 1955



ASGER JORN

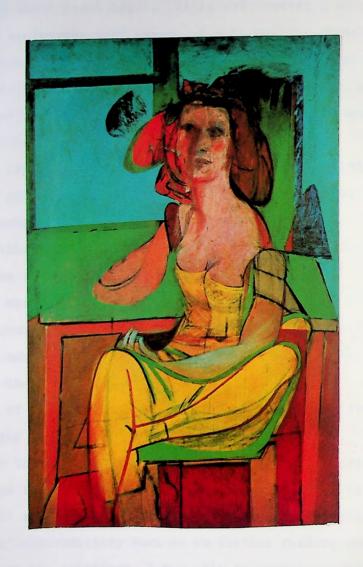
Portrait of the Owner 1963



APPEL
Figure 1956



de KOONING
Lizabeth's Painting 1958



de KOONING
Seated Woman 1940

INTRODUCTION

This is an essay about Karel Appel. It is not however a biographical essay nor is it an introductory essay. I will not for example be giving an account of his life, rather, I will take certain parts of Appel's career that I feel are important for this essay, and I will talk about these. I have for this reason, given a basic biographical outline at the start of this essay.

Generally, I am trying to get a greater insight into the artist and his art; to get a grasp of the attitude behind the work, at what makes the artist tick, as it were...

In order to do this I have found it necessary to use a number of direct quotations from Appel's own writings. Some of the quotations used were applicable to more than one point and I have in such circumstances repeated the quotation. This is purely for convenience sake and shouldn't really interfere with the overall flow of the essay.

On reading much of his writing I was somewhat surprised to find a lot of seemingly contradictory statements about his work. This is due I feel to the style of writing - Most of it is conversational and results in an honesty that reflects his work and there is I feel an amount of seemingly contradictory elements in Appel's work. I say 'seemingly' contradictory because on further reading and further looking at his paintings, I was able to come to certain conclusions that aligned these 'contradictions' - and in the end I was, I feel, better able to appreciate the artist's paintings and indeed his words.

I have tried to present the writings in a way that gives them a kind of coherence without interfering with the actual prose of the writings; that is, I have taken some writings from, say, 1978 and presented them along with earlier writings - In this way I

hope to make some points clearer and maybe less contradictory.

In any case, this ambivilance or apparent incongruence in Appel's writing and work, will be looked at in chapter four of this essay.

The rest of the essay is also involved with gaining a greater insight into the artist's work, however it is very much influenced by my own personal thoughts and bias. It is, if you like, my insight into Appel's work. For example, I am devoting a chapter of this essay to a kind of comparison with Van Gogh, and I will almost totally be ignoring the 'COBRA' group!

Maybe, you may feel, I am making too big a deal of his relationship

Maybe, you may feel, I am making too big a deal of his relationship with Van Gogh, but I believe there is a very interesting and indeed illuminating association of styles. Also Van Gogh was one of Appel's early heroes and in some of his writings he has talked about his admiration for Van Gogh's work. Also by making an association that perhaps hasn't been made before we might get a new insight into the work or it just might make us look again anyway I felt it was definitely worth writing about and that was justification enough at the time...

As regards COBRA, I didn't feel it was very relevant for this essay for a number of reasons.

For one thing the movement, which started in November I948, officially lasted for only three years and the main reason for the continued interest in COBRA now is the clear parallel between the work of painters such as Jorn and Appel and that of the American abstract expressionists notably Pollack, Kline and de Kooning. In this essay I will not be dealing with this parallel for the simple reason that it is quite a clear parallel and one that is obvious before you start talking at all!

This is not to say that I feel this association isn't important, on the contrary I feel the association says a lot about the relevance of this type of expression in the history of modern art (The fact

that similar movements should occur on different sides of the Atlantic around the same time gives this expression a real authenticity) however this overall relevance is not something I am concerned with in this essay. For this reason, therefore, the COBRA movement has also less revelance in this essay.

Also, curiously enough, although Karel Appel was a founder member of COBRA and exemplifies everything it stood for; spontaneity, instinctiveness, lack of inhibitions, his attitude towards the movement is decidedly casual.

'You know how painters are: jealousies and disagreements. Everyone lives his own life, some you saw only

For these reasons, then, I will not be devoting any great space to the COBRA movement. As an added point of interest here, it is worth pointing out that Appel denies having been influenced by de Kooning or any other American whose work and his seem close, even though a collection of Appel's nudes such as the one that made the rounds of various galleries in Europe and America in 1963-64 reminds one very powerfully of the female figures painted by de Kooning, himself an expatriate Dutchman, some years earlier. And indeed it is true that neither de Kooning or any of the other American painters whom one tends to bracket him with ever painted the horses, dogs, birds, cats and other not so easily distinguishable creatures that constitute a large part of Appel's language. Nevertheless, the term 'action painting' which is a distinctly American term, could easily be applied to Appel's approach to his work. Here is the late critic, Harold Rosenberg's description of how action painting was produced.

'The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of

material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter...!

This description is true of, at least. the freest and most expressionistic of the several painterly styles Appel practices, and in this way he belongs in the same bracket as de Kooning. In fact around 1958 Appel exhibited in a new gallery in Easthampton, Long Island, New York with both de Kooning and Franz Kline. However, for the purpose of this essay, it is not necessary to go into this relationship in any greater depth, than I have done, and I'll say no more about it.

I said earlier that I wasn't concerned in this essay with the artist's overall relevance in the history of modern art. This is primarily because I am concerned with the artist himself and his relationship with his work, in any case he isn't dead yet! And anyway I feel this would be of main importance or interest from a historical point of view.

I will in the remaining chapters of the essay be talking about Appel's childhood (again not in a historical context) and taking a general look at the language of Appel's work. Appel's art has often been called childlike (in fact in the early years his style was sometimes called "grown-up childlike" style) and Appel admits that in the early COBRA years

'there was something childlike about our dreams, our behaviour, our work.' - Paris 1977.

Even for these reasons, I think it would be interesting to take a look at Appel's own childhood and perhaps see if there is a relationship or source to be found. This investigation appears in the first chapter.

I will also in the course of the essay be talking about a number of particular paintings, the first one 'Portrait of a Girl', because it is an example of a very early Appel, and the others

either because they are particular favourites of mine or in order to illustrate some point or other.

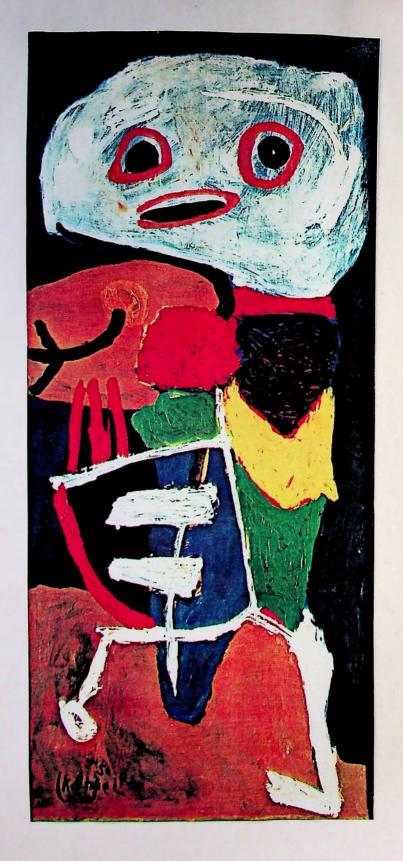
Also, because the main emphasis in the essay is to get a greater insight or feel from the art and the artist I will be using a number of illustrations in much the same way as I use the writings (just to get this feel from them). For this reason there will be a number of paintings illustrated that I won't be talking about directly. However, these illustrations are a very important part of the overall essay and should be viewed with as much emphasis as the written text.

CHAPTER I

PICKLES AND CREAM PUFFS



APPEL Eléphant 1977



APPEL

Воу



APPEL
Le Cri 1953

CHAPTER I

PICKLES AND CREAM PUFFS

In the following chapter I want to talk about Karel Appel's childhood, not for any biographical reason, but purely to get a greater insight into his very early years and possibly to get a 'feel' of the atmosphere and attitude he grew up in.

Also, I think that if an artist is honest in his work, then his work, paintings or whatever, will reflect or contain a part of the artist's personality, character, viewpoints etc. This emotive expression, if you like, would even be more apparent in an artist working with the same passion, spontanaiety and freedom as Appel does. Therefore, it would be fair to assume that by looking at the artist's early life, his experiences outside of his art, his possible influences, we might get a greater insight into his art and therefore a greater appreciation and understanding of it.

Most of the information and material about Appel's childhood is taken from his own writings, so that we can not only look at the facts and situations but also at his reactions to these situations......

Also, there is in my opinion, a certain feel from his writings that conveys a lot more than any historical account could give us.

When I was small I was very proud of my parents. They were the biggest, richest, fattest in the whole world.

My mother was a born actress. But: "If you want to become an actor I'll break your legs!" she often yelled at me. Later she often talked about acting.

She would sit in a corner and recite long poems by Multatuli (the Dutch writer Eduard Douwes Dekker, 1820-1887). She had problems with her memory, couldn't remember where she put things, but those

poems she still knew by heart. She knew everything from Proust, Multatuli. Her brother taught me to paint.

My mother was a real Amsterdammer, not at all a Dutch type. Her name was Chevalier. I think her origins were French, in the Jordaan (French Protestant quarter of Amsterdam) - long nose, dark hair. Her father was also dark, very quick-tempered. He died young in a fit of passion. After his death, my mother had a hard life - hard work, little money. She went to work when she was seven, cleaning houses along with her mother. Nothing but worries. She met my father when he rented a room from her mother. They got married and started a beauty shop (only hairdressing) in the Dapperbuurt.

Aunt Luik loved company, always parties, dancing, lots of fun. On Saturday one did not cook dinner. You just ate the whole evening long, pickles and cream puffs. She baked shortbread, coconut cookies, croquettes. And not just two croquettes for each, but plates full. We ate enormously in those days. My mother must have weighed three hundred pounds, just like a fat Italian. She always remained very natural and childlike. She preferred us when we were small. Lots of laughs in those days. My mother had a great sense of humour. She got her jokes first-hand from my father. Even when she Was very ill, my mother still laughed a lot. She gave me paint, chalk and boxes. I have always painted -I gave a lot of thought to it.'

The above is an excerpt from Appel's foremost achievement in

words - a book titled 'Appel on Appel', which was published in Amsterdam in 1971.

From it we can clearly see that Appel had quite an attachment to his mother and more than likely gained a lot of his character from her. The actress and humour in his mother has certainly come through in his work. But I think it is the overall feel of the writing that can tell us most. Appel obviously enjoyed his childhood. The racey, conversational way he writes gives the writing an intamacy that couldn't be achieved by anyone other than himself. His opening description of his parents

- the biggest, richest, fattest in the whole world is not unlike the style of many of his paintings - bold,
humourous, puerile, honestly theatrical!!
But above all, the 'feel' from his writings, I think you'll agree,
is one of enjoyment. Not really enjoyment of any material wealth
but more of the busy, sometimes carefree, life going on around
him. This freedom or attitude if you like, is I feel, the main
source of Appel's energy and was in many ways responsible for
his great paintings of the 50's and early 60's. This is a point
I will devote more time to in a later chapter, but for the moment,
let's leave the man talk for himself.

'From age fifteen to seventeen I worked in the shop with my father. It was a busy shop, a ladies and gents' hairdresser, in a busy part of town. Big outdoor markets, hard work even on Saturdays, and then in the evening to the market, lots of fun and music in the streets. Amsterdam bulged with sociability and good food. The labourers were paid in gold ten-guilder pieces in those days.

We slept in on Sundays and then ate. My mother loved companionship and good food. Large tables

were set up. The old Amsterdam customs were influenced by the Jewish population. Before the war Amsterdam was simply a Jewish town: humour, theatre, cabaret, snacks, sandwiches, pastrami and pickles.

On Sunday afternoons a neighbour came with his car.

We all got in, my father with his bowler hat and cigar.

"Go slowly", said my father, and we floated through our streets, of which we knew every stone, board and hole, and my father waved and bowed to all the neighbours sitting on their steps. MNot so fast!"

We went around the corner and stopped again in fromt of our house.

From the age of sixteen until the outbreak of the war,
I did lots of sports, jogging and running on the Olympiaplein. It did me a lot of good.

My uncle in Auizen taught me how to paint. I did landscapes, a little impressionistic, a la Monet. I always knew I'd become a painter. I also knew that a son should follow in his father's footsteps, and that I did enthusiastically but it wasn't enough. It is an urge inside of you, a different feeling, a different view of the world.

Not one of my brothers had stayed with my father in the business. I was there playing hairdresser, I looked outside where life was - blue sky - and I felt like a bird in a cage. I had to leave, although I loved the people's neighbourhood and the life that was lived there. But you know what it is like: always the same, the gossip, the adultery, the indifference. Inside of me there was an urge towards another life, another thought, another world. You cannot escape,

and then you have to leave.

I left home at eighteen.

- Appel on Appel 1971.

This then is Appel's own description of his early years where his first creative impulses were born and nourished, and even though he felt he had to leave, it is obvious that he brought a lot of those early experiences with him. In one sense, I feel, it was the very nature of these experiences that led him to leave.

These lived experiences served to encourage his yearning to see more.

-'Inside me there was an urge toward another life...'

The somewhat 'easy-going' attitude of these early years served to liven his spirit and in the end it was only natural he should leave. He learned to fly here and then he had to be free to fly!!!

Compare his description of Amsterdam before the war with his description of New York in 1977.

'Before the war Amsterdam was simply a Jewish town, humour, theatre, cabaret, snacks, sandwiches, pastrami and pickles...'

'To me New York is the biggest circus in the world, dangerous, spontanious, exuberant, cruel, instinctive, erotic often puerile - with the actors, like in a circus sometimes rising to a state of extasy...'

(Interview with Frédéric de Towarnicki) - May '77.

Two vastly different worlds, but to a youth living in a Jewish town before the war, and to a, by now, well established man of the world living in modern New York, perhaps there is not such a great difference. Do you get a similar kind of feeling from each description? I think so. There is, I feel, a similar sense of excitement from each description. In any case one

served as a basis for the other - the atmosphere and attitude of this Amsterdam town gave Appel the yearning to search for the life and exuberance he later found in New York. Not because this Amsterdam lacked all this life but because it gave him a small taste of it...

And remember, the thing that carried him to this new life was his painting, his creative urge and this found its origins in that simple Jewish town.

Now in New York Appel's apartment is filled with primitive sculpture, especially masks, from all over the world - Africa, Oceania and both Americas. That apartment also contains one of the largest collections of European and American toys in private hands. The emphasis is on toys that do things (or have forgottem how to do them) by means of gravity or some such simple, elemental source of energy. These performing dogs, racing cars, clowns and whatnot provide no less than the masks, an illuminating sidelight on Appel's personality; a personality that obviously found its first traits in those early, pickles and cream puff, days.

CHAPTER 2

ONE EARLY PAINTING



APPEL Portrait of a Girl 1945

CHAPTER 2

ONE EARLY PAINTING

As a child, Appel did quite a bit of drawing and just before the war his mother's brother introduced him to painting. His uncle was a Sunday Painter and he'd often take the young Appel out to the country, where he'd paint landscapes. Also before the war, exhibitions of abstract painting were pretty frequent in Amsterdam and it was here that Appel first saw and was impressed by the canvases of Kandinsky, Paul Klee and so on; but what really got through to him was as he put it himself —

'The simple, primitive forms and the vibrant colours of Van Gogh. They seemed less cold than the others, I discovered Vlaminck, too, and Matisse, his blue and incredible luminous red, I was less interested in his drawing. I liked the Surrealists and Dada - its painted objects, its dustbins. But it was when I came across the self-destructive forms of Picasso that I got a real shock. They made me feel a whole civilization was in the process of blowing up, and for a few months I did paintings that were a mixture of Picasso's forms, Matisses colours and Van Gogh's technique.'

It would be interesting, I feel, to look at one of these paintings that Appel painted around this time, keeping in mind, these ingredients' if you like.

The painting I have chosen is 'Portrait of a Girl', oil on canvas, that the artist painted in I945. He was 24 years old...

I don't feel that this is particularly one of Appel's better or more impressive pieces but as an example of his very early work and for our purposes at this stage, it is ideal, because not only

does the painting give us a look at where Appel came from, but it also shows us where he was going. In other words, the painting shows us the artist's influences and his direction.

The most dominant feature of the painting is. I feel the arm as

The most dominant feature of the painting is, I feel, the overall structure and particularly the structure of the face. This is due to the almost blatantly simple use of strong line and the dominance of the staring eyes. (Staring eyes are a feature found in many of Appel's later works.) This structure of the face is not unlike the structure found in many of Picasso's 'faces', for example 'Bust de Femme (Dora Maar)' and even the breaking up of the area around the figure into abstract shapes with an importance of their own can be related to Picasso - This is not to say that appel was here consciously copying Picasso's structures or forms, rather he was aware of them and was at this stage trying to achieve something as strong as he had seen in Picasso's work, and indeed in the work of a great number of contemporary artists.

What most impressed Appel about Matisse was his colour and in particular

'his blue and his incredible luminous red'.

This incredible luminous red is attempted in this painting - Red always was a favourite colour of Appel's - and he recalls this in an interview with Frédéric de Towarnicki in Paris, May 1977 -

'Red has always had a powerful effect on me. In my young days I'd open whole tubes of red with a razor blade and enjoy the flow of the bright paste. To put red on a white canvas was just about sufficient in itself. Born in blood my red has gradually become more spatial. Then other colours come into the picture: turquoise blue for example, a real festival of light that makes all other colours vibrate...'

So we can see that the two colours he most liked in Matiss's work



PICASSO

Buste de Femme (Dora Maar) 1944

were the two colours that had the most lasting effect. The use of the three primary colours in the painting also gives us some indication of what was to come in his later work. The colours are used almost in their purity, that is, there are no tonal changes of colour in any area of that colour, and this strength of colour became one of Appel's greatest attributes.

The two different tones of blue laid next to each other (not mixed with each other) in the bottom right hand corner of the painting are important because this technique (which can be found in quite a lot of Van Gogh's work) became a major consideration in a lot of Appel's work in the late 70's...This is something I will talk about again later on...

The most important aspect of the painting, for us now however, is, I feel, the brushwork, which can easily be related to Van Gogh. Remember Appel said that it was Van Gogh's 'technique' that he put in these early paintings and the blatant brushmarks are indeed reminiscent of Van Gogh. The marks the brush makes is not just a simple band of colour the width of the brush but it also contains the textured 'brushing' effect of the brush. This may seem a small point but I beg to differ - the fact that the 'brushstroke' is so apparent and not proposing to be anything other than a brushstroke shows us where Appel's true interest lies - in the quality of his mark - in the almost blatant use of paint for its own sake and this I feel, is an important feature of his later work - For example the plaits of hair on the figure are more about the actual brushstroke itself than about describing the figure's hair. In 1978 Appel wrote

'The colours and brushstrokes are just as important as the shapes and things which make up the scene and which can be evoked with just a few strokes and some shadings of the brush. They can reproduce an animal

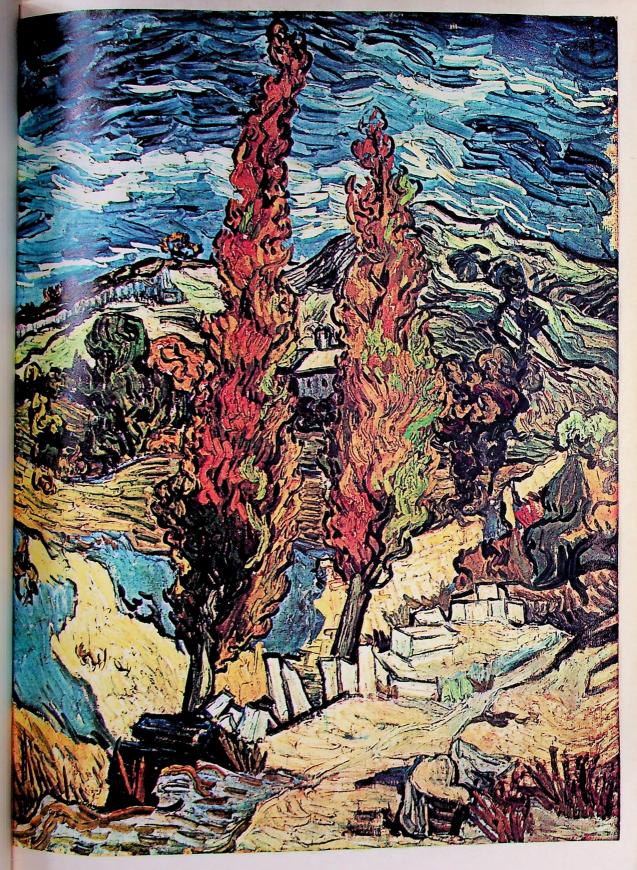
or a flower or a landscape in their essence. The brushstroke is of so much importance either to paint something out which does not really exist or to reflect a space, playful creatures, profoundness, jokes, sudden turns.

So we can see that Appel was beginning to be concerned with more than just an abstract representation of a figure or whatever and become involved in abstraction as an end in itself or with expression through the use of an almost purely visual language. When I talk about a 'visual language' here, I mean a language that is made up of purely visual elements, that is line, colour, shape etc. as opposed to a language of ideas which I feel is more a literary language in the sense that the idea or concept behind the work is more important than the means that depict the work. This is an area I will devote more time to in the final chapter. This visual language, then, that Appel was beginning to utilise here in this early painting, was, I feel fully exploited in his most impressive paintings of the late fifties and early sixties and was still a predominant concern in his work of the late 70's. Generally, the painting is not one that might be called original, in the sense that every aspect of the painting is directly derived from other paintings, yet the choice of which aspects used or the descision to use these particular aspects can give us an indication of Appel's own preferences and, looking with hindsight at where these preferences were to lead to. So, it is clear that this painting, 'Portrait of a Girl' not only shows us Appel's influences but also gives us a hint of what was

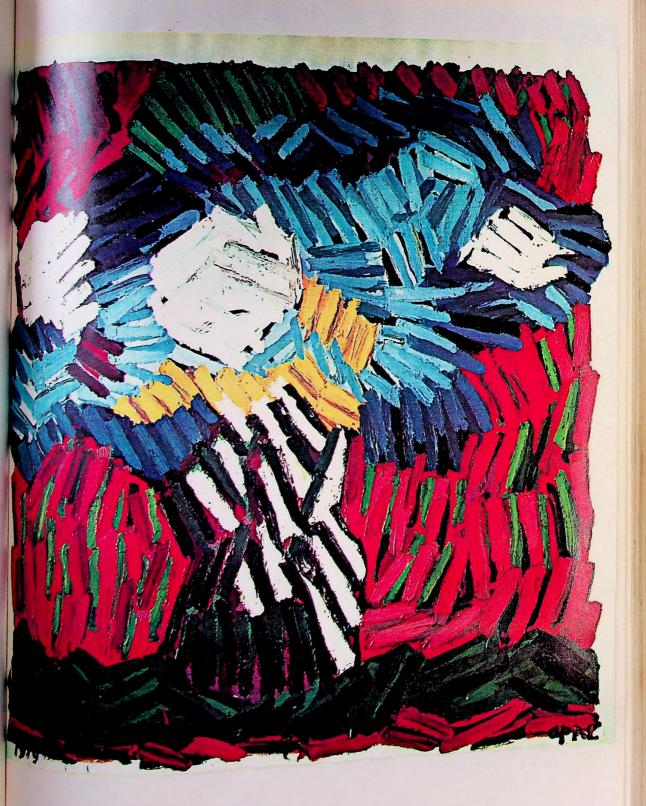
to come.

CHAPTER 3

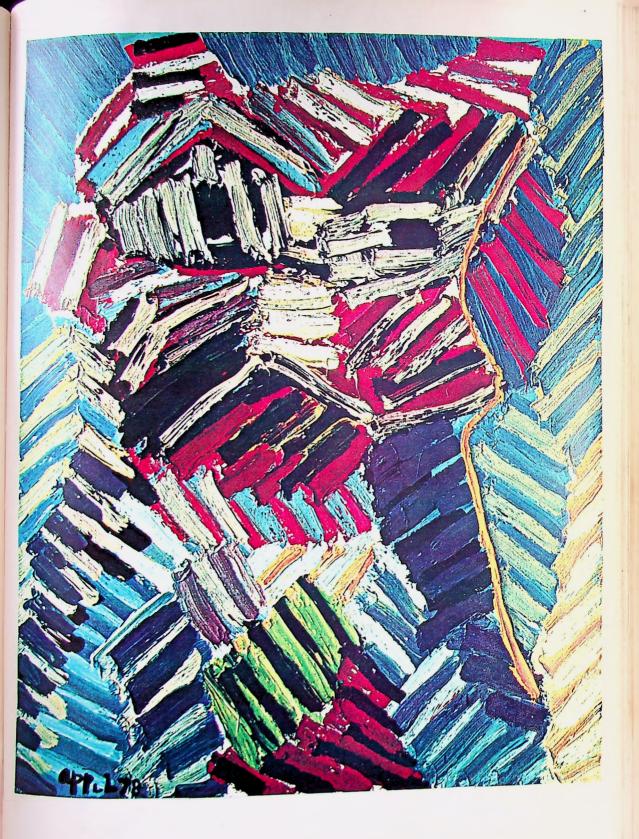
APPEL AND VAN GOGH



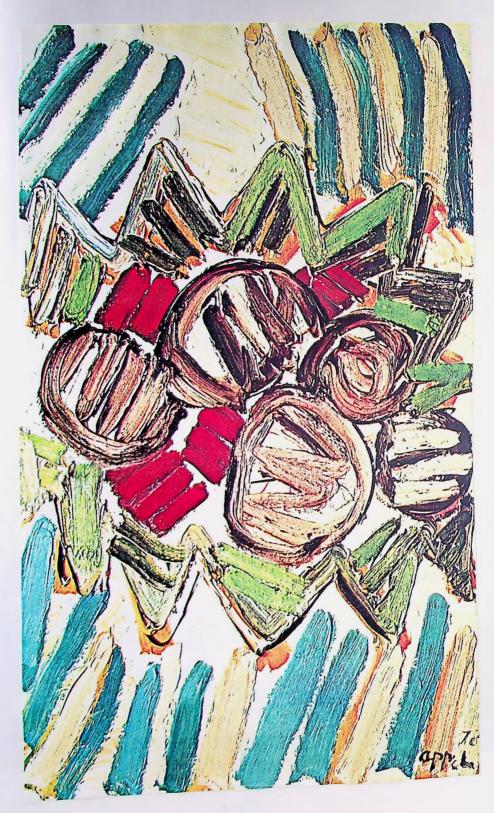
VAN GOGH



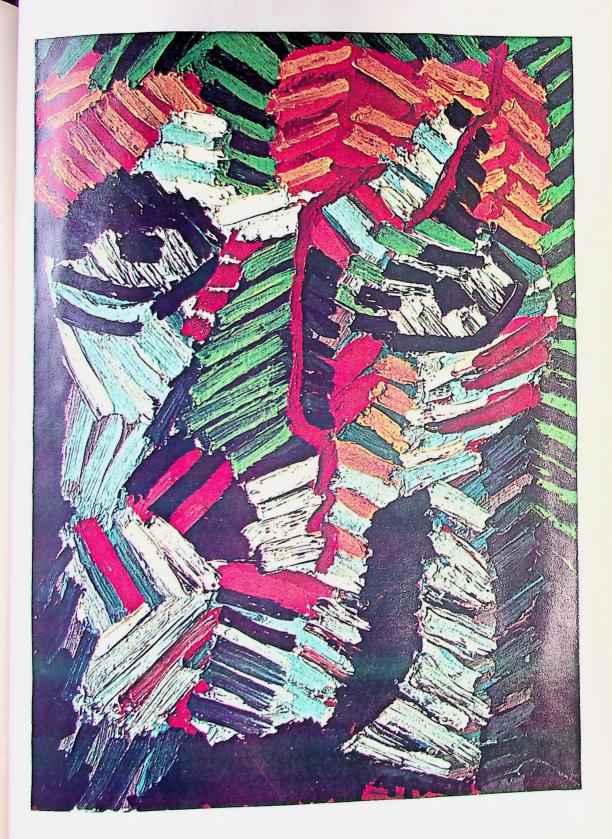
APPEL Tree as a Still Life 1979



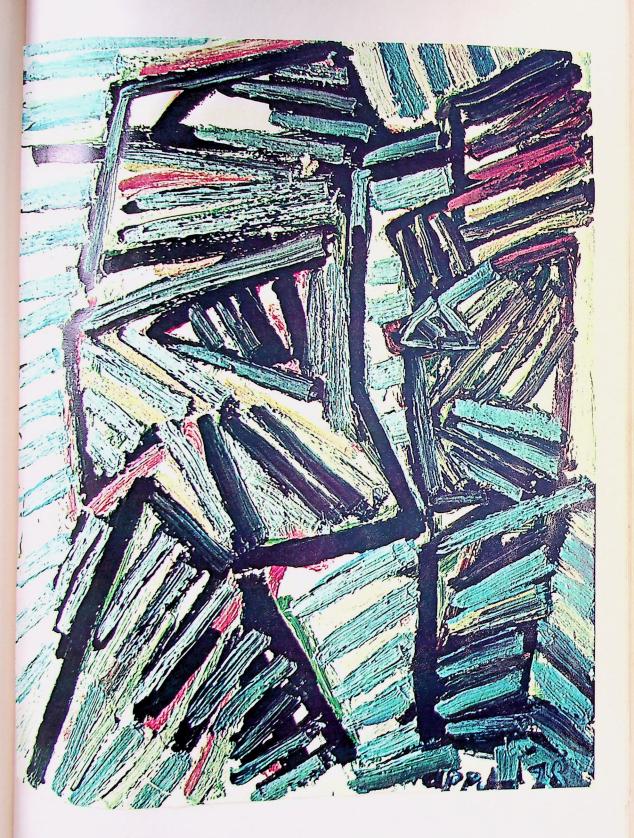
APPEL Cat as a Still Life 1978



APPEL Fruit as a Still Life 1978



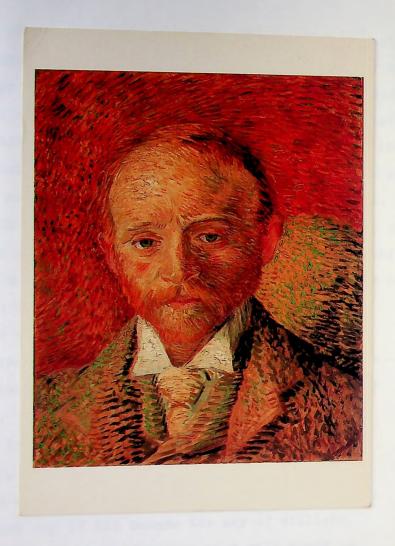
APPEL
Portrait of a Cat 1978



APPEL

Faces

1978



VAN GOGH Portrait of Alexander Reid 1886

CHAPTER 3 APPEL AND VAN GOGH

I want in this chapter to devote more time to the relationship between Appel and Van Goghs' styles of painting. There may not, at first, appear to be such an obvious relationship or indeed there may be other painters that would present a more obvious relationship, for example, Asjer Jorn, W. de Kooning or any of the other American Abstract expressionists, however by relating the style of a painter that would not normally be related to Appel we will, I feel, be inclined to look at the paintings with a different emphasis and therefore get a greater overall appreciation of them. In any case Van Gogh is a painter that Appel himself has more than once, talked about as one of his greatest influences and heroes.

'Van Gogh's painting - so incredibly simple, so concentrated - knocked me out. With one single stroke - form, matter, colour - he could express all the energy of nature. And that bold way he has of misshaping things to leave scope for the imagination. Looking at the sky, Van Gogh could see a coloured rhythm nobody had seen before. His blue intensified the sky, and that new sky of his became the sky of millions of people. Van Gogh made me see that will power is maybe more important and fertile than talent. By being willing to risk terrible solitude, Van Gogh became an existential hero. What a struggle at a time when technology was on the up and up, and artists were so many outcasts only good for starvation and contempt!

For Picasso also, Van Gogh was a hero.'

Having said that however, I am not going to talk here about the influence Van Gogh had on Appel, rather I will isolate certain

be made and indeed relationships that do exist. You may say that if you try, it is possible to make parallels between even the most distant painters, that is indeed so, yet let me make it clear that it is not the parallel for its own sake that is the point of this chapter, rather it is the insight that can be gained from this parallel. In this case by relating two painters whose subject matter is quite different, we are 'forced' to look at other aspects of both painters' work, namely their style or technique of expression - their language if you like and in the end even if we don't come up with any new startling discoveries we will at least have achieved a greater understanding of the qualities involved in these languages.

By way of introduction I would like to use what was the first basic study of Van Gogh's work, made in January I890 by Albert Aurier (I865-92). Aurier was a student of law, who wrote, painted and drew and was considered by many to be an innovater in art criticism.

This study appeared in the 'Mercure de France'...

'...In the case of Vincent Van Gogh, despite the sometimes disconcerting strangeness of his work, it is difficult to contest the naive truthfulness of his art. Indeed, independently of that undefinable aroma of good faith and of things really seen which all his paintings exhale, his choice of subjects, the constant harmony of the most excessive colours, the honesty in the study of characters, the continuous search for the essential meaning of each object, a thousand significant details unquestionably proclaim his profound and almost childlike sincerity, his great love of nature and of truth - his own truth...

What particularizes his entire work is the excess,

excess in strength, excess in nervousness, in violence of expression. In his categorical affirmation of the character of things, in his frequently headstrong simlification of forms, in his insolence in depicting the sun face to face, in the vehement ardour of his drawing and of his colour, and even in the slightest particularities of his technique, he reveals a powerful being, a male, a bold man, often brutal and sometimes ingeniously delicate. This can be seen in the almost orginstic excess of everything he has painted; he is a fanatic, an enemy of bourgeois sobriety and of trifling details. a kind of drunken giant, better able to move mountains than to handle bibelots, an ebullient brain which irresistibly pours its lava into all the ravines of art, a terrible and highstrung genius, often sublime, sometimes grotesque, almost always on the edge of the pathological. Lastly and above all, he is a hyperaesthete with obvious symptoms who perceives with abnormal and possibly even painful intensity the imperceptible and secret character of lines and forms, and even more of colours, of light, of magic iridescence of shadows of nuances which are invisible to healthy eyes. And that is why the realism of this neurotic, why his sincerity and his truth are so different ... '

In the above study Auriers mentions many of the qualities that particularizes Van Gogh's whole style - the constant harmony of excessive colours, his childlike sincerity, his great love of his own truth, his excess strength and his violence of expression. Many of these qualities are also to be found in Appel's paintings, indeed the constant harmony of the most excessive colours is

possibly more applicable to Appel than to Van Cogh. Excessive colour is undoubtedly the main characteristic of Appel's work. But as I said in the previous chapter, perhaps their greatest affinity lies in their use of brushstroke. The vast majority of Appel's paintings of the late 70's are concerned with colour and brushstrokes, with everything else, including the object he is painting, becoming of minor importance. While this is certainly not true of Van Gogh (he always maintained an emotional involvement with his subject matter), their actual technical use of the brushstroke are in many cases very similar. The brushstroke becomes much more than a method of applying paint, it takes on an importance of its own and is often as important as the paint it applies or the shape it describes. This is especially true of Appel's paintings of the late seventies where Appel began working in a new manner, employing broad, rich often thick trushstrokes of contrasting colours lying side by side. These trushstrokes - worlds apart from the rush and energy of the 1950's - are essentially the main theme as well as the method of these Faintings. This is quite apparent simply by looking at paintings such as 'Two Figures', 1977; 'Fruit as a Still Life', 1978; 'Faces', 1978; 'Cat as a Still Life', 1978 or any one of a number of the 'Cat' paintings he has painted. I would ask the reader at this point to have another look at the painting 'Portrait of a Girl' seen in chapter two and especially note the plait of hair and the blue area on the bottom right hand corner of the Painting. You'll agree that while the actual painting isn't as confident or competant as the later paintings, the actual technique is very similar to them. In this early painting it was this 'technique' he acquired from Van Gogh. The laying together of the two different tones of blue in a 'stripes' feshion has become a major feature of the later paintings. In the

painting 'Cat as a Still Life' this striped effect gives the painting a kind of dramatic radiance - the direction of the brushstrokes changing constantly, sometimes pushing against each other, sometimes forming arrows and sometimes acting like 'sun-rays' in a child's drawing. The blue area on the top of the painting is made up of a number of blue brushstrokes of varying tone. This is a technique that Van Gogh has employed on many occasions and can be seen in the painting 'Two Poplars on a Road Through the Hills' Oct. 1889.

In this painting the brushstrokes, while they are essentially describing a shape or form, they are themselves quite evident and have an importance of their own. This is especially true of the blue area that makes up the sky. Van Gogh was obviously concerned with the painting working as a painting as much as a landscape, and in this respect the brushstrokes have a vital part to play.

'...I prefer to see a simple brushstroke and a less far-fetched difficult colour. More simplicity, in short that intelligent simplicity which is not afraid of frank technique.'

- Van Gogh (8-I5 Dec 1885).

In the above quotation, which Van Gogh wrote in a letter to Theo, he was speaking about contemporary art he had seen in Antwerp. The simplicity and frank technique Van Gogh speaks about here is also a characteristic of Appel's - In the painting 'Portrait of a Cat' Appel has drawn in a yellow line, down the right hand side of the painting, using, what appears to be, paint straight from the tube. Although this technique is generally associated with the abstract expressionist movement and such like, it is also a technique that Van Gogh came to utilise and spoke about in one of his letters. He was painting some roots of a tree...

'It struck me how sturdily those little stems were

rooted in the ground. I began painting them with a brush, but the surface was already too heavily covered, a brush stroke was lost in it - then I squeezed the roots and trunks in from the tube and modelled it a little with the brush...'

The important association for us now, is not the fact that Appel and Van Gogh both used a similar technique but rather that this similarity reflects an attitude that is somewhat similar.

Both were aware of the strength of a basic brushstroke and also the strength of 'raw' paint, and this rawness of expression and simplicity of technique is in many ways responsible for the truthfulness of their art.

Finally, without, I hope, labouring the point, there are obviously certain parts of Appel's paintings that can be closely associated with certain parts of Van Gogh's painting and vice versa, both had the ambition and confidence to depict 'the sun face to face', as Aurier put it, and it is also true that Van Gogh was a hero of Appel's. Yet, any relationship between them is best appreciated by looking at their paintings and becoming familiar with their techniques and styles, and for this reason I'll say no more.

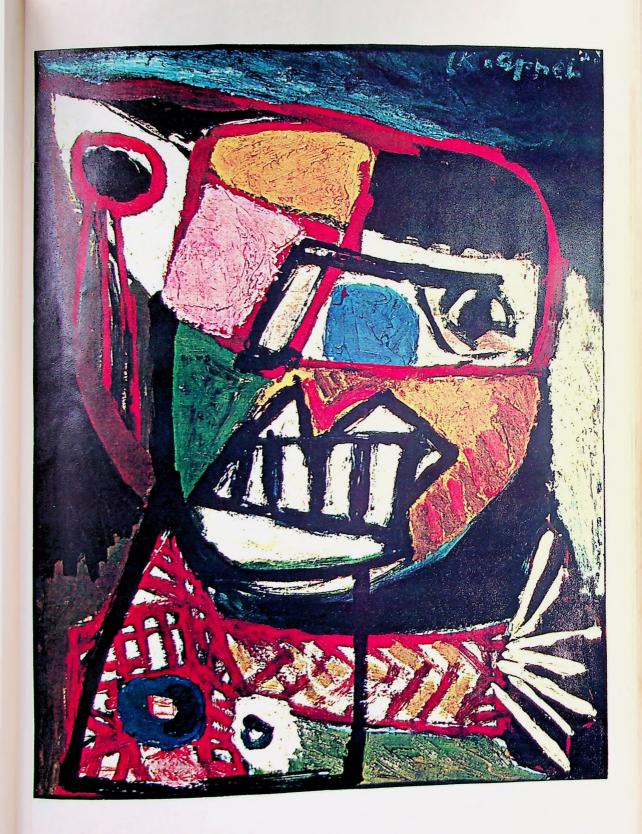
CHAPTER 4

THIS CRAZY JOYFUL SCREAM



A PPEL

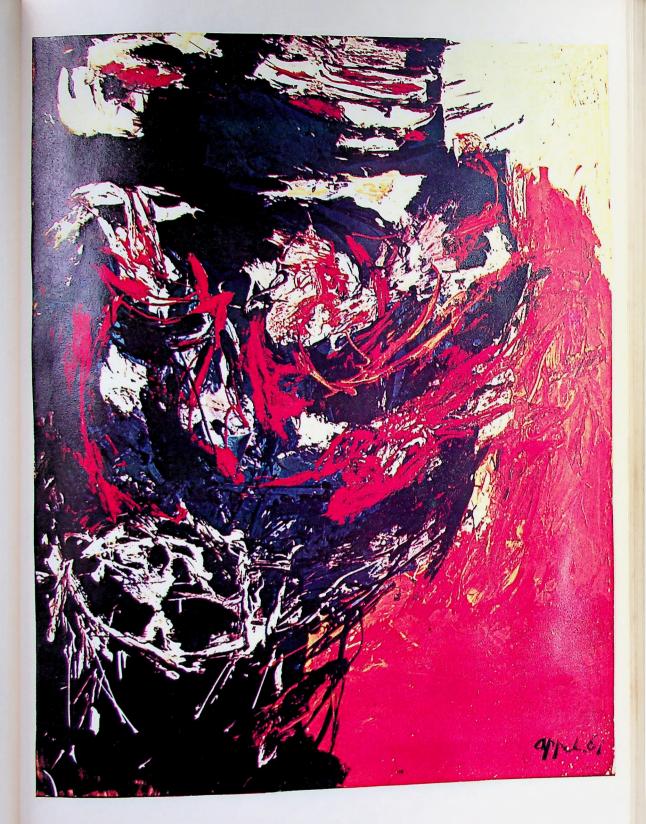
Thunderbirds (Detail) 1960



APPEL Head 1953



APPEL
Sleeping City 1952



APPEL Burned Face 1961



APPEL Girl 1957



APPEL Flying World 1961



APPEL Flying Couple 196I



APPEL The Crazy Mona Lisa 1963

CHAPTER 4 THIS CRAZY JOYFUL SCREAM

"To observe Karel Appel in the act of painting is to witness one of the great boxing matches of our times. He beats, cuffs and assaults the canvas wildly from all directions at once, and one feels he is scarcely aware of the image being built up on the surface of that canvas as a result of his attack."

The above description was written by Alfred Frankenstein (for 45 years, art critic of the San Francisco Chronicle and author of an impressive publication on Karel Appel, simply titled, Karel Appel) while talking about the most expressionistic of Appel's painterly styles, that, which he practiced most in the late fifties and early sixties, and it is this particular selection of work that I want, in this chapter, to discuss in more detail. After Appel left home, at the age of eighteen, he entered the world of German Occupation, alone. At this time his country was being occupied by Germany and war was raging in most parts of Western Europe.

'My principal worry during the war was to stay alive
while others were starving. During the first war
years I attended the Academy of Fine Arts. In order
not to be taken off to Germany, I carried an identity
card of the Academy. And they had a soup kitchen.
Those years I led a hungry and poor existance; I had
no money and all my friends were dirt poor, too.
Cold and hungry and yet working hard - very hard.
Crowded Amsterdam became even more bare and poor and
empty, the neighbourhood one big misery. Although
an epidemic was raging through the world, my beginnings

as a painter were enthusiastic. The Academy was a good place to learn about the classics, the Greeks, the Romans and Egypt.

One did live during the war - I lived on the Zwanen-burgwal - the Zeedijk neighbourhood, the harbour where all the black marketeers were, where you could trade a painting for goods. The citizens you couldn't sell to; they didn't know you and they hated you. I sang in bars and cafés, and the black marketeers and nouveau rich fed me and gave me expensive cigarettes for my efforts.

I had to leave later, was afraid to be picked up by the Germans and I went with some other painters to the South of Holland, where we roamed among the farmers who had cupboards full of food. We would stay one week with one and three days with another, and we left landscapes here and there.'

Things got even worse after the war. Anybody who had saved money had to turn it in. Appel had lived for some time in Twente (the east of the country) where he had saved 250 guilders from painting portraits and of this money he was allowed keep ten guilders. There was food for everyone except painters and the poverty was worse than it had been during the war.

Just how bad things were at this time is illustrated by the fact that Appel's girlfriend died within a week of moving in with him. She had galloping T.B. and of course the poverty didn't help. Around this time the first subsidies for painters were introduced. Appel was living in a dusty dirty studio in the Oude Zijds Voorburgwal. He had stolen some wooden boards which he put on the floor and used to sleep on American cake tins with a mattress over them. No light and very poor.

'I remember very well the two civil servants who came to see me in that attic. They were sent by someone, I don't know who. They were taken aback at what they saw. "You most certainly should get a subsidy", they said. "How much?" said I. "Seven guilders a week". "Fantastic!" I said. "A guilder a day, that's wonderful!" "You know what?" they said, "we'll predate your application."

In that way, I got fourteen guilders all at once.'
Appel's painting at this time was very much influenced by his
means. He couldn't afford to buy materials, paint, paper,
whatever and so he resorted to using whatever he could find.

'I was quick and knew how to hustle; very street smart. My freedom of thought was the most important thing to me, in painting above all. I painted on wrapping paper or old newspapers with paint I hustled somehow. I scrounged around garbage cans and made trash-can art. One object trouvé, pieces of wood nailed together and called 'passion in the attic', was exhibited in the Bar Madrid on the Rodkin, where people disliked it so much they smashed the windows. I did that sort of thing for quite a while. I didn't sell anything, later maybe three or four gouaches for ten guilders a piece.'

(Appel had to sell these works secretly because of the Government subsidy he was receiving.)

"You could live on a guilder a day, one bottle

of buttermilk, twelve cents; two rolls, two

smoked herring - that fed you for the day.'

These writings are evidence of a certain kind of passion, that is

inherent in Appel, that manifested itself in these early years

when survival alone was the main concern. They show us something of the struggle it was for an artist living during the war. They also give us an idea of the commitment needed and indeed exerted by Appel during these hard times. Appel was not just satisfied with 'making a living'; the very fact that he left home is evidence enough - he could quite easily have gone home after the war and worked with his father, as he was an accomplished barber. Yet, he chose a life that was, at the time, one of the hardest in Amsterdam. This kind of striving, for something that he didn't know would lead to any wealth, this kind of passion for living and not just existing, doesn't just disappear when survival is not such an issue and obviously has to express itself in some other fashion. In Appel's case this expression found its outlet in his painting and in particular the paintings of the fifties and sixties.

I would like at this stage to quote a poem written by Dylan

Thomas that contains many of the sentiments expressed in these
paintings.

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees Is my destroyer.

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
Turns mine to wax.

And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind Hauls my shroud sail.

And I am dumb to tell the hanging man How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head; Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood Shall calm her sores.

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lovers' tomb

How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

In this poem, as in many of Thomas' poems the central point is simple yet powerful. It consists of the confrontation in each verse of the two same ideas. One is the idea of "the green fuse" - the power in nature that drives everything forward; we feel this, we share its activity, it gives us strength and makes us bolder with each experience, in fact it gives us life - we feel it is on our side. The second idea in each verse is that we are however, being destroyed by this very same power. We are getting older, life and time are killing us a little with each experience. This confrontation, while we are living we are dying or while we are being given life we are also being killed, is something that Appel is very aware of and indeed has written about on many occasions.

'The tragedy: we are in the hands of the fantastic artist of life; life itself, it lets us be born and live and is at the same time the biggest murderer,

killing us irrevocably. '

- Appel 1961/62.

'We are all dying. This is the stimulus that gives dramatic force, colour and joy to our short sojourn in this world. Only this way can we make our life a feast on earth.'

- Appel Winter 1962

These quotations are involved with more than just a simple awareness of mortality. The latter quotation in particular refers to the violence of life and at the same time using violence as a reason for rejoicing. Appel is not only aware of 'the tragedy' of life but takes this tragedy as the impetus for living and this is, I feel, the essence of what Appel was painting about in the fifties and sixties.

The Atom Bomb, impending doom, the suffering of mankind, have often been mentioned with reference to Appel's painting, and indeed some of his paintings have titles that refer to this suffering and fear, for example 'Tragic World', 'Burned Face' etc; however, I feel that his paintings rather than depicting this suffering or acting as 'warning signals', as they are sometimes called, or indeed being paintings about these calamities are instead paintings that rejoice life because of these impending calamities.Let us look for a moment at the painting 'Tragic World'. Basically, it consists of a dragon type figure, a head shape and a building. It could be said, that this is a violent painting, that is, violent in the sense that it is about the violence of life - that there is suffering in the 'face' of the head - that the painting is dominated by the physical force of the 'dragon' however, the real force of the painting, I think lies in the Expressive powers of the artist. The painting exhales an exuberance and passion that excites in living. The bold linear structurees,



APPEL Tragic World 1953

the striking, daring colours and the blatant use of paint reflect the confidence and aggression and passion of the artist and these qualities are what the painting is more about. It is the artist's expression which is violent not his subject matter, in the sense that the paintings' force, strength and intensity comes more from Appel's expressive use of line, colour and painterly technique and this strength, intensity or violent expression reflect Appel's own violence rather than the descructive violence of the Atom Bomb and such like. The painting is about a personality that is aware of the tragedies of man and is at the same time full of life and exuberance and wants to express or rejoice in this exuberance. This exuberance of life or 'wild love of freedom' as Appel himself put it, which was evidenced in those earlier years just after the war, aligned to an awareness of the tragic elements of life be they the threat of Nuclear War or the natural calamities of nature, have been responsible for the violence of Appel's expression and this violent expression reflects not so much his 'violent' energy but his exhilerating energy - his love for life - his excitement at the everyday violence of living, the energy generated by the exhilerating experience of walking down a big city street of coming to terms with new values, new systems, new threats, the ever changing life that is the present; and the violent mark, brushmark, scrawb, scrape whatever, the blatant excessive colour, is a way of capturing the essence of that present; - the violent reality of the paint - paint that doesn't mean to be anything Other than paint - reflects the basic reality of the present - the Violence of this instant.

'After two World Wars, living between old and new systems, atomic explosions, space rockets, the howl of Ray Charles, the barbaric rupturing of human values, man moves over the earth like boiling lava, destroying

himself. procreating with a spatial thinking apart from the earth. This crazy joyful scream, full of vitality far above the infinite fantasy bordering on insanity, This explosive overwhelming love for life before the doom of the Great Master, Culture, overcomes the pupils.

- I959.

This 'crazy joyful scream' before the death of the freedom of expression is, I feel, what the majority of the paintings of this period are about and that would include 'Tragic World'.

This point is further re-iterated when one realises Appel's intense love of freedom or indeed need for the freedom of expression as was indicated by his years just before and after the war and as is apparent from his writing...

'I'm afraid that human freedom will be supressed once and for all. That's a fundamental anxiety. And it's maybe that fear, my wild love of freedom that accounts for my violence. In defence of freedom I've often acted like a street fighter ready to strike out madly at any brute maltreating an animal or some Weaker human being. The spectacle of injustice has always made me see red. I recall the sight of a man Deating his dog in the street in Amsterdam. I shouted out to him to stop or I'd beat his brains in. Thank God I never carry weapons. In fact I never use my potential violence on people: I project it onto my canvas. It turns into painting. I've often been told I paint like a boxer. True enough, like a boxer I dance around, dodge, feint and sometimes hit thin air. But sometimes. too. Bam, I win by a knockout. - Appel '77.

There was a further expression of this love of freedom on an occasion in I976. Appel was in Peru with an official of UNESCO and was so appalled at the bleakness and neglect of the shanty towns in the desert areas that he purchased two lorry loads of acrylic paint from a manufacturer in Lima and spent two days with the inhabitants painting the town with the images of their old Inca history.

This incident and others mentioned in his writing illustrate

Appel's way of putting much of what he paints about, into practice.

In many ways the inhabitants of those shanty towns in Peru,

the dog being beaten on a street in Amsterdam and the threat of
a Nuclear Holocaust are one and the same - they are the injustices that make Appel 'see red' and build up his capacity for
violence which is then projected onto canvas.

'It turns into painting.'

There is a quotation, a part of which I used in an earlier chapter, that I would like to use again here. It is a description of New York that Appel wrote in 1977.

'Yes, to me New York is the biggest circus in the world - dangerous, spontaneous, exuberant, cruel, instinctive, erotic, often puerile - with the actors, like in a circus sometimes rising to a state of extasy.

That's what I'd like to paint.

How would these qualities be achieved in a painting? Obviously the exuberance and spontaneity must come from within the artist — he has to sometimes naturally reach that state of extasy while he is in the act of painting. I suggest that this could only be achieved by someone painting in a manner not unlike the 'toxing match' described at the start of this chapter.

This is evidence of Appel utilising a violence of expression

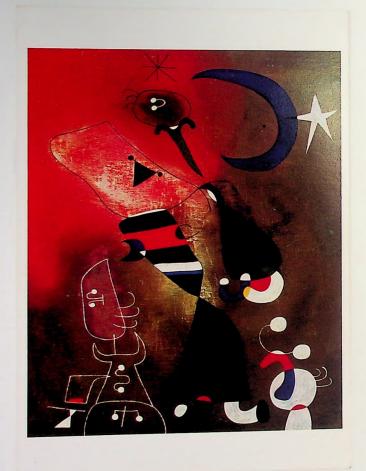
generated by physical effort and a passion for living to achieve a result that is at once exuberant, cruel, joyful and sometimes even terrified.

'To start off with, maybe I tried to express the suffering and the violence of our times, even more specifically, the Atom Bomb scare. It's true that people have seen signs of warning in my canvases. But today, when I stand back and take a look at my work, it seems to me that what I've been doing is to shout my love of freedom.'

- I977·

CHAPTER 5

LINES, MIRO AND APPEL



MIRO
Woman and Bird in the Moonlight
1949



MIRO Bois Grave 1955



MIRO

The Matador

1969



MIRO
Personnage charme par une Danseuse
1937

CHAPTER 5

LINES, MIRO AND APPEL

Monsters, ostriches, elephants, dogs, cats, horses, birds, fish, dragons and a host of other not so easily named creatures are to be found in Appel's paintings. They constitute a large part of Appel's language or 'vigorous bestiary', as the critic Michel Ragon described it in I947. But undoubtedly, the main component used in Appel's visual vocabulary is colour. In this respect, he reminds one of the Spanish artist Joan Miro (I895-), whose work consists of a strong use of colour and line alongside a large number of creatures often coming straight from the imagination. In this chapter, I want to take a general look at the language of Appel's painting and use Miro's work to further clarify this language.

First and foremost, it is a visual language, that is, it is a language made up of visual elements, line, colour, form etc. as opposed to language made up of concepts or symbols. Obviously the best way to appreciate this is by looking at the paintings.

As I said before, the most striking aspects of Miro's work are his use of line and colour. This is apparent from nearly all of his paintings. In the painting 'Woman and Bird in the Moonlight', I949, there are several motifs that recur in many of Miro's works - the circle or round shape joined by a flowing line to a similar circle or shape; the star; the moon shape and the asterix, which is a particular favourite of Miro's. Also in this painting where a line or a shape cuts across or overlaps another shape, the colour of the shape is changed. This breaking up of a shape by a line or another shape works to strengthen the line and creates more smaller shapes.

The colours in Miro's paintings are misleadingly limited in numbers. Basically, they are red, yellow, blue, sometimes green and always lots of black, not unlike Appel's. These colours are usually used in their purity without being blended or mixed with other colours. Generally, however, these colours are not presented to us on a white, blank surface, rather they are on a very rich area of blended atmospheric colour - the ambiguity of this area works to contrast and highlight the other areas of flat pure colour, mentioned before.

Often these colours, shapes, lines and motifs are put together in such a way that figurines and weird little animals appear, and Miro's titles add importance to these creatures. However, all these colours, lines, motifs etc. are not to be looked at for some particular meaning outside of themselves. If, for example, a particular shape may look like a representation of some weird animal it has to be looked at in the same way one looks at a child's graffiti. These are not, I feel, deliberate attempts by Miro to create little figures or whatever but rather result from spontaneous movements of line and shape in his paintings - this spontaneity has, however, been developed and added to by Miro to produce these figures - these figures have then become part of the language that is Miro's, and recur in his other works. This is also true of his titles as he himself says -

'I begin my pictures under the effect of a shock that I feel and that makes me escape from reality. The cause of this shock can be a small thread that has come loose from the canvas, a falling raindrop, or my fingerprint on the shiny surface of a table... My titles come to me in the process of working and I add one thing to another on a canvas. The title, once I have found it then becomes for me a complete

reality and creates an atmosphere around me in which I live....'

- Miro (Published 1959).

The figures which result from his spontaneity all add a new life and interest to the original shapes and lines which, however, still exist as shapes and lines in themselves. The recurring motifs and symbols in Miro's work are not to be read or looked at for some meaning, rather they become understood and appreciated through familiarity with his work.

Miro has developed a language of his own where symbols are not given particular meanings of their own but express themselves through their existance with each other. It is a visual expression in the sense that it uses purely visual means, line, colour, shape etc. and the associations his motifs, stars, circles etc. relay, are not with some outside influences but rather, with his own work. In other words, in order to appreciate what is going on in Miro's painting it is not necessary to have knowledge of something outside his work but to have familiarity with his work. This is also true of Appel's painting.

Appel's language, like Miro's, is essentially made up of colour and line, and the shape or form of the creatures and figures that appear in his paintings is often derived from whatever direction or movement the spontaneous line moves.

'By working fast, I cooperate, playfully, with chance, and I get unexpected answers from the way the canvas organizes itself and from the expressive force of the colours. It's all unforeseen.

I often destroy the image, but an obscure trace always remains, and it gives rise to another image...'

'Let's say the first colour I put on canvas is red.

Well, that act determines the whole process of the painting. Thereafter I may put on some yellow, some blue; then I may destroy the red with black; and the blue may become yellow, and the yellow purple, while the black turns back to white. Anything, apparently, can happen. But the whole fascinating process started with the first red, and if I hadn't begun with red, the whole painting would be different. Is there a system, an order, in all this chaos? All I know is that if I put paint on the canvas, it sticks, whereas if my aim's out, it ends up on the floor. There's logic for you, no? Anyway, it's as near logic as I can get, because the rest of the process is beyond me; it's pure freedom.'

- Appel 1977 (Paris).

This process of creation is not unlike the 'shock' process of Miro's and in the same way Appel develops his initial spontaneous outburst to create figures and images. However, these figures remain essentially colours, stripes, shapes whatever and in this way his language remains a visual language and can best be appreciated through familiarity. I would also suggest that many of Appel's titles are also decided in much the same fashion as Miro's.

The titles come to him in the process of working and this would then determine the mood or direction the rest of the painting would take, for example a certain line might suggest the shape of a fish - this then becomes a fish and the rest of the painting reacts to it - eventually the fish might be obliterated and some reacts to it - eventually the process begins again...

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have tried to look at certain aspects of Appel's work, in order to get a greater appreciation and understanding of it. There are, however, many aspects of his work that I haven't looked at - his flat coloured acrylic relief paintings, his sculptures, his series of painted nudes etc. - however the work I have talked about should, I feel, give the reader an insight into Appel's own personality and indeed a better understanding and appreciation of his art.

Nonetheless, as I said in the last chapter, the greatest appreciation can be obtained from familiarity with his work and this can only be gained by further looking.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

TITLE AUTHOR Karel Appel Alfred Frankenstein New York 1980. Van Gogh A.M. & Remilde Hammacher A Documentary Biography London 1982. Van Gogh Jean Ley Marie Geneva 1978. The Story of Modern Art Norbert Lynton Phaidon 1980. Jacques Dopagne Miro New York 1974. Sir Roland Penrose Creation in Space of I978. Joan Miro Herbert Read Realism and Abstraction I964. in Modern Art Jacob Bronowski The Visionary Eye I978. Dylan Thomas The Poems Everyman Pub., 1971. 1980-83.

Sotheby's Auction Catelogues ..

TITLE

Larousse Encyclopedia

of Modern Art

updated version I980.

The Macmillan Encyclopedia

of Art

1977.