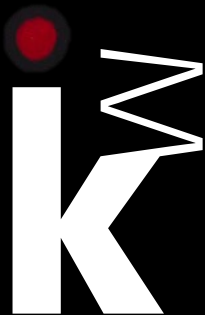
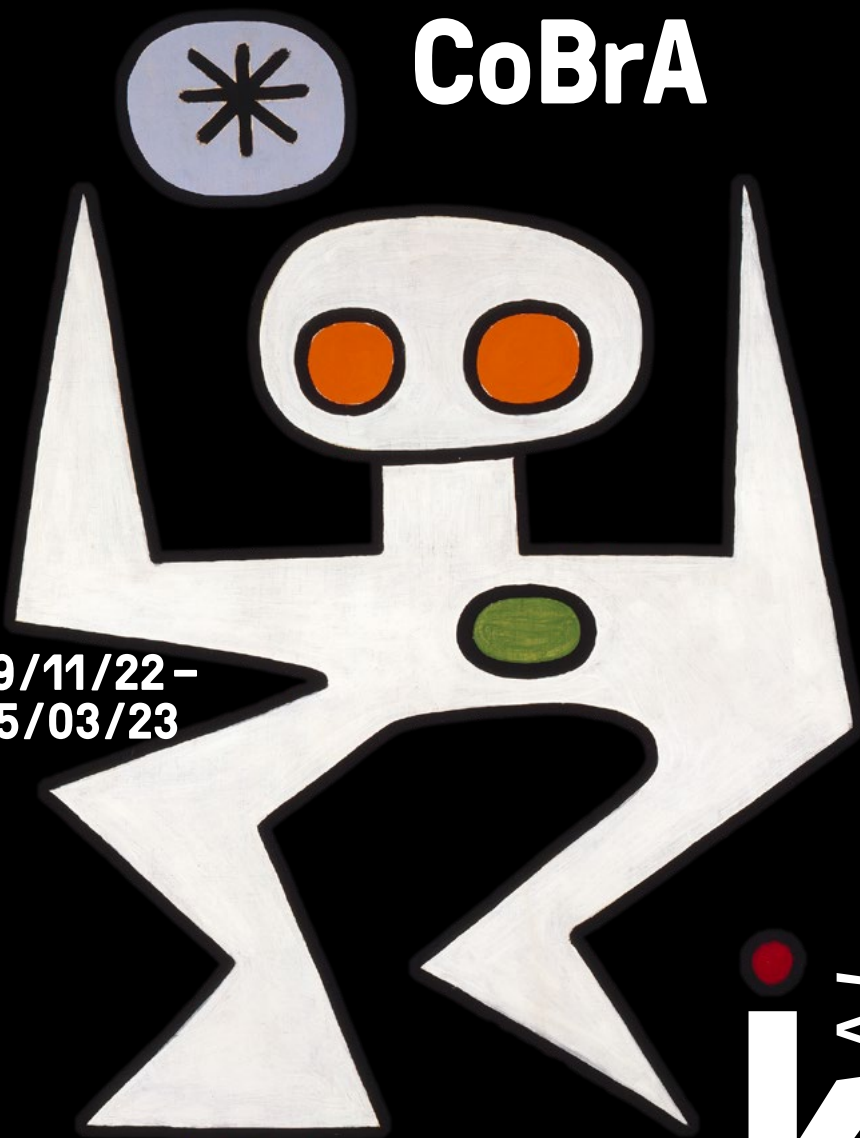


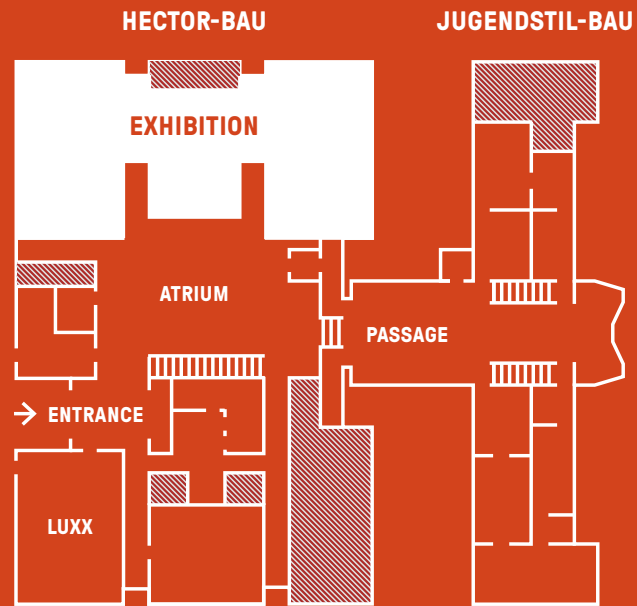
KUNSTHALLE  
MANNHEIM

# BECOMING CoBrA

EN

19/11/22 –  
05/03/23





## BECOMING COBRA. FLOOR PLAN



## PROGRAM

The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive programme. Visitors can engage with the work of the CoBrA artists in lectures, guided tours and art talks. There is also a wide range of activities for children on the themes of the exhibition. You can find the complete programme at: [HTTPS://WWW.KUMA.ART/EN/PROGRAM](https://www.kuma.art/en/program)

## AUDIOGUIDE

With the bilingual (de/en) media guide, you can learn more about the artists' motivations, hear lyrical recitations and examples of important musical inspirations from New Orleans hot jazz to the polyphonic songs of the Aka pygmies.

Simply download the app with the QR code >> App and under "Exhibitions" – "Becoming CoBrA" start the tour.



For individual contributions, please enter the corresponding three-digit number. You will find these next to the individual works or here in the brochure.

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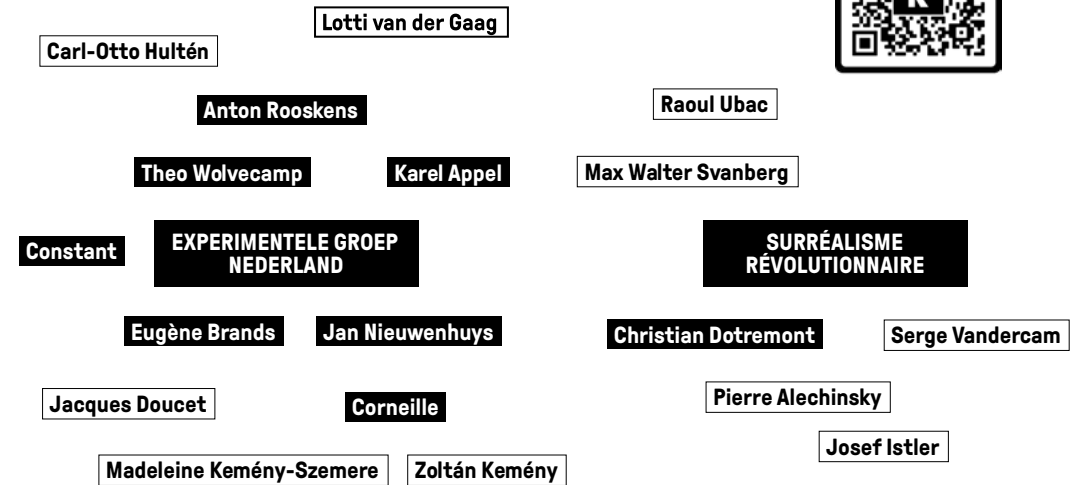
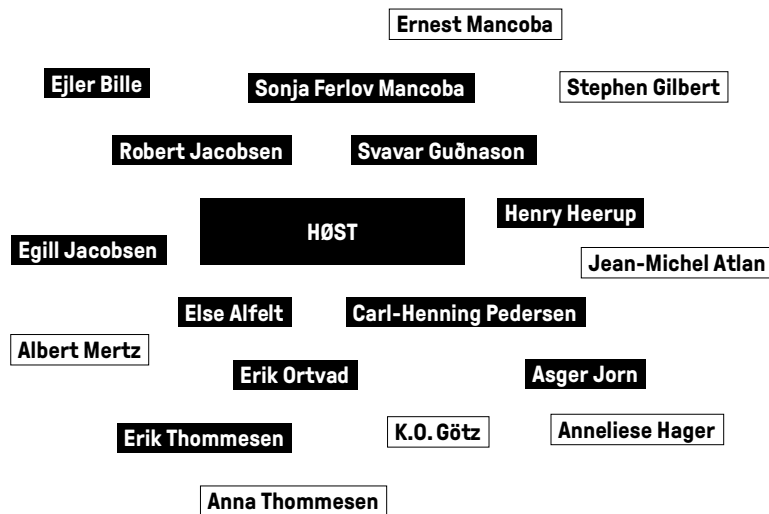


MANNHEIM <sup>21</sup>



AUDIO

## THE COBRA NETWORK



## BECOMING COBRA. BEGINNINGS OF A EUROPEAN ART MOVEMENT

It was to take until 1948 before the artists' collective CoBrA was founded in Paris, united in their desire for revolution and freedom after the experiences of the Second World War. The artists involved came not only from Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands – the three countries that CoBrA represents with its initials, Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam. Participants also joined from Sweden, France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Scotland, Sweden and Hungary. The ambiguity of the group's name is as much part of its programme as

the image of the dangerous cobra snake, as a symbol for art that sought to defy the ossified categories of art historiography – CoBrA not only because of the three cities' first letters but also because it is the name of an animal and not of an artistic style. But just three years later, in 1951, the heterogeneous group dissolved once more. Looking back at the period leading up to its foundation reveals how a circle of very different personalities from various countries gave rise to an international network such as had

never existed before. In the 1940s, in a period of war and insecurity, an art developed across national borders that stood for peace, international understanding and a redefinition of a *living art* – carried by the rebellion and optimism of a young avant-garde on the move.

**A wealth of their themes and motifs dating from before 1948 can be discovered in the exhibition. Immerse yourself in the cosmos of *Becoming CoBrA!***

*“In the current period of upheaval, the role of the artist can only be that of a revolutionary... A new freedom is emerging, which will allow people to express themselves according to their instincts... and art is assuming significant psychological weight in the struggle for a new social order.”*  
– CoBrA-Manifesto, 1948

## AN AVANTGARDE OF PEACE: IMAGES OF WAR AND RESISTANCE

The Second World War (1939–1945) not only left its mark on the artists' lives; it also became the artistic starting point for socially critical works that exposed violence and nationalism as destructive. Karel Appel's main motif was a reaction to the war: the painting *Vragende Kinderen* (Asking or Begging Children). It tells of the catastrophic situation in which children in particular find themselves in times of war – fenced in, they stand in the midst of a bloodbath, gazing questioning into the future. But it also shows the vital importance of a child's unadulterated imagination, which

the artists of CoBrA emulated. This was also the case with Henry Heerup, who assembled found pieces of wood and furniture into unadorned assemblages in his refuse models. Among them is an ominous grim reaper from 1943: *Døden høster* (Death Reaps). The beach at Nieuport, marked by battles between the German and Belgian armies, is turned into a melancholy, deserted place in Serge Vandercam's series of black-and-white photographs (1948–1949) – the traces of bullet holes, hand grenades or barbed wire testify to devastation and exclusion.



## ARTISTIC ROLE MODELS AND SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

The sources of inspiration for the subsequent CoBrA artists are as diverse as their modes of expression: They admire children's creativity and the abundance of mythological characters, studying different forms of folk art and creating the fantastic and dreamlike.

Influences from Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism or Abstraction are still quite visible at the end of the 1930s. Asger Jorn's surrealist paintings from 1937 to 1939 are reminiscent of dream worlds by Salvador Dalí or Joan Miró, while Ejler Bille's animal and bird sculptures echo Hans Arp's fluid growth processes borrowed from nature – an interplay between abstraction and figuration. The experience of war and intense exchange with like-minded people led to the further development and questioning of former aesthetic principles – as was being said: "*Spontaneity is our weapon [...] it is the only thing we have against formalism*" (Christian Dotremont). Unconstrained expressiveness, individual imagination and childlike joy in creativity were exemplary, explaining the group's fascination with children's drawings.



The horse of hell, Helhesten, the three-legged horse from Scandinavian mythology, becomes a symbol of resistance, adorning the cover designs of the eponymous magazine by the Danish collective Høst (Harvest). Precisely because of its human-like, sometimes playful, sometimes thoughtful features it defied the National Socialists' rigid notion of the so-called Aryan human being.

**Animal and fantasy creatures like the hell-horse were therefore consciously chosen counter-images to war and violence: symbols of liberated human nature.**

The painful and the cheerful, the rational and the irrational, light-heartedness and emotional abysses lie close together – like Jean Dubuffet, Anton Rooskens, Lotti van der Gaag, Robert Jacobsen and other artists attempted to study art by people with mental illness in order to reach the heart and depths of the human psyche.

AUDIO
604
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## A LIVING ART: IN SEARCH OF THE UNIFYING

In Sonja Ferlov Mancoba's expressive sculptures and paintings, everything revolves around what connects us,

the harmonies between living beings, and a vision of humanity living in peace: „Only through each other can we live and breathe, and no-one creates alone,“ the artist wrote.

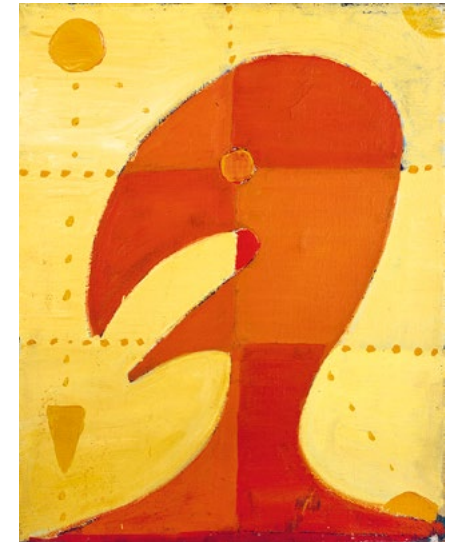
In 1939, Ferlov Mancoba painted *Composition* (see cover). Despite, or rather in defiance to the looming Second World War, it shows a creature dancing: part

human, part animal, part mask – neither denying death nor refusing to live.

In a similar way to the sculptures of her studio neighbour Alberto Giacometti in Paris, Ferlov Mancoba's powerful paintings are defined by their questioning of the human

*“A painting is not a construction of colours and lines, but an animal, a night, a cry, a human being, or all of these together.”*  
– Constant

being's existential and social role. The full range of human expression is found in one of her principal motifs, the mask. This is a phenomenon that unites and transcends cultures – even at a young age she studied masks from African, Mexican and other cultural spheres. She shared this interest with South African artist Ernest Mancoba, whom she married in 1942. Combining the folk art of non-European and European cultures, both were seeking universal signs, and in their own works they celebrated the huge importance of the subconscious and a return to nature.



**CoBrA was the attempt by a group of like-minded people to create life-affirming, free-thinking art and to lend a fresh, international face to folk art. Together, the artists discovered European and non-European cultures, music and mythical worlds, valuing them as important sources of inspiration for their own work.**

From the late 1940s, for example, Corneille and Eugène Brands travelled to Tunisia, the Congo, Brazil, Mexico and the Caribbean, both amassing their own extensive collections of masks and sculptures. As white Europeans, their access to those was under privileged conditions, through an art market operated from

Europe that profited from colonialist structures. Brands as well as Constant criticized the inhumane practices of colonialist structures, in which ultimately, they recognized the failure of so-called Western high culture. They also questioned the self-image of their artistic role models like Paul Gauguin or Paul Klee.

## ART WITH NO LIMITS

Experimental art free of conventions characterized the cultural activism of the Høst group, as Egill Jacobsen wrote in the magazine *Helhesten* in 1941:

*“Life should not only be thought out and measured; it should be lived. A development towards the unknown constitutes every living art.”*



Aspiring as they did to an art for and by all, they experimented not only across national borders, but also across the boundaries of artistic disciplines. The everyday environment, popular or urban art forms, and the peculiarities of the materials were the starting points of artistic creation: Henry Heerup and Eugène

Brands recycled found plywood and everyday objects and used them to produce sometimes humorous, sometimes thoughtful figures. Christian Dotremont and Asger Jorn found a way back to the origins of handwriting as an artistic means in their word paintings (*Peintures-mots*), in which they responded to each other as poet and painter.

Jacques Doucet’s collage drawing from 1948 is a homage to jazz and the Parisian nightclub Bal Blomet: he uses a form of graphic expression reminiscent of children’s chalk drawings on pavements or house walls. His fascination with the origins of graffiti art, which can be traced back to Stone Age cave painting, linked him to Asger Jorn, who was also interested in spontaneously carved signs, figures or caricatures on Parisian house walls and church doors.

**AUDIO** 607 608

Jazz riffs overlapping in free improvisation inspired the later members of CoBrA, and they attempted to transfer them into their paintings with similarly free, spontaneous gestures.

**AUDIO** 609

## WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE MOVEMENT

There have always been important women artists. For the most part, they have not been granted a place in the historiography, or their work has been subjected to stereotypical notions of femininity. Else Alfelt, Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Anna Thommesen, Madeleine Kemény-Szemere, Anneliese Hager, Lotti van der Gaag and other women artists from CoBrA and its predecessor collectives have long been forgotten, marginalized or misinterpreted, although they were as committed and innovative as their male colleagues in promoting the revolution in art.

Learn more about the women artists and their importance for the develop-



ment of CoBrA from the biographies in the digital network *Becoming CoBrA*.

Discover how Anneliese Hager’s surrealist poems and her experimental photograms interrelate!

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*“It is not a question of selecting at all, but one of probing the whole cosmic structure of rhythms, forces and matter that is the real world – from the ugliest to the most beautiful, everything that has character and expression, from the coarsest and most brutal to the most delicate and gentle, everything that addresses us in its own way. [...] This is the suspension of the aesthetic principle.”*

– Asger Jorn: *Intime Banaliteter / Intimate Banalities*, 1941

## COBRA'S PREDECESSOR COLLECTIVES

The fresh orientation in art and society was not only discussed in personal exchanges between the artists, but also tested in the alliances of CoBrA's predecessor groups.



## HØST IN COPENHAGEN

Despite the Nazi occupation beginning in 1940, Denmark remained a largely sovereign state until 1943. Thus, the Høst (Harvest) group successfully picked up on impulses from the modernist art movements, Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism, and developed them further. From 1941 to 1944, Høst published its own magazine series entitled *Helhesten* (Hell-

Horse). In addition to experimental exhibition formats such as the tent exhibition at Copenhagen's Dyrehaven park (1941), Høst's artists also promoted the first forms of Danish experimental film. Through Asger Jorn and Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, the group networked with like-minded artists in Belgium, the Netherlands and France.

## EXPERIMENTELE GROEP NEDERLAND IN AMSTERDAM

Immediately after the war ended, still independent of each other, Constant and Corneille utilized their newly-won freedom to travel to Paris. There, Constant met the Dane Asger Jorn, while Corneille networked with the French artist Jacques Doucet in Budapest. Corneille, Constant and Karel Appel were united by their interest in Jean Dubuffet's work, the

expressions of non-European cultures, especially African and South American, and also shared an enthusiasm for children's drawings. After they had founded the Group for Experimental Art (1948), other artists and poets such as Gerrit Kouwenaar and Lucebert join them. Together, they published the magazine *Reflex*.

## SURRÉALISME RÉVOLUTIONNAIRE IN BRUSSELS AND PARIS

In Belgium and France, artistic debate had revolved around Surrealism since the 1930s. The leader of the Belgian movement was Christian Dotremont. In 1947, he founded the *Surréalisme Révolutionnaire* as an alternative to the French Surrealists around André Breton, convinced of the connection between Marxist ideas and experimental art. Alongside Asger Jorn, Dotremont was also in contact with avant-garde groups from Czechoslovakia (Ra) and Sweden (Imaginsterna). Their surrealist dream worlds were no longer dreamt in isolation, as in Breton's imagination: after 1945, they had become a common dreaming, the dreaming of new forms of art and social coexistence.





## CATALOGUE

A catalogue (248 pages, German/English) with contributions by Christina Bergemann, Inge Herold, Karen Kurczynski and Mathias Listl is being published to accompany the exhibition by Deutscher Kunstverlag and is available for 29.50 euros in the museum shop of the Kunsthalle Mannheim.

## APP & NEWSLETTER



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The multimedia companion through the Kunsthalle with guided tours and information on exhibitions, artworks and events.



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## CONTACT

Kunsthalle Mannheim  
Friedrichsplatz 4 · 68165 Mannheim  
Besuchertelefon +49 621 293 6423  
Fax +49 621 293 6412  
[info@kuma.art](mailto:info@kuma.art)  
[www.kuma.art](http://www.kuma.art)

## OPENING HOURS

Tue – Sun and holidays 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.  
1st Wed of the month 10 a.m. – 10 p.m.  
(free admission only on the first Wed of the month from 6 p.m.). Mon closed  
24.12.22 & 31.12.22 closed,  
01.01.23: 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.

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Family ticket (2 adults with children under 18)	20 €
Annual ticket	30 €
Annual ticket for students	12 €
Public guided tours (60 min)	6 €
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