

## **New light on the Cobra movement. Constant: 'There is no Cobra style and no Cobra aesthetic'**

*Esther Schreuder, 21 October 2013, Wordpress*

Coincidence and action were important to the Cobra artists. Coincidence can be drawn from an act. You can, for instance, put yourself in an unpredictable situation.

Which is what I did. I, an art historian always on the lookout for hidden stories, had heard on the grapevine that the Ambassade Hotel in Amsterdam had a large collection of Cobra artworks. Curious to find out if there was any truth in the rumour, I paid a visit. The story was immediately given credence because I saw several beautiful works of art hanging and standing. Soon afterwards I had a meeting with the collector himself: Wouter Schopman. We talked for hours about what Cobra meant to him personally and how he had acquired the pieces. At the same time, we walked through the many corridors of the ten canal houses that make up the hotel to look at the hundreds of pieces of art.

An art collection was discovered.

The collection of an art collector reveals a personal vision. A passionate collector sees other things in the works of art than a curator of a museum. The latter more or less follows the art-historical canon written by art historians. A passionate collector, however, buys on instinct and frequently listens to advice from the artist him or herself. Wouter Schopman is a case in point. This is partly why his collection shows 'new' avenues of Cobra that differ from historiography and the interpretation of standard art-historical books. As such he has bought over four hundred artworks by Theo Wolvecamp, because he personally became friends with the artist and developed great admiration for the integrity and quality of Theo Wolvecamp's work.

Not long after our first encounter, I was asked to do research on texts for the hotel website. The stories that emerged were so fascinating it was decided to also include them in a book about the collection.

Because collectors often seek advice from the artists themselves, I decided to conduct my research from the artists' perspective. Who were they? What did the movement mean to them and what was the meaning of Cobra for the artwork included in the collection? These were the questions I posed. In addition, I particularly went looking for what they personally said about Cobra. So I watched a lot of documentaries, read interviews and perused books to discover the mind's eye of the artists. This approach changed my understanding of Cobra.

Cobra turned out to be a many-headed creature.

Each and every one of the artists and writers had their own reasons for joining the Cobra movement and each and every one developed individually. The group meant something different to each member. They jointly strove for freedom, but it was different for everybody. There were constant changes within the group. Christian Dotremont, who thought up the name and was one of the three

theoreticians, summed it up in one of his many statements: '*Cobra refuse les positions tout faites et fait sa position en marchant.*' Loosely translated: Cobra refuses to take a stand and takes its stand while on the move.

In short: Cobra was much more interesting than I previously thought.

The most famous definition of Cobra is, without doubt, by Willemijn Stokvis. Stokvis did comprehensive art-historical doctoral research on Cobra and summed up the group as a movement in which the artists were the most important element. These artists worked with spontaneity, which gave rise to a Cobra language. In her introduction to 'The language of Cobra and its sources' (in the book entitled *The Language of Cobra*, 2004), she wrote, 'As far as their creative expression was concerned, it implied for all of them that, in a sense, they applied a conscious regression to that layer of human consciousness from which artistic expressions were abolished by the conventions of the western world and did not belong to 'Art with a capital A'. It is the stage that is called the 'pre-logic stage' in children, in which, similar to primitive societies and mental disorders, a symbol is found for all things and all things seem to be animated: a tree, a table, and a stone are dynamically charged, and people and animals are on an equal footing. You could say that animism dominates here in various ways. Working from these aspirations and using the sources they sought and found in this area, a certain similarity developed in the way they expressed themselves: a common language.'

Stokvis' art-historical frame has been adopted by many museums and, in particular, by the art trade. There are various pieces in the Ambassade Hotel Collection that fall within this frame. However, there are also works of art where this 'Cobra language' is not evident.

Constant, one of the other Cobra theoreticians, responded to Stokvis' findings as follows: 'There is no Cobra style and no Cobra aesthetic. Although, particularly in the museum world, they have often tried to make it look as though one exists through a process of careful selection.' He went on to say, '*L'esprit Cobra* is the spirit that rebels against limitations, the spirit of freedom ... and if you can talk about a Cobra style of painting, then this expression should relate to the *peintures-mots* (word paintings), and the collective paintings, murals and lithographs, which surfaced now and then, yet regularly, in the course of the Cobra movement, and without which the "esprit Cobra" cannot be properly understood.' For Constant, the playful human being was pivotal.

For Dotremont, Cobra meant more than just a collection of certain types of people. He said, 'The wealth of Cobra, of practically all Cobra jokers, is also to be a writer, an ethnographer, a sculptor, whilst actually being a painter, like Jorn, or a painter, a dramatist, a film-maker, whilst actually being a poet, like Hugo Claus, or painting your poetic verse in the painterly painting by mutual fast and spontaneous exchanges.' Cobra does not seem to fit into the straitjacket of art theory. Indeed: Cobra members stuck their tongues out at it. They also stuck their tongues out at the formalism of De Stijl and the theoretical nit-picking of the surrealists.

The Cobra mindset was mainly one of confrontation and debate, of collaborating on experimental work, of travelling and of competition. They experimented in the visual arts, but also in writing, books, a film, exhibitions and, in particular, magazines.

Asger Jorn, the third Cobra theoretician, said, 'Dotremont wrote, formulated and organised, while I constantly took a stand against him and proposed the opposite. We debated incessantly and disagreed on almost everything. But the collaboration was fruitful so long as we were able to keep it up. The point was, we wanted to understand each other and reach agreement. This attitude created an inspiring collaboration which spanned an incredibly broad range.'

Members of the Cobra movement seemed mainly to have possessed a mentality that resulted in certain works. Dotremont: 'In our life, in our work, in our experimentation and in our art the colours, the canvas, the black ink, the white paper, the forms and the entire thing shouts without singing; they rarely sing without shouting, they rarely shout without laughing, and so on. A mixture of jokiness and oppression is expressed in our work through quick and immediate spontaneity, which produces torpor and perspective.' The Cobra attitude is sometimes comparable to avant-garde groups of artists such as the Dadaists and the surrealists. Moreover, the Cobra artists share common ground with the Dadaists in that they emerged from a war psychologically damaged and disillusioned with the Western world. Dada from the First World War and Cobra from the Second World War.

A trauma needed dealing with first.

Hugo Claus in Pierre Alechinsky's exhibition catalogue from 1963:

'Are you also disabled?'

'Of course. What did you think?'

'Oh, that's okay then... excellent... perfect...'

The artists seem to have chiefly sought each other out in terms of mutual influence: what can I learn from the other person? It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in retrospect there are many different descriptions of Cobra. And many are claimed to have come straight from the Cobra members. Dotremont wrote in 1996, 'It is pointless to want to sort Cobra painters according to one definition or the other. Rather, it is better to find a definition based on the sum of what Cobra painters jointly were. Cobra was a very special moment in time, where several lines of development converged.'

Dotremont also wrote, 'The progenitors of Cobra were, in fact, nomads. Quite often Jorn would be in Brussels, I was in Copenhagen and Constant was in Paris. We lived in each other's homes and I can actually bear witness to the fact that the three years of Cobra radically changed all of us. The nomadic aspect of Cobra was highly significant because we were looking for our roots, for what was authentic to each of us within our cultural identity and we wanted to put it to the test against the others.' Sometimes exchanging ideas, in particular between Dotremont and Constant, ended up with heated arguments.

Troels Andersen, Museum Director (Museum Jorn in Silkeborg), formulated the following art-historical definition: 'Cobra was thoroughly dialectic [discussing contradictory opinions to arrive at a third opinion, author's note]. Not only was the movement an alliance of various nationalities and of

different groups, which had all come about under their own circumstances, but also each group consisted of its own contradictions, which were passed on to Cobra and which all gave the movement its tremendous vitality.' In other words, it was the huge differences that made Cobra such an interesting moment in time for the artists. It did not lead to a melting pot, but it did give the artists and writers direction. And without exception they all seemed to have fond memories of that period in time.

It was the internationalism and the joint sum of the artists and writers that made Cobra what it became. They pushed each other to the limit.

The book ([published December 2013 Samsara / Ambassade Hotel Amsterdam](#) review Huff Post) is not intended to be seen as a new overview of Cobra, because the collection is missing too many artists as well as too many key works. However, the book probably sheds new light on the artists who are represented in the collection and on that particular period of time. The book was written without footnotes and aims at a wider audience. A bibliography is included at the back of the book. Many of the quotes, however, are from documentaries and newspaper interviews.