

Thirteen Artists in a Tent: Danish Avant-garde Exhibition Practice during World War II

Kerry Greaves

In late spring 1941, as England endured the Blitz and 60,000 Baltic citizens were deported to Siberia, a group of Danish artists assembled a large carnival tent in a park north of Copenhagen (fig. 1). Members of the wartime Danish collective Helhesten (The Hell-Horse), the artists installed their colorful abstract paintings in the sun, making frequent pauses for beers while their children played around them (fig. 2). The charming scenes in the extant photographs and the reviews of *Bellevue: 13 Kunstnere i Telt* (Thirteen Artists in a Tent), the most radical of all Danish exhibitions attempted during the war, belie the serious nature of the endeavor. It was, in fact, the show's emphasis on play, humor, and fantasy that formed the very basis of the collective's social activism and its cultural critique in Nazi-occupied Denmark.

This article argues that, despite its virtual absence in the literature, as the first truly avant-garde exhibition in Denmark to attempt to merge art and life, the Tent exhibition was an event of singular importance to Danish exhibition practice. Moreover, the exhibition's versatile, inclusive approach to experimental art and its aspirations for cultural intervention made it a prototype for the collective experiments of post-war countercultural groups such as Cobra and the Situationist International.¹ Taking place from 17 May to 15 June 1941 in Dyrehaven (The Deer Park), a popular recreational destination for Copenhageners, the show was organized one year into the occupation and was Helhesten's most visible manifestation of the artists' experimentation with Dada and surrealist-inspired disruption and improvisation. In a manner similar to Helhesten's eponymous journal, the exhibition's carnival-like atmosphere openly appropriated surrealism's startling vernacular juxtapositions, while the celebration of nonsense

¹ Helhesten is given cursory treatment in publications on Cobra. See Lambert and Adriaens-Pannier. The main texts that discuss Helhesten in depth are Hovdenakk, Jespersen, Shield, and Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, which is based on her more extensive dissertation, *Beyond Expressionism*. Jespersen, Shield, Friis, and Kurczynski give brief overviews of the Tent exhibition. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own and emphasis in quotations is from the original texts.



Figure 1: Sigurjón Ólafsson, Asger Jorn, and Else Fischer-Hansen in front of Helhesten's tent, Dyrehaven, May 1941. Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.



Figure 2: Sigurjón Ólafsson, Erik Thommesen, and Asger Jorn taking a break outside the tent, May 1941. Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

and subversive humor had its source in Dada dissidence and avant-garde “primitivism.” Yet because Helhesten operated within a hostilely controlled environment, the artists did not seek to shock or confront their visitors directly; instead, they invited viewers to embark on an interactive process of personal experimentation and creative discovery that could bring about greater awareness and human connection. The exhibition’s socially inclusive program promoted creative freedom, experimentation, and an integration of play as a critical practice in the public realm, challenging more traditional Danish exhibitions and marking the show as inherently transgressive in the midst of military occupation.

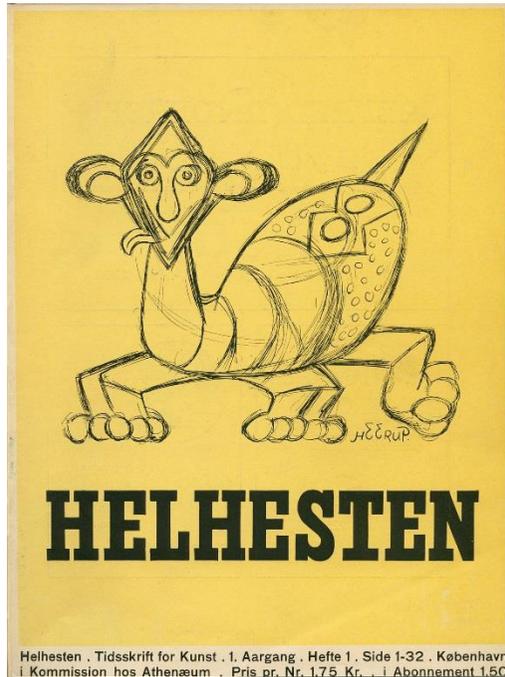


Figure 3: Henry Heerup, Cover, *Helhesten* 1, no. 1, April 13, 1941. Donation Jørn, Silkeborg.

Helhesten and its Influences

Named for the three-legged hell-horse, the messenger of death from Nordic folklore and the tales of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, Helhesten included the Danish modernists who would soon become internationally known as the Danish component of Cobra, in particular Henry Heerup (1907-1993), Egill Jacobsen (1910-1998), Asger Jorn (1914-1973), and Carl-Henning Pedersen (1913-2007). These artists joined forces with archeologists, psychologists, and poets to produce twelve issues of a journal over the course of the occupation from 1941 to 1944 (fig. 3). *Helhesten* was illustrated with over fifty

original, mostly color graphic works, and was printed in editions of 800. The journal was affordable to the general public; a full set of all the issues cost twelve kroner, or the equivalent of \$2.30 in 1944. Artists were not paid for their contributions, and group dues covered the printing costs (Jespersen 128-30). The editor of the journal, Robert Dahlmann Olsen, was also the editor of the first issue of *Cobra*, which was a virtual duplicate of *Helhesten's* format.

Helhesten promoted contemporary Danish art as well as international modernism, indigenous folk art, and popular culture. Members contributed articles on prehistoric Scandinavian rock carvings, Viking rune stones, vernacular architecture, and medieval Scandinavian church frescos, while artists profiled one another as well as contemporary international artists such as Fernand Léger and Paul Klee. *Helhesten's* essays on recent European art marked the group as cosmopolitan, a characteristic traditionally used to qualify avant-garde status in Denmark by artists and critics alike, and supported ideas of universalism and inclusivity by emphasizing quotidian art forms and symbols common to all cultures. The journal emphasized humor, playfulness, and amusement in its reproductions of satirical images of the hell-horse and other creatures, popular art forms such as advertisements, tattoo designs, folk poems, and fairytales, and whimsical children's drawings, while a photo of the artists imbibing at their local bar and discussing art emphasized festive socializing as a creative practice. The journal disseminated the artists' ideas about their own work and the future of Danish art, and served as a vehicle for the elaboration of and inspiration for experimentation with colorful gestural abstraction and fantastical subject matter. Such an aesthetic was varied and distinguishable by artist but also collective in its reflection of spontaneity and fantasy as agents of creative freedom and social equality.

Like the journal itself, the character of the artistic practices of *Helhesten* was influenced by French surrealism, which the artists viewed as the most avant-garde style of the preceding decade because, as Asger Jorn wrote in 1944, it had made it "possible to achieve truly vital and liberated art forms" ("Face to Face" 71). The artists' initial approaches to abstraction were shaped by experimentation with the creative possibilities of psychic automatism and the collective unconscious. Like the surrealists, the *Helhesten* artists were also interested in the composite meanings of unexpected juxtapositions and the interaction of objects as suggestive of new, previously unexplored ideas. Yet the Danes would invert surrealist interiority into humanistic openness and ultimately become critical of automatist practices in favor of a more freely spontaneous approach that was rooted in the sensory materiality of painting, and which the artists viewed as a creative release that was independent of any one aesthetic dictum. The *Helhesten* artists' resolutely social-democratic basis valued the inherent creativity in all people, rejected the romantic notion of artistic genius, and eschewed allowing any one figure to gain authoritarian control over the group. The group's collective mission statement published in the journal's first issue in 1941 made clear the importance

of plurality: "The journal is not narrowly sectarian-based, but represents various points of view, which together should reveal the living life of culture" (*Helhesten* 1.1 [13 April 1941]: 1). The emphasis on collective artistic practice was in evidence on several occasions, most notably at the Tent exhibition, and extended to the multiplicity of subjects and styles represented in the journal.

While scholars have rightly emphasized the significant impact of surrealism on Danish abstraction of the 1930s and 1940s, in its implicitly countercultural stance and interdisciplinary approach *Helhesten* was also very much a child of Dada, a connection that is rarely cited.² The reasons for this oversight are twofold. First, the life-affirming, politically strategic optimism of the *Helhesten* rhetoric seems to counter the conventional notion of Dada's nihilism and, second, the German element in Dada has led to the misconception that because of the Nazi occupation, Danish artists would have ignored its impact. As a result, art historians have overemphasized, instead, the influence of French surrealism. Yet it was the artists themselves who cited the importance of Dada in the formation of their theories on spontaneity. The *Helhesten* artists first wrote about Dada in 1937, but most likely they knew about Dada exhibitions as early as 1932. The artists' close examination of journals such as *Cahiers d'Art* in Copenhagen meant that they would have seen several examples of German and Parisian Dada events, including a reproduction of an article featuring the First Dada-Messe in a 1932 *Cahiers* issue. The *Helhesten* artists met and socialized with artists such as Hans Arp and Max Ernst when they were in Berlin and Paris from 1932 and through their involvement with the surrealist art collective *Linien* (The Line, 1934-1939). In 1941 Egill Jacobsen wrote in the founding manifesto of *Helhesten*, "Salighed og mystik" (Objectivity and Mystery) that "Dada broke down empty tradition and bourgeois reason and consequently introduced spontaneous expression" (24). In 1944 Jorn included a section about Dada in his essay "Face to Face," proclaiming, "Dadaism and Surrealism have liberated artistic creation from the cold, clammy and deadening embrace of aestheticism. . . .Art has not just become engaged with life, it is now identical with life itself" (66). In his book *Picasso, Surrealisme, Abstrakt Kunst*

² Torben Jelsbak is one of the first scholars to assert that the influence of Dada on Danish artists was substantial, stating: "Dadaist practices and tactics did play an important, though neglected, role in the emergence of the Danish avant-garde culture in the years around 1920" (401). He has explained that the overarching labeling of Danish artists as "expressionist" has obscured the number of styles they represented, from fauvism and futurism to Dada. Danish artists were familiar with Dada through the avant-garde art journal *Klingen* and through contact with *Der Sturm*. Later they were influenced by the provocative anti-performances of the Danish poets Frederik Nygaard and Emil Bønnelycke, and the political activism of the Danish Communist New Student Society (DNSS), which had connections with Berlin Dada and which organized a series of "Dada parties" in 1922-1923 (401-08). In addition, Rudolf Broby-Johansen, a leading poet in the DNSS and close friend of George Grosz, influenced Danish artists' understanding of the political potential of art and its relation to Dada (Kurczynski, "Beyond Expressionism" 85 and Jelsbak 408-12).

(Picasso, Surrealism, Abstract Art, 1945), Helhesten artist Ejler Bille (1910-2004) explained that surrealism had developed from Dada's "negation of culture" and "artistic anarchy." He cited Tristan Tzara, Kurt Schwitters, and Marcel Duchamp as the movement's main figures and illustrated the text with images of works by the latter two artists (187-91).

Finally, like Dada, the anti-rational provocations of Helhesten were also born of and nourished by the traumas of war. In a 1946 letter the Helhesten artists sent to the Museum of Modern Art in New York as part of an unsuccessful exhibition proposal, they explicitly linked their defiance of political dogma during the war with their stylistic development: "The free experimental art rose to importance as an opposition to the Nazi view of art. Danish artists and connoisseurs regarded artistic freedom as symbolic of the resistance against . . . Nazi art-ideology within Danish territory. . . .All this time this art was inspired and fertilized by the fight for cultural values" (Alfelt). But rather than adopting media more typical of socio-political critique such as photomontage and collage, Helhesten championed the more "traditional" medium of painting as capable of transforming the ideas of both artist and viewer alike. Stimulated by Dada nonsense and humor, they rejected the Danish and German National Socialist promotion of a common Nordic heritage, and caricatured the idealized Aryan body by emphasizing open-endedness and frivolity with their messy cartoon-like compositions and carnival-like exhibition.

Danish Avant-Garde Artists' Collectives and Exhibition Practice

Just as *Helhesten* drew together a range of influences and strategies, the group also practiced a kind of permeable inclusivity in its exhibition practices. In addition to exhibiting twice (the artists also held a small exhibition in February 1943 at the gallery Pustervig Kunsthandel), Helhesten artists joined forces with other exhibition collectives such as Corner (est. 1932), Høst (Harvest, est. 1934), and Grønningen (The Common, est. 1915), in shows that included a range of styles from the conservative to the radical. The 1948 Høst exhibition was, in fact, the first time Danish and Dutch members of the newly formed Cobra exhibited as a group. Informed by *folkelighed*, the cultural value of "the popular" and the Danish social-democratic tradition, such wide-ranging plurality has been a defining characteristic of Danish artists' associations, known as *kunstnersammenslutninger*, since they were established with *Den frie Udstilling* (The Free Exhibition) in 1891. This *salon des refusés* was comprised of the leading modernists of the period such as P. S. Krøyer (1851-1909), who declared his independence from the Royal Academy.

As exhibition collectives, where all aspects of the production, exhibition, and sale of works are managed by the artists themselves, *kunstnersammenslutninger* have dominated Danish exhibition life and have allowed for the unproblematic appropriation of numerous and sometimes antithetical artistic discourses

simultaneously within one group. This was certainly true for the Tent exhibition, which included the painters Jorn, Pedersen, Else Alfelt (1910-1974), Bille, Jacobsen, Egon Mathiesen (1907-1976) and his wife Else Fischer-Hansen (1905-1996), the Icelandic painter Svavar Guðnason (1909-1988), and the Danish author and naïve painter Hans Scherfig (1905-1979), who was later imprisoned by the Nazis for his Communist activities. Contributing sculptors included Henry Heerup (who also exhibited paintings), Erik Thommesen (1916-2008), and the Icelandic sculptor Sigurjón Ólafsson (1908-1982). Perhaps most striking was the inclusion of the established modern artist Vilhelm Lundstrøm (1893-1950), who had made his name in 1918 with his Dada “packing case” assemblages, and who added credibility to the show.³

Helhesten’s artistic production and inclusive exhibition practice were directly influenced by two *kunstnersammenslutninger* in particular: Grønningen and Linien. While Linien is always cited as the direct precedent for Helhesten, the connection to the 1915 Grønningen exhibition has been overlooked, despite the fact that it was the Helhesten artists themselves who cited its importance. Established during the favorable cultural climate in World War I Copenhagen, Grønningen was formed by artists from the modernist group Ung dansk Kunst (Young Danish Art) such as Harald Giersing (1881-1927) and Sigurd Swane (1879-1973), whose painterly, expressive, and colorful works and attitude of cultural rebellion served as precedents for the Helhesten artists. It was the Grønningen artists’ contact with the Scandinavian pupils of the Académie Matisse in Paris and Der Sturm’s presentation of Die Brücke, cubism, and futurism in Copenhagen that provided Danish artists with examples of alternative artists’ groups that were built around an image of rebellion and an assault on prevailing cultural values through an emphasis on the “primitive.”

The inaugural Grønningen exhibition took place during World War I in a temporary wood building nicknamed the “Indian Hut” because it was ostentatiously painted in brightly colored abstract patterns. The artists’ emphasis on roughly applied luminous color was bound up with ideas of growth, energy, and freedom, and informed their self-conscious image as a tribal brotherhood acting out a collective revolt. The Grønningen artists sold works directly from the exhibition, wrote their own catalogue, and published articles theorizing their art. The group created advance publicity by publishing a drawing of the exhibition building in the major Copenhagen newspapers, and they sold advertisement space in the catalogue, a first for Danish exhibitions. Grønningen’s temporary wooden hut set the most tangible precedent for Helhesten’s tent, which the artists drew attention to when they publicized *Thirteen Artists in a Tent* by stating, “Not since first year of Grønningen has anyone attempted to realize the idea [of an exhibition]

³ Egill Jacobsen was the first person to note the connection between Lundstrøm’s packing cases and Dada, which contrasts the traditional view that they were mostly influenced by cubism. See “Objectivity and Mystery.”

associated with open air spaces.” The link to Grønningen undoubtedly influenced the Helhesten artists’ choice of a striped carnival tent and its evocation of the circus.

As would later be the case with *Thirteen Artists in a Tent*, the Grønningen exhibition was a response to Denmark’s conservative cultural politics during wartime and functioned to showcase avant-garde Danish artists, yet the more subversive aspects of the show and the artists’ links with German culture were in both instances ignored by critics, who focused on the more utopian elements of the artists’ styles. The perceived radicalism of Grønningen, in fact, obscured the group’s official support. The temporary hut was built on a plot of land donated by the Copenhagen city government, and a number of museums such as the Statens Museum for Kunst bought works from the show. The stylistic plurality of the exhibited images, which ranged from traditional impressionism to abstract painting, was also overlooked. Similar to the inclusion of Lundstrøm in the Tent show, neither Grønningen’s artists nor its critics viewed links to more conservative styles as problematic for the group’s independent position within Danish culture.

It was not until the 1930s that another *kunstnersammenslutning*, Linien, would take up Grønningen’s avant-garde mantle. Named for Wassily Kandinsky’s 1926 book *Point and Line to Plane*, Linien, through its journal and three exhibitions, introduced surrealism to Denmark and encouraged Danish artists and critics to acquaint themselves with international avant-garde art in order to revitalize Danish culture. Linien was cofounded by Ejler Bille, Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen (1909-1957), and Richard Mortensen (1910-1993). Mortensen had met Kandinsky in Paris in 1937 with Bille and was interested in the theories of Paul Klee, but would move toward a more constructivist style after the war. Bjerke-Petersen, who had studied at the Dessau Bauhaus, published the book *Symboler i abstrakt kunst* (Symbols in Abstract Art) in 1933, which established him as a major theorist of surrealism in Denmark. Bjerke-Petersen left Linien in 1935 after a dispute with the other cofounders who saw his views of surrealism as too dogmatic. He then organized an exhibition of cubist and surrealist art in Copenhagen in 1935 juxtaposing works by surrealists and Scandinavian artists, with Max Ernst and André Breton arranging the French section.

Linien exhibited in 1934, 1937, and 1939, and the group’s journal was published in twelve issues from January 1934 until April 1935, with two special numbers produced to coincide with the 1937 and 1939 exhibitions. The first issue of *Linien* marked the group’s inaugural exhibition in 1934, which was held in Den frie’s building. The issue included an advertisement for *Minotaure* on its front cover, and articles on modern Danish art, jazz, Alberto Giacometti, and surrealism. The exhibition was the first major display of surrealism in Denmark, showcasing the conventional European surrealists the journal championed such as Arp and Salvador Dalí, in addition to Kandinsky and Klee, along with Danish artists such as Heerup, Bille, Bjerke-Petersen, and Mortensen. While artwork was hung traditionally, the artists played jazz on an old gramophone and openly discussed

their works with visitors while Henry Heerup rode around the space on a bicycle (Olsen 5). Linien's use of sound would be further explored fifteen years later in the first major Cobra exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, where a record player blasted drumbeats throughout the space.

Linien's 1937 exhibition, *Efter-Expressionisme, Abstrakt Kunst, Neoplasticisme, Surrealisme* (Post-Expressionism, Abstract Art, Neoplasticism, Surrealism), was again held in Den frie's building and was hung similarly to the 1934 show. Organizers supplemented recent works of international and Scandinavian surrealism with those by artists such as Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich, whose geometric abstract style was labeled "konkrete" in Danish, a term that derived from both Breton and Theo van Doesburg. Linien's final exhibition in 1939, which took place at the Copenhagen University Students' Union, would be the last international show before the outbreak of the war and differed little from its earlier enterprises.

Thirteen Artists in a Tent

Helhesten would expand upon Grønningen's variety and Linien's emphasis on surrealism by engaging with ethnographic and socio-political interests as a way of re-establishing human connection during the occupation from 1940 through 1944. During the first two years of this period, the Danes lived in relative freedom, including Danish Jews, who were thoroughly assimilated into the predominantly secular country. Such latitude during the first half of the occupation was due to Hitler's view of Denmark as a *Mustertprotectorat*, or model protectorate, and a case study of the occupation of a Nordic Aryan race, as well as the moderate policies of Germany's plenipotentiary in Copenhagen, Werner Best (Hong 192-210). An atmosphere of increasing animosity towards, and fear of, the Germans led to greater and greater attempts at resistance during the last two years of the occupation. By 1943, Hitler enacted martial law and death penalties for sabotage and resistance activities. In October of that year the dictator also ordered the deportation of the country's Jewish population. The information was leaked, however, and Danish citizens transported almost all of the country's 8,000 Jews to neutral Sweden.

Certainly when compared to the atrocities experienced by other countries, Denmark's situation during the occupation may seem mild in hindsight. But at the time Danes were living in a threatening and unpredictable environment of daily anxiety in a country that was a policed state occupied by hostile foreigners. The artists themselves later explained: "But even if we were not, as the Norwegians were, exposed to the whims of a Quisling government and the ensuing autocratic black-out of civilized life, we have not avoided strong pressure from the German occupants . . . no one during the occupation knew if and when actual persecution might be effectuated" (Alfelt).

Indeed, the stakes were high for a group of committed Communist artists who would take part in resistance activities. In June 1941, the very moment of the *Tent* exhibition, membership in the Danish Communist Party, or DKP, was made illegal. The DKP's support of abstraction and more lenient cultural policies than in other countries caused the Danish artists to identify with Communism, which they saw as capable of making experimental art relevant to ordinary people and of revitalizing the conservative Danish art establishment. The Danes were well aware of the "Aragon affair," when Breton rejected Louis Aragon for writing in an overtly propagandistic style in accordance with Communist Party standards. Yet there was never such a schism for artists affiliated with surrealism in Denmark. This was partly due to the fact that the DKP's embrace of abstraction lasted until late 1947. As art historian Karen Kurczynski has explained, the Helhesten artists were more interested in the broad collective aspects of Communism, which they viewed not as a specific set of political guidelines but as an egalitarian alternative to capitalism and Fascism, and they continued to support Communist ideas during the war ("Beyond Expressionism" 95-96).

Denmark had been occupied for just over a year when Helhesten opened *Thirteen Artists in a Tent* in May 1941. The exhibition was an attempt by the artists to create a more visible profile with the general public visiting Dyrehaven that summer, and an expression of cultural freedom during a period when the Danish government was still accommodating the Germans. The eleven-square-kilometer park had once been the royal hunting grounds of Danish kings and an important archeological site. By 1941, however, it was better known as a popular recreational destination for Danes who wanted to try their luck at Bakken (The Hill), the world's oldest amusement park and a working-class alternative to the upscale Tivoli pleasure gardens in Copenhagen. In their title for the show, the artists purposefully called attention to nearby Bellevue Beach, the most popular beach in Denmark with lifeguard stations designed by Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971). The show's title was thus part of the artists' strategy to associate it with places that were widely known for providing enjoyable summer distractions in the hopes of attracting as many visitors as possible. Indeed, although secondary sources cite only thirty visitors as attending the show (Jespersen 134), in fact almost 2,400 visitors attended the opening weekend alone ("I strandpyjamas").

The exhibition presented the artists' most recent experiments in abstraction within the ebullient surroundings of a fairground tent, an atmosphere that paralleled the jocular underpinnings of the journal, whose second issue was published in conjunction with the exhibition. That issue's cover by Egon Mathiesen, an enlarged reproduction of which can be seen in the background of figure 4, presented the hell-horse as a cartoon-like, smiling mare happily reclining against a bright red background. An article in the same issue explored the elements of fantasy and humor in the films of the Danish Dada filmmaker Albert Mertz, Charlie Chaplin, Fritz Lang, and the Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer, and was illustrated with a film still of the Marx Brothers crawling from underneath

what appears to be a striped carnival tent. The issue also included a notice for the exhibition that promised the “most youthful Danish art” and a free hayride tour of the park by the artists themselves.⁴ Jorn’s most important early text, “Intime banaliteter” (Intimate Banalities), which theorized the importance of kitsch for contemporary art, was also in the issue, as were profiles on Jacobsen and Léger and articles on Chinese Buddhist sculpture and ancient rock carvings.



Figure 4: Entry space in the tent, with enlarged *Helhesten* covers in the background and Egon Mathiesen and Else Fischer-Hansen’s daughter in the foreground. Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

The journal’s amalgamation of ethnographic subjects, abstract art, and kitschy popular culture was mirrored in the carnival-like space of the tent. Visitors entered the striped marquee via a quickly constructed wooden footbridge made by the Danish designer Finn Juhl (1912-1989), who had procured the pre-fabricated ten-by-forty-meter structure from a business in Aarhus (Jespersen 134-35). At each end of the bridge large disks of garish colors, which were painted by Else Fischer-Hansen on site, recalled the country games park goers could play at Bakken. Once

⁴ (*Helhesten* 1.2 [10 May 1941]: inside back cover).

inside, visitors were enveloped in an entry space marked off from the structure's central hall by a wooden partition. Here, enlarged reproductions of *Helhesten* journal covers hung on the walls next to childlike writing that advertised the journal; the haphazard arrangement suggested the Nazis' 1937 *Degenerate Art* show in Munich, which Carl-Henning Pedersen had visited (fig. 4). After being given the option to purchase a copy of the latest *Helhesten* issue on a makeshift card table, visitors entered a large brightly lit space that was punctuated by a number of abstract sculptures in organic materials and brightly colored paintings hung on untreated wooden partitions (fig. 5). While most of the paintings were fairly large and hung at eye level with generous space between them, the sculptures were randomly situated throughout the area on plinths or directly on the earthen ground. The paintings were grouped by artist so that there must have been at least eleven discrete but interconnected areas within the overall space.

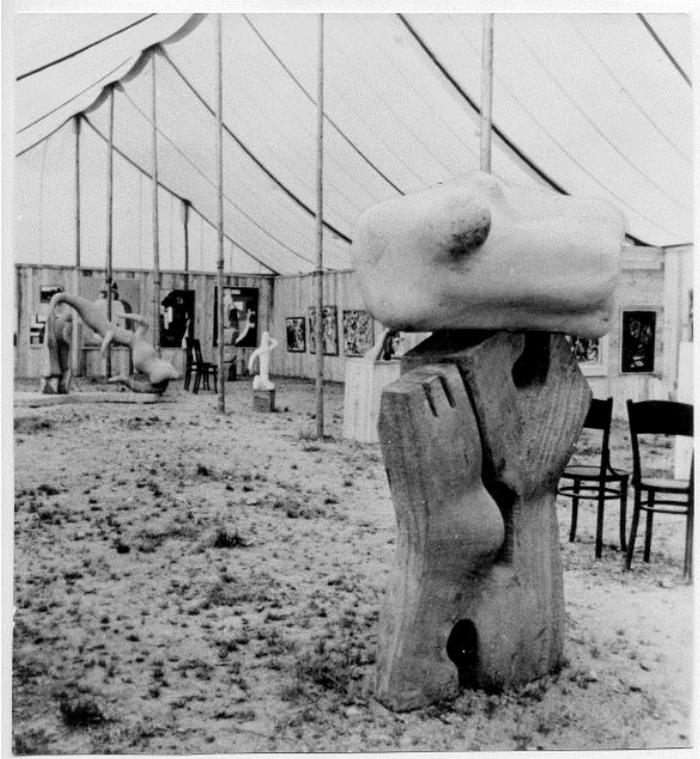


Figure 5: Tent interior, with Sigurjón Ólafsson's *Man and Woman* (foreground, 1939, oak and linden, Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Ålborg), *Woman* (right background, ca. 1937, plaster, location unknown), and *The Dragon* (left background, 1939-40, concrete and wood, location unknown). Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

The environment within the Tent was social, where impromptu discussions no doubt erupted over bottles of beer while the artists' children wandered and played among art objects. Each exhibitor had a different role in setting up and maintaining the show, and they took turns sleeping in the tent to safeguard the artwork (Jespersen 135) (fig. 6). In his profile of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the second issue of *Helhesten*, Mathiesen championed the museum as "a laboratory [where] the public is invited to take part in its experiments" (39). Similarly, visitors to the tent, some of whom were recorded as being dressed only in their bathing suits, could meander throughout the space and interact with the artists and their friends and families. The emphasis on social interaction, belonging, and community was crucial during the isolation of the war, and was enacted within the framework of the group structure as a liberating force for creativity. As a manifestation of a collective art space representative of common goals, the Tent exhibition would prefigure the group's other communal art making experiments, such as in 1944 when, with members of Høst, they decorated a



Figure 6: Egon Mathiesen helping raise the tent. Courtesy Museum Jorn.

Copenhagen kindergarten classroom with cartoon-like animals while the school children were present. Such a cooperative approach to art-making later inspired Cobra's collective events, such as the second international Cobra meeting in August-September 1949 at a house in the Copenhagen suburb Bregnerød. There, the artists working collaboratively with their children and spouses transformed the house into a total art environment by decorating it with a fantastical bestiary. Socializing was seen as integral to the creative experience of the meeting, which Christian Dotremont noted when he described the event: "The congress had fun, cutting wood, drinking spirits . . . dreaming, sleeping, working . . ." (Adriaens-Pannier 69).

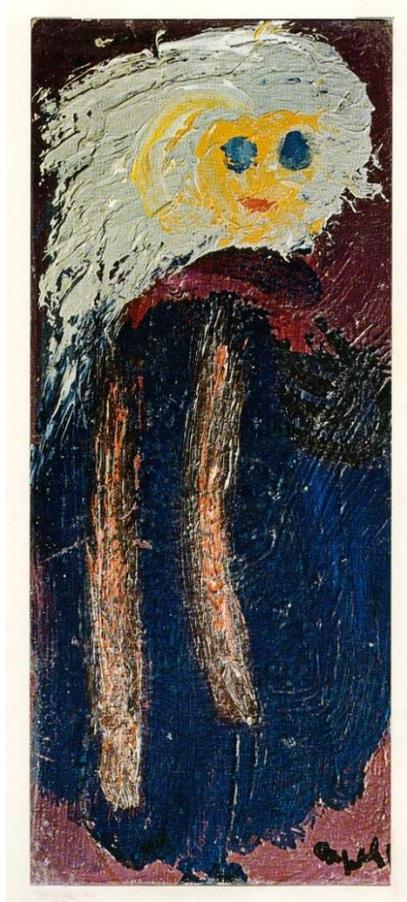


Figure 7: Asger Jorn, *Untitled*, oil on board, 1940 (Atkins #191).
Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

The Tent exhibition also documents an early turn in the Helhesten artists' work from surrealist-inspired styles to the participatory and humanistic implications of the spontaneous gestural abstraction that would characterize the Cobra aesthetic. Jorn exhibited twenty-three works in the Tent that included a range of styles, from lyrical automatist patterns to explorations of colorful, purposefully unskilled abstraction. One untitled work of 1940 (fig. 7) exhibited in the Tent resembles both a child's doll and a shooting star. The figure that emerges from thick, crusty material is a less finished version of another more surrealist work of that year, *Spanish Ballerina* (oil on canvas, location unknown, Atkins #190), and reflects the Danes' growing interest in a spontaneous abstraction that called attention to the artist's gesture.

This and several other untitled works Jorn exhibited in the show anticipate his critique of automatism as too intellectual, formulaic, focused on the process, and dependent upon the artist's individual talents, rather than as a creative outcome that could be reached by anyone, even non-artists. In Jorn's 1949 article "Address to the Penguins" he argued: "Our experiments seek to allow thought to express itself spontaneously without the control exercised by reason. . . . [I]n contrast to Breton we believe that behind the false ethical and aesthetic, and even *metaphysical* conceptions which do not correspond to the vital human interests, we find true morality and true *materialist* aesthetics" (184-85). Here, Jorn proposed spontaneity as a fundamental quality of the authentic creative expression shared by all humans, which has the potential to level differences in time, religion, class, and race, just as he had found inspiration in the democratic elements of the decorative motifs of folk art and kitsch forms of popular culture in "Intimate Banalities."

The idea of spontaneous and experimental creative practice informed the ambiguous subject matter in Jorn's abstract images, which he encouraged and empowered viewers to decipher on their own terms. In 1939 Jorn advised viewers to "Look at my pictures and add new values to it, just as I add new values to it every time I look at it. Build up a new picture that is entirely your own" ("Skabelses processen"). Such a participatory process called forth the interaction of the viewer as a determiner of the meaning of the image, which was not prescribed or fixed but open to individual interpretation. Similarly in the tent, the informal atmosphere was meant to encourage viewers to actively construct new meanings from the displayed artwork in a liberating process that imbued painting with the power to transform personal experience. The interest in viewer-artwork interaction prefigured Cobra's experiments in which artists would undertake what Jorn called the "miracle of the transformation of the motif" by discerning different discrete forms in each other's works, with the result of elaborating the meaning and visual impact of the image (Lambert 41).

While Jorn probed the nature of spontaneity and inclusive participation, Carl-Henning Pedersen's work emphasized the creation of fantastical bestiaries and landscapes as mythical worlds developed from vernacular folktales and popular myths. Egill Jacobsen described Pedersen in *Helhesten* in 1941 as a painter of

fairytale whose work was “life in itself . . . as the fetish . . . and fables are in our culture. It is a bridge over prejudice and anxiety, stupidity and dark forces . . . so the picture too . . . has become an independent world, open and full of meaning” (73-74). Pedersen’s *Mother and Child* (fig. 8) was reproduced with Jacobsen’s profile and exhibited in the tent. The mask-like figures reflect the basic bond between a mother and her offspring, a motif that could be found in the medieval Danish church frescoes the Helhesten artists had visited together, and which Pedersen wrote about in the journal in 1944 (“Middelalderens kalkmalerier” 102-10). Pedersen’s repetition of basic organic shapes enclosed in thick outlines recalls tribal masks and the simple make-believe doodles of children. In his 1943 article “Abstrakt kunst eller fantasikunst” (Abstract Art or Fantasy Art), Pedersen similarly proposed the term “fantasy” to describe the Helhesten artists’ abstraction (92-93). His bright painterly aesthetic also recalled German expressionism. Expressionism undoubtedly informed the Helhesten figures’ interest in Nordic identity, myth, and the spiritual in art, a connection the artists minimized for political reasons after the war. Unlike the earlier style, however, instead of a prescribed psychological message, Pedersen’s images sought to suggest open ideas of fantasy through basic shapes and forms comprised of brilliant color and the tangible materiality of the paint.



MASKER.
Dejligt har gjort mig. Jeg har taget venner. Nu skal jeg smide.



EN LILLE GODT FUGL!
Jeg kan flyvende fra træerne! Jeg skal se på jer!

vor Kultur. Den er en Bøe over Fordom og Angst, over Døthed og mørke Kræfter, fra et Udslingsgrube til et andet. Og lige som Kunstneren, naar han er færdig med Billedet, er vokst fra den Oplevelse, der er dets Indhold, saadan er Billedet ogsaa, naar det er færdigt, blevet en selvstændig Væsen, adnen og betydningsfuld.

For at forstå den danske, abstrakte Kunst er det nødvendigt at forstaa dens Forbindelse med disse Udtryk.

Det er derfor værdt at bemærke, at her i Danmark arbejder den saakaldte abstrakte Kunst med Fabelen og Eventyret i det naturlige Spørg, som Grundlag af disse aarhundredegamle Betyrninger.

En Eventyrene og Fabelernes Maler er Carl-Henning Pedersen. I hans Sind findes ophobet Aarhundreders Farseseremy; naar han maler, er det Naturen, som Farsen er det i Naturen. Nogle Blomster tilvoktet Barne ved deres stærke Farsen, andre afslører deres glatte og drøbelde Egenkabler. Størlig i Kunstnerens har man Eksempler paa de magiske Farsen og Forme; der findes Insekter, der tilids lummer deres Øjne ved deres mælvindige, hængende Farsen og Forme. I Naturen forvandler vi os over, hvor alle er organisk. Henning Pedersens Billeder er en organisk Natur. Her er intet Simul, ingen forloren Skæbhed. Han skaber sine Billeder ud fra sit eget Sind. Det smukke er smukt, det grimme grimt, det onde ondt, det gode godt, det søde sødt, det stærke stærkt. Han er klar over, at enhver Tanke og Handling afspejles i det kunstneriske Indhold. Han kæmper for at udvikle sig selv, og han fortæller, at al Udsvikling hanger sammen med hele Menneskeheden Udsvikling. Naar man prøver at forstaa hans Billeder, vil man se det. Med stor Falskhed følger han sit eget Følelse, derfor findes der kun én Vej fremad. Hans Udsvikling er berøvet, og den vil blive det endene mere. Han véd, at Simulien



EN MOR OG ET BARN.
Vi holder om noget af blødder. For Helhesten, har et det stærkt! Mor, har mig gas et Blis Tur, saa jeg kan læse dem at handle.

Figure 8: Carl-Henning Pedersen, *Mother and Child*, as reproduced in *Helhesten* 1.3 (17 Sept. 1941): 75. Donation Jørn, Silkeborg.

The sculpture on display in the tent explicitly evoked the organic and natural. The sculptures by Erik Thømmesen and Sigurjón Ólafsson were based on the human figure and consisted of tactile materials such as wood, plaster, and stone,

summoning broad associations that ranged from African sculpture to prehistoric rock carvings and rune stones. Ólafsson's *Man and Woman*, 1939, which can be seen in the foreground of fig. 5, was one of his first abstract sculptures and one of seven works he displayed in the exhibition. The contrast of oak and linden wood, vertical and horizontal axes, and angular and curvilinear planes referenced the fundamental differences between the two sexes while also intimately relating them through scale and material into an organic whole. Similarly, three untitled plaster figures Thommesen exhibited paralleled the supporting poles of the tent, not to mention its stripes, and suggested the ritual totems of ancient cultures or human bones. The natural evocations of the sculptures on display inside the tent invited viewers to contemplate the art forms and rituals of cultures removed in time and location from war-torn Europe. In their human scale, the sculptures encouraged visitors to relate to them as living beings they could interact with playfully by exploring the personal associations suggested by the elemental forms.

Perhaps the exhibition's closest link to the vernacular was the work of Henry Heerup. He had started out in the 1930s making surrealist assemblages such as *Marie Antoinette* (1932, location unknown) in which a rock penetrated by razorblades appeared under a glass cheese dish like an appetizing meal, before he moved on to more abstract sculptures in granite and wood. Heerup alternated these works with his *skraldeskulptur* (junk sculpture) such as *Death Harvest* of 1943 (Louisiana Kunst Museum, Humlebæk), which consists of chair frames, metal wire, and used lumber. Writing in the fourth issue of the second volume of *Helhesten* in 1943, Heerup presented a recipe for his *skraldeskulptur*: "No precious materials are necessary here . . . anybody can make his own junk sculpture. *Start now*" ("Skraldemand & 'Skraldemodel'" 94). The democratic approach to materials and forms was repeated in his analysis of popular art in his 1944 *Helhesten* essay "Al kunst bør være folkelig" (All Our Art Ought to be Popular), where he argued for a truly popular, or *folkelig* art of the present (111-12).

Heerup viewed the form of his sculptures – brightly painted, rough granite masses akin to modern Scandinavian rune stones – as already inherent in the material itself. He chiseled and carved the stones, allowing chance to reveal the inherent shapes and patterns of the material in a process he related to the ancient Danish Jelling stones, which he had visited in 1935. In his 1943 profile of Heerup, artist Dan Sterup Hansen (1918-1995) compared the sculptor to Hans Christian Andersen, stating that Heerup "creates, by means of the stone from the fields, the colors from his tubes and tin boxes, the branch and the razor blades, works of powerful reality that make just as strong an impression on us by the way they are made as by what they represent." A photograph of Heerup sitting among his quirky stone sculptures in his Vanløse garden accompanied the text (fig. 9). The artist was pictured like a medieval stonemason working outdoors, in what could be a fairytale garden or ancient burial site.

The idea for the exhibition's tent structure came from Le Corbusier's 1937 La Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux for the International Exhibition in Paris. As one of

Léger's students, Jorn had contributed to the building with a large mural entitled *Les Moissons* (The Harvest Season).⁵ Le Corbusier's large pavilion was a temporary structure clothed in waterproof canvas that evoked a nomadic tent, but the architect's functionalism served as another concept to which Helhesten responded critically. Jorn published a number of articles on the relationship between art and



Figure 9: Henry Heerup working in his garden in Vanløse, as reproduced in *Helhesten* 2. 4 (24 Dec. 1943): 74. Donation Jorn, Silkeborg.

architecture throughout the 1940s, often harshly criticizing both functionalism and Le Corbusier.⁶ While he acknowledged and applauded what he saw as Le Corbusier's heroic attempts to synthesize a complete architectural space, Jorn lamented functionalism's sterility, disregard for potential spontaneity and creative response, and lack of equal collaboration between artists and architects. In his 1944 essay "Face to Face," Jorn noted that Le Corbusier's Pavillon in particular failed to integrate architectural space and everyday life.

In his 1945 essay "Notes on the Way" Jorn defined the ideal architectural space: "Organic space, the space that grows and develops, just as today's abstract paintings . . . evolve like a living organism . . . that is the language of the new age"

⁵ Gelsted and Jespersen both state that it was Egon Mathiesen, who had visited the exhibition in 1937, who suggested the idea for the tent. It is much more likely that it was Jorn, who if not the initiator of the idea, at least further developed it. Jespersen mistakenly says that the tent was inspired by Le Corbusier's 1950 Porte Maillol project (134-35).

⁶ For more on Jorn's critique of Le Corbusier see Pezolet and Baumeister.

(83). In contrast to what Jorn saw as Le Corbusier's artificial attempt to impose a predetermined set of aesthetic values on the everyday lives of people, the easily built, practical, and ephemeral structure, constructed and maintained by all of the artists, encouraged playfulness and popular entertainment and served as a metaphor for spontaneity. As thousands of revelers entered the park that summer to escape the Nazi presence and picnic at beer gardens or pursue cheap thrills at Bakken – an area known for its tented game spaces – the Helhesten enclosure would have blended in perfectly with its festive surroundings and implicitly promoted fun and feckless pleasure inside the tent.

By drawing on the themes of popular vernacular entertainment, the organic, and informal socialization, the Tent exhibition emphasized openness and community in a way that was less conservative than the Linien shows. Further, the bright open space also differed from the grotto-like rooms of earlier surrealist exhibitions such as Duchamp's *International Exhibition of Surrealism* at the Galerie-Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1938. In that show, the space evoked the dream world of the unconscious and visitors' participation was mobilized by their attempts to navigate the dark and bizarre spaces. In contrast, the tent's soft natural light and dirt floor highlighted the playful, fantastic nature of the abstract images on display as a way of activating viewers' imaginations. Any ideas of dislocation or conflict were avoided in favor of openness, welcome, and community. Artists' seizing upon such "primitivizing" concepts as a transgressive celebration of the simple, naïve, and unsophisticated directly linked their project to that of Grønningen while also restoring the positive aspects of the primitive that the Nazis were attempting to destroy.

Helhesten purposefully alluded to popular entertainment and the overturning of established hierarchies and norms that occur during a carnival. The artists built upon the surrealist use of games such as *Exquisite Corpse* to experiment with the creative possibilities of spontaneity and chance to create a ludic space within the tent. In this way the Helhesten artists enacted the idea of games and play as implicit cultural critique that were concurrently espoused by the Dutch cultural theorist Johan Huizinga in his 1938 text *Homo Ludens* (165-68). Though the Helhesten artists were not aware of Huizinga's text during the war, the similarities between their approach and Huizinga's idea of play as a culturally constructive and democratic impulse fundamental to all people are striking.⁷ The Tent exhibition embodied the five characteristics of play defined by Huizinga: play is free; it is not "real" life; it is distinct from real life in location and duration; it creates order; and it is not connected with material interest or profit (7-13).

That play involves a certain level of freedom – that is, it is free of determinism and never imposed as a moral duty – aligns to the open-endedness and

⁷ Jorn and Guy Debord later cited Huizinga's work in their book *Mémoires*. The December 1952 chapter of *Mémoires* opens with a quote from Huizinga's 1919 *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*.

spontaneity of Helhesten's approach to art making and the potential for art to stimulate an undetermined yet transformative experience in both artist and viewer. Huizinga contrasted the freedom of play with the rules and cultural functions of ceremonies, implying that the dictatorial approach of the Nazis had eradicated the play element in society (101). As an informal gathering space where there were no rules about how to act and inclusive, creative response was encouraged, the Tent exhibition was a subversive alternative that existed concurrently with the rigidly regulated choreography of Nazi spectacles.

The exhibition engaged with the ideas of spontaneity and creative play exactly at a moment when overt political action had become impossible, a condition Huizinga cited as stimulating a greater need for play (15). Helhesten asserted to a general public Huizinga's dictum that even in oppressed conditions, play is not lost to the people. Ejler Bille similarly wrote about play in his 1934 article "Kunst og leg" (Art and Play) in an issue of *Linien*:

The human being plays. . . . Some can still love, some can still go down a street saying, "Here I am, I am a free mammal, I breathe . . . despite everything, despite Heil Hitler, standardization, discipline, such and such to order – *jawohl*." . . . Despite everything there are still people . . . who feel life . . . and taking firm hold of it and expressing it in thought, color or form. This is the truly creative human being – the artist, who shapes life. Art is true play. The child plays, but the grown human being creates, in order to live spiritually and materially. Play has taken on a practical purpose (10).

Like a playground, carnival, or magic circle, play is limited in time and space. The Tent exhibition's transient nature and enclosed space separated it from the daily operations of the ancient park, while inside the artists were able to create a sense of control over the uncontrollable. This being "apart-together," Huizinga argued, is a communal ideal in an exceptional situation in which the game players create order and provide meaning inside the circle of the game where the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer apply (11-12). While certainly the show was undertaken partly to find a greater market, the desire to reach a general audience and manifest being apart-together were the real underlying reasons for the exhibition and stimulated its inclusive, carnival-like atmosphere.

Historian Nathaniel Hong has explained that this kind of passive resistance was popular in Denmark from the fall of 1940 (45). In its spontaneous and fleeting nature, the exhibition's cultural critique was masked by amusement and satire, enacting passive resistance similar to phenomena such as the Danish *Alsang* movement, in which large groups of people would sing impromptu, seemingly innocent nationalistic songs in public that ridiculed their occupiers. The derisive humor embedded in the *Alsang* activities, like that of Helhesten's project, was not fully understood by the Germans and was tolerated – at least until 1943. Nonetheless, the leading Danish Nazi artist and critic Gudmund Hentze attacked

abstraction like that of Helhesten as “degenerate.” In Hentze’s 1942 article for the Danish Nazi newspaper *Fædrelandet* (Fatherland), which was illustrated with a drawing by Ejler Bille, he wrote, “But the insipid foolishness, which is now spreading under the name of ‘abstract art,’ belongs to no home. . . . National Socialism will grab such nettles with a firm hand, pull them out and throw them into the fire like the weeds they are in the garden of art, be assured of that.”

The Tent exhibition received several reviews, which were characterized by positive but uncritical responses. Critic Otto Gelsted cheerfully proselytized the show as a fun place to visit while at Dyrehaven: “An experience in itself is the large, oblong tent . . . which in the sunshine has a beautiful, pearl-like luminous tone, crossed with blue shade trees and foliage shade! A series of master pines supports the tent and resembles slender golden pillars.” Gelsted focused on the festive nature of the tent more than on analyzing individual artworks, which he advised readers should be experienced rather than be explained. His brief overview of the group criticized Jorn as an “unsure stylist” and noted that the artists’ styles tended to border on a decorative use of color. That Gelsted’s article also contained a glowing, yet much shorter review of the Statens Museum’s concurrent exhibition of established Danish modernists reveals the ease with which new and established artists were considered alongside one another, while also pointing to a fundamental lack of understanding of, or willful ignorance about, Helhesten’s provocative experimentation in favor of emphasizing the utopian aspects of the exhibition.

The Helhesten artists’ transformation of aesthetic characteristics of earlier styles into indicators of absurdity, humor, and fantasy marked the Tent exhibition and the works it displayed as challenging to the general public and critics, insurgent to the Danish government’s policy of appeasing the Germans, and inflammatory in its counteraction of the Nazi views of modern art. The exhibition, though veiled by amusement and playfulness, functioned as implicit socio-political critique that engaged with the conditions of the occupation by promoting inclusivity, creative freedom, nonsense, and happiness during wartime. As an ephemeral culmination of the Helhesten artists’ investigation of the artistic practices they assimilated during the 1930s and theorized in the 1940s, the exhibition was a testing ground for their approach to collective art making, exploration of the vernacular, and play as a critical practice in the public realm that flew under the radar of official cultural and political circles, and until now, Danish exhibition history. Ultimately *Thirteen Artists in a Tent* served as an embryonic catalyst for the artists’ later radical experiments that would only resurface and be further developed by Cobra and the Situationist International after the war.

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