University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Karen Kurczynski

Spring 2011

Primitivism, Humanism, and Ambivalence: Cobra and Post-Cobra

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Figure 2. Ernest Mancoba, *Composition*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 59 x 50 cm (23.2 x 19.7 in). Collection of Jens Olesen, Copenhagen.

Primitivism, humanism, and ambivalence

Cobra and Post-Cobra

KAREN KURCZYNSKI and NICOLA PEZOLET

Introduction

In a herringbone tweed jacket, carrying folded glasses and a copy of the day's *London Times* in his hands, Ernest Mancoba looks more like a gentleman than a modern painter (fig. 1). A South African living in Paris and a French citizen since 1961, he was visiting Denmark to work on a set of lithographs with Peter Johansen. His sidelong glance at Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti's bronze *Spoon Woman* of 1926–1927, a sculpture inspired by anthropomorphic carved wooden spoons made by the Dan and Wobe peoples of the Ivory Coast, speaks volumes. It was likely a passing glance during what must have been a pleasant visit to the Louisiana Museum to see the works of his friends (Mancoba once lived in a studio above Giacometti's in Montparnasse). Yet it seems to stand silently for a world of feelings: distrust, resentment, separateness, reluctant recognition, unacknowledged difference. This look embodies, for the contemporary observer, a subjectivity long silenced, forever spoken for by others in the name of civilization, too often defined by the dubious acclaim of white primitivists who misrecognized aspects of his identity as a "radical" critique of Western reason.

The 1994 photograph depicts not just a black artist reacting to white modernist primitivism, but also an artist of the postwar Cobra group reconsidering the encounter with African art of an earlier generation of modernists. Mancoba was at the time a member of the Danish Høst exhibition society together with his wife, artist Sonja Ferlov. The two exhibited at the Høst exhibition in Copenhagen in 1948, at the first international exhibition to include the Danish artists of Helhesten (the successor of Linien) and Høst alongside the Dutch artists of Reflex who, together with the Belgian Revolutionary Surrealists, would make up Cobra. Though Mancoba was invited to exhibit at the Stedelijk in 1949, the Høst group refused to participate, so several Danish Cobra artists were not in that key exhibition. While Cobra existed officially only from 1948 to 1951,¹ this essay explores

the ambivalent relationship to primitivism among some of its major artists during and after the movement (when some of its members went on to found the Situationist International [SI], 1957–1972): Danish artist Asger Jorn, the Dutch artists Constant and Karel Appel, and South African Mancoba. Formerly a sculptor, Mancoba made his first abstract, primitivist painting in 1940 in Paris (fig. 2). He had learned of the connections between African traditions and modernism in Cape Town, when two European sculptors, Libby Lipschitz and Elza Dziomba, encouraged him to read the book *Primitive Negro Sculpture* by Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro.² Although he entered modernist painting via primitivism, Mancoba was marginalized in the Cobra movement and its major histories, in part because of the colonialist cultural assumptions underlying modernist primitivism itself.³ While they were fascinated with some of the premises of primitivism, the Cobra artists also continued their pre-Cobra investigations arising out of Surrealist ethnography that problematized and ultimately registered the postwar breakdown of primitivism along with humanism, which primitivism helped define through negation.⁴

Dotremont and Joseph Noiret. The group's major exhibitions in Amsterdam in 1949 and Liège in 1951 involved many more artists from Høst, postwar Surrealism, and other international contexts (there never was any official list of Cobra "members"; only those who were more or less active, and those included in each manifestation of the group).

2. P. Guillaume and T. Munro, *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (New York: Hacker, 1968).

3. See L. M. Smalligan, "The Erasure of Ernest Mancoba: Africa and Europe at the Crossroads," *Third Text* 24, no. 2 (March 2010):263–276.

4. The question of humanism's redefinition in the postwar period is too large to be fully addressed here. The observations of René Girard concerning André Malraux as the proponent of a "humanism conceived dynamically" indicate the way the discourse was changing: "It is true that increased attention to the primitive world has contributed to the decline of Western humanism. Historical skepticism and anthropological reflection converge toward the same end. A more profound understanding of the primitive mind has revealed the relativity of mental structures once mistaken for the very laws of the universe. Our old humanism believed that its values were universal. But this does not distinguish it from other cultural myths." R. Girard, "Man, Myth, and Malraux," *Yale French Studies* 18, special issue: "Passion and the Intellect, or: Andre Malraux" (1957):57–58.

1. The Cobra manifesto was signed in Paris in 1948 by the painters Asger Jorn, Constant, Karel Appel, and Corneille, with poets Christian

This essay reconsiders through the lens of Cobra the shift from a primitivism that fetishizes cultural others, characteristic of the early twentieth century, to a more contemporary dialogic field of subject positions in which aesthetic practices from all parts of the globe are legitimized, at least compared to the earlier marginalization of non-white artists under colonialism. It positions primitivism and humanism as a dichotomy central to Western culture since the Enlightenment, one which faced its first real challenges in the 1930s with interwar Surrealism and ethnography in France, key precedents to Cobra. It then considers Cobra's role in the radical cultural changes that transpired after World War II in Europe, in which the dichotomy of "civilized" humanism versus "savage" primitivism began to break down due to processes of decolonization and the increasing recognition of the sophistication of non-Western cultural production. This essay charts an ambivalence toward both primitivism and humanism among Cobra artists before, during, and after the official existence of the group. It argues that Mancoba's radical claim to post-colonial humanism directly countered the European artists' critique of humanism and was a significant factor in his marginalization within the movement. Finally, it explores how the group's internal contradictions led to radical reconsiderations of primitivism after 1951. The post-Cobra artists broadened their experiments into a more dialogic encounter with cultural others via the anthropological artist's book (such as Jorn's "10,000 Years of Nordic Folk Art," which we will discuss), the experiments in ceramics that juxtaposed late Futurist and folk traditions (the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus), and the visionary projects that emerged from a dialogue with the marginalized Zingari culture in Italy (Constant and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio). A closer look at the origins of many such early Situationist works will nuance some of Guy Debord's programmatic historiography of the postwar years, according to which the SI was the only group that managed to go beyond Cobra's neo-Surrealist primitivism.⁵ Ultimately, the complexity of these investigations suggests that while the term "primitivism" is too formalist, too laden with racist assumptions, and too imprecise to be

5. Situationist International, "Ce que sont les amis de Cobra and ce qu'ils représentent," *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958):4–6. Although the essays on Surrealism and Cobra are unsigned, it is fair to say that Debord's point of view was dominant within the SI, as he was the director and primary editor of the journal.

Figure 1. Peter Johansen, *Ernest Mancoba*, 1986. Photograph, 8.3 x 11.7 in. © Peter Johansen.

useful in describing the art of Cobra and its aftermath, primitivism's legacy of opening global artistic dialogues made it an essential step toward establishing the more level playing field of contemporary art.

Mapping primitivism and humanism

Primitivism became a major counter-discourse to progressive versions of modernism by the late nineteenth century, in the dual framework of evolutionary theory and colonialism. To counter Western Enlightenment, primitivism posited discourses repressed by the social structures of civilization, often believed to persist in various forms in colonized lands. Under colonialism, European culture intellectually domesticated the more threatening aspects of other cultures by categorizing them as culturally less developed than Europe. Much like its ideological cousin "orientalism," the concept of primitivism is a Western construct, assuming a privileged

knowledge of non-Western peoples with little relation to their lived realities under colonialism.⁶

Art historian Frances Connelly demonstrates that from its eighteenth-century origins, primitivism served as the inverse of academic classicism, which defined a “humanistic theory of painting” based on the order of reason.⁷ While humanism is notoriously difficult to define comprehensively, for the purposes of this essay it refers to the Western tradition of humanity as the measure of all things, reaching back to ancient Roman definitions of *homo humanus*, the educated inheritor of Greek philosophy, opposed to *homo barbarus*, the uncivilized and animalistic side of human nature.⁸ In early-twentieth-century France, humanism generally meant a doctrine of classical, secular education in the Western humanities canon and the history of legal subjecthood inherited from the Enlightenment, sometimes called “liberal humanism,” nuanced by a post-revolutionary perspective on universal human rights and the tradition of utopian socialism with its firm belief in social progress and human perfectibility.⁹ Recent scholarship has demonstrated to what degree the liberal humanist tradition of classicism in France was in fact strongly racialized as a white discourse between the wars and into the 1950s, in the context of changes in colonial policy.¹⁰

Modernist primitivism in art overtly challenged the humanist conception of painting as the mirror of a rational, civilized, white subject able to transcend instinct and animal nature, beginning with Paul Gauguin’s anti-classical depictions of Tahiti in the 1890s. Twentieth-century primitivists, enabled by the ideological presumptions and economic inequalities of colonialism and inspired mostly by colonial objects collected in the European metropole, projected their assumptions about other peoples’ purported naturalness,

communitarianism, sexuality, and spirituality back into their own artistic traditions as a critique.¹¹ Since the notorious 1984 “Primitivism and Modern Art” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, scholars have widely criticized the conception of primitivism as a Western “innovation,” emptied of its social critique and divorced from colonial realities.¹² Yet primitivism was a step, however ambivalent, toward a fuller recognition of the cultural production, and eventually the human subjectivities, of both Western minorities and colonial subjects. In the Harlem Renaissance, Indian modernism, Mexican Muralism, and other movements, primitivism functioned as a celebration of indigenous traditions as part of anti-colonial struggles and celebrations of independence.¹³

In the 1930s, primitivism was shifting radically in France toward something much more open-ended and directly involved with ethnography, a dialogue between cultures rather than an appropriation of forms. The Institut d’Ethnologie was created in Paris in 1925 not only to explore comparative anthropology philosophically, but also to train colonial administrators along revised humanist lines that viewed, at least in the teaching of Marcel Mauss, Western society as one among many legitimate cultural formations.¹⁴ James Clifford describes the breakdown of the colonialist structure of scientific knowledge just as it was being consolidated in Surrealist ethnography, culminating in the Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931 published in *Minotaure*, an unprecedented mission to collect “documents” of African cultures in which participants like Michel Leiris recorded extraordinary interactions that challenged ethnographic superiority.¹⁵ The development of ethnography as a major

6. R. Araeen, “From Primitivism to Ethnic Arts,” in *The Myth of Primitivism*, ed. S. Hiller (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 167.

7. F. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725–1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), p. 32.

8. Noted in the postwar critique of humanism by Martin Heidegger, see his “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 224.

9. S. Geroulanos, *An Atheism that Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 19.

10. B. Jewsiewicki, “Le primitivisme, le postcolonialisme, les antiquités ‘nègres’ et la question nationale,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 31, nos. 121/122 (1991):199–202. See also G. Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

11. See R. Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1986); and C. Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

12. H. Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” in Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (New York: New Press, 1985), p. 205. See also the critiques in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. J. Flam and M. Deutsch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

13. See S. Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and P. Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s Artists and the Avant-Garde 1922–1947* (London: Reaktion, 2007).

14. Wilder (see note 10), pp. 63–75.

15. J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). Among the many individuals involved with Cobra, the architect Aldo van Eyck, who designed an exhibition space for a group exhibition, was strongly influenced by 1930s Surrealism, in

field forced Western culture to reexamine its own role in turning foreign peoples into specimens of knowledge. The subjective exploration of ethnography (a field itself structured around the centrality of dialogue and the paradox of “participant observation”) by Surrealists like Leiris or Georges Bataille refused the standard assumptions of objectivity that later came to dominate anthropology in favor of admitting the subjective biases and desires on the part of each side of a colonial encounter. The Surrealist group’s activism against colonial politics (such as the 1931 declaration “Don’t Visit the Colonial Exhibition”) further demonstrates the critical possibilities opened up by primitivism, even as it avidly collected tribal arts and appropriated its forms in painting and sculpture.

Among the artists influenced by such new positions, developed mainly in the little magazine *Documents*, was Alberto Giacometti. In her classic essay on Giacometti’s primitivist sculpture, Rosalind Krauss describes the artist’s participation in the ethnographic Surrealist investigations of Georges Bataille in the journal *Documents*. There, ethnographic data was applied “to transgress the neat boundaries of the art world with its categories based on *form*,” for example, in the detailed investigations of pre-Columbian ballgames in which play—so ubiquitous in orthodox Surrealism’s use of banal parlor games to access the unconscious—in fact took overtly political, violent, and emphatically sexualized forms. This use of the “primitive,” Krauss argues, “embed[s] artwork in a network that, in its philosophical dimension, is violently anti-idealist and antihumanist.”¹⁶ Even in a more benign inspiration, such as Giacometti’s sculpture *On ne joue plus*, inspired by African Dogon board games such as those collected on the Dakar-Djibouti Mission, Krauss makes a compelling case for the significance of Bataillean “baseness” in relation to Giacometti’s turn toward the horizontal register, on which he would symbolically sacrifice his *Woman With Her Throat Cut* a few years after the more vertical, less polemically antihumanist *Spoon Woman* of 1926–1927.

particular by Griaule’s ethnographic studies. Not only did it lead him to travel to Africa with his wife and eventually to publish about his expedition in the Dutch journal *Forum*, but it also became a catalyst for his reflections to develop playgrounds as alternatives to modernist city planning. See A. van Eyck, “Bouwen in de Zuidelijke Oasen,” *Forum*, no. 1 (1953):28–38. Van Eyck was also a catalyst for Constant’s transition from painting to architecture and urbanism.

16. R. Krauss, “Giacometti,” in *“Primitivism” in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), p. 514.

If primitivism for Western artists was a misrecognition of the other as a critique of the west, it was also a crucial step toward political acknowledgment of other cultures, which could not be sustained in its more fetishistic forms once the West began to recognize non-Western peoples as themselves producers of culture, and thus at least potentially part of a more global cultural dialogue. As pan-Africanism became widespread after World War II, challenging colonialist hegemony in both Africa and Europe, Western art history shifted toward a greater recognition of the artistic traditions of tribal cultures. This shift is evident in revisionist art historical accounts, for example, poet Jean Laude’s 1966 *Arts de l’Afrique Noire* (the same Laude who had written a monograph for the 1950 Cobra Bibliothèque on painter Jacques Doucet). Though Laude maintains a belief in the authenticity of traditional African practices that is a hallmark of primitivism, his text is also one of the earliest to note the obvious diversity of African arts in the plural, to demonstrate the politico-economic nature of the historic vogues for African art in Europe, and to indicate the unforeseen proportions of the postwar market for them after decades of active collecting.¹⁷ The recognition of the innovation and diversity of African cultural production from Guillaume and Munro’s earlier history to Laude’s provided modern African artists with creative histories to engage.

In Europe, the recognition that the “primitive” was nothing but a modern construct became widespread among artists and intellectuals by the 1960s, thanks to developments in structural anthropology begun with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s investigation of myth as a linguistic system of rational oppositions in the 1940s. In *La pensée sauvage* (1962) and other writings, Lévi-Strauss famously recognized the logical structure of myth in tribal cultures and critiqued the assumption of superiority of Western history and classical bourgeois humanism. In response to the *Critique de la raison dialectique* of Jean-Paul Sartre (whose relationship to humanism was complex and fraught), Lévi-Strauss maintains that “the idea of some general humanity to which ethnographic reduction leads will bear no relation to any one may have formed in advance.”¹⁸ He further develops his perspective on humanism in *Anthropologie structurale II* (1973), calling ethnology “a democratic humanism” and asserting that it “has humanism traveling through its third stage. It

17. J. Laude, *The Arts of Black Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

18. C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 247.

will undoubtedly be the last, since after that man will no longer have anything of himself to discover—at least from the outside (for another research exists, this one in-depth, the end of which we are not close to seeing).¹⁹ This in-depth research, begun by psychoanalysis, was equally carried out by the artistic avant-garde (as Lévi-Strauss was well aware) beginning with Surrealism and continuing in Cobra, initiating the investigation of the truly savage mind of the white, Western subject.

At the same time, Edward Said describes the “sense for Europeans of a tremendous and disorienting change in perspective in the West-non-West relationship” in the postwar context as Francophone theorists like Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire critiqued colonialism while the very battles for independence were being waged.²⁰ Fifteen years after *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, Sartre recognized that “there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism, since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters.”²¹ In the wake of the particularly violent Algerian war of independence, Paul Ricoeur recognized famously that it now seemed “possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an ‘other’ among others.”²² Mancoba was even more specific in 1953: “The world has become more and more of a single entity, to such an extent that we have to reconsider all our views and opinions on racial distinctions because they have become obsolete and dangerous.”²³ Historian of African modernism Chika Okeke underscores that “modern artistic subjectivity is linked to political independence.”²⁴ The postwar independence struggles allowed modern African artists to be able to enter the field of modernism. This process of cultural recognition bore fruit in Mancoba's case only decades later, just before his death in 2002, when his work was included in the landmark

exhibition *The Short Century*, and he received a warm homecoming in South Africa. It was precisely through primitivism's opening onto the increased recognition of non-Western cultural production that humanism as an exclusively Western discourse critically broke down during the African independence decade of 1955–1965, guiding global modernism into the complex, multicentric, and cosmopolitan artistic practices of today.

Postwar primitivism continued to challenge the humanist reconception of modernist art, in the midst of a massive revival of humanism immediately after the war in France.²⁵ This revised humanism ultimately replaced the classical humanist tradition with a neo-humanist postwar conception of the École de Paris, recuperating modernism and to some degree abstraction as humanist national traditions.²⁶ Traditional primitivist assumptions, however, were also questioned; Cobra began to explore primitivist tropes while at the same time insisting on the “primitive” elements within Western society: popular traditions that stood for socially oppressed creativity and the modernist impulse that aimed to restore a fundamental spontaneity suppressed by an increasingly rationally planned society. Jean Dubuffet, an inspiration and later colleague of the Cobra artists, confronted the humanist revival with “savage values”; Jorn wrote of and attempted to embody *l'homme magique* as producer of a materialist art “at once conscious and instinctive.”²⁷ The Cobra artists regarded the artwork as evidence of the artist's inhabiting an unalienated, impulsive—formerly called “primitive”—state of consciousness. The Cobra manifesto called for direct collective aesthetic action: “an organic experimental collaboration which eschews every sterile and dogmatic theory.”²⁸ Michel Ragon, the young French critic who promoted the group since its conception in Paris, signaled a new and final stage of modernist primitivism in Cobra, an art that foregrounded the spontaneous material creation available to any artist:

19. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vol. 2, trans. Monique Layton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 273–274.

20. E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pp. 196–197.

21. J.-P. Sartre, “Preface” to Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), p. 26. See also Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Nagel, 1946).

22. P. Ricoeur, “Universal Civilization and National Cultures,” in his *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p. 278.

23. Mancoba, excerpt of a 1953 letter published in *Le Musée Vivant*, translated in *In the Name of All Humanity: The African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba*, ed. Bridget Thompson (Cape Town: Art and Ubuntu Trust, 2006), p. 54.

24. C. Okeke, “Modern African Art,” in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*, ed. O. Enwezor (New York: Prestel, 2001), p. 29.

25. M. Kelly, “Humanism and National Unity: The Ideological Reconstruction of France,” in *The Culture of Reconstruction*, ed. Nicholas Hewitt (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), pp. 103–119.

26. See N. Adamson, *Painting, Politics, and the Struggle for the École de Paris, 1944–1964* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009), p. 233.

27. J. Dubuffet, “In Honor of Savage Values,” *RES* 46 (Autumn 2004): 259–268. Jorn, “Les formes conçues comme langage,” *Cobra* 2 (March 1949), n. p. See also M. Ragon, “Dubuffet et Cobra,” *Opus International* 82 (1981):34; and M. Draguet, “Jean Dubuffet et ses amitiés belges,” *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne* 77 (2001):71–79. See also K. Minturn, “Dubuffet, Lévi-Strauss, and the Idea of Art Brut,” *RES* 46 (Autumn 2004):247–258.

28. “La Cause était entendue,” signed by Appel, Constant, Corneille, Dotremont, Jorn, and Joseph Noiret, in J.-C. Lambert, *Cobra* (New York: Abbeville, 1983), p. 25.

"abstract art suggests the essence of things. . . . The sharpest intellect finds at the end of its path the most absolute primitivism."²⁹ While the term "primitivism" may appear in some Cobra writings, it does not account for the group's Surrealist-inspired anthropological investigations, dialogic and anti-specialist practices, or critique of the institutional exclusions of modernism that ultimately prevented these artists from fetishizing exotic cultures in the same way as earlier artists.

Cobra and popular expression

In order to position Cobra's contribution to the changes that occurred in Europe during the middle decades of the century, it is crucial to consider its various continuities and ruptures in relation to the prewar period. Like earlier avant-gardes from the Blaue Reiter to Surrealism, the Cobra artists considered both Western and non-Western art forms highly personal, anti-academic expressions of human subjectivity. The artists made countless paintings, poems, and books together, such as the "peintures-mots" made by Jorn and Dotremont for the November 1948 conference of the "International Center for the Documentation of the Art of the Avant-Garde." The event was organized by Noël Arnaud and René Passeron of the Revolutionary Surrealist group, already beset by internal schisms and the growing opposition of both the French Surrealists and the Communist Party out of which the group had formed. Jorn and Dotremont felt the conference had become too wrapped up in philosophical polemics, so they brought several word-paintings as their silent contribution—exuberant, collective, experimental, and interdisciplinary works featuring simplistic gestural figures and scrawled phrases, such as "a hand that does not exist encounters (in the night) a hand that will soon appear." They left the conference for the famous meeting at the bar of the Hôtel Nôtre-Dame on the Quai Saint-Michel, where they produced the manifesto of Cobra, proclaiming the perspective of Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam but also making a call "to artists of any country who are able to [. . .] join in what we are working towards."³⁰ In the "peintures-mots" and other works, Cobra celebrated the gesture not as an individual revelation, but as a manifestation of a singular subjectivity within a group identity. Both non-Western and especially folk art from Europe, from the "guldgubbe" (pre-Christian

Scandinavian image embossed in gold foil) reproduced on page one of the journal's first issue (March 1949) to the Dutch Sunday paintings reproduced in *Cobra* 4 (November 1949), symbolized a spontaneous, anonymous expression.

The Cobra idea of spontaneity developed directly out of Surrealist automatism, interpreted as a practice based on "the instant, on the magic of the second when things make themselves, on work as it is lived."³¹ However, the Cobra artists were very critical of the positions that André Breton developed upon his return from the United States in 1947, for what they perceived as a retreat of the orthodox Surrealists from revolutionary politics. While they maintained a powerful interest in automatism as a path towards individual and collective liberation from Western logocentrism, they redefined it through the perspective of peripheral or dissident surrealists, such as Gaston Bachelard (who wrote extensively on human imagination from a materialist point of view),³² Michel Leiris, Marcel Griaule, Alberto Giacometti, and Antonin Artaud.³³

The exuberance of Cobra artwork was a conscious choice to look forward rather than revisit the traumas of the war: Christian Dotremont announced the artists' interests "to proclaim the organic joy of the universe."³⁴ Much Cobra-period painting recalls the vivid, joyful colors and naïve forms of children's art and its reinterpretation by modern artists like Joan Miró or Paul Klee. Yet the artists did not simply embrace earlier notions of the "primitive" or a primitivist "style."³⁵ Cobra art presents a deliberately deskilled gestural expression, which signals artistic exuberance as a dialectical response to the specific historical situation of war and occupation arising from an inequitable society.³⁶

31. S. Vandercam, "Souvenirs et traces," *Cobra en Fange: Vandercam-Dotremont, Dessin-Ecriture-Matière, 1958-1960* (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1994), p. 32.

32. Bachelard is the only philosopher who also contributed an essay to the *Cobra* journal, on the practice of engraving. See G. Bachelard, "Notes d'un philosophe pour un graveur," *Cobra* no. 6 (1950):15.

33. S. Vandercam, "Souvenirs et traces," *Cobra en Fange: Vandercam-Dotremont, Dessin-Ecriture-Matière, 1958-1960* (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1994), p. 19.

34. C. Dotremont, catalogue preface for the exhibition Appel, Constant, Corneille (Galerie Colette Allendy, May 1949) in *Paris-Paris* (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1992), p. 224.

35. Willemijn Stokvis simplistically refers to Cobra as the "second great wave of Primitive Expressionism" in twentieth-century art in *Cobra: An International Movement in Art after the Second World War* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), p. 7.

36. See Constant, "Manifesto" (1948), in *ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

29. M. Ragon, "Les Mains éblouies," *Derrière le miroir* 32 (October, 1950), n. p.

30. Lambert (see note 28), p. 25.

Figure 3. Constant, *J'ai vu des ours blancs*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 144.3 x 109.6 cm. Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Aalborg.

Constant's 1949 painting *J'ai vu des ours blancs* (fig. 3), for example, recalls James Ensor's masks, children's art, Miró's biomorphic abstraction, and street graffiti, in a scene less celebratory than haunted by visions of the past. Such multigure compositions not only link Cobra works to children's art, but also signify intersubjective dialogue and rejection of the individualist tendencies of Surrealism. Constant's two-dimensional forms cannot fetishize cultural others because no specific subject is

more than suggested in the visual flux of the painting. Although Cobra statements occasionally restated primitivist tropes, such as the equation of childlike spontaneity and tribal culture, the imagery of its major artists belies any such assertions. Graham Birtwistle describes how the group also connected bourgeois culture to racial prejudice, critiqued Nazi primitivism as distinctly reactionary, and inspired later "counter-cultural" social provocations and reconsiderations of the

role of art in industrial societies in the 1960s.³⁷ In Cobra, the primitivism of artists like Appel, who wrote in 1947 that he was “now making a powerful primitive work, more primitive than Negro art and Picasso,” coexisted with explicit anti-colonial sentiments, such as those expressed by the poet Lucebert in the anti-colonialist poem “Love Letter to Our Tortured Bride Indonesia.”³⁸

Cobra also explicitly rejected humanism as a bourgeois individualist philosophy, revived by postwar Bretonian Surrealism, Existentialism, and Informel.³⁹ The Danish Pre-Cobra groups Linien (1934–1939) and Helhesten (1941–1944) had already critiqued modern humanism as bourgeois and problematized modernist primitivism in their writings on non-Western art. They developed all the major visual strategies of Cobra by 1945: the emphasis on spontaneously produced, deskilled gestural expression encompassing open-ended, semi-figural, symbolic forms. Linien and Helhesten questioned the definition of “the primitive” as other, adopting interwar Surrealism’s exemplary investigation of the primitive within Western culture in the anthropological research published in their journals. In the late 1930s, Linien artists Egill Jacobsen, Ejler Bille, Richard Mortensen, Ferlov, and Mancoba lived in Paris, where they often visited the Musée de l’Homme. In 1938, Bille and Jorn reviewed the newly opened museum, reporting the comment of museum director Jacques Soustelle that “primitive” art “does not exist” and that the development of culture in ancient Mexican art equals anything in ancient Greece.⁴⁰

For the Helhesten artists spontaneity and rhythm, linked by them to tribal art as well as to jazz and popular music, became manifestations of the centrality of creativity to social life. Rejecting the idea of “primitive” cultures as timeless, static, and traditionalist, the artists strove to create a “living art,” finding examples of it

in masks from Africa and Greenland, prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia, and animal carvings from nomads in China. They maintained that “it is a common and mistaken view that children think ‘magically,’ and in this vein people have compared them to primitive people, who in any case don’t think so differently from us, as one earlier assumed.”⁴¹ Jorn wrote that although Western writers commonly describe prehistoric people as living in fear of nature, this “terror” only exists in the European imagination.⁴² Helhesten argued that myths developed naturally out of everyday life, but that creativity itself opposed the “mythmaking” artists to the “believers of myth,” likely meaning the Nazi occupiers.⁴³ Myth for these artists signified a more authentic, universal human invention, manifested most directly in the combination of “immediate painterly spontaneity” and the form of the mask: “Primitive peoples [. . .], in order to express psychic experiences in dramatic form, [. . .] bring before the face a mask, which is something wholly different than a face. A totally new creature comes into being, neither animal nor human, created by the artist’s fantasy and in accord with human psychic needs.”⁴⁴ The turn to fantasy was less an escape than materialist recognition that imagination was fundamentally human, while its popular manifestations were suppressed by classical humanism. Ejler Bille used the term “dialectical” to emphasize the physical as opposed to the spiritual in their art, and noted that “Dialectics (Gr.) means the art of dialogue,” underscoring the Helhesten interest in the link between expression and community.⁴⁵ The emphasis on physicality was thus not only linked to the egalitarian politics of the Marxist tradition, but also to a broadly democratic understanding that viewed art as an open social communication.

With this artistic legacy, Cobra directly criticized the dichotomies of center/periphery, modern/primitive, high/low, and avant-garde/kitsch. It explored popular expression as a manifestation of what was once called the “primitive” both within and outside Western culture. Like the “primitive,” the “popular” is also a place-holder

37. G. Birtwistle, “Primitivism of the Left: Helhesten, Cobra, and Beyond,” *Cobra, 40 jaar later (Cobra, 40 years after): Collectie, J. Karel P. van Stuijvenberg* (Amsterdam: Nieuwe Kerk/Den Haag: SDU, 1988), pp. 37–44; Birtwistle, “Behind the Primitivism of Cobra,” in *Cobra: Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam*, ed. P. Shield (London: Hayward Gallery, 2003), pp. 20–29.

38. K. Appel, letter to Corneille, 1947; Lucebert, “Minnebrief aan onze gemartelde bruid Indonesia,” *Reflex* 2 (1949):3, cited in Birtwistle, “Behind the Primitivism of Cobra” (ibid.), pp. 25–27.

39. See Jorn, “Nya tendenser i Pariskonsten,” *Ny tid* (August 8, 1947), n.p.; Dotremont, “La Porte va enfin s’ouvrir tout à fait: du surréalisme à Cobra (1940–1948),” *L’Estaminet* 7 (1996):n.p.

40. E. Bille, “Nyaabnet afdeling af gammel amerikansk kunst i ‘menneskets museum.’ Trokadero, Paris,” *Nyt tidsskrift for kunstindustrie* 12 (1939):117.

41. J. Sigsgaard, “Naar børn tegner,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 4 (1941):117.

42. A. Jorn, “Yang-Yin: Det dialektisk-materialistiske livsprincip,” *A5. Meningsblad for unge arkitekter* 3, no. 4 (1947):28.

43. N. Lergaard, “Myten,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 3 (1941):65. This interest in “mythmaking” was in complete ignorance of the American “mythmakers” Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, and Barnett Newman.

44. A. Jorn et al., “Den ny realisme,” in *Høstudstillingen* (Copenhagen, 1945), n. p.

45. E. Bille, “Om nutidens grundlag for en skabende kunst,” *Helhesten* 2, no. 1 (1942):6.

for the political needs of groups who are excluded from power but attempting to claim their own values as legitimate, in the place of mainstream or hegemonic values.⁴⁶ In art history, the “primitive” has served a parallel function to the popular in politics, standing for the grotesque, the non-Western, the untrained, the instinctive, and a host of other discourses united only by their common rejection of the hegemonic, humanist discourse of classicism.⁴⁷ According to Ragon: “Just as art nègre had been the ferment of the cubist generation, the popular arts were a ferment for Cobra.”⁴⁸ By the Cobra period, the artists explicitly espoused “popular” art—meaning spontaneous, irreverent expression—and critiqued “populist” art, especially social realism, as an aesthetic imposed onto others.⁴⁹ The post-Marxist exploration of popular art combined with an interest in expressive abstraction led the Cobra artists to view non-Western arts as forms of popular expression. They proclaimed that “popular art is the brother of experimental art.”⁵⁰ The interest in the popular also set Cobra in opposition to the postwar artistic tendencies of Informel and Abstract Expressionism then becoming hegemonic in the Euro-American art world, defined as it was by a trans-Atlantic struggle for preeminence. The deskilled forms of Cobra art rejected the postwar discourse of gestural abstraction as the trace of a privileged human subject. The group reconceived the artist not as a talented individual, but as a member of a popular community, attempting to speak consciously from the margins.

The November 1949 issue of *Cobra* was devoted explicitly to folk art, including discussions of non-Western art. Jorn, Ragon, and Dotremont planned Cobra’s ninth issue (never published) as a sort of “catalogue of the Musée de l’Homme,” to feature images and texts about its collections.⁵¹ The April 1950 issue included articles on popular Italian, German, and Danish Medieval art, letters from Gaston Chaissac and Dubuffet,

and an article on African art by the Belgian Cobra member Luc Zangrie (Luc de Heusch). Zangrie would later do fieldwork in Congo after studying ethnology with Marcel Griaule in 1951–1952 and become a professor of anthropology in Brussels. He describes the social function of ancestor statues he discovered among the Basumba (Boyo) people of Congo, asserting that “there is no popular art among the Basumba [. . .]. There is only an art of religion and of belief.”⁵² His account problematizes the conception of a single Cobra position on either primitivism or popular art and disrupts the romantic tendencies of Cobra’s celebration of the popular by analyzing the social function of the objects. The post-Surrealist dialogue between modern art and ethnography in Cobra led to a recognition that the reality of tribal cultures forces a redefinition of existing categories of art, religion, and the popular.

In some ways the mythic turn of art after the 1930s globally replaced the earlier idea of the artist communicating to the oppressed masses with a new conception of the artist reaching an audience now conceived to be universal rather than class-based.⁵³ Yet for Jorn and Constant class remained a site of critique. They conceived creative expression as a universal potential, but one not universally recognized; it was a human capacity directly opposed to the bourgeois humanism exemplified in the abstract-expressive painting promoted by the French government in the 1950s as an international style. Nevertheless, this recognition of the politics of freedom of expression did not lead the majority of Cobra artists to relate their own understanding of expression to the political hegemony of Western culture over the colonized world, because they conceived of themselves as socially marginalized and opposed to nationalism. By the Cobra period, explicit references to non-Western art become less prominent than the discourse of spontaneity, inspired by popular and children’s art conceived as expressions opposed to the institutionalized art world. As Constant stated in 1948: “The satisfaction of that primitive need for vital expression is the driving force of life [. . .]. As such it is the property of all and for this reason every limitation that reduces art to the preserve of a small

46. E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: New Left Books, 2005). On Cobra’s relation to the popular, see K. Kurczynski, “Asger Jorn, Popular Art, and the Kitsch-Avant-Garde,” in *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. M. Kjellman-Chapin (London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, forthcoming 2010).

47. Connelly (note 7), p. 32.

48. M. Ragon, *Cobra, dix ans après* (Paris: Galerie Mathias Fels, 1961), n.p.

49. C. Dotremont, “Le ‘Réalisme-Socialiste’ contre la Révolution,” *Cobra* brochure, 1950.

50. Quoted in Ragon “Dubuffet et Cobra” (see note 27), p. 34.

51. M. Ragon, *Karel Appel: De Cobra à un art autre, 1948–1957* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 107.

52. L. Zangrie, “Sur le terrain des Basumba,” *Cobra* 6 (1950):16. On Luc de Heusch’s ethnography and films, see *Cobra en Afrique*, special issue of *Revue de l’Université de Bruxelles* 3–4 (1991), ed. A. Nysenholc.

53. S. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 113.

group of specialists, connoisseurs and virtuosi must be removed."⁵⁴ As critical outsiders, they did not view their belief in the universal possibility of spontaneous expression as a colonial privilege. Like Dubuffet and Lévi-Strauss, who also promoted revisionist views of non-Western culture, the Cobra artists for the most part did not directly address the politics of colonialism. This failure to conceptualize the radically unequal opportunity for expression in colonized communities prevented Cobra from taking full account of the post-colonial perspective of Mancoba, who was doubly marginalized by the impossibility for the mainstream Western art world to seriously legitimize any sort of modern non-Western cultural expression at that time.

Mancoba's "common humanity"

Mancoba's story is central to reconceiving Cobra primitivism as more than just another colonialist enterprise. In the 1920s and '30s, even as he participated in the New African intellectual movement, Mancoba, a devout Christian, carved religious wood sculptures in South Africa. When offered a position carving "native art" for tourists (which he refused), he realized that his future was limited as both a citizen or an artist in his home country, where apartheid would begin a decade later.⁵⁵ Mancoba entered the discourse of primitivism just as the Euro-American Cobra artists did, through the literature on African art that documented the growing private collections of it in Europe. Enthused by his reading of Guillaume and Munro's *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, he decided to continue his studies in Europe, hoping for a vibrant exchange about the nature of art and identity. Upon arriving there, he found authentic dialogue impossible. He recalls: "Only a few were ready to draw the consequences of their admiration for African art, in the more general consideration of the one who made them: the African man."⁵⁶ Mancoba's first friends in Paris were Danish Linien artists Christian Poulsen, Ejler Bille, and his future wife. She introduced Mancoba to the Giacometti brothers, who became close friends.

In 1940, Mancoba was interned in a camp in St. Denis for four years because of his British-South African citizenship, an experience that further intensified his social marginalization. This was just after he had made

his first abstract painting (fig. 2), a primitivist work in direct dialogue with Linien and Helhesten works. Mancoba creates masklike forms in vivid modernist colors, with no direct relation to particular precedents, using gestural lines in a shallow painterly space. He deliberately referenced his own region's cultural heritage; the jagged forms recall South African textiles or beadwork rather than West African masks. At the same time, the Helhesten group theorized that the mask symbolized a collective experience, manifested through a singular, playful viewpoint.⁵⁷ The mask signaled that fantasy always developed as a personal interpretation of a collective form.

Before and after the war, Mancoba frequented the Musée de l'Homme with Ferlov, and became friends with Madeleine Roussouw who edited the museum's journal *Le Musée Vivant*. In its 1953 issue, Mancoba wrote: "Today, more than any other moment in the history of mankind, we must realize that we can no longer live in isolation (nationally, racially, or socially) in this world; we must adapt to the aspirations and needs of others as well."⁵⁸ Mancoba's words may seem like a common postwar humanist response to the traumatic experience of World War II, but they were also a radical claim for human subjectivity from someone not recognized as human on the same level as a European. His words responded to the increasing calls for recognition among African intellectuals in postwar France, such as Aimé Césaire and Leopold Sedar Senghor, the theorists of the colonial independence movements. Mancoba supported their efforts, even if he did not agree with their partisanship, which seemed to divide what he considered the "truth of our common humanity."⁵⁹ His critical humanism coexisted in Cobra with Jorn, Dotremont, and Constant's rejection of the bourgeois humanism of Bretonian Surrealism and Existentialism.

After the war, Mancoba and Ferlov moved to Denmark and became members of the artist's exhibition society Høst. In November 1948, Høst supported the first public exhibition of Cobra only eleven days after the group's formation at the Café Notre-Dame in Paris.⁶⁰ Although Ferlov and Mancoba embraced the

57. See M. Mussari, "Farvens Sprog: The Masks of Egill Jacobsen," *Scandinavian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2004):489–499.

58. E. Mancoba, excerpt of a 1953 letter published in *Le Musée Vivant*, translated in Bridget Thompson, "Beyond the Western Paradigm," *In the Name of All Humanity* (see note 23), pp. 53–54.

59. Mancoba did not agree with the counter-concept of "negritude," because he stated that the "truth of our common humanity" could not be proven, but must be understood "instinctively" with "identification and love." Mancoba (see note 55), p. 16.

54. Constant, "Manifesto," *Reflex* 1 (September–October 1948) in Stokvis (see note 35), p. 29.

55. E. Mancoba, "An Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 18 (Spring–Summer 2003):14.

56. Mancoba (*ibid.*), p. 18.

Cobra movement and the continuing existence of Høst, the Danish members of Høst split rancorously over artistic differences among the representational, abstract, and geometric camps in 1949.⁶¹ In the wake of Høst's demise, Ferlov and Mancoba returned to Paris. Mancoba expressed later his memory of "silent opposition" to his presence in Høst and his relationship to Ferlov, in which he felt "in their eye, some sort of 'invisible man' or merely the consort of a European woman artist."⁶² This opposition related not only to his and Ferlov's espousal of abstract tendencies that appeared at the time quite radical to the other Høst members, but also to his denunciation of South African politics ("it seems that the time had not quite come in 1950 for the question to be clearly posed," he recalls).⁶³ Mancoba's situation, on the margins of a marginalized group of European artists at a time when he and his colleagues shared an increasing ambivalence about primitivism, contrasts strongly with the more successful Afro-Chinese Cuban artist Wifredo Lam. Lam, another artist of color who entered the dialogue of primitivism via his exposure to both African and modern art in Europe, showed with Cobra in its 1951 exhibition in Liège and remained close friends with Jorn. He was celebrated by Picasso and the Surrealists since his move from Madrid to Paris in 1938.⁶⁴ Lam achieved success by constructing a persona as a "living primitive," deliberately embracing in his art the Afro-Cuban spirituality of his own culture, which he knew made his work more compelling to the Surrealists. Mancoba later observed that the difference between them also stemmed from Lam's background as a Creole man from an independent country, as opposed to his own uncertain political status as a South African during the formation of apartheid.⁶⁵

Rather than claim a privileged relation to the primitive as Lam had done, Mancoba moved quickly out of a primitivizing style and toward a more general lyric abstraction that refused overt references to African art. The contrast is striking between his overtly confrontational mask painting of 1940 (fig. 2) and

Figure 4. Ernest Mancoba, *Painting*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 35 x 27 cm. Museum Jorn, Silkeborg. Photo: Lars Bay.

his Cobra-period painting of 1950 (fig. 4), in which the surface is evenly covered with a loosely sketched scaffolding of gridded and slanted lines shaded with muted colors, framing glowing colors emerging from raw canvas. Like Ferlov's abstract sculpture, his paintings eschewed the grotesque semi-figuration of the more well-known Cobra artists in favor of a lyric gestural abstraction more typical of the Danish artists of Høst. His work synthesizes multiple artistic references and historical meanings. The 1950 painting evokes not only the geometries of South African textiles and the West African Kota ancestor figures he referenced throughout his later life, but also the chalky textures of early Christian frescoes in rural Danish churches.⁶⁶ While the Cobra group transformed folk symbols into childlike gestural scribbles, Mancoba embraced lyric abstraction

60. Invited to exhibit at Høst, the Dutch artists flew to Denmark almost immediately after the signing of the Cobra manifesto. Lambert (see note 28), pp. 103–106.

61. G. Jespersen, *De Abstrakte: Historien om en kunstnergeneration*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen: Palle Fogtdal, 1991), pp. 182–183.

62. Mancoba (see note 55), p. 20.

63. Ibid.

64. See L. Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923–1982* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

65. Mancoba (see note 55), p. 20.

66. Elza Miles, *Lifeline out of Africa: The Art of Ernest Mancoba* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1994), pp. 50–54.

for its universality. For the rest of his life, he claimed that “my people are the people of the whole world.”⁶⁷ He recalled that, in opposition to the activism of his New Africa Movement colleagues, “I believed, on the contrary, that Art was precisely also a means to produce a greater consciousness in Man, which, for me, is highly part of the struggle for any human liberation.”⁶⁸

Recent scholarship underscores the significance of Mancoba’s work in developing a modernism both specific to Africa and broadly humanist.⁶⁹ It was this universal outlook, however radical from a post-colonial perspective, that effectively separated him from the Cobra critique of humanism from within as a philosophy linked to hegemonic social institutions under bourgeois capitalism. In the era of Abstract Expressionism and Informel, for a black artist to assert a universal humanity by means of the painted gesture was completely illegible to audiences who still expected artists of color to paint recognizable, preferably naïve, scenes of their own people. Mancoba’s marginalization in Cobra, in this sense, directly parallels the marginalization of Norman Lewis in Abstract Expressionism, in contrast to the relative success of an African-American figurative modernist like Jacob Lawrence.⁷⁰ The unacknowledged racist structure of the art world paralleled the broader social landscape in which liberation theorists like Fanon were attempting to argue for a “new man,” a complete and autonomous subject of post-colonial history, just as the incipient Structuralist movement was beginning to break down the humanist legacy. We have yet to fully acknowledge the cultural consequences of these crossed purposes, in which people of color argued for their full personhood just as Western theorists were moving, in Lévi-Strauss’s words, “not to consitute, but to dissolve man.”⁷¹ According to Rasheed Araeen, “Mancoba’s achievement flies in the face of all the binaries that are constructed by colonialism—White/Black, Coloniser/

Colonised, Self/Other, Modern/Primitive, etc.—and whose legacies continue to undermine the freedom of the postcolonial liberated subject, by denying him/her a place within the geneology of mainstream modernism.”⁷² This statement also pinpoints the reasons for illegibility of Mancoba’s work to the art world at the time, since black artists remained firmly positioned as the deprived term in such binary oppositions until decolonization permanently changed the cultural landscape. Even as Cobra’s position within the geneology of modernism remains fraught, Mancoba deserves a place alongside it.

The contradictory legacies of Cobra after 1951

Upon the demise of Cobra, many of the artists involved in the group continued to develop dialogues between cultures that questioned the assumptions of primitivism, using different strategies. These artists underwent a period of redefinition and self-questioning as to the possibility of art to enact social changes, a process felt with increasing urgency in the 1950s. Not only were new political issues coming to the fore, including decolonization, but the Cobra art works, once marginalized from the metropolitan art market, were increasingly celebrated by fashionable Parisian critics associated with Informel and Tachisme, such as Michel Tapié and Charles Estienne. As a consequence, the purported critical impact of new works by former Cobra artists changed significantly. Whereas former members like Appel and Corneille seem to have readily consented to Cobra’s commercial success and continued relatively comfortably to produce (and to sell increasingly expensively) pictorial and sculptural works in the same kind of gestural style for the next decades, Jorn and Constant were highly critical of Cobra’s posthumous popularity in the 1950s.⁷³

Jorn produced extensive theoretical writings and illustrated books that complemented his ironic, pseudo-expressionist painting strategies. His books continued to champion popular art or *folkekunst*. Jorn specified that folk art is not “primitive,” but an art that rejects classical art.⁷⁴ His theoretical writings from the late

67. Interview with Bridget Thompson, quoted in *In the Name of All Humanity* (see note 23), p. 13.

68. Mancoba (see note 55), p. 15.

69. O. Oguike, “Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art,” *Third Text* 16, no. 3 (2002):243–259; O. Oguike, “The True Location of Ernest Mancoba’s Modernism,” and Bridget Thompson, “The African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba,” *Third Text* 19, no. 4 (July 2005):419–422.

70. See A. Gibson, “Norman Lewis: ‘How to Get Black,’” in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. K. Mercer (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 102–123.

71. Lévi-Strauss (see note 18), p. 247. On Fanon’s “new man” and Structuralism, see K. Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 157–165.

72. R. Araeen, “Modernity, Modernism, and Africa’s Place in the History of Art of Our Age,” *Third Text* 19, no. 4 (July 2005):417.

73. Appel also produced several murals in the context for the UNESCO and for the World Exhibition in Brussels in 1958, turning the “Cobra style” into an affirmative type of promotion for the Dutch nation-state on the international stage. See the SI’s critique of Appel: “Ce que sont les amis de Cobra and ce qu’ils représentent” (note 5).

74. A. Jorn, “L’art du peuple,” eight-page handwritten, unpublished manuscript, ca. 1951, Asger Jorn archives, Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, n.p.

1940s described peasant culture and the early stages of human agriculture as a golden age of human collectivity in which popular creativity flourished. Yet, despite his idealization of early agriculture, Jorn did not explicitly condemn either city life or mass-produced kitsch. Rather, he focused on promoting existing forms of rural folk culture and attempting to link them to the socialist conception of the urban proletariat. He saw this folk culture manifest not only in relics of the past, like ancient Scandinavian rock paintings or Medieval church graffiti, but also in contemporary popular festivals, discussed in the finished volumes of his planned series of twenty-eight books of photographic, artistic, and anthropological investigations of "10,000 Years of Nordic Folk Art."⁷⁵ These books explored ancient, non-Western, tribal, and decorative art of all sorts dialogically, with texts by an international team of archaeologists and anthropologists, whose viewpoints sometimes directly contradicted each other. Jorn's project further developed Clifford's "Surrealist moment in ethnography" by dwelling on the primacy of the image, through pictorial sequences entirely separated from the textual analysis in moments of poetic rupture. The publications intervened directly in the consolidation of ethnography as a discipline even as it was given renewed social-scientific legitimacy by Structuralism.⁷⁶ The conception of their subject as "folk" rather than "primitive" art redefined them as politically marginalized, rather than culturally underdeveloped.

Several of the former Cobra artists traveled extensively across Europe in the mid-1950s. Of the many countries they visited, Italy provided both Jorn and Constant with a new context to develop more critical projects that aspired to go beyond Cobra primitivism as a normalized "style." Jorn was the first to visit the Mediterranean country. Due to poor health, he was forced to stay in sanatoriums for several months, ending up in the small village of Albisola, where he was invited by the artist Enrico Baj. It is during his stay at the Chalet Perce-Neige in the Canton de Vaud that he discovered that the Swiss artist and designer Max Bill, formerly a student at the

Dessau Bauhaus, was actively involved in the creation of a "new Bauhaus" in the West German city of Ulm. In 1953, Jorn wrote several letters to Bill, hoping to get a teaching position at this newly founded Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG), which rapidly led to a series of misunderstandings. As a response to Bill's rejection of the allegedly "retardaire" expressionism of Cobra, Jorn decided to create the provisional International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (IMIB), a loose collective under whose name he presented a public statement at the Milan Triennale of 1954, eventually published as "Against Functionalism." First, Jorn sought to expand his pictorial and sculptural experiments by associating them with the wider spheres of handicrafts and industrial production, and secondly, he set out to critique, in a series of essays eventually anthologized in the book *Pour la Forme*, the kind of techno-primitivism that rejects the liberatory potential of science and technology. As Jorn declared in 1957: "What is the IMIB? It is the answer to the question WHERE AND HOW to find a justified place for artists in the machine age. [. . .] We want the same economic and practical means and possibilities that are already at the disposal of scientific research, of whose great results everyone is aware."⁷⁷ In this context, Jorn invited to Albisola a shifting international group of former Surrealist, Cobra, and independent artists to develop ceramics, wall decorations, and architectural proposals that moved beyond formalized primitivism into a spontaneous exploration of both natural and synthetic materials in order to revive local artisan traditions and to promote collective ways of life. Contrary to Appel's forays into public art for bureaucratic, commercial, or national institutions, Jorn maintained his distance from such projects, as well as from the metropolitan art world with its temptation to resort to a single, legible, and repeatable practice. Instead, in parallel to his anthropological research and artist's book projects, his new works in ceramic were meant to evoke the much less visible but equally viable aesthetic traditions of the small Italian village of Albisola, where artisans and artists had been collaborating for decades.

Art historians frequently note two important influences on the work produced by the members of the IMIB: the collaborative ceramic production of Joan

75. These include *Skånes Stensulptur under 1100-tallet* [*Skanic Stone Sculpture of the 1100s*] (Copenhagen, 1965) and the posthumously published *Folk Art in Greenland Throughout a Thousand Years* (Cologne: Walther König, 2001). See A. Nordbrandt Fuchs, "Asger Jorn and Art History," *Hafnia* 10 (1985):128–146.

76. Jorn and Noël Arnaud directly parodied Lévi-Strauss's *Le Cru et le cuit* in their book *La Langue verte et la cuite, étude gastrophonique sur la marmythologie musiculinaire* (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert/La Bibliothèque d'Alexandrie, 1968).

77. A. Jorn, "Notes on the Formation of an Imaginist Bauhaus" (1957), in *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City*, ed. Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani, 1998), pp. 35–36.

Miró with Josep Llorens Artigas, as well as that of Pablo Picasso in Vallauris, the small village on the French Riviera that the artist inhabited in the 1940s.⁷⁸ Yet often overlooked as an influence is the work of Italian Futurist artists and designers during the interwar period, whose own work maintained a particular relationship to primitivism and populism. In 1954, Jorn first visited the Fabbrica Ceramiche Mazzotti, a workshop owned by the Italian Futurist ceramicist and poet Tullio Mazzotti (also known as Tullio d'Albisola).⁷⁹ Mazzotti rapidly became Jorn's friend and collaborator throughout the middle decades of the century, and even introduced him to several other postwar avant-garde artists, such as Lucio Fontana. In the small exhibition space on the first floor, Jorn discovered with much interest the superbly colorful and stylized ceramics of the Mazzotti family and those of Bruno Munari, Giuseppe Mario Anselmo, Ivos Pacetti, and Fortunato Depero (some of which were later shown in the "Futurist Ceramics" exhibition organized by the IMIB in Alba in 1956). These artists, and others like Farfa and Enrico Prampolini, were an integral part of what is normally referred to as "Second Futurism," when F. T. Marinetti encouraged the artists in the movement, shortly after the publication of the famous manifesto "Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe" of March 1915, to create small institutional structures that would help popularize and disseminate a playful Futurist aesthetic into the daily life of the masses through fashion, craft, and industrial design. By the 1930s, many Futurists had moved away from the techno-utopian imagery of Antonio Sant'Elia and instead become interested in the ingenuity of popular craft and the exuberant formal qualities of the simplified and colorful shapes of local peasant art and architecture. As noted by Michelangelo Sabatino, for example, Fortunato Depero's imagery was indebted to the folk arts, crafts, and architecture of southern Italy: "[T]he peasants of Capri are celebrated for their primitive exuberance, which was equated with modernity in contrast to the detached self-containment of nineteenth-century academic painting and subject

matter."⁸⁰ This interest in folk customs was not limited to a set of formal motifs—in the 1920s, Depero also opened a workshop similar to Mazzotti's in Rovereto, where local artisans, most of them women, produced handcrafted furniture, tapestries, and ceramics.

Even if Jorn expressed interest in Second Futurism, the works produced by the IMIB at the first "Incontro della Ceramica"—an event held at Mazzotti's ceramic workshop during the summer of 1954—were markedly different. First, contrary to the Futurists, the Imaginists did not adapt peasant motifs. Also, while both make abundant use of colorful patterns, the Imaginist ceramics were produced through deskilling and collective experimentation and not by hired artisan women. The artists, with the assistance of Mazzotti, were joined by children and non-professionals to create dozens of small sculptures and ceramics. Most of them were hastily created out of clay, a readily available material during postwar scarcity and also one connected to the Ligurian ceramic tradition. Jorn, Roberto Matta, and Corneille, who were most prolific, painted on ceramic objects in a gestural, automatist, and spontaneous manner with colorful, semi-translucent glazes—very different from Second Futurism's predominantly Déco style (fig. 5). Some of the ceramics represented animals, much like in Munari's various toys, while others were shaped like irregular plates featuring figurative elements, evocative of the strange, formless creatures found in the work of Miró and Artigas. Most of the ceramics were made collectively and all of the group's creations were later exhibited outdoors, in a small public space (fig. 6) in another attempt to emulate outdoor fairs, bazaars, and flea markets—vernacular modes of exhibition, distribution, and consumption that commodity culture has displaced or submerged. According to Jorn, truly modern art belongs to the life of the "people," meaning simply to local communities (however, it should be noted that Jorn, as a long-time communist, had always been opposed to the Fascist corporatist ideology, which made similar populist claims). As he explained in a short *Cobra* article titled "Art Without Borders," this attitude should not be confused with a form of reactionary nationalism or a return to the earth similar to the one that occurred during the "retour à l'ordre." For Jorn, to be

78. See "Una occasione forse decisiva per l'artigianato italiano," *Domus* 226, no. 1 (1948):24–38; and Stokvis, "COBRA and Ceramics," in *The Unexpected: Artists' Ceramics of the 20th Century*, ed. J. Koplos et al. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), pp. 143–157.

79. Tullio d'Albisola was involved with several Second Futurist exhibitions, where he showed many of his ceramics. He also wrote a book on artisanal ceramics, *La Ceramica Popolare Ligure* (Milano: Edizioni del Milione, 1964). On the history of Futurist ceramics, see E. Crispoliti, *La Ceramica Futurista da Balla a Tullio d'Albisola* (Florence: Centro Di, 1982).

80. M. Sabatino, "Back to the Drawing Board? Revisiting the Vernacular Tradition in Italian Modern Architecture," *Annali di Architettura* 16 (2004):174. See also M. Sabatino, "Tabula Rasa or Hybridity? Primitivism in Futurist and Rationalist Architecture," in *Futurism and the Technological Imagination*, ed. G. Berghaus (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 287–314.

Figure 5. Page from the Imaginist journal *Eristica*, no. 1, 1954. Courtesy of Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.

internationalist meant to be especially attentive to one's own (as well as to others') vernacular traditions, not in a primitivist fetishism but rather a process of open-minded reinterpretation.⁸¹ In that sense, the Incontro created a ludic experimental space for artists and for the local population: The mass-production of hundreds of objects became a way of developing new creative networks

to question the role of commercial standardization, demonstrating how both industrial and artisanal production could be deskilled. A year later, in 1955, Jorn's children and other kids from the local population of Albisola decorated hundreds of white plates, further emphasizing how non-professionals could be involved in the creation of everyday objects. Jorn's essay "Structure and Change" does not idealize the child's creativity as a form of pure expression as in earlier primitivist discourses, but considers it equally worthy of interest

81. A. Jorn, "L'Art sans frontières," *Cobra* 6 (1950):6.

Figure 6. Photograph of the Incontro della Ceramica exhibition, Albisola, 1954. Published in Asger Jorn, *Pour la Forme: Ébauche d'une Méthodologie des Arts* (Paris: Internationale Situationniste, 1958). Courtesy of Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.

as the work of mature designers, hence "questioning the role of intelligence and of knowledge in artistic creation."⁸²

When Constant rejoined the IMIB for the first Congress of Free Artists held in Alba in July 1956, he became one of the most vocal opponents to Jorn's positions. Constant's post-Cobra work is radically different from what he had done at the turn of the 1950s: Not only did he proclaim that he gave up easel painting completely after 1951, but he also rejected Cobra's emphasis on the expressive gesture. He instead chose to work in an abstract-geometrical style closer to that embraced by the Soviet Constructivists and the De Stijl artists in the 1920s. Constant refashioned himself as a designer, in collaboration with the young Team 10 architect Aldo van Eyck. Before joining him in Italy, Constant sent a letter to Jorn, in which he declared: "What I have in mind when I propose to collaborate with you is to counter the functionalist tendency. [. . .] You know me well enough to know that I've always opposed such a tendency, but I am enough of a realist to know

not to combat functionalism without a conception of a similar order. That is what Cobra lacked."⁸³ In other words, Constant proposed that the IMIB combat Max Bill's so-called "functionalism" by developing a counter-discourse on the human habitat, instead of producing handmade, collectible objects on the margins of industrialized society. This led him to create a series of horizontal sculptures to be seen not as art, but as potentially achievable architectural proposals. With these early maquettes, inspired in part by Aldo van Eyck's playgrounds, Constant set the terms for his New Babylon project (which he further developed in a vast series of models, drawings, prints, and books from 1956 to 1973). New Babylon was clearly a megastructural, technoutopian project advocating the liberatory potential of free play made possible by total, worldwide automation. It is rarely mentioned that Constant's encounter with the Zingari, the population of gypsies who lived on the outskirts of Alba, led the artist to devise his very first

82. A. Jorn, "Structure et Changement," (1956) in *Pour la Forme: Ébauche d'une Méthodologie des Arts* (Paris: Allia, 2001), p. 70.

83. Constant, letter to Jorn, July 31, 1956, n.p. Constant archives, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, Holland. See also Constant, "Sur nos moyens et nos perspectives," *Internationale Situationniste* 2 (December 1958):21–26.

Figure 7. Photograph by Victor E. Nieuwenhuys of Constant, *Ontwerp voor zigeunkerkamp* (*Model for a Gypsy Camp*), 1956. Stainless steel, aluminum, plexiglass, oil on wood, 21 x 130 cm (8.3 x 51.2 in). Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

model, a circular, tent-like tensegrity structure called *Model for a Gypsy Camp*, 1956 (fig. 7).⁸⁴

Constant never explains in what ways the gypsies influenced him, nor does he explain his knowledge about their actual way of life. His statement remains purposely vague and ahistorical: It is the image of the gypsies that inspired him, as some kind of uncanny

84. He would later describe his encounter as follows: "[The Zingari] lit their fires, hung their tents from the pillars to protect or isolate themselves, improvised shelters with the aid of boxes and planks left behind by the traders. [. . .] They'd closed off the space between some caravans with planks and petrol cans, they'd made an enclosure, a Gypsy Town. That was the day I conceived the scheme for a permanent encampment for the gypsies of Alba and that project is the origin of the series of maquettes of New Babylon. Of a New Babylon where, under one roof, with the aid of moveable elements, a shared residence is built; a temporary, constantly remodeled living area; a camp for nomads on a planetary scale." Constant, "New Babylon," in *New Babylon*, exh. cat. (The Hague: Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1973), n.p.

return, at the edges of commodity culture, of historically repressed customs based on nomadism, barter, appropriation, and the use-value of objects. Yet, at this point in time, very few Zingari were actually nomadic. In Italy, most lived permanently with their extended family on strips of land allocated by the local *comune* (as was the case in Alba), or were sometimes integrated in social housing programs. So why choose his encounter with the Zingari as some kind of originary moment for New Babylon? His motivations seem to be overdetermined. World War II ended only about ten years earlier, and it was becoming better known that hundreds of thousands of gypsies had been killed by the Nazis, a fact that surely affected Constant's favorable vision of the gypsies as outsiders existing *within* oppressive European civilization instead of in an exotic locale. Also, this statement revisits some familiar tropes derived from Western art and architectural theory, in particular that of nomads gathered around an outdoor bonfire as the image of an unmediated community. The tendency for

European artists to more or less romanticize nomadism as a critique of bourgeois normalcy also has a long-standing history (especially in the nineteenth-century bohemian literature).⁸⁵ Similarly, in Constant's project, the image of gypsy culture is instrumentalized to support and legitimize his claims that habitation is a ludic and appropriative practice. The Zingari "improvised shelters with the aid of boxes and planks left behind by the traders": By appropriating the scraps left behind by capitalism, Constant argued, one could envision the future of humankind, no longer at work, the *homo faber*, but at play, the *homo ludens*.

Constant's challenging of previous primitivist discourses paradoxically enabled their re-introduction, albeit under a techno-utopian guise. He suggested that dwelling is about mobility and appropriating what is at hand. Yet his goal as an architect was to create fixed images and models of the futuristic structures to be lived in. If the gypsies indeed "improvised shelters" using discarded scraps, the materials used by Constant for his models were industrial: Plexiglas, Lucite, aluminum, tension wires, and so on. Similarly, to construct his utopian city he advocated the use of modern materials, which were clearly not available to the ordinary person. In a speech delivered in Alba in 1956, Constant declared: "One need only mention concrete or steel casts, thin sheets of steel-reinforced concrete, stainless or non-oxidizing metals and their welds, to get some idea of the means currently available to a free and audacious imagination."⁸⁶ To avoid such blatant contradictions, Constant alludes to the "mobile elements" of New Babylon and of the gypsy camp (shaped like a bicycle wheel, perhaps to suggest movement). However, he never really explained how these mechanisms would work, nor if they formed part of the models themselves, which were perfectly static. The architectural historian Mark Wigley suggests that Constant eventually reverted back to drawing and painting in a gestural manner, as he had during his Cobra days, precisely because his models were too static and could not convey the dynamism of his utopian vision.⁸⁷ This led him back to the same

artistic means favored by the postwar Surrealists that he had rejected as ineffective a few years before.

The Situationists indeed argued that postwar Surrealism lacked political agency because it never went beyond the passive depiction of liberated subjects and societies and, as a consequence, its experimentalism was easily co-opted by advertising and by the culture industry.⁸⁸ Sculpture and painting, as privileged activities, could no longer actively transform society, whereas architecture and urbanism could potentially do so by creating interactive physical environments (by using sound, light, and movement to create "ambiances").⁸⁹

This disavowal was again partial: Constant's first architectural models, such as the "gypsy encampment," were in fact based on Surrealist works. Indeed, in an interview shortly before his death, Constant admitted that his first architectural models were inspired by the work of Giacometti, especially his ethnographic-primitivist horizontal board-game sculptures like *On Ne Joue Plus*.⁹⁰ This influence, however, was concealed by Constant's decision to work with hi-tech material instead of natural materials, such as wood. Like his Surrealist predecessors, Constant could not resolve the tensions inherent in his utopian practices. New Babylon continued to exhibit a primitivist logic (in displaced but related concepts like ludic creativity, perceived as a more authentic form of human interaction) and resisted direct political activism and confrontation, remaining mostly ineffective in changing the urban reality of the time. Much more politically progressive, perhaps, was Gallizio's direct and far less romantic involvement with the gypsies, as he defended their rights at the Alba *comune*. In a series of public hearings, Gallizio tried to secure them their civil rights against the repression by the Italian police. As a result of Gallizio's interventions, the Zingari community was also able to publicly argue on their own behalf, demanding not only housing rights, but also the reeducation of their own

85. M. Brown, *Gypsies and Other Bohemians: The Myth of the Artist in Nineteenth Century France* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985).

86. Constant, "Tomorrow, Life Will Reside in Poetry" (1956), in *New Babylon: The Hyper Architecture of Desire*, ed. M. Wigley (Rotterdam: 010, 1998), p. 78.

87. M. Wigley, "Paper, Scissors, Blur," in *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*, ed. C. de Zegher and M. Wigley (New York: The Drawing Center, 2001), pp. 27–56.

88. Situationist International, "Amère victoire du surréalisme," *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958):3–4.

89. In a manifesto signed by Constant, Jorn, Guy Debord, and several others, the Situationists proclaimed: "Against unilateral art, situationist culture will be an *art of dialogue*, an art of interaction. Today artists [. . .] have been completely separated from society, just as they are separated from each other by competition. But faced with this impasse of capitalism, art has remained essentially unilateral in response. This enclosed era of primitivism must be superseded by complete communication." "Manifeste, 17 mai 1960," *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 4 (June 1960):37. The authors' emphasis.

90. B. H. D. Buchloh, "A Conversation with Constant," in *The Activist Drawing* (note 87), pp. 14–25.

community to foster more productive cohabitation with the Italians.⁹¹ Even though Gallizio, who was obsessed with premodern culture, may have shared with Constant similar primitivizing views of the Zingari, he nevertheless resisted the attempt to see them simply as an image, and instead chose to work with them as a community activist whose role was to create zones of resistance within everyday life.

Constant's ideal was to create a space based on "mobility, and the disorientation it produces [which] facilitates contact between people . . . endowing social relations with a perfect openness."⁹² His goal to create a universally accessible "social space" resisted any opposition of self versus other in a continual opening onto new social interactions. Constant also notably framed his vision as a potential space of interracial dialogue, however utopian. He believed this ludic social interaction would result in "both the disappearance of racial differences and the fusion of populations into a new race, the world-wide race of New Babylonians," like a sci-fi version of Mancoba's "common humanity."⁹³ Although problematic in its universalist perspective, Constant completely redefined the term "race," suggesting a post-humanist condition of identity created through action. Even this passing recognition of racial difference set Constant's practice apart from many other visionary postwar urban projects (such as those of Archigram, for instance, which were oblivious to such differences and uncritical of capitalist mass culture).

Expanding the dialogue

Helhesten, Cobra, and IMIB produced a complex web of primitivist and anti-primitivist viewpoints that register a new stage of the breakdown of primitivism, which began under Surrealism. They transformed the legacy of Surrealist ethnography into a discourse of universal human spontaneity while distrusting humanism as exclusively bourgeois. They critiqued the foundational assumptions of primitivism and rejected the revised

humanism of the immediate postwar period as it became attached to gestural painting, moving to a direct critique of painting and a more engaged dialogue with the artwork and spaces produced by cultural others in the Situationist period. Yet the movement also unwittingly participated in colonialist politics when its anti-humanist position and unacknowledged social assumptions resulted in the marginalization of Mancoba for his radical embrace of humanism as a postracial discourse.

The Cobra investigations participated in broader cultural tendencies that would reshape the cultural relationships among global cultures in the postwar period: the dialogic practices of ethnology with its increasing recognition of the cultural and intellectual contributions of the non-West, the political processes set in motion in the 1940s for decolonization around the globe, the increasing presence and recognition of artists from colonized peoples in the West, the legitimization of non-Western cultural production as art, and the increasing recognition within the art world that its aesthetic concerns are shaped sociologically and politically by the institutional discourses that frame cultural practices. Cobra championed a polemically celebratory view of a world of diverse popular expressions, which the group set into active intercultural dialogue. If they failed, perhaps it was due as much to the massive changes that were transforming the colonial landscape at the time, as the artists' own varying degrees of political naïveté. In fact "failure" or "success" have little meaning in evaluating the determination and complexity of their attempt to counter hegemonic cultural assumptions. The material legacy of the group remains today to be reexamined and re-mobilized in contemporary cultural debates.

True dialogues, of course, would necessarily involve a mutual recognition of each party by the other—in the binary opposition that is the legacy of colonialism, most reductively cast as black/white—as subjectivities with their own legitimate histories, identities, desires, and agency. The attempt at dialogue is necessary even if no two sides could ever truly be considered "equal," nor would the cultural leveling such a term implies necessarily be desirable. Such dialogues have, in fact, occurred more and more since the 1960s, at widely divergent places and times depending on local possibilities for political and aesthetic encounters. Okwui Enwezor maintains that only through decolonization could artists from the majority of the globe, an area covering two-thirds of the earth's surface, enter the discourse of modernity. This means that they simultaneously entered the discourses of modernism,

91. The Zingari also argued pointedly that "the houses should not be built by the Imaginist Bauhaus Architects (gypsies prefer carts)." "The Home of the Gypsy," *Le nostre tôr*, 1957, translated in *Pinot Gallizio: The Laboratory of Writing* (Milan: Charta, 2005), p. 229. This dismissive view of the housing project by the Dutch architect Har Oudejans, sent to Gallizio by Constant, further complicates the group's fraught relationship to the gypsy population.

92. Constant, "New Babylon, Outline of a Culture," in *Theory of the Dérive* (note 77), p. 165.

93. Ibid.

postmodernism, and contemporaneity—a situation that problematizes all the terms at once.⁹⁴ The overwhelming, if belated, positive reception of contemporary black African artists like Malick Sidibé of Mali or Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare at major Western exhibitions such as Documenta and the Venice Biennale in recent years—unthinkable before the 1960s—are just two examples of the prominent participation of artists from post-colonial Africa in the mainstream discourse of contemporary art.⁹⁵ The entry of former cultural “others” into an increasingly global art world, in fact, may be the single most important reason for the difficulty to even define “modern” or “contemporary” art outside of specific local contexts. For the same reason, Cobra, too often dismissed as another last-gasp modernist endgame, must be reframed as a transitional movement between modernism and contemporary artistic practice. It was a major participant in the discourse of primitivism—even as it began to break down along with its counterpart, humanism, in the postwar context of decolonization—as a key counter-discourse that helped overturn the assumptions that mythologized colonized peoples as others in the first place.

94. O. Enwezor “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. T. Smith, O. Enwezor, and N. Condee (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 224–225.

95. In 2007, the Board of the Venice Biennale presented the Golden Lion for lifetime achievement to Sidibé on Robert Storr’s recommendation, marking the first time an African artist ever received the prize. “Golden Lion for Malick Sidibé,” *Nafas* (May 2007), http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2007/news_tips/malick_sidibe (accessed March 30, 2010).