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Exhibiting Cobra across the Iron Curtain: Exhibition Diplomacy and Modernism as *Ostpolitik* across Borders in Northern Europe during the Cold War

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Abstract

The article examines how the Danish artists of the group Cobra appeared in front of exhibitions organized by the Danish state touring the state socialist countries during the Cold War from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. This unknown aspect of the international circulation of the artists were part of the official cultural diplomacy of the Danish state and can contribute to a new understanding of art exhibitions in the Cold War as “Ostpolitik” and the commitment of the artists in these efforts. The article observes the importance of cultural diplomacy in relation to border-crossing exhibitions and the development of Danish “exhibition diplomacy” through the Cold War.

Abstract

Artiklen undersøger, hvorledes de danske Cobra-kunstnere hyppigt optrådte i udstillinger organiseret fra dansk side i de statssocialistiske lande under den Kolde Krig fra starten af 1960'erne til sidst i 1980'erne. Disse udstillinger udgør en overset side af den internationale cirkulation af efterkrigstidens helt centrale kunstnere og deres rolle som genstand for det officielle kulturelle diplomati og den danske “Ostpolitik” kan give en ny forståelse af aktørerne i den kulturelle kolde krig. Artiklen fokuserer på den moderne kunstudstilling i relation til kulturdiplomati og analyserer udviklingen i den danske brug af kunstudstillinger igennem koldkrigsepoken.

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The spontaneous abstraction and expressive symbolism of the North-European *Cobra* group (1948–1951) is the quintessential symbol of Danish postwar art, whose international success is, for Nordic art, only matched by Edward Munch’s international acclaim.¹ Founded in Paris and exhibited in the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, Cobra and its protagonists were highly active on the Western European art scene, circulating, collaborating, and exhibiting widely,² including at the Venice Biennale and documenta,³ and retrospectively at the historical exhibition of postwar art *Westkunst* (Cologne 1981), which featured a prominent presentation of Cobra as the only Danish representation. The trajectory of exhibitions of the Danish Cobra artists on the other side of the Iron Curtain is less known, practically invisible in the extensive literature on the group and the artists’ biographies. Yet, Cobra was at the forefront of several exhibitions organized from the Danish side in the socialist states from ca. 1960 to the end of the Cold War. Exhibited as a distinct group, in solo exhibitions, or as the finale in historical presentations of Danish art, Cobra was obviously an officially promoted image of modern Danish art. Could you conclude from all this that Cobra was used as an instrument of soft power in the Cold War—and if so—how did it succeed as such?

Seeing exhibitions of Cobra in the socialist countries as acts of cultural diplomacy, when the Cold War and a divided Europe was very much a reality in the Nordic-Baltic region, raise some intriguing questions, which will be the subject of this article. From the artists’ perspective, it is interesting to follow how these once dedicated communist artists interacted with official cultural diplomacy of the Danish state and its institutions, and what happened to their work, when showed in this context—again, a subject still untouched in the existing literature

on the arts and politics of Cobra.⁴ Simultaneously, we can study the workings of cultural diplomacy in relation to the history of modern art exhibitions: What was the meaning and significance of the promotion of Cobra in these exhibitions? Are we onto a specific kind of “exhibition diplomacy” which permitted a large extent of abstract art, otherwise rarely shown in the socialist countries, by Danish initiative, and how can this be related to the European *Ostpolitik* and the significance of cultural exchanges during the Cold War in general?

To answer these questions, I will examine the exhibitions *Danska Umetnost / Wystawa wspolczesnej Szuki Dúnskiej* (Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana in Yugoslavia, Warsaw in Poland 1961), *Wystawa Malarstwa Egilla Jacobsena (DANIA)* (Warsaw and Cracow, Poland 1965), *Három dán festő a Cobramozgalomból* (Budapest, Hungary, and Warsaw, Poland 1980) and *Danish Artists of the Cobra Group* (Belgrade, Yugoslavia; Sofia, Bulgaria; Bucharest, Romania; Prague, Czechoslovakia; and East Berlin; GDR, 1986–1988) using existing source material.⁵ The analysis will focus on these exhibitions as “missions” of cultural diplomacy. It will consider the structures behind their creation, examine how the artistic content was put into words by the Danish and local organizers, and attempt to understand (to the greatest extent possible) how these exhibitions were received in the socialist societies.

To provide a background to this study, I will briefly discuss the context of exhibition making within cultural diplomacy and outline the Danish cultural policy during the Cold War. I will then review each exhibition and relate them to the developments of the Cold War and its cultural diplomacy, before drawing comparative observations and offering some conclusive perspectives on exhibitions and diplomacy in the end.

¹ Per Hovdenakk: *Egill Jacobsen. Malerier 1928-65* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1980), 7.

² For the emergence of a new European network of in the 1950s, see Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s–1980s. A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds* (London: Routledge 2015), 78 ff.

³ E.g. Carl-Henning Pedersen and Henry Heerup at the Venice Biennale 1962 and Asger Jorn at documenta II in 1959 and documenta III in 1964.

⁴ This is the case in larger biographies as Hovdenakk (1980) and Anni Lave Nielsen, *Henry Heerup: Motivets Magt 1907–1993* (Rødovre: Heerup Museum 2015) as well as in newer research like Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avantgarde Won't Give Up* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) and *The Cobra Movement in Postwar Europe: Reanimating Art* (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁵ Research for this article is carried out through the project Exhibiting Across the Iron Curtain (<https://artsandculturalstudies.ku.dk/research/exhibiting-across-the-iron-curtain/>). For more on the project see the article “Exhibiting Across the Iron Curtain: The Forgotten Trail of Danish Artists Exhibiting in the Context of State Socialism, 1955–1985” in this volume of the *Art@s Bulletin*.

Cultural Diplomacy and Exhibitions: Introductory Definitions and Methodological Reflections

Exhibitions are the medium through which art is made public and ultimately meets its audience through the work of many different actors of the art world.⁶ Exhibitions realized as interstate affairs across the Iron Curtain obviously contains a layer of political context rarely taken into account when studying art exhibitions.⁷ Here exhibitions are not just a matter among art-world insiders within the same society, but also an encounter of different art worlds, societies, and political systems, where diplomatic and political organs are more or less directly involved. Despite these implications, the relations of cultural diplomacy have only recently appeared in research on art exhibitions and then in specific contexts, which does not include Danish cases.⁸ It is also important to notice, that focus here will be on cultural exchanges conducted openly, where considerable attention have been given to the secret support structures and their hidden agendas, especially from the US side within the Western countries.⁹ It is not my primary agenda to reveal such ‘secrets,’ but instead to cast a new light upon Danish cultural diplomacy in the international circulation of exhibitions.

Cultural diplomacy has been broadly defined as “a form of directed intercultural communication between nations that is coordinated by state agencies.”¹⁰ Among other kinds of diplomacy, cultural

diplomacy is characterized by often involving “non-governmental, private actors”¹¹ like artists and cultural producers—even if we must recognize the different relations between state and non-state organizations on the two sides in the Cold War context.¹² Cultural diplomacy is an interplay among many actors, both from the political and cultural fields. Its objects, such as the exhibited artworks, are not produced for use in the service of cultural diplomacy, and neither are the resulting exhibitions highlighted as “cultural diplomacy” for their audience, but rather as art, as in this case of ‘Danish modern art.’ The border-crossing systems of cultural diplomacy appear as an intermediary to realize the exhibitions and overcome the considerable practical and structural obstacles, even if there is also a strategic use of art implied. Cultural diplomacy has a complex agency that cannot be isolated to a singular instance of “taking over” or “using art” for its own good. The artists themselves, along with art historians and writers, museum curators, administrators and secretaries, diplomats and many others would be involved in the cultural diplomacy phase of an exhibition, not necessarily calling it so, but also not being used without their knowledge. Certain individuals would be highly influential in the cultural diplomacy efforts. For instance, Erik Tjalve (1915–1976), an administrative officer in the Danish Ministry of Culture, was instrumental in the Danish organization of exhibitions and cultural activities abroad and was also closely connected to artists like Egill Jacobsen (1910–1998)—who himself took up active artistic exchange with Poland. In the case that concerns us in this article, cultural diplomacy implies the meeting of two systems: art and politics, and their means, namely exhibition-making and cultural exchange. This meeting was characterized by new organizational structures as well as considerable improvisation. For the analysis, I will thus approach cultural diplomacy in a pragmatic understanding—as something happening in

⁶ For an understanding of the art exhibition see Bruce Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics”, in Bruce Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg & Sandy Nairne (eds.), *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996), 175–190, and Bruce Altshuler, *Biennials and Beyond: The Exhibitions that made contemporary art* (London: Phaidon, 2013).

⁷ Recent research in the political context within the Eastern bloc is featured in Jérôme Bazin, Glatigny Dubourg Pascal and Piotr Piotrowski (eds.), *Art beyond borders: Artistic exchange in communist Europe (1945–1989)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).

⁸ Examples include Norman Vorano, “Inuit Art: Canada’s Soft Power Resource to Fight Communism,” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* Volume 5, Number 3, 2016, 318–338; Michal Wenderski et.al., *Cosmopolitan Ambassadors: International Exhibitions, Cultural Diplomacy and the Polycentric Museum* (Vernon Press 2019); and Theodora K. Dragostinova, *The Cold War from the Margins: A Small Socialist on the Global Cultural Scene* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

⁹ The disclosure of CIA support of American abstract art started with Eva Cockroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon in the Cold War,” *Artforum* Summer 1974, 39–42. A recent example is the exhibition on the world-wide activities of the CIA-supported Congress for Cultural Freedom was the exhibition *Parapolitics. Cultural Freedom and the Cold War* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2017–18).

¹⁰ Giles Scott Smith, “Transatlantic Cultural Relations, Soft Power, and the Role of US Cultural Diplomacy in Europe” in *European foreign affairs review*, 2019-08-01, Vol.24 (2): 21–41, 22.

¹¹ Simo Mikkonen, Jari Parkkinen, Giles Scott-Smith, *Entangled East and West: Cultural Diplomacy and Artistic Interaction during the Cold War* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

¹² For an understanding of the organization of Soviet cultural diplomacy, see: Rósa Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One: The United States of America in Soviet ideology and Propaganda, 1945–1959* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) and Myroslava Hartmond, *Trojan Horses in the Cold War: Art Exhibitions as an Instrument of Cultural Diplomacy 1945–1985* (Master’s Thesis, Oxford University 2014).

a specific context and responding to the situation, which included the volatile Cold War climate in the foreign affairs, the new Danish Ministry of Culture founded in 1961 leading many new culture political initiatives, and the no less dynamic art scene of the 1960s and its involved artists.

Cultural Exchanges in the Danish Cold War Policy

During the Cold War conflict, the Eastern Bloc, whose territories lay just 35 km away from the Danish coastline, was the main priority of Danish foreign policy. After Denmark joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, its foreign policy was defensive and mainly focused on the commitments to the Western Alliance, and dealing with communism on the “home front.” A new phase can be recognized from the mid-1960s to ca. 1979, “characterized by attempts at a more active *Ostpolitik*, aiming at expanding relations and ameliorating human rights conditions in the East in the wake of global and European détente,” as Ole Nørgaard, Per Carlsen and Nikolaj Petersen subsume in their analysis of the Danish foreign policy towards Eastern Europe.¹³ Two factors in the international development of the Cold War conflict are important here. The first one is the relaxed tension among the superpowers known as the *détente* settling in the 1960s. An early opening was the agreement on exchanges in cultural, technical, and educational fields (known as the “Lacy-Zarubin agreement”) made between the USA and the USSR in 1958.¹⁴ This agreement made exchanges from individual student visits to large-scale exhibitions possible and was obviously instrumental for the activities of cultural diplomacy.

¹³ Ole Nørgaard, Per Carlsen and Nikolaj Petersen, “Danish Ostpolitik 1967-1993: Breakdown of Stability – Unknown Challenges,” in Due-Nielsen, Carsten and Nikolaj Petersen (eds.), *Adaption and Activism. The Foreign Policy of Denmark 1967-1993* (Copenhagen: Dansk Udenrigspolitisk Institut, Jurist og Økonomforbundets Forlag DJØF Publishing, 1995), 134.

¹⁴ “The Agreement between the United States of America and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics on Exchanges in the Cultural, Technical and Educational Fields” of January 27, 1958 was made by William S. B. Lacy, the U.S. special assistant on East-West exchanges, and the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Georgy Zarubin. For more on the agreement, see Rósa Magnúsdóttir, *Enemy Number One: The United States of America in Soviet ideology and Propaganda, 1945-1959* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) and Yale Richmond, *U.S.-Soviet Cultural Exchanges, 1958-1986. Who Wins?* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987).

The other one is the new European initiatives resulting from the “Ostpolitik” of West Germany formulated by Egon Bahr and practiced by Chancellor Willy Brandt after 1969 until the mid-1970s. Characterized by “*Wandel durch Annäherung*” [change through rapprochement] this plan took formal steps to accept the communist states, enhance diplomatic relations, and influence societies through these relations. This, again, involved cultural activities. The Ostpolitik also marked an active agency of the European states, taking their own initiatives apart from the American leadership of the Western powers. In this field, the Danish détente policies aimed to be stabilizing, but were also searching for openings to be instruments of change. As stated by Nørgaard, Carlsen, and Pedersen: “On the one hand Denmark was prepared to accept the so-called European ‘realities’; on the other hand the goal was to soften up the borders and differences between political and economic systems so as to encourage contacts, both state-to-state and people-to-people, between East and West.”¹⁵ Thorsten Borring Olsen and Poul Villaume also recognized two main motifs in the active Danish diplomacy of the 1960s: to create a “small-state dialogue” with the Eastern European countries to contribute to loosening their ties to the Soviet Union, and to work actively on a “bridge-building program” towards the East-countries to stimulate the general development towards East-West détente.¹⁶ As shown in studies by historians Poul Villaume and Marianne Rostgaard, Denmark was one of the most active Western countries in diplomatic efforts across the Iron Curtain and in cultural exchange with the Eastern Bloc countries.¹⁷ Especially after the mid-1960s, Denmark

¹⁵ Nørgaard, Carlsen, and Petersen, “Danish Ostpolitik 1967-1993: Breakdown of Stability – Unknown Challenges,” in Due-Nielsen, Carsten and Nikolaj Petersen (eds.), *Adaption and Activism. The Foreign Policy of Denmark 1967-1993* (Copenhagen: Dansk Udenrigspolitisk Institut, Jurist og Økonomforbundets Forlag DJØF Publishing, 1995), 138.

¹⁶ Thorsten Borring Olsen and Poul Villaume, *I blokopdelingens tegn, 1945-1972 (Dansk udenrigspolitiks historie no. 5)*, (Copenhagen: Danmarks Nationalleksikon, 2005), 740.

¹⁷ Poul Villaume, “Anticipating European Détente: Denmark, NATO and the Struggle for an All-European Security Conference in the ‘Long 1970s,’” 126-144 in Poul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager, Helle Porsdam (eds.), *The ‘Long 1970s’: Human Rights, East-West Détente and Transnational Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), and Marianne Rostgaard, “Changing the ‘Front System’: The Case of Danish-Polish Youth Exchange, 1965-85,” 107-123 in Poul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager, Helle Porsdam (eds.), *The ‘Long 1970s’: Human Rights, East-West Détente and Transnational Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016). Villaume and Rostgaard does not focus on art exhibitions in their studies of cultural diplomacy and exchange.

was pro-active in establishing contacts with the smaller East European countries, like Czechoslovakia, Poland and Yugoslavia. Carrying out formal and informal diplomacy had the official aim of “bridge-building” through cross-bloc dialogue, but could also serve as a way to affect the socialist societies and put in a wedge between the more open smaller countries and the Soviet leadership. This is the space of the cultural Ost-diplomacy and its activities, including art exhibitions.

The intersection between Ostpolitik and cultural affairs was possibly most directly through the working group set up to coordinate cultural exchanges with the “Soviet bloc,” *Arbejdskomite vedr. kulturudveksling med Sovjetblokken* [Working committee regarding cultural exchanges with the Soviet Bloc], which had been established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1963 and was the gateway through which all official cultural exchanges had to go in the 1960s and 1970s. The Danish group referred to the committee *Working Group on Exchanges with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, set up at a British initiative in 1960 to coordinate the cultural Ostpolitik of the NATO members. An annual meeting was held, where each country provided a report on its activities in culture, education, and science, which formed the basis for coordinating the cultural exchange programs with the socialist countries, and discussion on the developments of the cultural connections with the Eastern bloc. These reports portray the amount of activities and the overall aims of the exchanges.¹⁸ The purpose of the cultural exchange expressed by the American representative at the committee meeting in 1967 in The Hague is both *symbolic*, showing that relations with the Eastern countries had bettered over the last 10–15 years (“even if in ruptures and with momentaneous setbacks”), to which the increased contacts testified, and *instrumental* in that the cultural contact with the Eastern countries could contribute to stimulate changes in the political and social structures of the Eastern societies in a more liberal (Western) direction, especially by encouraging

local groups to change.¹⁹ Like the abovementioned change through rapprochement, this strategy contains two layers: the official symbol value, where cultural exchanges are formal responses to the political conditions, but also a more proactive mission beneath, where art and culture are supposed to change minds and move boundaries.

A central instrument in this strategy can be identified in the establishment of cultural exchange agreements with individual countries. Here Denmark was noticeably proactive signing a cultural exchange agreement with the USSR in 1962, following upon a communique on collaboration made in 1956 after the state visit of Danish Prime Minister H.C. Hansen (1906–1960) to the USSR, who was one of the first Western leaders to do so. Cultural exchange agreements were also made with Poland (1960), Czechoslovakia (1964), Romania (1967), Yugoslavia (1970), Hungary (1971), Albania (1972), and GDR (1976). Expanded exchange and communication among Western European nations in the postwar era inspired these agreements, which were prioritized as a “significant contribution to détente between East and West” by the Danish authorities.²⁰ It is however worth noticing that the activities of the cultural exchanges were often improvised and acted upon in specific situations. Often invitations were received by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who would then forward them to the Ministry of Culture, who would contact cultural institutions, organizations, or individuals. The established artist’s associations in Copenhagen and museums (especially Statens Museum for Kunst—the National Gallery of Denmark) were among the central organs of this network. Larger exhibitions were often handled by Kunstnerkomiteen for Udstillinger i Udlandet [Artist’s committee

¹⁸ Archived in Rigsarkivet, Udenrigsministeriet, Gruppeordnede sager 1945–1973, 41 c 143 (Arbejdskomite vedr. kulturudveksling med Sovjetblokken).

¹⁹ According to the Danish minutes from the meeting of the *Working Group on Exchanges with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* in Hague 1967. [“Som Symbol – Atmosfæren mellem USA og østlandene havde i de sidste 10-15 år om end rykvis og med momentane tilbageslag undergået en bedring og med forøgelse af kontakterne mellem USA og Øst, som havde kunnet konstateres i de pågældende år, var i sig selv udtryk for den bedre sfære.

²⁰ Instrument: Den kulturelle kontakt med Østlandene kunne bidrage til at fremme ændringen af de østlige samfunds politiske og sociale struktur i en mere liberal (vestlig retning). Særligt bidrage til at opmuntre lokale kredse (local groups) til ændringer.”] Rigsarkivet, Udenrigsministeriet, Gruppeordnede sager 1945–1973, 41 c 143.

²⁰ *Betænkning 636: Dansk informations og kulturarbejde i udlandet 1970*, government report (Copenhagen: Kulturministeriet 1972), 12.

for exhibitions abroad] with members appointed by the artist's associations and the art academy.

The Danish art world was also characterized by new orientations and international connections in the era. The Copenhagen-based artist associations like Den Frie Udstilling (1891–), Grønningen (1915–), Høst (1932–1949) so central in the interwar years quickly became challenged by new ways of organizing and exhibiting. The international Cobra group exemplifies this and served as a catalyst of international circulation for many of its participants. It is remarkable that the group was founded after the failed attempts to raise a broader movement of revolutionary surrealism uniting artists and communists as *Surréaliste Révolutionnaire* in 1947. In the Danish context, the communist party Danmarks Kommunistiske Parti (DKP) (where many artists had been organized since the 1930s) held a conference on culture in 1948, where the party leadership introduced the doctrine of socialist realism and asserted that intellectuals should follow the party and not “think as artists.” This alienated many of the abstract artists, who left the party and sought new commitments. This included Egill Jacobsen, who quitted in 1948, while Carl-Henning Pedersen had already been excluded in 1935. The alliance between artists and the communist party, which had led the DKP to claim that “almost all young Danish artists support the party” (even if they “did not understand the cultural policy of the Soviet Union”),²¹ was creaking and left artists wondering how to act within the context of the Cold War.

Danska Umetnost: Testing the Ground in Yugoslavia?

The first official exhibition of Danish art in a socialist state was *Danska Umetnost* [Danish art] presented in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia 1961. The exhibition was a broad presentation of “Danish contemporary art” through the 20th century tied to

Danish art history (which was represented in photographic reproductions from the National Gallery of Denmark).²² The exhibition was organized following an invitation for a travelling exhibition of Danish art from the Yugoslav government in 1960, possibly responding to an exhibition of medieval church frescoes from Yugoslavia exhibited in Copenhagen 1955. The Artist's Committee for Exhibitions Abroad under the Ministry of Education (the Ministry of Culture was not yet founded) consisting of artists Kai Mottlau (1902–1984), Knud Nellemose (1908–1997) and Flemming Bergsøe (1905–1968), together with Erik Tjalve from the ministry as secretary, took care of the organization of the exhibition, from the selection of works and diplomatic communications to the practicalities of transport and on-site installation, all within a few months. The works came from many private collectors and public collections with the National Gallery serving as central collecting point, from where the works were shipped. National Gallery director Jørn Rubow wrote a catalogue essay on Danish art—the catalogue production being in itself a sign of the importance of the exhibition at the time. Curiously, catalogues and posters for the exhibitions sent to the Socialist states were always produced in the local context, maybe as an act of censorship from the receiving countries to secure control over the contents. The exhibition itself featured approximately 150 works with, as said, the pre-1900 artworks presented through photographic reproductions. The selection of newer Danish art started with Wilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916) and ended with the then living artists Richard Mortensen (1910–93), Carl-Henning Pedersen (1913–2007), Henry Heerup (1907–93), Svend Wiig Hansen (1922–97) and Palle Nielsen (1920–2000). No doubt that the face of contemporary art was modernist abstraction and the Cobra artists Pedersen and Heerup, even if there were expressive figurative elements in the works of Hansen and Nielsen. Each artist was solidly represented with about six works. It seems to have been decided by the committee to highlight

²¹ Commentary by Svend Nielsen 1948, Jørgen Ib Nørlund Arkiv. Konferencer, kurser og møder 1937–1962, Arbejderbevægelsens Arkiv Arbejdermuseet, Copenhagen.

²² Press release, The Ministry of Education, January 6th, 1961, Komiteen for Internationale Kunststudstillinger, Udstillingssager, 1960–61. Dansk Kunststudstilling i Jugoslavien.



Figure 1. Carl-Henning Pedersen's works at the exhibition *Wystawa współczesnej Sztuki Dąńskiej*, Warsaw 1961. Photo: Zacheta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki.

newer Danish art and present its prehistory from the perspective of the present, demonstrated by contemporary sculpture blending with the photographs of older art (Fig. 2).

The socialist country of Yugoslavia was nominally outside of the Soviet Bloc, but still without close contacts to Denmark. It was thus an appropriate testing ground for exhibition diplomacy across the Iron curtain. The exhibition opened in the capital Belgrade, before being shown in Zagreb in the Croatian Yugoslav Republic, and finally ending in Ljubljana in the Slovene Yugoslav Republic. Here it was installed at the Moderna Galerija museum founded in 1948 as the first postwar art museum in a socialist country. In Belgrade it was reported as a “considerable success” with 10,000 visitors the first weeks and the Yugoslavian state radio broadcasted a reportage from the exhibition with audience interviews.²³ Press reviews applauded

²³ Aktuelt, January 28th 1961.

the exhibition’s ability to give a well-organized overview of Danish art and approved most of the selected artists. Carl-Henning Pedersen was compared to Marc Chagall and Richard Mortensen to “monumental abstraction.”²⁴

Danska Umetnost was a successful presentation of Danish art in the non-aligned socialist Yugoslavia. Even though it was an official exhibition organized via the Danish state, it was not part of a cultural exchange agreement or a planned program of cultural diplomacy. Arguably, it paved the way for further planning of such activities, not least because the exhibition itself showed to be in demand elsewhere. Its portrayal of Danish art had been planned to be exhibited in Flensburg by the society for Danish art in this former Danish city. But as the Polish government expressed interest in the exhibition, it was quickly decided to plan a stop in Warsaw. The exhibition was thus presented as *Wystawa współczesnej*

²⁴ J. Mesesnel, “Krajevna inaieca evropske I a izroeiila,” *Delo*, March 23, 1961.



Figure 2. Exhibition view from *Wystawa wspolczesnej Sztuki Dúnskiej* (1961), where a sculpture by Henry Heerup stands in front of photos of older Danish art on the walls. Photo: Zacheta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki.

Sztuki Dúnskiej [Exhibition of Contemporary Danish Art] at the Zacheta Gallery in Warsaw, where it opened in May 1961 after closing in Ljubljana a few weeks earlier. Several reviews in Polish press bear witness to the exhibition as a remarkable event and indeed a rare presentation of art from a Western country. The reviews had a special eye for the two Cobra artists, and Heerup was highlighted as the “greatest individuality” of the exhibition (the catalogue also portrayed him working in his sculpture garden) and Pedersen as the greatest talent in painting.²⁵

Egill Jacobsen’s Polish Connection

The fast organization of the exhibition was probably facilitated by the recent cultural exchange

agreement made between Denmark and Poland in 1960. From the Danish side, exchanges with Poland would later in the sixties be referred to as the most “unproblematic” and frequent,²⁶ which is well-illustrated by the number of art exhibitions. A large exhibition of Danish design was presented in Warsaw in 1965²⁷ and later the same year a Danish artist was again present at the Zacheta kunsthalle when a solo exhibition of Cobra painter Egill Jacobsen (1910–1998) opened there. *Wystawa Malarstwa Egilla Jacobsena (DANIA)* was a retrospective exhibition of the painter’s work from the 1930s to the present day in 36 works, put together with the artist’s active involvement (Fig. 3). As noticed by Polish art historian Andrzej Pieńkos, solo exhibitions of foreign artists were rare in a venue like

²⁵ Summary of the exhibition by Zacheta at: <https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/wystawy/wystawa-wspolczesnej-sztuki-dunskiej> (accessed February 2022).

²⁶ Marianne Rostgaard, “Dansk kulturdiplomati over for Østblokken ca. 1960–1972,” *Historisk Tidsskrift* Bind 111, Hæfte 2 (2011): 495.

²⁷ For more on this exhibition see: <https://formkraft.dk/en/milano-new-york-toronto-warszawa-when-the-exhibition-machine-started/> (accessed February 2022).



Figure 3. Exhibition view of Egill Jacobsen's exhibition at Zacheta, Warsaw 1965. Photo: Leonard Sempoliński, Zacheta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki.

Zacheta at the time and the ones that took place were devoted to Pablo Picasso, André Beaudin, Henry Moore, Lasar Segall, Emilio Vedova, Robert Hainard—and Jacobsen—between 1955–1970.²⁸ This period, known as the “Polish thaw under the leadership of Wladyslaw Gomulka (1905–1982),” saw relatively liberal conditions and a large interest among Polish artists and critics in modern art, which at some point was delimited by the authorities through a curious “15 percent admittance of abstract art” at any official exhibition.²⁹

Jacobsen had not been part of the 1961 exhibition, but was central in other presentations of Danish art, from the Venice Biennales of 1948 and 1956 to his first solo exhibition abroad, which took place in

Paris in 1961. In 1959 he had been appointed professor at Det Kgl. Danske Kunstakademi [the Royal Danish Art Academy] as the first abstract artist. He also happened to be a close friend of Erik Tjalve from the Ministry of Culture, which might have paved the way for the Warsaw exhibition, which again coincided with other diplomatic efforts towards Poland, including a visit by the minister of foreign affairs Per Hækkerup in autumn 1965.³⁰ In Danish cultural exchange, a solo exhibition of a contemporary artist was rare and thus can be seen as another step in creating exchanges beyond the national umbrella of official exhibitions. Exhibition photographs show the contemporary look of the exhibition display, with white walls and a spacious

²⁸ <https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/wystawy/egill-jacobsen> (accessed February 2022).

²⁹ Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadows of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion Books 2009), 70.

³⁰ Seen as a significant diplomatic campaign by Villaume, see Poul Villaume, “Anticipating European Détente: Denmark, NATO and the Struggle for an All-European Security Conference in the ‘Long 1970s,’” 126–144 in Poul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager, Helle Porsdam (eds.), *The ‘Long 1970s’: Human Rights, East-West Détente and Transnational Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

hanging that made use of temporary panels. The catalogue also has a distinct modern look and featured an essay by art critic Gunnar Jespersen. Different from *Wystawa wspolczesnej Szuki Dúnskiej*, the Jacobsen exhibition was not introduced through committees of officials, but as a “normal” exhibition of modern art without intermediaries. It was still created through the cultural diplomacy network, co-organized by the Danish ministry of culture, the artist committee for exhibitions abroad, and the Polish Biuro Współpracy Kulturalnej z Zagranicą [Office for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries]. Jacobsen was also active in the staging of the exhibition and went to Warsaw with Tjalve. He also planned to take a large group of students from the art academy to Warsaw (the outcome of this initiative is unknown). This information was reported by the Danish representative at the meeting of the Committee of East-West Exchanges in Oslo 1965, where the exhibition was reported as one of several fruitful exchanges with Poland.³¹ Jacobsen’s exhibition at Zacheta reached an audience of over 40,000 (also helped by an overlapping exhibition of Picasso’s graphic works).³² The exhibition featured works from the National Gallery of Denmark, private collectors, and from the artist’s own collection, and can thus be seen as a bridge between official cultural diplomacy and individual “face-to-face” diplomacy by the artist. As such, the exhibition created for Jacobsen a lasting entrance into the Polish art world. For instance, the Polish state TV broadcasted a reportage from Jacobsen’s exhibition in Copenhagen 1977,³³ and the artist donated a work, *Fellini and his Wife* (1974), to the National Museum in Warsaw, which had been selected by the gallery director himself³⁴—a really rare instance of a Western modern artwork entering a national museum collection in a socialist country.³⁵ Poland also seems to have been on the artist’s mind in the two paintings *Warszawa Brænder* [Warsaw Burns] and *Polsk Landsby* [Polish Village] (both 1974). Jacobsen’s

works were playfully abstract, structured around the human figure without being portraits. Their symbolism was open to free interpretation, which might have enabled them to cross borders and appeal to the Polish audience.

Following these two Danish successes, and again in relation to the Danish-Polish cultural exchange agreement, an exhibition of new Danish art, *Duńska sztuka współczesna*, was presented at Zacheta in 1968 with the younger, post-Cobra generation. This exhibition would also be shown in Yugoslavia and Romania (where a cultural exchange agreement had been signed in 1967). Carl-Henning Pedersen would also be presented at a solo-exhibition in Bucharest in 1970, matching Jacobsen’s in scale but seemingly without the same level of involvement by the artist.³⁶ Back in Poland, another Danish abstract expressionist artist in the Cobra vein, Mogens Andersen (1916–2003) was also given a solo exhibition at Zacheta in 1973, where he went on research trips throughout the country with help from the cultural ministries.³⁷ These activities show the late sixties as an active phase in “exhibition diplomacy,” even if there were also setbacks, not least the Soviet aggression against the Prague spring in 1968, which put several cultural exchanges to a halt, including a planned Danish-Soviet friendship month. When cultural exchanges were reactivated, it was decided to include and emphasize media and film aimed at a broader audience as content of the cultural exchange agreements. These included the Danish *Olsen Banden* films (1968–) which were notoriously popular among audiences in the socialist countries.

Rebel Artists for the Freedom of Polish Workers

Art exhibitions continued, and Jacobsen was exhibited in Warsaw again, this time in a turbulent context. An exhibition of the three Cobra painters, Else Alfelt (1910–74), Egill Jacobsen and Carl-Henning

³¹ Meeting in Oslo 1965, Rigsarkivet, Udenrigsministeriet, 41 c 143 Arbejdskomite vedr: kulturudveksling med Sovjetblokken.

³² <https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/wystawy/egill-jacobsen> (accessed March 2022).

³³ At Brøndsalen, Frederiksberg Have, organized by Gallerie Mark 1977.

³⁴ *Aktuelt*, May 31st, 1980.

³⁵ The work is still in the collection of Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie with the inventory number MOW 104 MNW.

³⁶ The circumstances of this exhibition and the artist’s involvement in this exhibition is yet to be researched.

³⁷ Rigsarkivet, Udenrigsministeriet, Danske galleriudstillinger i Polen 41. Dan-Pol 6a/2.

Pedersen, was organized in Budapest in 1980. The invitation came from the Hungarian institutions, indicating an interest in Danish art in general and Cobra in particular. It was put together by Lars Rosttrup Bøyesen (1915–1996), director of the National Gallery of Denmark, who referred to contacts with Hungary from a previous exhibition of Hungarian constructivists in Aalborg.³⁸ The exhibition titled *Három dán festő a Cobra-mozgalomból* [Three Danish Painters from the Cobra movement] took place in the Kunsthalle Budapest (Múcsarnok) in August 1980. It consisted of over 50 works, spanning their career and displayed in separate rooms for each artist. The introductory text by Bøyesen presented the exhibition as both portraying the Cobra group and the three individual artists. As the core of their artistic expression the text highlighted “the free” and the subjective expression in ways that could be seen as deliberately aimed at the state socialist art worlds:

Their pictorial language is free, and they tell stories using different props. [...] All of them more or less followed their immediate impressions of nature, which they interconnected and transformed into personal picture of the world, a dream, a tangible expression that breaks from the oppressive ropes of reality.³⁹

With more than 11,000 visitors the exhibition reached a large audience and was well received by the Hungarian press. Especially the Nordic theme and the opportunity to see art from Denmark was sympathetically perceived, even if some critics seemed to have wished for a broader presentation of Danish art or an overview of Cobra and its significance (which would be the ambition of the later exhibition of the Cobra movement in 1986–88 shown in socialist countries other than Hungary and Poland).

Following a month-long showing in Budapest, the exhibition of the three Cobra painters travelled to Warsaw, where it was presented at the National

Museum (which had acquired Jacobsen’s painting) in October 1980 as *Troje malarzy z grupy ‘Cobra.’* The Polish introduction in the catalogue written by the director of the National Museum, Stanislaw Lorenz, highlighted the exhibition as “a new link in a long and rich chain of cultural relationships connecting Poland with Denmark” including Bertel Thorvaldsen (whose monument to Prince Józef Poniatowski in Warsaw had been restored after World War 2 with Danish support) to the recent exhibitions of Danish art and Jacobsen’s dedication of his work to the museum, which was then used as the first illustration (Fig. 4).⁴⁰

The independent trade union Solidarity had been founded in August 1980 and raised a wave of civilian resistance against the communist regime. Western press followed the events closely and Poland became a focal point of change and freedom struggle. This gave new relevance to cultural interactions with Poland and the exhibition of the Danish Cobra painters were read in this context. The Social-Democratic newspaper *Aktuelt* headlined an article on the exhibition as “Three Danish rebellion-painters to Poland” suggesting that the rebellious Danish artists were part of the freedom struggle of the Polish workers (Fig. 5).⁴¹ The article presented the exhibition’s staging in Poland as resulting from the recent events (which was likely an exaggeration) and stated that spontaneous abstraction was “far away from the socialist-realist dogma of the communist regimes.”⁴² The newspaper was careful to mention the previous collaborations of Jacobsen with the Polish art world and featured an interview with the artist. Jacobsen suggested that many in Poland looked towards the Nordic countries and wanted further contact, searching a “lifebuoy” in the threats of the bloc-divided world. He had the impression of an open cultural climate hitherto without open censorship. Over this background, the exhibition was a “Danish-Polish affair”

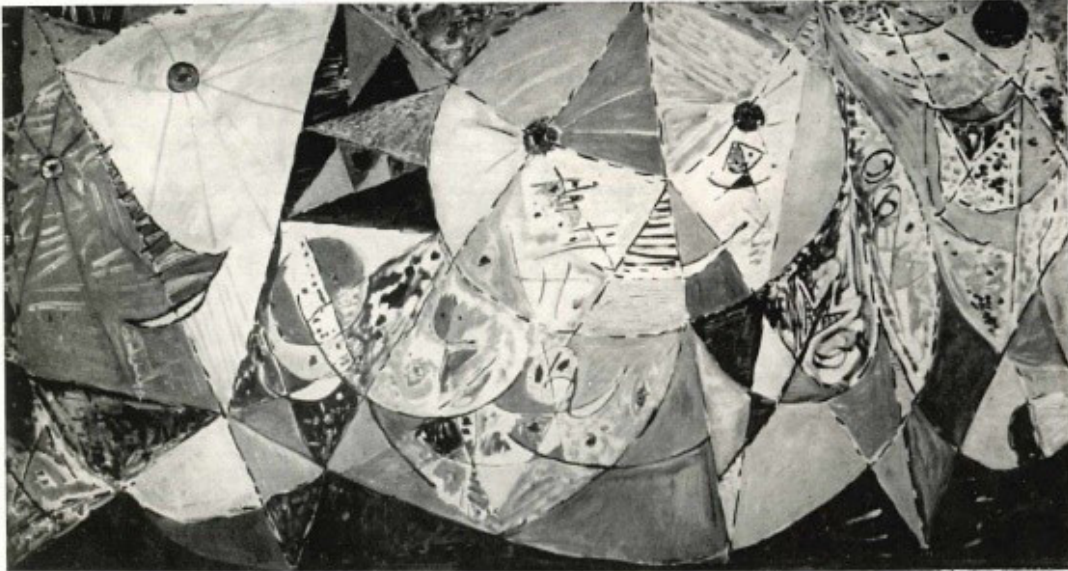
³⁸ Ole Hyltoft, “Danske berømtheder præsenteres i Ungarn,” *Aktuelt*, May 2nd 1980.

³⁹ Catalogue text by Lars Rosttrup Bøyesen. I thank Yulia Karpova for the translation from Hungarian and archival research in the archives of the Kunsthalle Budapest.

⁴⁰ *Troje malarzy z grupy ‘Cobra,’* Exhibition Catalogue (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 1980), n.p.

⁴¹ Ole Hyltoft, “Tre danske oprørsmalere til Polen,” *Aktuelt*, August 28th 1980. [“Skal abstrakte danske oprørsmalere være endnu en brik i de polske arbejderes frihedskamp?”]

⁴² *Ibid.* [“langt fra den østeuropæiske kommunismes socialrealistiske dogmer”]



Egill Jacobsen, *Fellini i jego żona*, 1974, 112×212,5 — obraz ofiarowany przez artystę Muzeum Narodowemu w Warszawie w 1978 roku.

Figure 4. Egill Jacobsen's *Fellini's Wife* represented in the exhibition catalogue of *Troje malarzy z grupy 'Cobra*, Warsaw 1980.

not aimed at a confrontation between the blocs and their different art systems, but at fostering collaboration and even at helping Poland become an “object of peace” instead of war.⁴³ Jacobsen obviously continued his diplomatic ambitions—at this time, he had also become a member of the Social Democratic Party in Denmark and worked actively to shape its cultural policy. The Cobra exhibition during Solidarity movement in Poland was the most direct intersection between an exhibition

and political change although it is unknown if the exhibition had any direct relations with the reform movement. The lively exchange activities with Poland were challenged by the tensions of the martial law imposed by the military leadership of Wojciech Jaruzelski from 1981 to 1989, which caused Denmark to impose restrictions.⁴⁴

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ For the Danish diplomatic relations with Poland 1960s to 1980s, see Marianne Rostgaard, “Changing the ‘Front System’: The Case of Danish-Polish Youth Exchange, 1965–85,” 107–123 in Poul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager, Helle Porsdam (eds.), *The ‘Long 1970s’: Human Rights, East-West Détente and Transnational Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

TRE DANSKE OPRØRSMALERE TIL POLEN

Af Ole Hyltoft

■ Skal abstrakte danske oprørsmalere være endnu en brik i de polske arbejderes frihedskamp?

■ Midt i strømmen af dramatiske meldinger fra Gdansk og Warszawa kommer meddelelsen om, at polakkerne ønsker at vise en udstilling af Else Alfelt, Carl-Henning Pedersen og Egill Jacobsens malerier.

Udstillingen skal have fernisering 2. oktober på Nationalmuseet i Warszawa.

Cobra

De tre danske maleres værker har i sommer været vist i Budapest. Men nu ønsker også polakkerne at se de tre danskere, hvis spontane, nonfigurative billeder lægger langt fra den øst-europaiske kommunismens socialistiske doktriner.

Else Alfelt døde ved en færdselsulykke for nogle år siden. Men Carl-Henning Pedersen og Egill Jacobsen er yderst nulevende hovedpersoner i dette århundredes vesteuropaiske malerkunst.

Alle tre danske Warsza-

wa-udstillere tilhører den såkaldte Cobra-gruppe af belgiske, hollandske og danske abstrakte malere, som debaterede i Kierner og fik deres gennembrud i 50'erne.

Gave til Polen

Noget af forhistorien til de danske Cobras maleres optræden på den polske arena midt i den politisk spændte situation ligger et par år tilbage. Da holdt Egill Jacobsen en separat udstilling af sine tyeste billeder i Haveselskabets lokale ved Frederiksberg Have.

Ved den lejlighed bragte det polske fjernsyn en reportage fra udstillingen. (Den danske TV-Avis glimrede ved sit frager, som fjernsynet jo normalt gør ved kunstgiverheder af kvalitet). Egill Jacobsen forærede den polske stat et af udstillingens malerier. Billedet hedder "Fellini og hans kone". Det hænger nu

på Nationalmuseet i Warszawa.

Egill Jacobsen havde sidst i 60'erne udstillet 40 af sine billeder i Polens hovedstad. I de 14 dage, udstillingen varede, besøgte den af ca. 25.000 polakker.

Satire

Hvis polakkerne ønsker det, rejser jeg gerne med til åbningen af vores udstilling, siger Egill Jacobsen.

Polakkerne ser hen til Norden som en redningsplanke. Også mange kommunister i Polen vil gerne have kontakt med os skandinaver. Det er ikke mit indtryk, at der er nogen retningenscensur i Polen. I det polske kulturministerium finder man endnu mere alsidige kunstretninger repræsenteret end i det danske.

Den polske billedkunst har hidtil tilladt sig at være satirisk over for den såkaldte "socialisme", der styrer landet. Jeg husker



Egill Jacobsen: — Danske kunstnere og politikere skal samarbejde med polakkerne. Selv de polske kommunister betragter Norden som en redningsplanke.

satiriske malerier af kommunister med hvide skjorter og røde slips.

Folk i Polen er ikke bange for at sige deres mening. Der hersker en tolerance og en frihed midt i det kommunistiske samfund.

Hvis vi i Danmark siger eller skriver, at Anker Jørgensen er en åbe, bliver vi ikke sat i spjældet for det. Men Anker bliver ked af det! Lidt af det samme findes i Polen.

Ronald Reagan

Danske kunstnere og danske politikere skal hjælpe Polen, fortsætter Egill Jacobsen.

Polens selvstændighed er et spil mellem øst og vest. Russernes mistanke er uden grænser, og det forstår man jo også godt, når sådan en cowboy som Ronald Reagan kan blive valgt.

Men vi skal spare Polen. Polen har lidt så me-

get. Endnu mere end Rusland, som også har lidt meget.

Vores udstilling i Warszawa er et polsk-dansk anliggende. Den er ikke udtryk for had mod Sovjetunionen. (Jeg var selv i mange år aktiv kommunist).

Jeg synes, det er vigtigt, at vi gennem kunstnerisk samarbejde med polakkerne hjælper Polen til at blive et fredsobjekt i stedet for et krigsobjekt.

Figure 5. Article on the three Danish rebel painters in Warsaw. *Aktuelt*, August 28th, 1980.

The Travelling Cobra Museum

As a formalization of the European détente, the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was founded in 1975 as a forum for increased dialogue between 35 countries from the East and the West.⁴⁵ Its focus on military détente and human rights (known as the "Helsinki Accords") to a certain extent implied a downscaling of cultural exchanges as a strategic effort in the conflict. Nonetheless, in the mid-1980s, cultural exchange

agreements were still recognized by the Danish state as the "only opportunity" for cultural activities in the socialist states, which should still be pursued, even if other kinds of cultural activities through "more free exchanges" were also desirable.⁴⁶ The same government report on Denmark's cultural export efforts highlighted Cobra as among the most important aspects of Danish culture, "a marker of our identity as a cultural nation," which had been used in many exhibitions.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ This had been a goal in Danish diplomacy. See Poul Villaume, "Anticipating European Détente: Denmark, NATO and the Struggle for an All-European Security Conference in the 'Long 1970s,'" 126–144 in Poul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager, Helle Porsdam (eds.), *The 'Long 1970s': Human Rights, East-West Détente and Transnational Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

⁴⁶ *Betænkning om kultureksport, Betænkning 1106* (Copenhagen: Kultureksportudvalget, 1987), 80.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 123, ["I en del tilfælde har dansk kunst forvælt de udefra kommende påvirkninger og ud fra danske forudsætninger tilført dem elementer og kvaliteter, som har vakt international interesse [Guldaldermalerne, Hammershøi, Cobra m.fl.] og som har været med til at markere vor identitet som kulturaktion."]

Around this time, Cobra had again been used in a major Danish exhibition in the socialist countries. The exhibition was a survey of the Danish artists of the group created from the collections of the three museums: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, Herning Kunstmuseum, and Holstebro Kunstmuseum, that is to say, newly-founded museums of modern art in Jutland (dating from 1982, 1977 and 1967, respectively) with a strong emphasis on Cobra in their collections. The key person in the creation and execution of the exhibition was Troels Andersen (1940–2021), who was the founding director of Silkeborg Kunstmuseum (today: Museum Jorn Silkeborg) based on the collections of Asger Jorn (1914–73). Andersen had an early interest in the Russian avant-garde and was able to do pioneering archival research on Kazimir Malevich in Soviet archives in the early 1960s. This had led to a rich network of contacts with the art scenes of Eastern Europe, as well as local know-how and rare language competences. When the Foreign Ministry received a request from Yugoslavia for an exhibition of Cobra art (maybe inspired by previous exhibitions), Andersen was given the task to assemble such a presentation. He took the initiative to collaborate with two other museums, both to get a larger, more representative group of artworks and to share the responsibilities of numerous installations and transportation.

Danski umetnici grupe Cobra [Danish artists of the Cobra Group] was shown in February-March 1986 at the Museum of Contemporary Art (Muzej Savremene umetnosti Beograd) in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. It then went to Sofia (Bulgaria) at the Shipka building of the Bulgarian Artist Union in 1986, to Bucharest (Romania) at the Art Museum of the Socialist Republic of Romania in the giant Republic's House in 1986, to Prague (Czechoslovakia) at Namesti Primatora, a building owned by Narodni Galerie v Praze in 1987, and finally to East Berlin (GDR) at Nationalgalerie in 1988. Each installation was realized by staff members of the three Danish museums, who would go to one destination and travel with the exhibition to the next.⁴⁸ This itinerary was the most ambitious yet

⁴⁸ Involved staff included museum assistants Lars Bay and John Sand from Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, Rigmor Lovring from Herning Kunstmuseum, and Jesper Knudsen from Holstebro Kunstmuseum. I have been in contact with all of these, whom I thank for their collaboration.

of all the Danish art exhibitions in Socialist states and toured for over two years. It brought the Danish Cobra artists to new destinations in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR, while omitting the venues of the previous exhibitions in Budapest and Warsaw.⁴⁹ Presenting 71 works by eight Cobra artists from 1939 to 1983 with an emphasis of the early years of World War 2 it was a more historical exhibition, portraying the historical impact of the group on Danish art rather than displaying it as the face of the contemporary art. As a noticeable detail, the exhibition also featured a presentation of the three Danish museums (Fig. 6), which was highlighted as part of modern Danish culture and connected to the exhibited Cobra-art. These new museums were now included in the diplomatic efforts (which had previously been centered on the National Gallery of Denmark), and the exhibition was also referred to as a “campaign for the included museums” in the planning of the exhibition.⁵⁰

The exhibition's last stop was in the state-socialist country closest to the Danish border, but farther away in diplomatic relations: The German Democratic Republic where, as said, the exhibition was shown in East Berlin at the central venue of the Nationalgalerie (today the Altes Nationalgalerie).⁵¹ Besides the diplomatic varnish, maybe a message struck out when Andersen declared in the catalogue essay that “what distinguished the Danish contribution to the Cobra group above all was their strong sense of freedom in artistic expression.”⁵² Such words were politically charged in the socialist societies of the 1980s and indicates that there were still a mission for exhibiting Cobra across the Iron curtain. The GDR edition of the exhibition catalogue also featured the most figurative of the Cobra artists, Heerup⁵³, on the cover whereas it had been

⁴⁹ The tour developed from an initial idea of an exhibition in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Other cities in Yugoslavia were also considered after requests, and showings in Albania and Hungary were mentioned but skipped.

⁵⁰ Letter from Lisa Herold Fibing, Kulturministeriet March 27th, 1985, Archives of Museum Jorn Silkeborg.

⁵¹ The exhibition was postponed a year due to slow communication and difficulties in finding the right venue.

⁵² *Dänische Künstler der Cobra Gruppe* (Exhibition Catalogue, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 1988), 6. [“Was aber den dänischen Beitrag zur Arbeit der COBRA-Gruppe vor allem auszeichnete, das war ihr starkes Bewusstsein von Freiheit im künstlerischen Ausdruck.”]

⁵³ The figurative symbolism of Henry Heerup was more acceptable in the GDR. A Heerup exhibition had been shown in Leipzig and Gera in 1979 organized by the



Figure 6. From *Danish Artists of the Cobra Movement* at Namesti Primatora, Narodni Galerie v. Praze, Prague 1987. Photo: O. Palán. The archives of Museum Jorn Silkeborg.

in a more colorful abstract style in Yugoslavia—possibly reflecting the stricter policy of socialist realism in the GDR and the more liberal conditions in Yugoslavia. A review in the GDR press welcomed the exhibition as “experiments in a colorful collection,” put emphasis on the “political experience” of Jorn and the popular motifs and color composition of Heerup, and thanked the Zentrum für Kunstausstellungen in der DDR [Centre for Art Exhibitions in the GDR] for such a “colorful exhibition.”⁵⁴

Evaluating the Cobra Mission: How did Cobra Perforate the Iron Curtain?

The analysis of exhibitions of the Danish Cobra artists in the socialist states from the early 1960s to

the late 1980s shows a consequent effort to highlight this art as the image of modern Denmark with a specific relevance for the socialist societies. This includes different exhibition formats from larger surveys of Danish art (the typical format of national presentations in cultural diplomacy) to the more intimate displays, including a solo exhibition, the presentations of three Cobra artists, and an art historical presentation of the Cobra artists selected from three museums. This indicates that the exhibition work—and it was a considerable effort to realize exhibitions in this context as those involved remember⁵⁵—was taken seriously and sought to be developed further by using the opportunities within the framework of diplomacy. For instance, the invitation for a “Danish art exhibition” in 1960 was used to put a focus on

Ministry of Culture as part of the cultural exchange agreement made with the GDR in 1976.

⁵⁴ Anne Lemke-Junger, “Experimentelles in einer farben-frohen Kollektion,” *Neues Deutschland*, March 11th, 1988.

⁵⁵ For this article, I had several conversations with John Sand, Rigmor Lovring and Lars Bay, who were involved in the organization and execution of the touring Cobra exhibition. They remembered first and foremost the difficulties in handling practicalities as well as organizational cooperation, with some differences from nation to nation, and for instance refer to the museum in Belgrade as being relatively easier to collaborate with.

modern Danish art and living artists like Heerup and Pedersen. This exhibition was then transferred to Poland when the opportunity arose. There it could fit into the cultural exchange agreement, which became an important operational tool for the next decades. This also facilitated another kind of exhibition with the solo presentation of Jacobsen in Warsaw in 1965, which was a rare arrangement and can certainly be read as a step towards closer connections between the two countries beyond the official umbrella and into art-world relations.

Jacobsen's own commitment was central there and resulted in a lasting exchange with the Polish art world, which can both be seen as his own cultural-diplomatic mission and part of the artist's international orientation. The exhibition activities of Jacobsen also show a political trajectory from being an outspoken communist until 1948, then participating in Cobra searching for new ways of organizing art, and then collaborating with new museums and the ministry of culture and ultimately joining the Social Democratic Party in the 1970s. While not displaying any obvious political symbols in his abstract-expressionist forms, Jacobsen definitely sought to circulate his art and for society to interact with it. His donation of *Fellini's Wife* to the National Museum in Warsaw illustrates this and stands as a remarkable example of donation from a Western artist to a museum across the Iron Curtain—even if it was forgotten by his biographer.⁵⁶

Such lasting relations, both from artists and from authorities, can be seen as a success parameter for the cultural diplomacy effort—that it had worked to a satisfying degree and led to new developments. This both consolidated existing contacts, as with Poland, and led to exchanges with new areas, as in the 1986-88 exhibition to countries like Bulgaria and the GDR. There were also setbacks caused by events in the intense Cold War-climate. Planned exhibitions and other activities were regularly cancelled, often without specified reason, and some

bilateral exchanges were notoriously difficult, not least with the Soviet Union. The USSR-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 put cultural exchanges on hold for a time in the general détente climate. The events in Poland with the oppression of Solidarity and the military dictatorship of Jaruzelski also affected the active contacts with Poland.

There were also different rationales and tendencies spearheading the exhibition activities on the Danish side. Cultural exchange agreements and a new turn in the Ostpolitik in the 1960s made the exhibitions possible and Cobra obviously fitted well into this. Our research shows that art exhibitions were especially important in the East-West cultural diplomacy from ca. 1960 to the 1970s, in an era, where the democratization of modern art in Western societies (and not least Denmark) were pursued through cultural political initiatives, new museums, and new kinds of exhibitions, again with Cobra at the forefront. The exhibitions were created in various collaborative constellations between the ministry of culture, the Danish museums, and the artists. In the 1970s, other media were also included in the cultural exchange agreements, like film and folk culture, which spread focus beyond fine culture like modern painting. Another turning point came with the Helsinki Agreement in the mid-1970s which made human and artistic rights a general concern in the East-West relations in a much more pervasive way than the aesthetic indications an art exhibition could provide.

Following the goals set by the Committee for East-West exchanges, the Danish Cobra exhibitions were symbolic, paving the way for cultural exchange. From there, they could also be instrumental, as the increasing contact with Poland offers perhaps the best example. For the artworks, they definitely met new audiences and did not stagnate as “state art” or serve an overt agenda. Danish Cobra art did manage to perforate the Iron Curtain, even if the traces are hidden.

⁵⁶ The largest biography and oeuvre catalogue on Egill Jacobsen by Per Hovdenakk (1980) does not include any info on the Polish exchanges or the work being in the Polish museum, even though it was given to the museum in 1978 and the donation was covered in Danish press.