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The memory of World War Two and the canonisation of the Cobra movement in the Netherlands

Claartje Wesselink

Introduction

In 1950, the Dutch realist painter Carel Willink published a book with the title *The Sorrowful State of Painting*. Willink (1900-1983), a well-known painter in the Netherlands then and now, recognised a trend that worried him. 'At every exhibition', he wrote, 'one can foretell with mathematical certainty, that the right-wing media will be negative and the left-wing media will be positive when an artwork is abstract or semi-abstract, and that it will be the other way around when an artwork was created in a traditional manner, in other words, in a more or less realist style.'¹ It was not hard to explain for this reasoning, according to Willink: 'National Socialism had ruthlessly banned all non-realist art. "The sky is blue and not green, as in Van Gogh's work," Hitler reportedly said. Small surprise that people were happy to see abstract and deformative art blossom after the war. Its revival symbolised the revival of a liberated and renewed Europe.'² Although Willink painted too black-and-white a picture with his statements – there were also left-wing newspapers with relatively traditional art critics, and the other way around – he was not the only one to notice this tendency.³ The reputed art critic Jan

*This article is based on the final chapter of my dissertation *Kunstenaars van de Cultuurkamer. Geschiedenis en herinnering (Artists of the Chamber of Culture. History and Memory)*, that was published in Dutch (University of Amsterdam, 2014). With this article, I intend to present some of the ideas developed in my dissertation to a non-Dutch speaking public.*

¹ Carel Willink, *De schilderkunst in een kritiek stadium*, Amsterdam: Peter van der Velden, 1981, 53. This book is a reprint of the original edition of 1950. The source text reads: 'Bij elke tentoonstelling kan men met wiskundige zekerheid voorspellen, dat de rechts politiek georiënteerde organen slecht en de links georiënteerde goed zullen schrijven, of omgekeerd, naarmate het tentoongestelde werk abstract en semi-abstract of enigszins traditioneel gebonden en dus meer realistisch is.'

² Willink, *De schilderkunst in een kritiek stadium*, 54. The source text reads: 'Het nationaal-socialisme had zich genadeloos tegen alle soorten niet-realistische kunst gekeerd. "De lucht is blauw en niet groen, zoals bij Van Gogh" schijnt een uitspraak van Hitler geweest te zijn. Geen wonder dat men de opleving van de abstracte en deformerende kunst met acclamatie begroette. Haar opleving symboliseerde min of meer de opleving van een bevrijd en zich vernieuwend Europa.'

³ Jonneke Jobse, *De schilderkunst in een kritiek stadium? Critici in debat over realisme en abstractie in een tijd van wederopbouw en Koude Oorlog 1945-1960*, Rotterdam: nai010 uitgevers, 2014, 17-32.

Engelman argued likewise. Progressive styles, he wrote in 1949 in the Dutch weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer*, implied 'free of tradition, whatever tradition, free of individual feelings (...); strongly styled, abstract, lacking a subject, inclined to the new cage life'. Traditional styles, he wrote, were perceived as 'reactionary, conservative, three-dimensional, classical, bourgeois, and of course, fascist'. This classification was one of the most ridiculous aspects of the present-day art world, Engelman asserted. Nevertheless, it was hard to ignore for art lovers 'visiting museums and cafés in Amsterdam, or strolling through the Sonsbeek park to see the exhibition (...)'.⁴

The previous examples show how works of art can be actively turned into bearers of socio-political content. Next to its inherent, aesthetic qualities, an artwork is a mediator of collective memory and identity. This perspective is leading in this article, which focuses on the influence of (the memory of) World War Two on the production and reception of Dutch visual art during the reconstruction period (1945-1960); especially the art of the progressive Cobra movement. This socio-political perspective on the artistic canon does not imply that the aesthetic aspect of the artwork plays a secondary role; however, in the following, I will pay attention to outer-aesthetic factors that likewise constitute the canon.⁵ Because of his influence in the Dutch art world right after the war, Willem Sandberg (fig. 1), former resistance member and director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, will be a prominent figure in what follows.⁶ He was appointed director of the Netherlands' most

⁴ Jan Engelman, 'Een ruimtelijk probleem opgelost', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 73: 37, 10 September 1949, 9. The source text reads: '(...) vrij van traditie, welke traditie dan ook; vrij van individuele gevoelens (...); sterk gestyleerd, abstract, voorstellingsloos, geneigd tot de nieuwe holbewoning.' / '(...) reactionnair, behoudziek, drie dimensionaal, klassiek of klassicistisch, burgerlijk en natuurlijk fascistisch.' / '(...) als men te Amsterdam musea en koffiehuisen bezoekt of op de tentoonstelling in het landgoed Sonsbeek langs de gazons loopt (...)'. The Sonsbeek (sculpture) exhibition is a famous Dutch exhibition, irregularly held at the Sonsbeek Park in the city of Arnhem. The first edition took place in 1949. The first five editions were devoted to European sculpture, whereas from 1971 onwards, the exhibition showed contemporary art of various disciplines. For Jan Engelman as an art critic during the reconstruction period, see Jobse, *De schilderkunst in een kritiek stadium?*, passim.

⁵ For a similar perspective on the process of canonisation see: Gregor Langfeld, *German Art in New York. The Canonization of Modern Art 1904-1957*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015; Elizabeth C. Mansfield ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, New York etc.: Routledge, 2007 (especially part I: 'Border Patrols. Art History as Identity'). Recent studies dealing with the subject of canonisation in general are: Ruth E. Iskin ed., *Re-envisioning the Contemporary Art Canon. Perspectives in a Global World*, New York etc.: Routledge, 2017; Nana Leigh, *Building the Image of Modern Art. The Rhetoric of Two Museums and the Representation and Canonization of Modern Art (1935-1975): The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Museum of Modern Art in New York*, diss. Leiden University, 2008; Gill Perry and Colin Cunningham, eds, *Academies, Museums and Canons of Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. Also see the theme number on canonisation of the Dutch art historical journal *Jong Holland*, 18: 2, 2002.

⁶ For Willem Sandberg's influence on the Dutch art world after World War Two see: Caroline Roodenburg-Schadd, *Expressie en ordening. Het verzamelbeleid van Willem Sandberg voor het Stedelijk Museum, 1945-1962*, Amsterdam/Rotterdam: Stedelijk Museum/NAi Uitgevers, 2004;

prominent museum for modern art right after the liberation and was to remain so until 1963. As such, he eagerly stimulated the development of new styles in the Dutch artistic landscape. While looking for those new styles, he especially came to like the art of the Cobra group. His rhetorical talent was a notable factor in his making and breaking careers. The way he propagated Cobra's work is a remarkable instance of linking socio-political content to artistic form.



Figure 1 Willem Sandberg (on the left side of the picture) and the sculptor Ossip Zadkine in front of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1 April 1965. Photograph taken by Jac. de Nijs / Anefo, National Archive, The Hague.

Art, war and memory in the Netherlands

In his book *German Art in New York. The Canonization of Modern Art 1904-1957*, the art historian Gregor Langfeld describes how the German pre-war avant-garde became popular in the United States at the end of the 1930s. Being branded as *entartete Kunst* by the Nazi's, this work could be used to propagate the righteousness of the American democracy.⁷ A few years later, in the Netherlands, museum director Willem Sandberg likewise understood the capacity of the artwork to convey ideological meaning. He tended to accentuate the political meaning of both the progressive art he preferred – thus aiming to create understanding for it among the public – and of the traditional styles he rejected.

Sandberg's Stedelijk Museum, which was reopened in June 1945 after having been closed in the final stages of the war – initially scheduled liberation exhibitions such as *Canadian War Artists*, *The Free Book in Unfree Times* and *Harnessed Art*.

Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland 1910-2000. Picasso als pars pro toto*, Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2001.

⁷ Langfeld, *German Art in New York*, 192-193, 195. In the Netherlands, too, German expressionism received more praise after the war than before. Gregor Langfeld, "Hitler hield niet van groene luchten". Kentering in de waardering van de Duitse avant-garde in Nederland na 1945', *Jong Holland*, 18: 2, 2002, 40-49.

Besides, Sandberg showed pre-war modernists such as Van Gogh, Braque, Picasso and Mondrian, who according to him could guide the way to a new, post-war Dutch art.⁸ At the same time, he had a conflict with the handful of Amsterdam-based artists' associations that had traditionally shown their work in the Stedelijk Museum once or twice a year. In his new position as a director, Sandberg wanted to get rid of these rather conservative associations as they did not fit in the artistic programme he had sketched. The public argument he advanced, however, was the associations' cooperative attitude during the war – they had all obeyed the Nazi regulations for the art world, including the dismissal of Jewish members, and had profited from the flourishing art market during the German occupation of the Netherlands.⁹ In a letter to Amsterdam's cultural alderman Ab de Roos, Sandberg explicitly linked traditional styles to the Nazi regime: 'Traditional art, as it was tolerated by the Nazi's, has been sufficiently showed during the war years.'¹⁰

Already before the war, Sandberg, who was still a curator at the time, and Stedelijk Museum director David Röell had tried to introduce modernist styles to the Dutch public.¹¹ In the rather conservative, crisis-ridden art world of the thirties, their effort had been to little avail. During the reconstruction period, the climate slowly but steadily altered. The vivid war memory provided Sandberg with a powerful tool to reshape the canon. Of course, he did not stand alone in his mission of aesthetic renewal. The aforementioned socialist alderman Ab de Roos faithfully defended Sandberg's museum policy in the Amsterdam city council, whereas in the national art world, peers such as museum director Edy de Wilde (Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven), the cultural politician and later museum director Bram Hammacher (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo) and Stedelijk Museum curator Hans Jaffé equally favoured a progressive course. As Bram Hammacher wrote about Sandberg's deeds in 1947:

Who looks back, can see that we have truly been part of European art life in the last two years. He will have to admit that we have been able to study the major problems of the post-war world with artists such as Braque, Picasso, and Matisse; that we have seen younger French artists, an important overview of Mondrian, as well as Le Corbusier, the Belgians, Campigli. For younger and older artists, that has been of invaluable worth.¹²

⁸ Roodenburg-Schadd points at the fact that Sandberg's exhibition policy was more progressive than his purchase policy, as he passed up opportunities to buy important works by (for example) Picasso, Braque and Mondrian. Roodenburg-Schadd, *Expressie en ordening*, 114-131.

⁹ Claartje Wesselink, *Kunstenaars van de Kultuurkamer. Geschiedenis en herinnering*, Amsterdam, Prometheus/Bert Bakker: 2014, 197-201.

¹⁰ Willem Sandberg, letter of advice to alderman Ab de Roos, 28 March 1947, Stadsarchief (City Archives) Amsterdam, archive Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of Amsterdam (5192), inv.nr 477. The source text reads: 'De traditionele kunst, zoals die door de nazi's werd getolereerd, hebben wij gedurende de oorlog voldoende kunnen bekijken.'

¹¹ Roodenburg-Schadd, *Expressie en ordening*, 62.

¹² A.M. Hammacher, 'Museum, kunstorganisaties, tentoonstellingen', *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 7 June 1947. The source text reads: 'Wie zo vluchtig z'n herinnering raadpleegt, zal

Hammacher's observation contains the core of Sandberg's success: his choices were appreciated by young artists starting their career right after the war. They found inspiration in the Stedelijk Museum. As the art journal *Kroniek van Kunst en Cultuur* observed about the Braque exhibition of October-November 1945: 'The coming to Holland of this exhibition was a deed. And deeds is what we need at present – deeds that can be the germs of new deeds. Let us not be afraid of possible epigonism – a true art will come, even if it is after a period of copying great predecessors. Braque is one of them!'¹³

As from 1946, the Stedelijk Museum offered the stage to the newly founded artists' group Vrij Beelden – literally meaning Free Expression. The artists belonging to this group worked in an innovative idiom, varying from expressionism to pure abstraction. Group member Willy Boers (1905-1978), who had worked in a realistic style before 1940, made clear that the group's artistic choices were a result of the war: 'Everything we had believed in; justice, reason, morality: they had turned into hollow phrases. We could not continue painting as we had done before.'¹⁴

It was not the Vrij Beelden artists, however, who were to become Sandberg's favourites. After what could be called an orientational phase, he bestowed this honour to the younger artists from the Cobra group. Cobra's seed was sown in the winter of 1947-1948, when the artists Karel Appel (1921-2006), Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005) and Corneille (Cornelis Guillaume van Beverloo, 1922-2010) met each other.¹⁵ In July 1948, the three friends founded the 'Dutch Experimental Group' together with Theo Wolvecamp (1925-1992), Anton Rooskens (1906-1976), and Jan Nieuwenhuys (1922-1986). In November of that year, the Experimentalists – as the group members called themselves – made a pact with kindred spirits from Copenhagen and Brussels, and CoBrA (Cobra) was born.¹⁶ Although officially the group existed only three years, their artistic legacy was considerable, and long-lasting. They worked in an expressionist, yet highly abstract manner, using bright, often primary and secondary colours. Important sources of

bemerken dat we in de afgelopen twee jaar werkelijk deel hebben gehad aan het Europese kunstleven. Hij zal toegeven, dat we hier de grote problemen van na de oorlog hebben kunnen bestuderen met Braque, Picasso, Matisse, dat we jongere Fransen hebben gezien, een belangrijk overzicht van Mondriaan, voorts le Corbusier, de Belgen, Campigli. Voor onze jongere en oudere kunstenaars is dat ontzaglijk veel waard geweest.'

¹³ Anon., 'Georges Braque', *Kroniek van Kunst en Cultuur*, 7: 2, 1 December 1945, 62. The source text reads: 'Het naar Holland doen komen was een daad. En aan daden hebben wij juist thans de allergrootste behoefte – aan daden die de kiemen kunnen zijn van nieuwe daden. Laat ons niet vrezen voor mogelijk epigonisme – de ware kunst komt er toch, desnoods via een periode van navolging van waarlijk grote voorbeelden. Braque is een dier groten!'

¹⁴ As cited in Isabel Brouwer and Willemijn Stokvis, 'De kunstenaarsgroep Vrij Beelden', in: Willemijn Stokvis, ed., *De doorbraak van de moderne kunst in Nederland: de jaren 1945-1951*, Amsterdam: Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 1984, 133. The source text reads: 'Alles waar we altijd in geloofd hadden, het recht, de rede, de moraal, waren tot holle frasen geworden. We konden niet doorschilderen zoals we altijd gedaan hadden.'

¹⁵ Willemijn Stokvis, *Cobra. De weg naar spontaniteit*, Blaricum: V+K Publishing, 2001, 175.

¹⁶ Stokvis, *Cobra*, 176, 194.

inspiration were Picasso, Matisse, Jean Dubuffet, the Jeune Peinture Française, African art and German expressionism. Much represented themes were children, fantasy figures and animals (fig. 2); not seldom, works bore engaged titles such as *Questioning Children* (Karel Appel, 1949, fig. 3), *Cry of Freedom* (Karel Appel, 1948) and *Concentration Camp (War)* (Constant, 1950). In *Reflex*, the Experimental Group's



Figure 2 Karel Appel, *Frog and Cat*, 1990. Naoshima: Benesse House Museum. Photograph taken by Kimon Berlin, Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karel_Appel_-_Frog_and_Kat_\(26726524456\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karel_Appel_-_Frog_and_Kat_(26726524456).jpg).



Figure 3 Karel Appel, *Questioning children*, 1949. Gouache on wood, 87 x 60 x 16 cm. London: Tate Modern. Unknown photographer, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%27Questioning_Children%27_by_Karel_Appel,_Tate_Modern.JPG.

journal, the group's ideologist Constant (Nieuwenhuys) emphasised the necessity of a new art. Just as for Willy Boers, the war had been a crucial experience to him. 'The cultural emptiness has never been so strong as after this last war', he wrote. For his generation of artists, he saw only one solution: '(...) a complete dissolution of our cultural upbringing (...)'.¹⁷

An interesting detail is that Sandberg, who – as we have seen – in some cases explicitly drew attention to war reputations, did not care about the wartime activities of the Cobra member he favoured most: Karel Appel. Appel was not a National Socialist, but a penniless art student with a pragmatic approach and an already well-developed instinct for the kind of art the institutions favoured. He had been on friendly terms with the painter and politician Ed Gerdes, a Dutch National

¹⁷ Constant Nieuwenhuys, 'Manifest', *Reflex*, 1: 1, 1948, n. pag. The source text reads: 'De culturele leegte heeft zich nog nooit zo sterk en in zo algemene mate doen gevoelen, als na deze laatste wereldoorlog.' / '(...) een volledige losmaking van het gehele cultuurrudiment (...)'.

Socialist and an important figure in the nazified Arts Ministry;¹⁸ received subsidies and sold as many as six works to the Dutch National Socialist government. These artworks showed the kind of 'Aryan' motifs – Dutch landscapes and cityscapes for example – the occupier favoured, in a lifelike manner.¹⁹

When Appel contributed to the exhibition *Young Painters*²⁰ at the Stedelijk Museum in 1946, a fellow painter warned Sandberg in a letter. Appel did not deserve the honour to expose in a museum like the Stedelijk, he wrote, as he had 'eaten from the German hand' during the war.²¹ It seems that Sandberg did not pay much attention to this whistleblowing letter. In the top left corner, he noted 'store away', firmly encircling his scribble.

Over the years, Sandberg even was to brand Appel as the ultimate anti-war artist. In the early sixties, Sandberg wrote an introduction for a monograph on Appel. Part of it reads:

wars are examinations
examinations for society
much core-rot is cut away

(...)

on the battlefields
during the bombardments
in the concentration camps
a new relationship has grown between man and man

(...)

tragic figures cringe from fear of the atom
huge beasts devour the small
we see the monster rise
we hear a scream...

you will understand that here I am citing
titles of appel's paintings

¹⁸ The official name of this nazified ministry was the Department of Public Information and Arts (Departement van Volksvoorlichting en Kunsten, DVK). Tobie Goedewaagen was the secretary-general of the DVK. Ed Gerdes was the head of the architecture, visual arts and crafts section (Gilde voor Bouwkunst, Beeldende Kunsten en Kunstambacht, BBK) within the DVK.

¹⁹ Adriaan Venema and Jan Fred van Wijnen, 'Met beleefde groeten en dank, hoogachtend Karel Appel', *Vrij Nederland*, 51: 44, 3 November 1990, 10-12; Fransje Kuyvenhoven, *De Staat koopt kunst. De geschiedenis van de collectie 20ste-eeuwse kunst van het ministerie van OCW 1932-1992*, Amsterdam/Leiden: Instituut Collectie Nederland/Primavera Pers, 2007, 116.

²⁰ In Dutch: *Jonge schilders*.

²¹ Letter A. de Jong to Willem Sandberg, dated 15 June 1946, Stadsarchief (City Archives) Amsterdam, archive Stedelijk Museum (30041), inv. nr 3242.

for while writing
I constantly thought of his work²²

Being the stylistic counterpart of Nazi art, Sandberg presented Appel's work as the utmost criticism on it. Many years later, this branding was still effective. In a biography published in 2000, the art critic Cathérine van Houts retrospectively links Appel's post-war artistic 'revolt' to his biography during the war: 'Outside the war rages, inside his studio on the Zwanenburgwal, Appel is working hard on his studies. The war cannot take his zeal from him. Outside, freedom is increasingly restricted. Appel refuses to let his inner freedom and unbridled passion be crushed by the German violence. He refuses to be subjugated. He only has one master: art.'²³ But as Dutch (art) historians had pointed out already in the 1970s, one of Appel's major concerns during the war was developing his career, no matter what the political circumstances.²⁴

The artwork's mnemonic potential

As the previous makes clear, an artwork can be made to communicate meaning and memory. What's more, a message more forcefully sticks to mind when an image is attached to it, and the other way around: the two mutually enforce each other. As early as in ancient times, public intellectuals have pointed to this phenomenon, in search of an excellent command of the *ars memoriae*.²⁵ The art world, too, applies this principle – whether deliberately or not.²⁶ Here, the attachment of meaning to an object of art is a means to legitimise it, or, on the other hand, to put it in a bad light. When, during the post-war reconstruction period, the canon of Dutch art was reformulated, this process played a powerful role. Art objects, being associated with the ideas of either war, collaboration and death, or freedom, resistance and life, functioned as vessels of negative or joyful memories. Only a few years before, the Nazi politicisation of art had relied on the same principle: non-realist art was rejected as a product of a perverse and corrupted civilisation, whereas 'Aryan' art

²² Hugo Claus, *Karel Appel: Painter*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1962, 7.

²³ Cathérine van Houts, *Karel Appel. De biografie*, Amsterdam etc.: Contact, 2000, 30. The source text reads: 'Buiten is het oorlog, binnen in zijn atelier op de Zwanenburgwal zwoegt Appel op zijn studies. De oorlog zal hem zijn passie niet ontnemen. De vrijheid buiten raakt steeds meer beknot. Hij weigert zijn innerlijke, geestelijke vrijheid en tomeloze drang door de Duitse bijslag te laten versplinteren. Niemands knecht wenst hij te zijn. Hij heeft maar één meester: de kunst.'

²⁴ Hans Mulder, *Kunst in crisis en bezetting. Een onderzoek naar de houding van Nederlandse kunstenaars in de periode 1930-1945*, Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1978, 201, 204, 236; Venema and Van Wijnen, 'Met beleefde groeten en dank', 10-12.

²⁵ See on this topic Lina Bolzoni, 'The Play of Memory between Words and Images', in: Wessel Reinink and Jeroen Stumpel, eds, *Memory and Oblivion. Proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art Held in Amsterdam, 1-7 September 1996*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999, 11-18.

²⁶ This topos is extensively studied in the aforementioned volume *Memory and Oblivion* (see note 25).

like the work of Leni Riefenstahl and Arno Breker was said to represent a 'healthy' society.

Already in the early twentieth century, the cultural historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) reflected on the artwork as a bearer of meaning. According to him, an artwork possesses 'mnemonic energy': it functions as a reservoir of collective memory.²⁷ He interpreted the reuse of stylistic patterns by means of the term 'Pathosformeln' or pathos formulas: visual 'formulas' or motifs that can recur in different iconographic contexts, as conveyors of meaning.²⁸ 'The variations in rendering, seen in the mirror of the period,' Warburg explained, 'reveal the conscious or unconscious selective tendencies of the age and thus bring to light the collective psyche that creates these wishes and postulates these ideals, bearing witness, in its perpetual turning from concretion to abstraction and back again, to those struggles which man has to wage to achieve serenity.'²⁹

In line with Warburg's pathos formulas, it can be argued that war and fascism had their effect on the pathos formulas of the pre-war avant-garde. Its visual language was strengthened by the fact that the Nazi's abhorred it. It is understandable that after 1945 young artists, who had not yet committed themselves to a style, chose for the avant-garde. For, as Warburg stated, artworks are carriers of *pathos*, emotion. They emanate from emotions, and at the same time, they should deal with them and restrain them.³⁰ Right after the war, the painter Willy Boers described how he and colleagues had looked for other ways of expression, 'as a direct consequence of the violent events that shocked our country's spiritual life'. According to Boers, they had realised that the 'much abused' old forms could no longer represent the post-war spirit. They had to be abandoned completely.³¹

In the case of the radical political break of 1945 and the powerful artistic reaction to it, the mechanism described by Warburg is easily recognisable. But earlier examples, too, show the connection between form and mnemonic content clarified by Warburg. The literary scientist Lina Bolzoni describes how the sixteenth-century architect and sculptor Jacopo Sansovino (1486-1570) designed a small building at the foot of the San Marco cathedral in Venice. The building functioned as a meeting place for local patricians and became known as the *Loggetta del Sansovino*. The *Loggetta* was decorated with four bronze sculptures, representing Mercury, Minerva, Apollo, and peace. Sansovino's son Francesco described the

²⁷ The word 'mnemonic' – referring to the support of memory – is derived from the Greek Titaness Mnemosyne, the personification of memory.

²⁸ Colleen Becker, 'Aby Warburg's *Pathosformel* as Methodological Paradigm', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 9, December 2013, 10, <https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com>.

²⁹ As cited in Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, London: The Warburg Institute, 1970, 270-271.

³⁰ Marlite Halbertsma, 'De geschiedenis van de kunstgeschiedenis in de Duitssprekende landen en in Nederland van 1764 tot 1933', in: Marlite Halbertsma and Kitty Zijlmans, eds, *Gezichtspunten. Een inleiding in de methoden van de kunstgeschiedenis*, Nijmegen: SUN, 1993, 89.

³¹ W. Boers, 'Kentering in onze schilderkunst?', *Kroniek van Kunst en Cultuur*, 9: 7/8, 1948, 215. The source text reads: '(...) als rechtstreeks gevolg van de gewelddadige gebeurtenissen die het geestelijk leven in ons land hebben geschokt.'

sculptures in several publications dedicated to the city of Venice and its artistic splendour. With these four works, he wrote, their maker pointed to the wisdom and the beauty of Venice's government and the city's successes.³² Based on his father's



Figure 4 Jacopo Sansovino, *Minerva*, 1537-45. Bronze. Venice: Loggetta del Sansovino, Piazza San Marco.
Photograph taken by Wolfgang Moroder, Wikimedia Commons,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Loggetta_Sansovino_Minerva_Venezia.jpg.

sculptures, Sansovino the younger also discussed the mnemonic potential of art: 'Let us call the artworks places of memory; because as soon as the observer casts his eye on the Minerva statue [fig. 4], he will not only recognise all meanings poets have attributed to Minerva, but also the extraordinary wisdom of Venice's highest senate.'³³ The Minerva statue, in other words, conjures up a premoulded image. The observer understands why the artist chose this motif, knowing that it represents more than just a goddess. Bolzoni explains: 'Thus, the figure of Minerva/Pallas harbours a fully-fledged literary tradition (works of poetry) in its visual appearance,

³² Lina Bolzoni, 'Gedächtniskunst und allegorische Bilder. Theorie und Praxis der ars memorativa in Literatur und Bildender Kunst Italiens zwischen dem 14. und 16. Jahrhundert', in: Aleida Assmann and Dietrich Harth, eds, *Mnemosyne. Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991, 163-169.

³³ As cited in Bolzoni, 'Gedächtniskunst und allegorische Bilder', 168. The source text reads: 'Wir wollen sie Orte der Erinnerung nennen; denn kaum hat ein Mensch einen Blick auf das Bild der Minerva geworfen, so begreift er in diesem Zeichen nicht nur alle Bedeutungen, die ihr die Dichter zugeschrieben haben, sondern darüber hinaus die außerordentliche Weisheit des höchsten Senats von Venedig in seiner Regierung und seinen Handlungen.'

which can easily be recalled. At the same time, however, she possesses political agency. Because while symbolising the wisdom of Venice's regents, she represents a part of the urban myth and actively brings this to mind.³⁴

A similar mechanism seems to hide behind the artistic choices of the Cobra and the Vrij Beelden collectives. The visual forms these artists chose, reminded them of the socialist, universalist, pacifist, democratic and progressive messages conveyed by the works of Picasso, German expressionism, De Stijl and similar predecessors. These forms conjured up images of primitive societies and childhood, both innocent and pure. But these forms could also be linked to antifascism and victimhood; for the Nazi's had banned them as 'degenerate'.³⁵

Just as Sansovino's Minerva referred to 'a fully-fledged literary tradition',³⁶ the stylistic idiom of the Dutch post-war avant-garde referred to both the ideological content of their pre-war idols and the depravity of National Socialism. Thus, this art obtained a double meaning. Because as of the 1950s, Sandberg and other leading figures in the (international) art world paid more than the usual attention to Cobra, it was first and foremost Cobra's art that came to represent this message in the Netherlands.³⁷ Later, when the movement had obtained a firm place in the Dutch canon, the twofold meaning was strengthened further. It has retained its power until the present. Cobra exhibitions with titles like *The Colour of Freedom* (Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, 2003) and *Open the Cages of Art* (Cobra Museum Amstelveen, 2012) bear witness to that. At the exhibition *A Free Art in Unfree Times*, hosted by the Stedelijk Museum Gouda in 1985 and dedicated to artists who had resisted against the Nazi's, Karel Appel was also present. 'We are not being told why the curators have shown mercy to Appel,' art historian Louis van Tilborgh reacted on the remarkable decision to include Appel.³⁸ He assumed the curators' artistic preference had played a role. As Gregor Langfeld makes clear, the canonisation of German modernism in the United States happened in a similar manner. Artists who had been dismissed as degenerate in their home country, were branded as antifascist in the USA – which did not always do justice to the truth: 'The myth of the antifascist artist was born, ignoring all the political contradictions. The political attitudes of the artists close to National Socialism were consistently overlooked, downplayed, or

³⁴ Bolzoni, 'Gedächtniskunst und allegorische Bilder', 168. The source text reads: 'So verdichtet (...) die Figur der Minerva/Pallas in ihrer Gestalt eine vollständige literarische Tradition (poetische Schriften), die ohne Mühe vom öffentlichen Bewußtsein aufgerufen werden kann. Zugleich aber besitzt sie ein politisches Wirkungspotential. Denn sie repräsentiert mit der Weisheit der venezianischen Regenten eine Komponente des Stadt-Mythos und bringt diese auch zu Bewußtsein.'

³⁵ Elmyra van Dooren, 'Kunstenaars verenigd: Vrij Beelden en Creatie', in: Elmyra van Dooren, Caroline Roodenburg-Schadd and Evert van Uitert, eds, *Vrij Beelden en Creatie*, Bussum/Amstelveen: V+K Publishing/Cobra Museum, 1996, 16; Stokvis, *Cobra*, 164-182.

³⁶ Bolzoni, 'Gedächtniskunst und allegorische Bilder', 168. The source text reads: 'vollständige literarische Tradition'.

³⁷ Roodenburg-Schadd, *Expressie en ordening*, 415-422; 612-623.

³⁸ Louis van Tilborgh, 'Vrije kunst in een onvrije tijd', *Jong Holland*, 1: 3, September 1985, 62.

reinterpreted in order to vindicate their art. The success of this was phenomenal and continues even today.³⁹

Bolzoni furthermore points to the relationship between *imagines* (images) and *loci* (places). Sansovino's bronzes owed their political agency to their prominent location, according to the author. Also in the sixteenth century, the Piazza San Marco was a local hot spot.⁴⁰ Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum has a similar effect on the status of an artwork. Being on display on the walls of the Stedelijk, an artwork almost automatically becomes a good work of art.

The mnemonic capacity of art has been put to use by spiritual and worldly leaders of all times. Museum director Sandberg, too, understood this capacity in his own way. Art could communicate a message of freedom at a time in which the Dutch collective identity was instable after five years of Nazi rule. With the rejection of realism, the felt distance to the war increased. This effect was so powerful that the view on history itself was blurred – as the case of Appel demonstrates. Aleida Assmann speaks of 'myths' in this respect: '(...) in collective memory, mental pictures become icons and stories become myths, their power of persuasion and affective strength being their pre-eminent features. Such myths detach the historical experience from the concrete circumstances of its formation, and mould it into timeless histories (...).'⁴¹

Today, Cobra still counts as *the* Dutch art movement of the late forties and fifties, whereas their work only formed a small part of the total aesthetic idiom of the day. That Cobra has become so prominent a part of the Dutch canon, can partly be explained by its strong mnemonic content, which is understood up until today. The Dutch reconstruction period is marked by social and political restoration and reform; by a wide variety of political, cultural, and artistic reactions to a breaking experience. When looking back at this era, we prefer to remember expressions of reform and renewal, as in retrospect, they have proven to be 'right': with the cultural revolution of the sixties and seventies, the restorative forces in society lost foothold.⁴² It is not a coincidence that Willem Sandberg frequently repeated his saying that true artists stand on the watch 'with feelers'; having a sense of society's course before society itself is aware of it.⁴³

³⁹ Langfeld, *German Art in New York*, 195.

⁴⁰ Bolzoni, 'Gedächtniskunst und allegorische Bilder', 168-169.

⁴¹ Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, München: C.H. Beck, 2006, 40. The source text reads: '(...) im kollektiven Gedächtnis werden mentale Bilder zu Ikonen und Erzählungen zu Mythen, deren wichtigste Eigenschaft ihre Überzeugungskraft und affektive Wirkmacht ist. Solche Mythen lösen die historische Erfahrung von den konkreten Bedingungen ihres Entstehens weitgehend ab und formen sie zu zeitenthobenen Geschichten um (...).'

⁴² The literary scientist Ton Anbeek concludes that also the political innovators from the reconstruction period were relatively small in number, but nevertheless 'their statements have received a disproportionate amount of attention' ('waarvan de uitspraken overmatig veel aandacht gekregen hebben'). Ton Anbeek, *Na de oorlog. De Nederlandse roman 1945-1960*, Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1986, 8.

⁴³ See for example Ank Leeuw-Marcar, *Willem Sandberg. Portret van een kunstenaar*, Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1981, 110.

But the factor of *locus* – place – too, played a decisive role in Cobra's road to fame. The members of the Vrij Beelden group created similar artworks, equally marked by the spirit of artistic innovation. Whereas Cobra has become synonym to abstract expressionism in the Netherlands, Vrij Beelden's artistic harvest is more various, ranging from abstraction to expressionism and surrealism.⁴⁴ Some artists joined both Cobra and Vrij Beelden.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the reputations of both groups are incomparable. Ever since Sandberg's directorate, Cobra's creations have been exposed in prominent places. The opening of the Cobra Museum in Amstelveen in 1995 confirmed and continued their fame. Thus, Cobra has become prototypical for the post-war avant-garde movement in the Netherlands.⁴⁶

Assmann, too, mentions the mnemonic power of the image. She sees artworks as exponents of 'cultural memory', just like texts, monuments and festive rites. An artwork is a symbolical construction appropriated by the human brain, Assmann explains.⁴⁷ It can transfer its meaning onto new generations and can integrate a historical event into the identity of people who did not actually witness that event. This presupposes an active attitude of both the mediator of an artwork's meaning and of the work's consumer. Only when its symbolical meaning is continually revitalised, the remembrance remains vivid.⁴⁸ 'Agents of memory' in the art world are, for example, exhibitions, catalogues, newspapers, magazines, and social media platforms.⁴⁹ With the understanding and embracing of a memory conveyed by an artwork, a consumer makes clear to which cultural and spiritual tradition he belongs. That is illustrated by the Dutch appropriation and canonisation of the Cobra movement, but also, for example, of the masters of the Golden Age and the De Stijl movement.

Concluding remarks

In the foregoing, I tried to pinpoint how the memory of the Second World War was used to canonise the Cobra movement in the post-war Netherlands. For this 'strategy' – to use a somewhat unfriendly word – is especially visible in the case of the young and rebellious Cobra artists, who were the protégés of museum director Willem Sandberg. Of course, the break between the more traditional pre-war artistic climate and the more progressive post-war climate is not an absolute one. Sandberg also showed realistic artists in the Stedelijk Museum after 1945; and several artistic tendencies that developed after the war, had already germinated before 1940. The De Stijl movement was at the height of its production in the tens and twenties, whereas in the thirties, curator Willem Sandberg and museum director David Röell tried to educate the public by presenting non-figurative art forms at the Stedelijk

⁴⁴ Van Dooren, 'Kunstenaars verenigd', 21.

⁴⁵ Van Dooren, 'Kunstenaars verenigd', 23-24.

⁴⁶ Van Dooren, Roodenburg-Schadd and Van Uitert, eds, *Vrij Beelden en Creatie*, 6 (foreword).

⁴⁷ Assmann, *Der lange Schatten*, 32-33.

⁴⁸ Assmann, *Der lange Schatten*, 33-34.

⁴⁹ László Munteán, Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik, 'Things to Remember. Introduction to Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture', in: *ibid.*, eds, *Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, New York/London: Routledge, 2017, 12.

Museum. Especially in the thirties, however, the conservative cultural climate – being in the grip of the economic and political crisis that had spread across Europe – prevented progressive styles from blossoming. The Second World War had the effect of a *sacre du printemps* on the development of these styles. The occupation period was a time of forced reflection, in which artists prepared for an aesthetic catharsis.

Right after the liberation, the former resistance man Sandberg got the credits to change the Stedelijk Museum. After having hosted several exhibitions dedicated to the allies and the resistance movement, he filled the museum galleries with the pre-war avant-garde and progressive youngsters. The memory of National Socialism provided him with a powerful argument to ban the traditional artists' societies – who had willingly followed the Nazi instructions in order to sell their work – from the museum. Without the war, Sandberg presumably would not have been able to change the museum's face so radically.

The Warburgian effect of positive and negative association was a motivation and an instrument for artists and policy makers alike. The occupation period was used as a rhetorical means to force realism into the background and pave the way for abstract and expressionist styles. Changes in style are self-evident in art history, but their pace and measure are influenced by social and political developments. Realism's negative aura, surrounding it long after the war, can be explained by the Nazi compulsion to paint in a realistic manner.⁵⁰ As art historian Meyer Schapiro has argued in his essay 'Style', it is no coincidence that art history's boundaries are formed along the lines of political and economic regimes: 'Its main divisions, accepted by all students, are also the boundaries of social units – cultures, empires, dynasties, cities, classes, churches, etc. – and periods which mark significant stages in social development. (...) Important economic and political shifts within these systems are often accompanied or followed by shifts in the centers of art and their styles.'⁵¹ Or, as Willem Sandberg would later recall the art of the reconstruction period:

true, the established artists
went on as if nothing had happened
but
a younger group came to the fore
they had something to say
and said it in a new voice
violently

they made a resolute start

⁵⁰ In the last couple of decades, the popularity of realism in the Netherlands has increased again. This is e.g. shown by the foundation of museums dedicated to the realist style, such as the Scheringa Museum in Langbroek, which opened in 1997 and closed in 2009 (due to financial problems of its owner, the banker Dirk Scheringa); and its 'successor' Museum MORE in Gorssel, which opened in 2015.

⁵¹ Meyer Schapiro, 'Style', in: Meyer Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, New York: George Braziller, 1994, 99.

experimenting
with a brand-new way of expression
seething and vital

(...)

that period
is history now
but it was the take-off
for many an artist⁵²

The art propagated by Sandberg after he got in charge in 1945, appeals to a modern, democratic humanity; a humanity that has exchanged law-abidingness and group solidarity for individual freedom and self-expression. This artistic language – in the previous exemplified by the language of Cobra – does not want to please or solace any longer. Instead, it is a critical art, an art that poses questions. It is, if I may adapt the phrase of the Cobra member and poet Lucebert, an art without beauty, an art with a burnt face.⁵³

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⁵² As cited in Ad Petersen and Pieter Brattinga, eds, *Sandberg. Een documentaire / a documentary*, Amsterdam: Kosmos, 1975, 126. Sandberg's text was published in the exhibition catalogue *Nederlands bijdrage tot de internationale ontwikkeling sedert 1945/The Dutch Contribution to the International Development of Art since 1945/La contribution hollandaise au développement international de l'art depuis 1945*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam/Museum of Fine Arts, Montréal/the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1962.

⁵³ Adapted from the lines in Lucebert's poem 'ik tracht op poëtische wijze', published in 1952: 'in deze tijd heeft wat men altijd noemde / schoonheid schoonheid haar gezicht verbrand'. Victor Schiferli, ed., *Lucebert. Verzamelde gedichten*, Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2002, 52. Strikingly, Lucebert (Bertus Swaanswijk, 1924-1994), who just like Appel became an icon of anti-establishment and anti-war sentiments – with avant-garde poetry in his case – was recently found out to have a National Socialist past. During the war years, he had sympathised with Hitler and antisemitism and voluntarily moved to Germany to work in the war industry. His biographer Wim Hazeu compares Lucebert with the German writer Günter Grass, who had been a member of the *Waffen-SS* during his teenage years. Hazeu writes the following about Grass: 'His remaining silent about a suspicion of guilt kept on harassing him. (...) Writing books was an escape for him, a sneak route to other worlds.' Perhaps, to some extent, the same applied to Karel Appel. Wim Hazeu, *Lucebert. Biografie*, Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2018, 70-92, 145. The source text reads: 'Wat aan hem bleef knagen was dat zwijgen over een vermoeden van schuld. (...) Boeken schrijven was voor hem een uitweg, sluiptwegen naar andere werelden.'

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The memory of World War Two and the canonisation
of the Cobra movement in the Netherlands

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