

2-2015

Mobilizing The Collective: Helhesten And The Danish Avant-Garde, 1934-1946

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MOBILIZING THE COLLECTIVE:
HELHESTEN AND THE DANISH AVANT-GARDE, 1934-1946

by

KERRY GREAVES

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

MOBILIZING THE COLLECTIVE: HELHESTEN AND THE DANISH AVANT-GARDE, 1934-1946

by

KERRY GREAVES

Adviser: Professor Emily Braun

This dissertation examines the avant-garde Danish artists' collective Helhesten (The Hell-Horse), which was active from 1941 to 1944 in Nazi-occupied Copenhagen and undertook cultural resistance during the war. The main claim of this study is that Helhesten was an original and fully established avant-garde *before* the artists formed the more internationally focused Cobra group, and that the collective's development of sophisticated socio-political engagement and new kinds of countercultural strategies prefigured those of postwar art groups such as Fluxus and the Situationist International. The group and its eponymous journal involved the Danish modernists Asger Jorn, Ejler Bille, Henry Heerup, Egill Jacobsen, and Carl-Henning Pedersen, as well as anthropologists, archeologists, psychologists, and scientists. *Helhesten's* twelve issues from April 1941 to November 1944 featured essays on art theory, non-Western artifacts, literature, poetry, film, architecture, and photography, together with exhibition reviews and profiles of contemporary Danish artists. The group appropriated certain stylistic traits from German Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism. Yet rather than partaking in a retrograde modernist nostalgia, the Helhesten artists radically reformulated the tactics of these movements into what they called a "living art," or "new realism," which emphasized subjectivity, indeterminacy, and a fundamental anti-essentialism that rejected the Nazi obsession with purity as much as it did the prescriptive manifestos of the historical avant-gardes. What emerged was purposefully unskilled, brightly colored painterly abstraction and naïve styles that were

humorous and disarmingly child-like on the surface but trenchant and sophisticated underneath. Helhesten consciously challenged Nazi racist propaganda and its conception of *Volk*, caricatured the idealized Aryan body, defied Hitler's attempts to assert a common Nordic heritage, and critiqued the National Socialist obsession with historical continuity and order. Moreover, as a fundamental link between pre- and postwar vanguard art movements, Helhesten's living aesthetic celebrated quotidian existence through play, disruption, and heightened awareness in a manner that presaged the postwar avant-garde's engagement with everyday life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was a collective project very much in the spirit of Helhesten, and it would not have been possible without the efforts of many people. I would like to thank my adviser, Emily Braun, for her unflagging support of my research. Her rigorous scholarship and ability to get me to focus on minute details while considering the larger concerns of the field have been invaluable. Karen Kurczynski, whose dissertation on Asger Jorn sparked my interest in Helhesten, has been a steadfast mentor, source of enthusiasm, and friend. I express my sincerest gratitude to my defense committee members, Romy Golan and David Joselit—their unparalleled work has served as models for my own.

I have received indispensable financial support for my doctoral studies and dissertation. I thank all of the people involved with the Fulbright/Danish-American Foundation, the American Scandinavian Foundation, the Roth Endowment, and the CUNY Graduate Center. Because of the support of these institutions, I was able to spend more than a year in Copenhagen where I worked as part of a growing community of colleagues dedicated to the furthering of modern Danish art history. I would like to thank Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, Torben Jelsbak, Morten Thing, and Tania Ørum for reading early drafts of the dissertation. Frederik Tygstrup and Mette Sandbye at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen graciously arranged for office space and resources for the long hours of work. The generosity of Lotte Korshøj and Hanne Lundgren Nielsen at the Carl-Henning Pedersen and Else Alfelt Museum, Anni Lave Nielsen at the Heerup Museum, Dorthe Aagesen at the Statens Museum for Kunst, Birgitta Spur at the Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum, Jakob Sevel at KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art, Henrik Lundbak at the Museum of Danish Resistance, and Ivar Dahlmann Olsen all allowed me to undertake incredibly rich archival research and establish a network of Helhesten supporters that I

hope will continue to flourish. At the Museum Jorn, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Troels Andersen, Lars Bay, Karen Friis, Lucas Haberkorn, Teresa Østergaard Pedersen, and Jacob Thage. The unparalleled source material in the museum's archives was essential to my research, and I continue to be humbled by how helpful they have been. Colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic helped before and during this dissertation, not least with revisions, translations, research questions, and general relief of dissertation angst along the way. Hanne Abildgaard, Bonnie Apgar Bennett, Andrea Appel, Patricia Berman, Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Helle Brøns, Elena Ciletti, Solveig Daugaard, Nan Gerdes, Sherrill Harbison, Lauren Kaplan, Carol Lees, Walter Liszewski, Patricia Mainardi, Thor Mednick, Kevin Murphy, Kristina Rapacki, Britany Salisbury, Louise Sørensen, Pari Stave, Anna Strelis, Therkel Stræde, Jens Tang Kristensen, and Karen Westphal Eriksen—I am so grateful for your support, and your interest in this project.

To my friends Sarah Carmody, Jessica Difabio, Fie Kollerup, Kerri Maloney, Bridget Marlowe, and Jenny Trombley, we may live far apart most of the time, but your beautiful friendship and laughter has sustained me through this process. To my family, especially my parents John and Eileen Greaves and my brother John Greaves and his family, your unconditional love, work ethic, and constant understanding made this dissertation possible. It is dedicated to you.

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156. Carl-Henning Pedersen, *The Birds of Fantasy*, 1944, ink on paper, 21.6 x 27.9 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York
157. Erik Ortvad, *Untitled*, 1944, crayon on paper, 33 x 40 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York
158. Egill Jacobsen, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Asger Jorn, *Cobra 1*, no. 1 (March 1949): front cover
159. Photo of 1948 Høst Exhibition participants and family members with Carl-Henning Pedersen's doodles. Back row: Ernest Mancoba, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Erik Ortvad, Ejler Bille, Knud Nielsen, Sixten Wiklund, Aage Vogel-Jørgensen, Erik Thommesen. Seated: Karel Appel, Tony Appel, Christian Dotremont, Sonja Ferlov with her son Wonga, Else Alfelt. Front row: Jorn, Corneille, Constant, Henry Heerup
160. Robert Dahlmann Olsen Helhesten cases for the Royal Library exhibition, now housed at the Museum Jorn, Silkeborg
161. Detail, Robert Dahlmann Olsen Helhesten cases for the Royal Library exhibition, now housed at the Museum Jorn, Silkeborg

Later historians of our time will agree that in 1938 almost every conversation, in every country of our ruined continent Europe, revolved around the probability or otherwise of a second world war. The theme inevitably fascinated every social gathering, and you sometimes felt that fears, suppositions and hopes were being expressed not so much by the speakers as by the atmosphere itself, the air of those times, highly charged with secret tensions and anxious to put them into words.

Stefan Zweig, *Beware of Pity*

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the avant-garde Danish artists' collective Helhesten (The Hell-Horse), which was active from 1941 to 1944 in Nazi-occupied Copenhagen. Helhesten spearheaded cultural resistance during the war and developed new kinds of countercultural strategies that prefigured those of postwar art groups such as Cobra (1948-1951), Fluxus (est. 1961), and the Situationist International (1957-1972). The group and its eponymous journal involved the leading Danish modernists Asger Jorn (1914-1973), Ejler Bille (1910-2004), Henry Heerup (1907-1993), Egill Jacobsen, (1910-1998), and Carl-Henning Pedersen (1913-2007), as well as anthropologists, archeologists, psychologists, and scientists. *Helhesten's* twelve issues from April 1941 to November 1944 featured essays on art theory, non-Western artifacts, literature, poetry, film, architecture, and photography, together with exhibition reviews and profiles of contemporary Danish artists. The group took certain stylistic traits from the German Expressionists, and shared the latter's interest in Nordic identity, myth, and the spiritual in art. Helhesten also adapted the Dada interest in performance art and playful transgression, as well as Surrealist psychic automatism and an exploration of the collective unconscious.

Rather than partaking in a retrograde modernist nostalgia, however, Helhesten's artists vigorously transformed the tactics of Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism into what they called a "living art," or "new realism," which emphasized subjectivity, indeterminacy, and a fundamental anti-essentialism that rejected the Nazi obsession with purity as much as it did the

prescriptive manifestos of the historical avant-gardes. What emerged was a purposefully unskilled, brightly colored painterly abstraction that was humorous and disarmingly child-like on the surface but trenchant and sophisticated in its agenda of socio-political critique.

Surprisingly, the group's wilful reclaiming of culture from the hands of its occupiers not only involved the Danish liberal tradition; it also adroitly exploited its shared cultural history with Germany to challenge Nazi dogma. The collective's name, taken from the messenger of death of Norse mythology, folklore, and the tales of Hans Christian Andersen and the Grimm Brothers, symbolized this. Artists embraced the Danish traditions of egalitarianism and *danske folkelighed*, or the popular, to eradicate distinctions between high and low art and emphasize collective working methods and stylistic non-partisanship, while traditional folkloric symbols were used for anti-nationalistic, universalizing purposes. Such tactics consciously challenged Nazi racist propaganda and its conception of *Volk*, caricatured the idealized Aryan body, defied Hitler's attempts to assert a common Nordic heritage, and critiqued the National Socialist obsession with historical continuity and order. As a fundamental link between pre- and postwar vanguard art movements, Helhesten's living aesthetic celebrated quotidian existence through play, disruption, and a heightened awareness of life as it was lived in a manner that presaged the postwar avant-gardes' engagement with everyday life.¹

This dissertation provides the first major study of Helhesten, which despite its crucial position in the trajectory of Danish modernism and international gestural abstraction, has received little attention in the English and Danish literature. The group's marginalization in the

¹ Throughout this study I refer to "everyday life" in terms of Henri Lefebvre's definition, as the fragmented space outside of governmental regimes and bureaucratic systems, or as Lefebvre described it, the "residual, defined by what is left over." Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* [1947], vol. 1, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 2008), 97. It was Lefebvre, in fact, who cited Cobra as undertaking a parallel critique of everyday life, stating, "But I'd like to go farther back in time, because everything started much earlier. It started with the Cobra group...it was a Nordic group, a group with considerable ambitions. They wanted to renew art, renew the action of art on life." Presumably he did not know of Helhesten, but one could extend this recognition to the war-time collective. See Kristin Ross and Henri Lefebvre, "Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview," *October* 79 (Winter 1997): 70.

literature, in contrast to its successor, the more internationally focused Cobra group, is due to three main factors. Helhesten operated solely within the geographic boundaries of a country that is rarely regarded as having any international impact on twentieth-century art. Secondly, Denmark's government and daily operations remained relatively unaffected during the occupation, at least when compared to the tragedies experienced by other European countries. Finally, Helhesten was active during World War Two, which art historians have tended to view as an isolated period that sundered pre- and postwar European culture.

This study offers an alternative interpretation of the war period and the significance of Danish art by arguing for the committed and sophisticated socio-political engagement of the Helhesten artists. I consider the means and limits of cultural resistance under occupation to revise the current understanding of European gestural abstraction and postwar artistic strategies. I move beyond the dominant figure of Jorn, who was but one of the group's guiding forces and part of a larger cultural operation that took place in Denmark during the late 1930s and 1940s. Much of Jorn's well-known theorizations from the Cobra and SI periods took shape during the war and developed in dialogue with his Helhesten compatriots. In fact, most of the collective's artists were prolific art critics and theorists from the moment they began making art. With the exception of Jorn's writing, this is the first time that many of the *Helhesten* texts will appear in English. I have attempted to let the artists to speak for themselves by widely quoting them.

As mentioned above, art historians tend to discuss Helhesten briefly as an important, but minor, precedent to Cobra.² Helhesten has also been ignored in studies of Denmark and the war.³

² See Jean-Clarence Lambert, *Cobra*, trans. Roberta Bailey (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984) and Anne Adraïens-Pannier, et al., *Cobra* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2008).

³ See John T. Lauridsen, "Kulturkamp! DNSAPs opgør med moderne kunst og kultur," in *Dansk nazisme: 1930-45, og derefter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2002), 289-318.

In Danish art history the Helhesten artists' wartime activities has remained overshadowed by their earlier work with the 1930s Surrealist collective Linien (The Line, 1934-1939) and later involvement with Cobra.⁴ Gunnar Jespersen's 1991 Danish-language *De abstrakte* is the only book that features Helhesten.⁵ Although it is an invaluable resource for the history of the movement, it provides no in-depth art historical treatment of the subject.

Outside of Denmark, Helhesten has received almost no treatment by art historians. This is certainly the case in the United States, where until this year, there was just one book and two dissertations in English to discuss the group.⁶ The three publications produced in 2014 that include sections on Helhesten are all monographs on Jorn.⁷ Per Hovdenakk's survey *Danish Art 1930-50* is the single English-language book on the period, and it offers a general overview of the careers of the Danish artists along with selected translations from *Helhesten*. Hovdenakk concedes that Helhesten was "the most important forum for the new 'abstract' painting in the forties," though he does not explain why.⁸ Peter Shield's 1984 dissertation "Spontaneous Abstraction and its Aftermath in Cobra, 1931-51" provides a valuable historical account in English of artists' activities during that time. Most recently, Karen Kurczynski's book *The Art*

⁴ For example, Helhesten takes up one paragraph in Edvard Nørregård-Nielsen's 500-page survey *Dansk kunst: Tusind års kunsthistorie* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2003).

⁵ Gunnar Jespersen, *De abstrakte: Historien om en kunstnergeneration* (Copenhagen: Kunstbogklubben, 1991). This edition is an expanded version of Jespersen's 1967 book of the same name.

⁶ See Per Hovdenakk, *Danish Art 1930-50* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1999); Karen Kurczynski, "Beyond Expressionism: Asger Jorn and the European Avant-Garde, 1941-1961" (PhD diss., New York University, 2005), 85-109, and Peter Shield, "Spontaneous Abstraction and its Aftermath in Cobra, 1931-51" (PhD diss., The Open University, 1984).

⁷ See Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up* (London: Ashgate: 2014); Dorthe Aagesen and Helle Brøns, eds., *Asger Jorn: Restless Rebel*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 2014), and Karen Kurczynski and Karen Friis, eds., *Expo Jorn: Art is a Festival!* exh. cat. (Silkeborg: Museum Jorn, 2014).

⁸ Hovdenakk, *Danish Art 1930-50*, 137.

and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up offers the most extensive and detailed analysis of the group's aims and projects, though in relation to Jorn's involvement. Kurczynski is the first art historian to rightly consider Linien and Helhesten as part of the Danish *kunstnersammenslutning*, or artists' society, tradition. Unlike earlier Danish studies, which position Linien and Helhesten as loose groups of disparate artists who happened to publish journals and exhibit with one another, Linien and Helhesten were collectively committed nexuses of artists who exhibited, socialized, and created together, in the same way as did Cobra—a name which also stands for the artists' group as much as its journal.

In contrast to earlier studies, I frame Helhesten as a specifically Danish phenomenon that developed as part of several distinctive cultural and historical factors within Denmark. The legacy of the theologian N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) has been particularly important for Danish culture. Since the early nineteenth century Grundtvig's optimistic reformulation of the Lutheran tradition established the concept of *folkelighed*, or the popular, which has become a defining social value of what it means to be Danish. His impact on Danish identity was distilled into the country's avant-garde approach to cultural change and the tradition of *kunstnersammenslutninger*. Grundtvig first introduced the term *folkelighed* in 1838 in a series of lectures in Copenhagen, which were later published as *Mands minde (Within Living Memory)*. He was also the first person to translate selections from the Edda from Icelandic into Danish in 1810. Written by Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson in the early thirteenth century, the Edda is the foundational source of Norse mythology, made popular by later writers such as Hans Christian Andersen; the Edda is also the first source to mention the *helhest*.⁹

⁹ See Snorri Sturluson, *Prose Edda* [1220], trans. Jesse L. Byock, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

In works such as *Norse Mythology* (1808), Grundtvig used the stories of Nordic mythology to promote a modern culture that was based on the struggle with evil and a commitment to everyday life and individual freedom, which were the sources for a democratic and nationalistic *danske folk*.¹⁰ He advocated life in the here and now, freedom of thought and action, and his credo “first human, then Christian,” would reflect the relationship between Danes and government institutions, as well as social groups.¹¹ Grundtvig’s philosophy was based on ordinary people and their needs, and he was the first Dane to use the idea of the popular as a positive cultural factor that informed everything from laws, rules, institutions, and behavior—but not race. Grundtvig related *folkelighed* to nationalism in his 1848 poem “Folkeligheden”:

To one nation they belong
If that’s their chosen fashion
They share a common tongue
And love their fatherland with passion¹²

In works such as “Folkligheden” Grundtvig stressed that belonging to a nation was a matter of free choice. The decision to join the popular, or national community, meant accepting certain and mutual duties towards that community as a whole so that it would prosper.

Folkelighed also informed the Danish concept of Janteloven, or Rules of Jante, which was created by the Danish author Aksel Sandemose (1899-1965) in 1933. Janteloven has come to collectively characterize the behavior of Scandinavians, especially Danes, with its stress on communal good over individual success. The laws, which take the form of the Ten Commandments, thus include edicts such a “you’re not to think you are special” and “you’re not

¹⁰ Niels Lyhne Jensen, *A Grundtvig Anthology*, trans. Edward Broadbridge (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1984), 22-27.

¹¹ Knud Jespersen, *A History of Denmark*, trans. Ivan Hill (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 104.

¹² Translated in *ibid.*, 108.

to think *you* are more important than *we* are.”¹³ While this has had lasting consequences for Danish education, the ideas represented in Janteloven have also informed the notion of collective action over individual achievement in artists’ groups as well.

The emphasis of *folkelighed* on the active contributing individual to a greater whole was a defining aspect of the formation of group structures by the late nineteenth century in Denmark, from official institutions to those that hoped to change them, including alternative artists’ groups. Established as alternatives to existing art institutions, *kunstnersammenslutninger* operated as inclusive collectives and exhibition platforms that provided professional development and economic support to artists and frequently produced corresponding journals that espoused each group’s aesthetic ideas. When the first *kunstnersammenslutning* Den frie Udstilling (The Free Exhibition) was founded as an alternative to the Royal Academy in 1891, it was infused with the *folkelige* cultural associations of tolerance, openness, and inclusivity predicated on the fundamental equality of every person and a sense of communal responsibility.

Egalitarian inclusion, focus on collective aims, lack of stylistic partisanship, and celebration of the quotidian and local concurrently with an exploration of new and foreign forms of expression of *kunstnersammenslutninger* have shaped considerably the development of modern art in Denmark. The Danish artists in these groups appropriated a rhetoric of rebellion against the cultural establishment from the French *salon des refusés* and German secessions they encountered abroad and that traveled to Denmark. Yet the acceptance of a wide range of styles within one group and the diminutive nature of the Copenhagen art world meant that radical art was almost immediately assimilated into mainstream culture, with the result that the very avant-garde qualities that made the art original in the first place were neutralized much more rapidly

¹³ See Aksel Sandemose, *En flyktning krysser sitt spor* [1933] (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2005).

than in places like Paris. Though the art of Den frie might not have been completely accepted by the Royal Academy, artists still exhibited with both groups and taught at the Academy, thus allowing artists to sustain a radical image even while establishing themselves within official Danish culture. The World War One collective Grønningen (The Common) was formed in 1915 as a secession that broke away from Den frie, which by that time was considered conventional. Grønningen included the radical artists of the group Ung dansk Kunst (Young Danish Art) as well as the older Fynboerne (Funen Painters).¹⁴ The Fynboerne had originally helped establish Den frie twenty-five years earlier and its artists painted landscapes and interiors in a colorful naturalist style that was inspired by Impressionism. In addition to the inclusion of older stylistic works in Grønningen's first exhibition, several of the newer works were almost immediately purchased by the Statens Museum for Kunst. The rapid assimilation of *kunstnersammenslutninger* into mainstream institutions therefore occurred simultaneously with artists' proclamation that they were cultural outsiders. This phenomenon would directly impact the establishment of Helhesten.

There was another nineteenth-century figure in addition to Grundtvig whose influence on Danish culture was so pervasive that it could still be detected in the issues surrounding Helhesten's formation in 1941. The literary critic Georg Brandes (1842-1927) stimulated the so-called "Modern Breakthrough" of realism in Danish modernism, and established the idea of *radikalisme*, or radicalism, in Denmark.¹⁵ *Radikalisme* imparted a critical identity for the intellectual and artist, which though liberal, was to remain independent of politics because this

¹⁴ For an overview of Grønningen, see Lennart Gottlieb, et al., *Grønningen: De tidlige år* (Copenhagen: Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, 1990).

¹⁵ For more on Brandes and the influence of *radikalisme* on the twentieth-century Danish intellectual, see Morten Thing, "Kulturradikalismens arv," in *Kommunismens kultur: DKP og de intellektuelle 1918-1960*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter, 1993), 267-346.

allowed for the potential influence of the critic on more than one political party. Brandes linked cultural criticism with social change, writing, “Yet first and foremost, therefore, I everywhere trace the connection between literature and life.”¹⁶ He promoted the idea of individual responsibility, advocated for role of the intelligentsia as a critical group in society, and ultimately served as a prototype for the left-wing activist critic. Yet rather than following any specific political doctrine, Brandes argued that the political and ideological revolution for personal liberty that was required to “heal the state of Denmark” was that of greater freedom for creative and intellectual thought.¹⁷

Brandes’s *radikalisme* served as the foundational model for the politically engaged “*kulturradikale*” (cultural radical) critics of the 1920s and 1930s such as Rudolf Broby-Johansen (1900-1987), Otto Gelsted (1888-1968), Poul Henningsen (1894-1967), and Hans Scherfig (1905-1979). The term *kulturradikale* was first coined by author Elias Bredsdorff (1912-2002) in 1955 to describe the primarily left-wing, socially progressive humanism that was international in outlook and initiated by Brandes and the Modern Breakthrough in the 1870s. Fifty years later, the *kulturradikale* figures adopted Brandes’s celebration of the individual and an inherent commitment to resistance amid the rise of Communism and Fascism. Like Brandes, the *kulturradikale* critics and the Danish artists they influenced saw literary and cultural criticism as tools for political engagement and critique. It is therefore paradoxical that the legacy of Brandes has also limited awareness of the committed nature of the socio-political involvement of Danish modern artists. Brandes’s belief that the independent nature of the intellectual necessitated

¹⁶ Georg Brandes, *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, vol. 2, *The Romantic School in Germany*, trans. Diana White and Mary Morison (London: William Heinemann, 1906), 2.

¹⁷ Translated in David Skilton, “Georg Brandes, English Literature and British Parliamentary Democracy,” in *The Activist Critic: A Symposium on the Political Ideas, Literary Methods, and International Reception of Georg Brandes*, ed. Hans Hertel and Sven Møller Kristensen (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1980), 40.

remaining outside of any specific political party contributed to a longstanding perception that Danish artists were by design, apolitical. This has meant that the output of members of groups such as Linien and Helhesten, whose critiques were often veiled within the language of art, has been interpreted on primarily formalist terms with little consideration of the artists' political activism.

Brandes's 1871 series of lectures, "Main Currents in Nineteenth-Century Literature," critiqued Danish culture for being forty years behind the rest of Europe, and encouraged writers and artists to grow their knowledge of foreign culture.¹⁸ Situated on the outskirts of central Europe, Denmark's small size, homogenous population, late industrialization, and relatively stable economy also stimulated cultural figures to seek out international contact with international conduits. Brandes's advocacy of international culture resulted in artists pursuing international training, especially in France, from the late nineteenth century onward. Thus the leading art historian and critic of the period, Julius Lange (1838-1896), rejected the more insular, nationalistic practices of art officials of the generation before.¹⁹ Instead, he encouraged artists to jettison local training in favor of studying in Paris in his 1879 essay "National and International Art":

Now when I thus measure Danish Art with for example with that of France, is it quite natural to say that France with its mere population, its role in the world, and all its further helpful sources, is many points ahead of our small nation in the competition, so it goes

¹⁸ For more on the Modern Breakthrough in Danish art, see Patricia Berman, "Skagen and the Modern Breakthrough," in *In Another Light: Danish Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Vendome, 2007), 133-77.

¹⁹ This was also a reaction to the embarrassing reception of Danish art as provincial by French critics at the 1878 Exposition Universelle in Paris. See Berman, "Skagen and the Modern Breakthrough," and Emily Braun, "Scandinavian Painting and the French Critics," in *Northern Light: Realism and Symbolism in Scandinavian Painting, 1880-1910*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe, exh. cat. (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1982), 67-75.

without saying that its art is far more varied, [and] in all respects more richly equipped and therefore more attractive to the public, than ours.²⁰

Foreign training, especially in Paris, became a decisive factor determining Danish artists' success at home and avant-garde status. Modern Breakthrough artists such as P. S. Krøyer (1851-1909) actively sought out training and contacts in the French capital, which helped to advance their importance in artistic circles in Copenhagen.

The Modern Breakthrough artists' commencing of the Danish preference for French art led to the eclipsing of another nation's enduring influence on Danish culture: that of Germany. Traditionally, the relationship between the two countries has been hostile because of political conflicts over shared land, and Germany has remained something of a blind spot in the Danish cultural discourse. The border territory Schleswig-Holstein has engendered particular historical resentment, with its governance switching back and forth from Germany to Denmark from the nineteenth century through World War One. In actual fact, both N. F. S. Grundtvig and Georg Brandes recognized, were influenced by, and wrote about the importance of German culture for Denmark. Brandes devoted the second volume of his *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature* to Germany. He wrote, "German literature is in this period comparatively original in its aims and its productions; Danish literature either continues the working out of a peculiarly Scandinavian vein, or builds upon German foundations."²¹ Moreover, Grundtvig's establishment of a Danish national identity based on language and culture, rather than geographic boundaries, was based on the ideas of German theologian Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Herder had

²⁰ "Naar jeg nu saaledes maaler Danmarks kunst f. ex. med Frankrigs, ligger det jo ganske nær at sige, at Frankrig blot i sin folkemængde, sin rolle i verden, og i alle sine ydre hjælpkilder, har saa mange points forud for vor lille nation i vædekampen, at det følger af sig selv, at dets kunst maa blive langt mangfoldigere, i alle henseender rigere udstyret og derfor ogsaa for det store publikum mere tiltrækkende, end vor." Julius Lange, *Vor kunst og udlandets: Et foredrag* (Copenhagen: P. G. Philipsens Forlag, 1879), 12.

²¹ Brandes, *Main Currents*, 6.

sought earlier to create a German national identity from his study of pre-Christian folk culture, which he argued was the soul of the people, or *Volksgeist*.²² The German word *Volk* is a cognate of the Danish term *folk*, and both terms were originally used to describe authentically pure people without racial connotations—something the Nazi racist interpretation of *Volk* later overshadowed.

During the early-nineteenth-century National Romantic era when the meaning of these terms was established, Danish and German culture valued the same qualities, such as the piety, simplicity, and return to nature embodied by the German Biedermeier and Danish Golden Age movements. Art historian Barbara Miller Lane has argued that these shared German and Scandinavian traditions informed an early nineteenth-century Northern National Romantic style, which engendered an affirmative “dream of the North” during the 1930s and 1940s that was rooted in nostalgia for great non-Roman epochs of the past such as the Goths and Vikings.²³

Nevertheless, this focus on the positive aspects of a Nordic past was embedded within mythic notions of two types of thought based on a North/South discourse. As art historian Eric Michaud has demonstrated, the understanding of the Germanic and Latin races as oppositional became *the* interpretative model of cultural production from the early nineteenth century. At that time, some art historians inverted idea that the Renaissance was the apex of the history of European culture, instead subscribing to the idea that “thanks to their male energies, young Northern peoples—the barbarians—regenerated feminine and decadent old Roman Europe, propelling it into modernity.”²⁴ In art history, this North/South division charged debates about

²² Barbara Miller Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 22-23.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1-10.

²⁴ Eric Michaud, “Barbarian Invasions and the Racialization of Art History,” *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 60.

race and culture especially during the politically troubled decade of the 1930s. During the war, Danish artists' interest in the Northern National Romantic emphasis on naturalism, universal commonalities, a linkage to the past, and the inherent authenticity of the *danske folk*, or the common people, were also circumscribed by this North/South dichotomy, to displace the perceived dominance of the Greco-Roman tradition.

Another German cultural movement, German Expressionism, has been an important but overlooked influence on Danish art in the early twentieth century, with Danish art historians and critics emphasizing instead the impact of the Fauvism of Henri Matisse, especially since many Scandinavian artists studied with him personally and his work was collected by several prominent Danes. The dismissing of the influence of German Expressionism is also due to the fact that in Denmark the term *ekspressionisme* signified a range of modern movements that encompassed everything from Futurism to Dada, obscuring the influence of its specifically German aspects on Danish artists.²⁵ Undeniably, Fauvism was significant for Danish modernists. Yet artists in Denmark primarily came into contact with Matisse's work second-hand, through his Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish pupils. Though artists could see Matisse's work in Christian Tetzen-Lund's important collection of modern French art in Copenhagen, the collection did not actually open to artists until 1917.²⁶ As chapter four of this dissertation will propose, German Expressionism did have an impact on Danish modernists. Though they have been overlooked in the literature, the 1908 Die Brücke exhibition in Copenhagen and Herwarth Walden's traveling *Sturm* shows to the Danish capital cross-fertilized Danish modernism. In

²⁵ See Marit Werenskiold, *The Concept of Expressionism: Origin and Metamorphoses*, trans. Ronald Walford (Oslo: Univeritetsforlaget, 1984), and Torben Jelsbak, *Ekspressionisme: Modernismens formelle gennembrud i dansk malerkunst og poesi* (Hellerup: Spring, 2005).

²⁶ For more on Matisse's school and Tetzen Lund's collection see Kasper Monrad, ed., *Henri Matisse: Fire store samlere* (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 1999).

turn, Danish artists also visited the Berlin Secession and exhibited at the Der Sturm gallery in 1918. Further, the “Recent German Art” exhibition at Den frie Udstilling in 1932—and especially the works of Wassily Kandinsky, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, and Emile Nolde in that show—particularly impressed the Linien and Helhesten artists.

As a predecessor of Helhesten, Grønningen partook in something Georg Brandes had identified as “apply and remodel.” Despite his advocacy of creating international connections and although he could be critical of experimental art, Brandes positively assessed Danish writers and artists’ adapting of foreign examples as an *innovative* practice.²⁷ He identified early Danes’ ability to apply and reshape international cultural developments to their own environment, and framed this as a specifically Danish mode of cultural production. The Grønningen artists’ appropriation of Fauvism and German Expressionism emptied their work of any personal psychological content, so typical of the searing, and in the German case, introspective content of Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter. Instead artists preferred subjects that depicted interiors and landscapes, the propensity for which had been established since the Golden Age. Between the wars these subjects were painted in expressive, bright colors and came to signify a particularly Danish aesthetic that encompassed a range of associations from humble and intimate to youthful and verdant. The “apply and remodel” approach would continue with Helhesten, and the group’s experimental reformulation of elements of selected foreign styles into a new and original approach to art.

²⁷ Brandes, *Main Currents*, 7.

Traditionally art historians have interpreted Danish culture's oblique and often paradoxical relationship with Germany and France by using a center-periphery model.²⁸ Yet as the authors of the recent anthology *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries* have demonstrated, such an approach takes for granted that the center is always more radical than the periphery.²⁹ Instead, modernism and its avant-garde constituents were transnational, fluid, overlapping, and often in between styles, countries, and ideologies. In this way anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's analysis of global cultural flow provides a valuable framework with which to understand Danish modernists' relationship with their continental counterparts.³⁰ Appadurai has formulated a theory of the "social imaginary," which is a set of values, institutions, laws, and symbols common to a particular social group and the corresponding society and a system of meanings that govern a given social structure.³¹ The social imaginary consists of five aspects that affect the exchange of information and ideas globally, which he describes as "scapes": ethnoscap (migrating groups of people of and between nations), technoscap (the global configuration of technology), finanscap (the global economy), mediascap (the distribution of information through media), and ideoscap (the exchange of information through images). Although Appadurai's social imaginary is specific to contemporary culture, its emphasis on the fluid and fluctuate nature of the exchange of ideas that

²⁸ See Carl Thomas Edam, ed., *Scandinavian Modernism* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989); Torsten Gunnarsson, *Nordic Landscape Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Nancy Adler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), and Varnedoe, *Northern Light*.

²⁹ See "Preface," in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Gardes in the Nordic Countries, 1900-1925*, ed. Hubert van den Berg, et al. (New York: Rodopi, 2012). 9-17.

³⁰ Appadurai builds on Benedict Anderson's concept of a nation as an "imagined community," which is based on the shared cultural values of people who do not necessarily know one another. The nation is a socially constructed community that is imagined by people who perceive themselves to be part of that group. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006).

³¹ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 2007), 217-18.

inform concepts of nationalism, themselves also in flux, is useful for understanding how Danish artists of the 1930s and 1940s rapidly assimilated and rearticulated international cultural and political ideas into a native avant-garde during the war.

Particularly informative for the Danish phenomenon is the ideoscape, which is represented by images that reflect the shifting meanings of political ideology depending on the context of the viewer. Appadurai describes the ideoscape as:

The political narratives that govern communication between elites and followings in different parts of the world involve problems of both a semantic and pragmatic nature: semantic to the extent that words (and their lexical equivalents) require careful translation from context to context in their global movements, and pragmatic to the extent that these words by political actors and their audiences may be subject to very different sets of contextual conventions that mediate their translation into public politics.³²

The Helhesten artists adopted and reformulated images, texts, and ideas that were also propagated by the Nazis and Social Democrats, but to antithetical ends. As we shall see, the Helhesten artists and their antecedents questioned any master narratives such as democracy, sovereignty, or freedom, and utilized images and ideas from mythology, Nordic history, and international art styles to highlight the subjectivity of the viewer, the importance of context, and the way that symbols could be exploited for political ends.

Denmark's political climate during the 1930s and World War Two, which was fundamental in the shaping of Helhesten, followed many of the same developments as in the rest of Europe, but with some differences that require explanation.³³ The Danish Parliament, or Folketing, was dominated by four parties and built on a model of arbitration and consensus. The largest party from the 1930s (and throughout the rest of the twentieth century) was the

³² Ibid., 220.

³³ For an introduction to the modern political history of Denmark, see Jespersen, *A History of Denmark*, and T. K. Derry, *A History of Scandinavia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

Socialdemokraterne (Social Democrats), which represented the working classes on a broad-based, popular front platform.³⁴ In 1933 the “Danish model” of the welfare state, which provided universal welfare and social security to all Danes, was initiated by the Social Democrats with broad political support.³⁵ The elaborate negotiations this required subdued the ideological extremes of the four parties, most notably the Social Democrats, who abandoned their socialist roots and the related focus on international class struggle, in favor of a national, non-Marxist, and reformist program.³⁶ This reconstituted the image of the Social Democrats into the guardians of the Danish nation state during the popular front years and the party became synonymous with social democracy itself. In addition, the four-party collective democracy denied power to the extreme right or left, namely Danmarks Kommunistiske Parti (Danish Communist Party, or DKP) and Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Arbejderparti (Danish Nazi Party, or DNSAP). Paradoxically, the desire to keep the left and right out of and the ruling parties in the government—despite its Marxist roots the Social Democratic Party publically disavowed Communism as another form of Fascism from 1923—also led to the same collective democracy to accommodate Germany during the first half of the occupation.

All of the radical artists of the 1920 and 1930s either belonged to or identified with the Danish Communist Party. The DKP differed from its Soviet and European counterparts, in that

³⁴ The party was led by the popular Thorvald Stauning (1873-1942), who served as prime minister from 1929-1942. The Social Democrats were never able to achieve an overall majority, since the agricultural lower classes supported the Radikale Venstre (Radical Left, or Social Liberal Party), which also drew urban intellectuals. The Radical Left occupied a political position between the Social Democrats and the other major party, the Venstre (Left, or Denmark’s Liberal Party), which represented independent farmers, in addition to the Konservative Folkeparti (the Conservative People’s Party; Højre, or Right, before 1915).

³⁵ The Danish welfare legislation was a sweeping set of amendments signed into law the same day Hitler became German chancellor, and a response to the economic crises of the 1920s, which though not as severe as the rest of Europe, did affect Denmark.

³⁶ For a detailed description of the Social Democratic Party’s transition from Marxist socialism to its rejection of Communism, see Morten Thing, “The Russian Revolution and the Danish Labour Movement,” *Socialismo storia* 3 (1991): 177-219.

the homogenous, reformist nature of Danish society led to a more moderate approach than elsewhere.³⁷ Historian Morten Thing has applied semiotic theory to explain how the DKP adapted the more extreme and often antithetical rhetoric sent from the Soviet party to a more moderate Danish context. For example, during the 1938 national party conference, Danish party leader Aksel Larsen (1897-1972) proclaimed, “We call for gathering” instead of the more forceful Soviet term, “unity.”³⁸ Gathering connotes more popular and *folkelig* associations of a Danish village and its workers. In order to find a footing in Danish politics, and be representative of the larger goals of the Communism, the DKP thus had to filter and retranslate existing ideas. While such filtering is true of all local iterations of Communism, in Denmark this process manifested an element of Grundtvigian consensus. This process also unfolded in much the same way as that of the Danish artists who sought to assimilate their international training with a local cultural environment. In the 1930s Danish Communism was associated with a range of progressive ideas such as modern art, anti-authoritarian educational theory, jazz, Functionalism, and women’s emancipation—all elements that attracted Danish artists. Sexual reform and psychoanalysis, moreover, which were not prohibited by the DKP, were stimulated by a lecture by Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich in 1933 (Asger Jorn was in attendance) and the seminars of psychoanalyst and later *Helhesten* contributor Sigurd Næsgaard (1883-1956).

In addition to artists’ commitment to Communist ideals, two other factors that profoundly affected the history of *Helhesten* were World War Two and the Nazi occupation of Denmark. On

³⁷ The DKP did not win its first parliamentary seat until 1932, and developed within the relatively uniform Danish social structure and its fairly self-confident working class. The bolshevization of the DKP was therefore delayed into the late 1920s, caused partially by the problem of applying ultra-left policies to a Danish situation. See Thing, “The Russian Revolution”: 177-219.

³⁸ Morten Thing, “The Signs of Communism, Signs of Ambiguity: Language and Communism,” in *Communism: National and International*, eds. Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1998), 247-49.

the morning of April 9, 1940, Germany invaded Denmark; the occupation would last more than five years, until May 5, 1945.³⁹ The German invasion, codenamed Operation Weserübung, was met by only two hours of Danish armed resistance and took place in spite of a mutually agreed upon non-aggression pact between the two countries. The German commander of troops in Denmark, General Kaupisch, ordered the Danish army and navy to “show a spirit of understanding...by desisting from any passive or active resistance.”⁴⁰

In response, on April 9 King Christian X and Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning responded to the seemingly benevolent command with the statement:

The Danish government has, under protest, decided to adapt its policies in accordance with the occupation which has taken place and, consequently, to proclaim the following: The German forces now present in the country will establish relations to the Danish military forces, and it is the duty of the population to refrain from any resistance to these forces. The Danish government will attempt to safeguard the Danish people and...therefore, encourage the population to remain calm and restrained towards these conditions. ...Peace and order must prevail in the country, and loyal conduct must be exercised towards authority.⁴¹

The king was one of just a few leaders of an occupied nation to remain in power within his own country during the war and was the most prominent symbol of national unity. He was aloof toward the occupying forces, resuming his daily horse ride through the streets of Copenhagen just two days into the occupation, which was interpreted as a sign of passive resistance and encouraged national solidarity. Thus the King’s statement, with its measured tenor of acceptance, was also laced with a deep sense of effrontery that reflected the attitude of the entire country.

³⁹ Just over 3,000 Danes died as a direct result of the occupation, while 4,000 Danish volunteers died fighting as part of the German army. Gert Laursen, “The Occupation in Numbers,” *Danish Military History* (1997), accessed March 21, 2013, <http://www.milhist.dk/besattelsen/ww2stat/ww2stat.html>.

⁴⁰ Translated in David Lampe, *Savage Canary: A History of the Danish Resistance in World War Two* [1957] (New York: Skyhorse, 2010), 12.

⁴¹ Translated in Nathaniel Hong, *Sparks of Resistance: The Illegal Press in German-Occupied Denmark, April 1940-August 1943* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1996), 30 and 63n4.

At the outset of the occupation Denmark and Germany agreed to what is traditionally described as a “policy of negotiation,” which the Danish government believed would prevent a violent overtaking of its weak military forces.⁴² Although all of the Scandinavian countries had pledged neutrality in 1939, Denmark was the only country to enter into such an agreement. Hitler treated Denmark with a degree of latitude because of his view of the country as a *Muensterprotektorat*, or model protectorate, and a case study of the occupation of a Nordic Aryan race, as well as the fact that Denmark held little strategic use for the German campaign. Denmark was under the control of Joachim von Ribbentrop’s foreign ministry represented by Reich Plenipotentiary Werner Best, rather than the more restrictive S. S.⁴³ Thus, during the first half of the war until August 1943, a period described as one of adaptation, conditions were fairly comfortable, Danes lived in relative freedom, and Danish Jews were able to live in the same conditions as the rest of the country.⁴⁴ Because of the Danish cooperation, German officials stated they would “respect Danish sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as neutrality.”⁴⁵ It was during this period that the four-party coalition government continued to function and maintained much of its former control over domestic policy, while the police and judicial system remained in Danish hands. Helhesten, meanwhile, would emerge during this first period of the occupation, before overt resistance was undertaken.

⁴² The most comprehensive English-language source on the occupation is Nathaniel Hong, *Occupied* (Copenhagen: Frihedsmuseets Venners Forlags Fund, 2012). For an introduction to Denmark’s wartime policies see Tony Griffiths, “Presents from Hitler,” in *Scandinavia: At War with the Trolls* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 151-83, and T. K. Derry, “The Impact of World War, 1939-1947,” in *A History of Scandinavia*, 328-55.

⁴³ The first official to hold the post (until November 1942) was the German ambassador Cecil von Renthe-Fink.

⁴⁴ See Henrik Dethlefsen, “Denmark and the German Occupation: Cooperation, Negotiation or Collaboration?” *The Scandinavian Journal of History* 15, nos. 1-2 (1990): 194.

⁴⁵ Jørgen Hæstrup, *Secret Alliance: A Study of the Danish Resistance Movement 1940–45* (Odense: 1976), 9.

The disdain of Denmark for its occupiers intensified as the war went on, with the country's initial resigned acceptance of the occupation giving way to increasingly overt resistance enterprises during the last two years of the war. By August 1943 Hitler retaliated to an escalation of public acts of defiance by enforcing more extreme restrictions, including martial law, a curfew, the disarming of the Danish army, death penalties for sabotage, stricter censorship, and the control of Denmark was transferred to Heinrich Himmler. Ultimately the Danish government refused further economic cooperation with Germany and resigned in late August 1943. In its place arose Denmark's Frihedsraad (Freedom Council), which immediately established secret diplomatic links with Washington, London, and Moscow.

The two most important groups of the resistance movement were BOPA (Borgerlige Partisaner, or Civil Partisans) and Holger Danske. The latter group was named for the medieval Danish hero, who would wake from his slumber in Kronborg Castle to protect Danes in their hour of need, as described by Hans Christian Andersen, among others.⁴⁶ Holger Danske eventually grew to about 450 men of various political backgrounds. Unlike BOPA, Holger Danske usually operated in small isolated groups whose members only knew of one another as a precautionary measure if they were caught. Between 1942 and 1945 BOPA and Holger Danske each staged more than a hundred separate actions and ultimately spared the complete Allied bombardment of Copenhagen. As we shall see, all of the Helhesten artists were members of the resistance and participated in a range of clandestine activities.

In further retaliation to Denmark's disobedience, Hitler ordered the deportation of the country's Jewish population in October 1943. The Nazis had tried to burn the main Copenhagen

⁴⁶ BOPA was initially formed by a handful of Danish Communists and veterans of the International Brigade in Spain who considered sabotage the only practical partisan warfare for flat, densely populated Denmark. Although most of the BOPA leaders were caught, it would eventually consist of about 150 members. Hong, *Occupied*, 161-63.

synagogue in 1941, but this was the only blatant Nazi act of anti-Semitism in Denmark before this point. News of the impending deportation was leaked by the German attaché in Denmark Georg Duckwitz, and most Jews initially went into hiding.⁴⁷ Within just one month Danish citizens transported almost all of the country's 8,000 Jews to neutral Sweden.⁴⁸

Denmark's successful transportation of most of its Jewish population to Sweden has led to the general understanding of the country as a defiant resistor where "the Holocaust failed," and resulted in its inclusion as a founding member of the United Nations.⁴⁹ Yet the fact remains that Denmark signed the Anti-Comintern Pact in 1941, the Danish government actively collaborated with Germany during the first half of the war, and 7,000 Danes joined the German S.S.—roughly the same number of Jews whose lives were saved.⁵⁰ Historian Henrik Dethlefsen's analysis of the Danish government's interaction with Germany is one of several studies that have critically reexamined the complex conditions that gave rise to the political policies of the occupation. Although Danish politicians never collaborated as support for Nazi ideology or in hopes of a German victory, the Danish policy of "negotiation" was not simply the result of Denmark's powerlessness in the face of German military threat. As Dethlefsen has demonstrated,

⁴⁷ Since most Danes, Christians and Jews alike, rarely went to church or synagogue, it was the family doctors who formed an underground network, raising money for, hiding, and conveying Danish Jews to safety. Bispebjerg Hospital alone transported 2,000 Jews with no losses. Lampe, *Savage Canary*, 70-74.

⁴⁸ The Gestapo managed to arrest just 474 Danish Jews in 1943. They were sent to Theresienstadt, where 57 died, mostly of old age or sickness. While there, under the fictional cover of individual gifts, the Danish government sent them food and supplies. It was Niels Bohr, who was in Sweden *en route* to the United States, who convinced the Swedish government to acknowledge publicly Sweden's sheltering of the Danish Jews and to condemn Germany's actions.

⁴⁹ See Carol Rittner and Leo Goldberger, eds., *Rescue of the Danish Jews* (New York: Braun Center for the Holocaust, 1993), 4-9. Denmark's first public act of contrition was in 2003 when Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen condemned the Danish government's actions as "morally unjustifiable," stating that "If everyone in Europe—if the Americans and the Russians—had thought the same as the Danish lawmakers, then Hitler would have won the war." "Denmark: Apology for Cooperation With Nazis," *The New York Times* (August 30, 2003).

⁵⁰ Hong, *Occupied*, 80-82.

the Danish government negotiated with Germany in order to preserve Denmark's sovereignty, to keep the local Communists and Nazis out of government, and to legitimize the political system's collaboration with Germany.⁵¹ Although collaboration was not a choice for the Danish government, since it was the Germans who controlled the degree of latitude for political collaboration, the ruling political parties were, in actual fact, averse to breaking with the Germans and did all they could to prevent it.⁵²

Dethlefsen's study refines the previous one-sided interpretations of Denmark's relationship towards Germany during the occupation, which inaccurately assume that Denmark was a homogenous body acting in a collectively organized way by people with equal amounts of political power. The documentation provided by Dethlefsen also demonstrates that Danes were living in what theorist Carl Schmitt described as a "state of exception," when governments exercise and increase unchecked power during periods of political emergency.⁵³ As philosopher Giorgio Agamben has explained, rather than protecting national stakeholders and democracy, such harnessing of power outside of the law during a state of emergency can and does lead to totalitarianism. As Agamben states:

⁵¹ According to Dethlefsen, Danish politicians partook in two types of collaboration, which he describes as attentism and activism. Initially, collaboration served as a defensive strategy for survival during a period attentism, which was aimed at continuity and preservation of the existing political structure. This period then shifted into one of opportunistic activism, which was aimed at anticipating changes to make them more beneficial for the Danish government. The activist period consisted of offensive strategies on the part of Danish politicians to make concessions to the Germans before they could demand them, in order to secure good will. By late 1942 until the resignation of the government and the abandonment of collaboration the following year, the government shifted back to a policy of hesitant attentism. Henrik Dethlefsen, "Denmark and the German Occupation," 193-206. See also Henrik Dethlefsen and Henrik Lundbak, eds., *Fra mellemkrigstid til efterkrigstid* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 1998), and John T. Lauridsen, ed., *Over strengen, under besættelsen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2007).

⁵² At late as 1979, historian Hans Kirschhoff's dissertation was the first revisionist account to propose the idea of collaboration into the Danish scholarly discourse. See Hans Kirschhoff, "Augustoprøret 1943" (PhD diss, University of Copenhagen, 1979).

⁵³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (1922), trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005).

The entire Third Reich can be considered a state of exception that lasted twelve years. In this sense, modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system.⁵⁴

While the Danish government claimed part of the reason to collaborate with Germany was to keep local Nazis out of power, the fact remains that their prime objective was to maintain their own monopoly on power. In doing so, they conceded to Germany in defiance of the wishes—and legal rights—of the general population. This unchecked power of the Social Democrat-led government—so atypical of modern Danish politics—was what actually drove Danish citizens to question openly and later overturn that government, ostensibly enacting the first political revolution in Denmark since parliamentary democracy was established in the nineteenth century.

As historian Nathaniel Hong has documented, especially during the first half of the occupation, the Danish resistance was comprised of numerous acts that were non-visible, alternative, and outside of the usual realms of political engagement in Denmark during the war.⁵⁵ It was, in fact, the often unplanned and individual resistance actions of figures without political power, such as students and Communists, which ultimately brought about the resignation of the government. The break in August 1943 was forced on politicians from below, by young people who undertook resistance at places of work and in social gatherings. As this study will demonstrate, Helhesten similarly followed a model of an unofficial and grassroots resistance that aimed to subvert edicts handed down by the Danish government to placate the Germans, and they did so from the first year of the occupation when such activities were explicitly prohibited. Far more than just the historical circumstances that unfolded around Helhesten, the occupation was an integral aspect of the group's avant-garde platform. The Helhesten artists undertook

⁵⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

⁵⁵ See Hong, "Down with the Murderer Hitler!" in *Sparks of Resistance*, 83-113.

cultural resistance by celebrating so-called “degenerate” art, experimenting with seemingly nonsensical semi-figural gestural abstraction and naïve styles, and promoting ideas of a common humanity, creative freedom, and a playful approach to art making and to life.

Critical to the formation of Helhesten were issues of stylistic innovation and political engagement of avant-garde Danish artists during the 1920s and 1930s. The first chapter of this dissertation is therefore partially devoted to the *kulturradikale* art critics and their related publications. Rudolf Broby-Johansen, Otto Gelsted, Poul Henningsen, and Hans Scherfig were committed to radical politics of the left infused with DKP ideas, which they linked to their views on culture in their prolific writings. Because of these figures’ more overt cultural-political critiques and background in architecture and literature, they are traditionally viewed as somewhat unrelated to the artists around Helhesten’s most immediate predecessors, Linien and the journal *Konkretion* (*Concrete Art*, 1935-1936). However, the *kulturradikale* figures’ attachment to Communism and espousal of experimental art and politics in writing had a direct impact on Linien, *Konkretion*, and Helhesten. Led by the artists Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen (1909-1957), Ejler Bille, and Richard Mortensen (1910-1993), Linien, and Bjerke Petersen’s subsequent journal *Konkretion*, introduced French Surrealism to Denmark. Linien and *Konkretion* were both stylistically progressive and politically critical, and served as crucial models for Helhesten. Their transmission of Surrealism, however, was ambiguous. It was precisely this ambiguity that allowed for the Linien and Helhesten artists to freely adapt certain mannerisms from their French counterparts while ignoring others, in a process of selective appropriation that ultimately resulted in the Danish artists’ rejection of Surrealist automatism in favor of a politically committed, semi-figural gestural abstraction.

Chapter two investigates the theoretical foundations of Helhesten's establishment and its development of experimental appropriation of existing art styles and theories through a close examination of the contents of the journal. Rather than simply an adoption of mainstream European art styles and ideas, seen through the context of Appadurai's ideoscape, the artists used the format of the journal to reformulate ideological notions being exploited by national governments and cultures through images and texts. From the sardonic use of the *helhest* to mock the Nazi abuse of Nordic myths, to the employing of the traditional Danish elements of a consensus model and ironic humor to question established cultural modes and the Social Democratic government, the Danish artists turned culture on its head. Amidst the "culture wars" between the Danish Communist and Nazi Parties, the *Helhesten* contributors celebrated silliness, kitsch, and childlike elements in their art and writings to implicitly challenge fixed ideologies embedded in art and images. That the artists did so by also mining German cultural sources makes their project all the more radical.

The dissertation's third chapter proposes a set of ideological strategies, to release, relate, subvert, and recreate, which the Helhesten artists undertook in the development of their purposefully unskilled aesthetic. Helhesten's artists forged an art that they described as spontaneous, living, creative, and fantastical. The childlike forms and bright colors of Helhesten's images have obscured the seriousness and originality of their dual experimentation with formalism and socio-political critique in their images. Though they created in various media, the Helhesten artists invested painting with the potential to generate cultural change, and painted works that ranged from naïve figuration to total abstraction. The exploration of spontaneous release resulted in the free application of thick paint whose very materiality could stimulate the imagination. Such a creative emancipation, the artists maintained, facilitated art's

ability to relate to viewers, and in the process, they took up the leitmotif of the mask and a humanistic emphasis in sculpture as vehicles for human connection. The desire to relate was mirrored by the impetus to subvert existing structures. Artists' exploration of the gesture as a transgressive mark and the exploitation of humor and grimly comic themes, which often remained undetected behind the colorful imagery, questioned established ideas and systems. To release, relate, and subvert ultimately opened up the possibility to create new ideas and concepts that probed freedom, social agency, and community through art; a "new realism" for a new society, the title that they gave their final collective manifesto in 1945.

Like the Danish journals before it, *Helhesten* also served as an exhibiting platform for contributing artists. Chapter four contextualizes the group's little discussed 1941 "Thirteen Artists in a Tent" exhibition within the Danish tradition of *kunstnersammenslutninger*. Though not as shocking as Dada and Surrealist interventions, the exhibition provided a unique carnival-like setting in a park just north of Copenhagen. Artists distilled local and international manifestations of Dada, Surrealism, and Functionalism into a singular approach to exhibition design, viewer subjectivity, and the performative role of the artist. As the first avant-garde exhibition in Denmark to attempt to merge art and life, the Tent exhibition was a ludic event on the threshold between art and its public. For this reason, "Thirteen Artists in a Tent" also provides a new context within which to evaluate Asger Jorn's important 1941 essay "Intimate Banalities," which appeared in *Helhesten's* second issue and theorized about the importance of kitsch for contemporary art.

Chapter five considers the legacy of *Helhesten*. When the reception of the group during and after the war is examined, a series of missed opportunities emerges as to why this crucial avant-garde has been detrimentally subsumed into histories of Cobra, as well as the larger

cultural-political issues of postwar Europe and the United States. At the end of and just after the war the Danish cultural environment reflected a general anxiety toward the Helhesten artists' fantastical and naïve styles. In the wake of the European realization of Hitler's genocide and as a side effect of recovery, the relevance of abstraction to everyday life and the seemingly unserious element in the artists' images worked to expunge the Helhesten moment from art history for the next twenty-five years. The Helhesten artists' last collective enterprise was to send their final manifesto "The New Realism" as part of an exhibition proposal to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1946. Their seeking of international collaboration and promotion of creative freedom was perfectly suited to MoMA's postwar agenda, something that was lost on the museum, which rejected the proposal. Helhesten would not return to the spotlight again until the mid-1960s, when Robert Dahlmann Olsen curated two exhibitions dedicated to the Helhesten period, one in Copenhagen and the other in the United States. The little impact these exhibitions made was due not only to poor organization, but also the continued misunderstanding of the group as a subset of Cobra and an unsophisticated approach to gestural abstraction that was rooted in the group's national heritage—the very type of ideology that Helhesten sought to undermine during the war.

Lastly, a note on formatting. Group names such as Helhesten and Linien are italicized only when referring specifically to the journals they produced. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own, emphasis is in the original, and quotations from and titles of Danish texts appear as they were originally published. Danish has three additional letters than English: æ, ø, and å. During the period covered by the dissertation æ was also written as "ae," ø as "oe," and å as "aa." I retain the original way the letters were published in the journals, even if this was not always systematic. Asger Jorn changed his name from Asger Jørgensen in 1946. For

consistency he is referred to Jorn throughout the text unless his name appears in a title of a text or in a quotation.

Our art is a representation of, in our mental life, the (deeply) existing realities—hence the word: sur-realism.¹

Ejler Bille, *Linien*, January 1934

CHAPTER 1

Experimental Art Journals, Surrealism, and Politics in Interwar Denmark

In January 1934, the first conduit of French Surrealism into Denmark, the *kunstnersammenslutning* and art journal *Linien* (*The Line*, 1934-1939), made its debut. Inspired by the title of Wassily Kandinsky's 1926 book *Point and Line to Plane*, *Linien* was also very much influenced by sources other than Surrealism. The group was cofounded by Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, Richard Mortensen, and Ejler Bille, who were artists as well as prolific critics of art and culture. All three artists spent substantial time in Paris from 1937 to 1939, where they met with prominent Surrealists such as André Breton, Alberto Giacometti, and Hans Arp. The cover of the first issue of *Linien* prominently featured an advertisement for *Minotaure* (1933-1939), which along with Richard Mortensen's automatic drawing *Woman's Prayer* and Ejler Bille's definition of Surrealism, with its reference to the unconscious, made explicit that *Linien* was an eager conduit of André Breton's Surrealism and its corresponding emphasis on psychic automatism (fig. 1).

Also appearing on the cover of the first issue was the editors' mission statement, which stated simply, "Linien is a collective of abstract-Surrealist artists."² Though the two avowals of Surrealism are similar, they are not the same. In fact, the sur-realism/abstract-Surrealist variance points to underlying issues that contributed to what was actually an ambiguous and often

¹ "Vor kunst er en afbildning af de i vort sjæleliv (dybet) eksisterende realiteter—deraf ordet: sur-realisme." Ejler Bille, *Linien* 1, no. 1 (January 15, 1934): 1.

² "Linien er en sammenslutning af abstrakt-surrealistiske kunstnere." Editors, *Linien* 1, no. 1: 1.

incongruent transmission of French Surrealism to the Danish cultural environment. While the Danish artists' interactions with the Parisian Surrealists have been well documented, the nature of the factors that shaped the artists' often inconclusive and misinformed paraphrasing of Surrealist ideas has been little addressed. It was these very inconsistencies, moreover, that would free up a certain distance from the more dogmatic aspects of the French movement and allow the Helhesten artists to move beyond Surrealism.

The transmission of Surrealism to Denmark thus necessitates re-examination in order to fully understand how the Helhesten artists transitioned from automatism to a spontaneous, fantastical gestural abstraction and the development of universal symbols in naïve styles during the war. Because this translation was most clearly worked out in the artists' writings, the following will focus not only on the contents of *Linien*, but also the art journals *Kritisk Revy* (*Critical Review*, 1926-1928), *Konkretion* (*Concrete Art*, 1935-36), and *Linien*. The Surrealist art journal *Konkretion*, which Bjerke Petersen established in 1935 after a dispute with Bille and Mortensen, was in many ways a more theoretically and politically engaged periodical than *Linien*, and reflected a more acute awareness of the contemporaneous debates going on in Paris. Despite this, it has been neglected as an important model for *Helhesten*. Also overlooked as precedents for the cultural-political engagement of the artists involved with *Linien*, *Konkretion*, and later, *Helhesten*, are the publications of the left-wing *kulturradikale* critics of the 1920s and 1930s. While the social interactions between the *Linien* and *Helhesten* artists and the *kulturradikale* figures such as Rudolf Broby-Johansen, Otto Gelsted, Poul Henningsen, and Hans Scherfig, are well known, the art historical connections have not been extensively researched. This is characteristic of a tradition in Danish art history until relatively recently, which has tended to isolate formalist interpretation from an analysis of modern artists' political

engagement.³ Yet it was *precisely* the polemical cultural-political critique of *kulturradikale* publications such as *Kritisk Revy*, which served as the paradigmatic exemplars for the ideological drive of *Linien*, *Konkretion*, and *Helhesten*.

To return to the first cover of *Linien*, Ejler Bille's detachment of the word realism from the prefix *sur* betrays a tradition in Danish modernism that refused to relinquish a devotion to the tangible world as it was lived. This referral was the protracted heritage of the humble scenes of everyday life celebrated by the nineteenth-century Danish Golden Age. Conversely, the intimate anchoring of Surrealism to abstraction in *Linien*'s mission statement alludes to the Danish artists' attachment to expressive colorful abstraction, which had little to do with Surrealism, since it was rooted in the formalist focus of Matisse's Fauvism and the utopian aspects of German Expressionism, most notably that of Kandinsky. The reference to abstraction was indicative of the frequent designation of the artists involved with *Linien*, and later *Helhesten*, as abstract or "spontaneous-abstract," despite the variety of styles encompassed by these groups. More importantly, it connotes the fact that automatism was never a means in itself in Denmark, but functioned as a starting point for aesthetic experimentation.⁴ In point of fact, Danish artists and critics rarely used the word automatism in their writings about art. "Spontaneous-abstract"

³ See Peter Michael Hornung, et al., *Ny dansk kunsthistorie*, vol. 7, *Tradition og surrealisme* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Palle Fogtdal, 1995); Peter Michael Hornung and Gunnar Jespersen, *Ny dansk kunsthistorie*, vol. 8, *Cobra* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Palle Fogtdal, 1995); Per Hovdenakk, *Danish Art 1930-50* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1999), and Gunnar Jespersen, *De abstrakte: Historien om en kunstnergeneration* (Copenhagen: Kunstbogklubben, 1991). Exceptions include, Hanne Abildgaard, "Sympati og idiosynkrasi. PH og mellemkrigstidens danske kunstscene," in *Kritik og formidling: Studier i PH's kulturkritik*, ed. Jørn Guldborg og Niels Peter Skou (Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2008), 109-57, and Torben Jelsbak, "Avant-Garde Activism: The Case of the New Student Society in Copenhagen (1922-1924)," in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries, 1900-1925*, ed. Hubert van den Berg (New York: Rodopi, 2012), 541-56.

⁴ It was the artists themselves who used the words abstract and spontaneous throughout their writings of the period. One factor in the appeal of the terms was that they were almost the identical in French, English, and Danish, thus signifying a link to the international avant-gardes, specifically Surrealism. In *Linien*'s first issue, Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen provided the stylistic framework for the group's art as abstract Surrealism in his article "Den abstrakte surrealistiske kunst," *Linien* 1, no. 1: 11. By 1939, this label had been used in every issue of the journal.

came to stand in for automatism, however inappropriately, along with other disparate styles such as Henry Heerup's naïve figural compositions and Else Alfelt's pensive studies of forms.

Linien's first cover further reveals even more inconsistencies for a journal that purported to model itself after orthodox Surrealism. Despite the highlighting of *Minotaure*, the simple layout and all-lowercase, modern font of *Linien* was much closer to the journals *Documents* (1929-1930) (fig. 2) and *Bauhaus* (1926-1931) (fig. 3). Both *Linien* and *Konkretion* were influenced by the democratic emphasis on art and design in the Bauhaus, and like Georges Bataille, sought to level cultural and ideological hierarchies through an exploration of ethnographic objects. Thus even with its very first public appearance, *Linien* signaled the multiple referents that pollinated the journal's distillation of Surrealism.

In the realm of the ideoscape, as a signifier for the aims of the *kunstnersammenslutning*, *Linien's* first cover highlights the importance of the format of journal for assessing the inevitable inconsistencies that arise in any process of the dislocation and translation of cultural ideas and phenomena. If the *Linien* cover purported the journal to be a vehicle for disseminating Bretonian Surrealism, one assumes this also meant Breton's commitment to Communism, with its attendant rejection of proletarian needs and disregard for party dictates. Yet the similarity of the layout to *Documents*, suggested a more subversive understanding of Surrealism with Bataille's anti-idealist materialism. Further, the typographical affinity to that of *Bauhaus* implied an interest in the graphic and industrial arts and the structured nature of the German model of art education. It also linked *Linien* to the strict Functionalism and perceived activist Communism of the Bauhaus under Hannes Meyer, who led the institution at Dessau when Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen studied there in 1930-1931. Yet the Danish artists were never rejected by the Danish Communist Party (DKP), were dedicated to the proletarian cause, were not anti-idealist or interested in the

technical arts, and sharply critical of Functionalism. Thus while the cover signified the artists' multifaceted but general connections to mainstream European movements and their related politics, these were nonetheless reconverted for a Danish audience in an ambiguous manner.

The Danish artists involved with *Linien*, as with *Kritisk Revy*, *Konkretion*, and later *Helhesten*, were partaking in a creative process of progressive appropriation that was part of the of Georg Brandes's "apply and remodel" tradition of cultural development in Denmark. The ideoscape provides a framework with which to examine the fissures created during such appropriation of European art styles, since it reveals the altered meanings represented by images and texts as their context shifts. It was these openings, moreover, that allowed for creative experimentation away from original theories so that rather than any specific idea about Surrealism, it was *the way* it was transmitted to Denmark that most profoundly influenced *Helhesten*. The "apply and remodel" strategy artists engaged in during the 1930s produced a creative space far removed from orthodox Surrealism in which to reflect critically on the limits of automatism while undertaking sustained aesthetic experimentation during the war.

What About Culture? *Kulturradikalisme* in the 1920s and 1930s

The *kulturradikale* critics such as the writer and poet Rudolf Broby-Johansen, art historian Otto Gelsted, designer Poul Henningsen, and artist, writer, and future *Helhesten* contributor Hans Scherfig, all strongly identified with Communism and explicitly advocated extreme left-wing politics, which they saw as capable of making art relevant to ordinary people and of revitalizing the conservative Danish art establishment.⁵ Not only was the *kulturradikale*

⁵ While there were other important *kulturradikale* figures such as Hans Kirk and Edvard Heiberg, the four individuals discussed here are highlighted because of the impact of their publications on the *Linien* and *Helhesten* artists.

figures' attachment to Communism something which linked them to the later Danish artists involved with Linien and Helhesten, it was how they espoused their political beliefs—as intimately tied to cultural reform in journals about art and architecture—that had the most direct impact on the later groups.

The *kulturradikale* critics' agenda of cultural activism emerged as a direct response to the parochial Danish art environment and its ambivalent relationship to experimental art. Official culture was represented by the longstanding *kunstnersammenslutninger* Den frie Udstilling (The Free Exhibition, est. 1891) and Grønningen (The Common, est. 1915), as well as the collection and exhibition policies of Denmark's national gallery, the Statens Museum for Kunst, and its director Leo Swane (1887-1968). Although the cultural authorities were conservative, however, they were relatively accepting of difference as long as the cultural hegemony was not challenged. Indeed, the position of the Danish cultural establishment was exceptionally strong, and the press and the public alike generally supported its decisions. Exhibitions reflected a propensity for landscapes and interior subjects, which had been successfully introduced by the Danish Golden Age artists in the early nineteenth century. Stylistically, exhibitions showcased the colorful, expressive painterly tradition that had begun by the Modern Breakthrough painters such as P. S. Krøyer in the 1870s and developed by Grønningen. This was certainly the case with Swane, brother of Grønningen founder Sigurd Swane (1879-1973), who actively collected works for the Statens Museum collections that were mainly by the Grønningen artists, while dismissing anything that even remotely resembled Cubism or Dada.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the *kulturradikale* critics were committed to Communism, and were ardent Marxists. In 1928, Hans Kirk and Otto Gelsted traveled to the Soviet Union, and Henningsen later visited. Gelsted even reported his impressions to the Copenhagen daily

Ekstrabladet. While the Communist background of the vociferous *kulturradikale* critics somewhat isolated them from official Danish art life, their cultural activities caused them to be derogatorily labeled as *salonkommunist* (Salon Communists) by Communist political activists and at times the mainstream press, likening them to ineffective bourgeois intellectuals. Thus these figures were never completely accepted as part of either environment, although they were well known throughout Danish society and their critiques reached the general public. Nevertheless, their cultural ideas were seen as the unofficial policy of the DKP, since the party had no real cultural policy of its own. For this reason, their publications have been well examined, but usually within histories of Communism.⁶

Poul Henningsen was one of the most visible and influential *kulturradikale* critics, who wrote two of the most important contributions to visual culture of the 1930s. Henningsen's left-wing journal *Kritisk Revy* and his 1933 book *What about Culture*, laid out the *kulturradikale* prerogatives. Henningsen was trained as an architect, and his PH lamps (the first one was designed in 1926) made him famous and funded his work as a critic. Art historian Hanne Abildgaard has analyzed the evolution of Henningsen's cultural criticism, demonstrating that even though his politics were reactionary and progressive, his writing about experimental art lagged behind his politics, and was not fully developed until around 1930; until then Henningsen's criticism tended to focus on artists of a previous generation, such as those of the Grønningen circle.⁷ This fairly conventional approach to art criticism was typical of most of the

⁶ Morten Thing has provided an extensive account of the political activities of the *kulturradikale* critics in his aforementioned texts on the history of Danish Communism. The exceptions in the art historical literature include Abildgaard, "Sympati og Idiosynkrasi," and Torben Jelsbak, "Dada Copenhagen," in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries, 1900-1925*, ed. Hubert van den Berg (New York: Rodopi, 2012): 401-13.

⁷ Abildgaard points out that Henningsen's influence was only rivaled by that of the modernist critic Carl V. Petersen (father of Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen and initial co-organizer of Linien). Abildgaard, "Sympati og idiosynkrasi," 109-10.

kulturradikale writers. Yet Henningsen's relentless and witty criticism of the conservative nature of Danish society in various media including books, journals, and films, set a standard for later artists, including those of Helhesten. It was this type of criticism that forced him to flee the Nazis and move Sweden in 1943, though Henningsen still managed to produce anti-Fascist material through resistance poetry.

Kritisk Revy was published by Henningsen and an editorial team of left-wing architects and soon-to-be DKP members (fig. 4). The main precedent for the publication was the first modernist art journal in Denmark, *Klingen*, whose first editor, Axel Salto (1889-1961), later provided a cover for *Helhesten*.⁸ *Klingen* was modeled after Amédée Ozenfant's journal *L'Elan* (1915-1917). Both Henningsen and Otto Gelsted had contributed to *Klingen* extensively. It provided the standard for promoting an awareness of international culture in art journals, with art in France dominating its articles and reproductions, especially that of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Juan Gris. *Klingen* was also influenced by Herwarth Walden's journal *Der Sturm* (1910-1932). Walden's *Der Sturm* exhibitions to Copenhagen in October 1917 and October 1918, moreover, were both reviewed in *Klingen*. At one point *Klingen* and *Der Sturm* even attempted to collaborate, but nothing came of it. *Klingen* also featured the theoretical works of Kandinsky, while Danish artists were also featured with artwork and articles, most notably that of Grønningen founder Harald Giersing.

Kritisk Revy built on *Klingen*'s dual engagement with contemporaneous French and German culture. The editors of *Kritisk Revy* aimed it at a middle-class readership, and positioned the journal as an alternative to the conservative magazine *Arkitekten* (1927-1956). It came out in

⁸ For more on *Klingen* see Bjarne S. Bendtsen, "Copenhagen Swordplay: Avant-Garde Maneuvers and the Aesthetics of War Onen the Art Magazine *Klingen* (1917-1920)," in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries*, 391-400, and Torben Jelsbak, "Det levende kunstblad: Tidsskriftet *Klingen* (1917-1920) mellem modernisme og avant-garde," *Danske studier* 101 (2006): 128-60.

eleven issues between 1926 and 1928, was multi-lingual, experimented with typefaces, and integrated photography with text that focused on architecture, industrial design, and urban planning. Though most contributions dealt with architecture and design, the two discourses were positioned as social constructs that had to respond to the needs of contemporary society. Therefore, though several articles dealt with Functionalism and the Bauhaus, they represented critical responses to those movements. The contributors tended to interpret both approaches as too cold and lacking an emphasis on the more humanistic and organic elements that they championed in Danish design.⁹ Other articles compared Russian and Danish culture, discussed the importance of liberal education for the understanding of cultural history, and interpreted the movies of Charlie Chaplin, while Russian poetry was translated to Danish. Implied in the authors' criticism of architecture and design was a commitment to the social imperatives of people in life as it was lived on a daily basis. Thus *Kritisk Revy* should be viewed as a journal that prioritized social issues as much as it did cultural critique.

The liberal *Politiken*, a major Danish newspaper that had been co-founded by Georg Brandes, was a frequent advertiser. Despite *Kritisk Revy*'s left-wing approach, however, the Copenhagen daily newspaper *Ekstra Bladet* also advertised in its issues. The *Ekstra Bladet* advertisements reflected the Danish press's positioning of culture as separate from politics, which precluded any political conflict of interest. In doing so, although the advertisements were indicative of the mainstream Danish press's strong following of a wide range of cultural debates, they indicate the newspaper misunderstood the implied causal connections *Kritisk Revy*'s authors drew between social, political, and cultural problems.

⁹ For more on *Kritisk Revy* and other polemical Danish journals, see Bjarne S. Bendtsen, "Copenhagen: From the Ivory Tower to Street Activism," in *the Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Brooker, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 618-42, and Elias Bredsdorff, *Revolutionær humanisme: En introduktion til 1930rnes venstreorienterede kulturtidsskrifter* (Odense: Gyldendal, 1982).

In fact, *Kritisk Revy*'s commitment to Communism of could be sensed in every issue and in most articles. For example, in Communist novelist Hans Kirk's (1898-1962) article about Georg Brandes, Kirk criticized his literary forebear as an "aristocratic radical" not in touch with the actual lives of workers.¹⁰ Kirk had supported the worker in his article "On Proletarian Art," in which he championed Hans Christian Andersen as the true writer for the working classes. Because of the class basis of literary criticism, Kirk argued, Andersen's fairytales had been relegated to secondary status in world literature.¹¹ In the same article Kirk also related the development of modern Danish culture to historical and economic events and similarly criticized the Social Democrats for not truly representing the needs of the proletariat. Kirk's argument for more political representation of the working class, is just one of numerous instances that belie the label *salonkommunist*. Kirk's writing also reflects the fluid manner by which critics felt at ease in selecting examples from various points in history and geographic locations to support their arguments—this tendency would also occur with the articles in *Linien* and *Helhesten*.

Kristisk Revy was influenced by the Bauhaus aesthetically, ideologically, and literally, though authors often found fault with their German counterpart. The Bauhaus's educational practices, teachers, and approach to the applied arts and graphic design influenced the Danish artists' interest in abstraction and the leveling of high art and craft in a communal setting.

Kristisk Revy also reproduced images that had appeared in *Bauhaus*. The same photograph of Heinz Loew's mechanical model for example, which appeared in *Kritisk Revy*'s first issue of

¹⁰ "Aristokratiske radikalisme." Hans Kirk, "Georg Brandes," *Kritisk Revy* 2, no. 1 (March 1927): 58. Hans Kirk was a lifelong Marxist author who wrote Denmark's most sold novel, *The Fishermen* (*Fiskerne*, 1928), which depicted the lives of rural Jutland seamen in the 1920s. Kirk was also involved with *The Experimental Stage* (*Forsøgsscenen*, 1929-1932), a provocative theater and journal. The journal included photomontages, and contributions by artists such as George Grosz. Kirk was imprisoned by the Gestapo in 1941 but escaped and went underground in 1943.

¹¹ Hans Kirk, "Om proletarkunst," *Kritisk Revy* 1, no. 2 (1926): 14-16.

1928, had been similarly positioned in *Bauhaus*'s third 1927 issue. *Kritisk Revy*'s first number of 1928 also reprinted "The New World" by Hannes Meyer, the then leader of the Dessau Bauhaus, in its original German.

Later in the same issue, however, Otto Gelsted sharply criticized "The New World" for its focus on technology and the machine, which Gelsted argued came at the expense of the needs of the individual. The text, which was written in German and took the form of an open letter to Meyer, called for architecture and design to take into account real social issues and reflect an everyday humanism. Gelsted stated, "Most striking is your distrust and your contempt for the individual...you want to give the personality no place in art."¹² Gelsted cited none other than Hans Christian Andersen as a figure who truly understood the dangers of the deification of technology. For Gelsted, Andersen's story "In a Thousand Years" (1852) demonstrated that if technology did not take into account the actual needs of ordinary people, it would replace the individual's capacity for intellectual thought and mental contemplation with commercialization and technology for its own sake. Gelsted's article highlights an important factor for Danish culture that would reemerge in the articles of *Linien*, *Helhesten*, *Cobra* and even the *Situationist Times*; that is, the argument that everyday life as it was lived by ordinary people was a decisive component for the development of culture and its critique.

Though less refined and responding to a different level of the capitalist usage of technology, Gelsted's argument anticipated Situationist International founder Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle, where the commodity replaces authentic social life with its

¹² "Am auffälligsten ist ihr misstrauen und ihre geringschätzung gegen das individuelle...sie wollen der persönlichkeit keinen platz in der kunst einräumen." Otto Gelsted, "Modernismus und kritizismus," *Kritisk Revy* 3, no. 1 (1928): 22.

representation.¹³ Yet Gelsted's example was reliant on a fairly romanticized notion of humanism, which the SI would reject. Gelsted likened Hans Christian Andersen to Lenin, whom he argued understood the importance of the individual personality for Communism. Gelsted admonished Meyer for his lack of understanding of the importance of the social in architecture, stating that, "Of course the architect depends on the tasks given to him by society, but he must, in my opinion, from a clear socio-political orientation of his time select the solutions and correct the tasks that he holds superfluous or even harmful."¹⁴ The idealistic focus on humanism and its visual corollaries such as organicism, the importance of the individual experience of a building or object, and the emphasis in more humble qualities of design for relating to people, are reflective of the *kulturradikale* translation of Bauhaus and Functionalism to a Danish environment, which was less subservient to dogmatic design principles and more focused on ordinary people as individuals.

"The New World" had concluded with Meyer's aphorism: "Traditionalism is the hereditary enemy, modernism is the false friend," which historian Bjarne S. Bendtsen has argued actually summarized the approach of *Kritisk Revy* as firmly entrenched between tradition and modernism.¹⁵ Yet if one takes into account Gelsted's critique, and scrutinizes the use of photography, photomontage, and sardonic humor, the journal can be seen as initiating an acerbic Dada-esque socio-political critique in the Danish cultural sphere. The contents of *Kritisk Revy*

¹³ See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* [1967], trans. Martin Jenkins (New York: Soul Bay Press, 2009).

¹⁴ "Selbstverständlich ist der Architekt von den Aufgaben abhängig, die ihm von der bestehenden Gesellschaft gestellt werden, aber er muss meiner Meinung nach von einer klaren politisch-sozialen Orientierung aus seine Zeit zu korrigieren versuchen falls sie Aufgaben stellt und Lösungen wählt, die er für überflüssig oder gar schädlich hält." Gelsted's original German is written quite awkwardly; one suspects that he wrote it in that language with the hope that Meyer would actually read it. *Ibid.*: 24.

¹⁵ "Der traditionismus ist der erbfeind, der modernismus ist der falsche freund." Hanes Meyer, "Die neue welt," *Kritisk Revy* 1 (1928): 20. Bendtsen, "Copenhagen: From the Ivory Tower to Street Activism," 633.

and the related publications, moreover, challenge the general but incorrect assumption that photomontage did not interest Danish artists.

From the first issue of *Kritisk Revy*, photographs were used as the primary artistic medium to emphasize and elucidate the polemical arguments made by the journal's articles. The photographs depict buildings in use and within their actual geographical spaces, often focusing on international city scenes and urban advertising. Photographs of Parisian billboards at night and the display techniques of modern department stores alternate with architectural photos, plans, mechanical drawings, and maps. Advertisements, meanwhile, were advocated as an integral component of the journal and functioned as vehicles of political propaganda. This was the case with the 1928 text "For Advertisers!" which was contributed by one of the journal's editors, Edvard Heiberg (1897-1958). Denmark-based Norwegian architect Heiberg had studied under Le Corbusier and would go on to teach architecture at the Bauhaus in 1930. In the article Heiberg discussed the importance of advertisements to the journal and argued that they should be the publication's most interesting aspect.¹⁶

Cultural symbols were mercilessly exploited and critiqued in *Kritisk Revy*. In one 1928 issue, a photomontage appeared featuring N. F. S. Grundtvig above an advertisement for a professional house painter (fig. 5). In the image, Grundtvig rises upside down surrounded by bright red flames—the color used most predominantly throughout the journal undoubtedly for its Communist associations. Grundtvig's flaming beard becomes an architectural façade that emerges from the Copenhagen law courts, which were designed by the Neoclassical architect C. F. Hansen, whose work would later be promoted as ideal by the Danish Nazis. Grundtvig's flames burn all the symbols of Denmark, from the traditional and industrial buildings, to the

¹⁶ Edvard Heiberg, "Til annoncørerne!" *Kritisk Revy* 3, no. 4 (1928).

dannebrog, or red and white Danish flag, which was printed in black and white and is burned by the red fire.

Photomontage in *Kritisk Revy* was deployed most effectively on the covers, such as 1928's first issue, which depicted the Danish minister of culture in coattails, covered in monkeys, and precariously balancing on a tightrope over the Danish Royal Theatre (fig. 6).¹⁷ The caption drew attention to the hypocrisy of authoritative power, stating: "Stinginess is confused with economics, blind enterprise with foresight, dictatorship with clever authority."¹⁸ Another cover, for an issue later that year, presented an enlarged mechanical Ben-Day dot reproduction of the former Social Democratic Mayor of Copenhagen, with a bright red minus sign superimposed over his face, in effect blinding and silencing him (fig. 7). The cover for *Kritisk Revy*'s "Harmless Christmas Issue" of 1927, meanwhile, featured satirical caricatures of the journal's contributors as well as their opponents, all wearing red Danish *nisser*, or elf hats. This inclusion of the editors' "enemies," Bjarne S. Bendtsen has shown, reflected the journal's jocular and rebellious approach, as the editors even made themselves subjects of ridicule.¹⁹

These photomontages also reflect how the medium morphed into a specifically Danish idiom in *Kritisk Revy*. Not only did the montages indulge in the Danes' love of humor—the irony of a stoic Grundtvig being engulfed upside-down by Communist-red flames would not have been lost on any Dane—they explicitly aimed it at local cultural and political figures. In contrast to the photomontages of Berlin Dada, however, the humor was always tongue-in-cheek and a means of

¹⁷ It remains unclear who in the group created the photomontages for the covers, since little documentation survives. The fact that the editors did not name who created what can be seen as part of their collaborative working methods. Most likely Henningsen and Heiberg created them together and possibly with other contributors. I would like to thank Hanne Abildgaard for providing me with this information.

¹⁸ "Fedtethed forveksles med økonomi, blind foretagsomhed med fremsyn, diktatur med klog myndighed." *Kritisk Revy* 3, no. 1 (1928): front cover.

¹⁹ Bendtsen, "Copenhagen: From the Ivory Tower to Street Activism," 632.

getting the message across in an entertaining way. The Danish montages were consequently simpler, less perverse, and more jovial than those of artists such as George Grosz or John Heartfield, since they were aimed at an audience that had never experienced the same class conflicts or political upheaval as their southern neighbors, and shock would only alienate rather than instigate Danish readers.

Henningsen's 1933 book, *What About Culture* was a watershed for cultural criticism in Denmark. One reason for this, although it has not been explored in the literature, is the use of photomontage. In fact, *What About Culture* further experimented with photomontage as a didactic and propagandistic tool for the critique of contemporary Danish society (fig. 8). The text directly linked Danish culture to politics and criticized the cultural establishment. Henningsen even went so far as to castigate the Social Democrats' lack of an official cultural stance by correlating such an approach to German Fascism. He used a comparative method in the book, juxtaposing Danish and international examples. Henningsen opened the book with the question: "Will there be barbarism or a new flowering of culture?"²⁰ Rather than directly answering this, he referred to the developments in Germany, the Soviet Union, and Denmark to argue that that art was always tied to economic and political conditions, and that this was what determined whether culture would flourish or not, rather than some inherent independent value that lay outside of real life.

The photomontage that appeared on *What About Culture*'s cover emphasized Henningsen's advocacy of praxis. The image presented the modern associations of women's liberation, sexual freedom, and modern art, which was directly associated with the DKP. The image juxtaposed a nineteenth-century bicycling suffragette with a short-haired "new woman"

²⁰ "Kommer der barbari eller en ny blomstring af kulturen?" Poul Henningsen, *Hvad med kulturen* (Copenhagen: Mondes Forlag, 1933), 1.

whose tanned healthy body leaps over an axonometric diagonal line. These modern females of pre- and post-World War One were situated under a thrice-repeated title reproduced in Germanic gothic script as well as a modern typeface that could have been designed at the Bauhaus. The overlapping of the foreground contemporary font over the more traditional background titles emphasized the unfolding of different forms of modern culture through time, from the Middle Ages until the present.

The photomontages in the book and further experimented with dark humor and irony to reveal the ideological disjunctures embedded within bourgeois imagery. One pair of images represented “Life outside the home: Then and now” (fig. 9). A photo of an upper middle class restaurant represented life outside the home “then,” when Henningsen states ironically, “along with the decline in church power, prostitution also declined, [and] drunkenness has lessened.” A prostitute who is being arrested stands amidst policemen and a waiter, all of whom are placed underneath the vaulted arches of an austere Danish cathedral.²¹ Though the montage contrasted differing scales, the perspective is still linear and recedes behind the figures toward the apse of the church. Contemporary life outside the home “now,” when the “‘depraved’ youth...live their outdoor lives and dance to jazz over a cup of coffee,” was represented by a diagonally divided composition of male and females engaged in pleasurable activities.²² The lower half of the image featured a jazz band playing in front of a dark background, while dozens of women dressed in revealing swimsuits and set in various scales walk on the beach and watch the musicians.

The farcical proximity of disparately placed yet immediately identifiable types—the proud prostitute smiles, the policemen are compared to waiters, the female bathers watch the

²¹ “Med kirkens faldende magt er ogsaa prostitutionen gaaet tilbage, drukkenskaben er blevet mindre.” Ibid., 18.

²² “Bedærvede’ ungdom...lever sit friluftsliv og danser til jazz over en kop kaffe.” Ibid.

grinning musicians in their bathing suits—sardonically attacked and undermined the cultural and leisure activities expounded by the upper middle classes as superficial pursuits dictated by the economic policies of institutions of power. The fairly traditional scale in the bourgeois image, when compared to the flattened composition of life now, moreover, implicitly linked the social values of the earlier era to more naturalistic representations in art.

Although the book was published by the Danish Communist Party's Monde Group and Hans Kirk positively reviewed it, Henningsen's text garnered strong criticism from the DKP for what the party interpreted as his superficial knowledge of Marxism. Even if Henningsen's argument lacked a nuanced Marxist approach, it was his critique of what he saw as the secondary role culture had played to Marxism that instigated the party's criticism. Indeed, he stated that the purpose of the book was twofold, and aimed "Against the many Marxists who set the culture problem aside as marginal and trivial—and against the many culturally interested who look with apprehension or indifference at the political."²³ This attitude displayed Henningsen's lifelong skepticism towards an unquestioning acceptance of Communism as much as his refusal of any kind of monolithic framework to judge art. It also represented the engagement of later Communist artists such as Asger Jorn and Egill Jacobsen to value art and politics as two interdependent sides of the same coin.

As a plea for a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between culture and politics, the book itself also represented Henningsen's lifelong dictum that "all political art is bad—all good art is political." Hans Scherfig's back cover for the book symbolized this idea (fig. 10). The photomontage featured the incredibly popular Danish Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning wearing a wig of Nazis. The medusa-like headpiece was comprised of Hitler

²³ "Mod de mange Marxister, som skyder kulturproblemer tilside som underordnet og ligegyldigt—og mod de mange kulturelt interessede, som ser med ængstelse eller ligegyldighed paa det politiske." Ibid., 6.

surrounded by his ardent followers sprouting wildly from Stauning's bald head. Their youthful enthusiasm is contrasted with the aged Danish politician's overly stern visage, which is slightly obscured by Hitler's hand. Scherfig further transformed Stauning's jacket into a Constructivist trapezoid, which points downward towards nothing.

Scherfig had visited New York City from 1929 to 1930, where he had witnessed the more extreme effects of the Depression first-hand and moved away from his initial Cubist style towards developing satirical drawings and photomontages concurrently. These works differ from his later and better known naïve landscape scenes, some of which he contributed to *Helhesten* and the 1941 Tent exhibition. Yet images such as *New York, Coney Island. "Hit the Nigger!"* reflect his multiplicity of approaches in various media, and the dark humor used in his drawings was similar to his satirical writing style (fig. 11). In the drawing, Scherfig made explicit his condemnation of capitalist America as a hypocritical country. The unthinking strongman strikes out at the weaker, less fortunate African American, while the unseeing bespectacled American businessman looks on apathetically, all in a place for "harmless fun" that capitalist profit produced.

Like Henningsen, Scherfig was a prolific writer. His first book, *What Are We Learning in School*, which published by Monde in 1933, was a children's text that satirized the old fashioned methods of Danish primary school teachers and the development of bourgeois values in schools.²⁴ One of his most famous novels, *Stolen Spring*, 1940, advocated education as the best method for turning youths into productive socialist intellectuals rather than relying on class-

²⁴ Hans Scherfig, *Hvad lærer vi i skolen?* (Copenhagen: Monde, 1933).

based family upbringing.²⁵ It was for his Communist activities that the Nazis imprisoned Scherfig in June 1941, though he was later released because of his poor eyesight.

As Scherfig's differing styles suggest, he did not believe that Socialist Realism was the only answer to popular art, and in fact that style had little relevance for the *kulturradikale* critics discussed here and their publications. From the 1930s Scherfig argued that the way an image was made was more important than the subject in conveying meaning, writing: "Painting should *make intelligible, not depict*."²⁶ Even while Scherfig created images that in a general sense could be linked to Socialist Realism, they like the other *kulturradikale* writers, he rejected the idea that Soviet-dictated Socialist Realism was the only kind of art that could represent the needs of the people. Rather, he described proletarian art as that which had revolutionary potential because it could "break with the existing traditions, forms and prejudices—the academic painting, the home-town painting."²⁷ Scherfig not only emphasized the political ramifications embedded in stylistic reform aimed at more experimental aesthetic, he allowed for the possibility that abstraction could be that style.

Strict Socialist Realism, in fact, never established a strong foothold in Denmark. Rather, artists such as Scherfig combined elements of caricature and humor with the exaggeration of German Expressionist woodcuts. Danish artists such as Scherfig were influenced more by the satirical aspect of the drawings style of George Grosz, whose work was the subject of the last

²⁵ Hans Scherfig, *Det førsomte foraar* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1940).

²⁶ "Malerkunsten skal *anskuelliggøre*, men ikke *skildre*." Hans Scherfig. *Arbejderbladet* (September 22, 1936). I want to thank Morten Thing for his assistance in drawing out the nuances of Scherfig's statement.

²⁷ "Brud med de overlevede traditioner, former og fordomme—det akademiske maleri, hjemstavnsmaleriet..." Hans Scherfig, *Arbejderbladet* (March 21, 1937): 2.

issue of the Danish Monde Group's journal *Social Kunst* (1930-1932).²⁸ A satirical, darkly humorous style was also the first avenue through which the young Asger Jorn would experiment with politically engaged art. Like his Helhesten compatriots, Jorn's developing political awareness emerged within the *kulturradikale* debates of the 1920s and 1930s as they played out in their various publications.

As early as December 1933, some of the first images Jorn contributed to a publication—under the *nom de guerre* Asger Isen—appeared in ardent Communist Rudolf Broby-Johansen's journal *Frem* (*Forward*, 1932-1935) (fig. 12). *Frem* was primarily a political journal, but it did include some artwork and dealt with cultural topics.²⁹ Jorn's sixteen woodcuts, entitled "Blasphemous Christmas Songs," were included in the same issue along with an excerpt of a text by the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine on Communism, which the editors entitled "Communism and Nazism," and articles on sexual politics and political symbols, and Italian Fascism and the workers' movement. Broby-Johansen was known in art circles for his anti-art Dada performances in Copenhagen in the early 1920s and his Expressionist collection of poems *Blod* (*Blood*, 1922), which had been almost immediately condemned as pornographic and confiscated by the police. But he was also an engaged art critic who influenced Jorn in particular. Jorn positively reviewed Broby-Johansen's book *Hverdags kunst, verdenskunst* (*Everyday Art, World Art*, 1942) in the fourth issue of *Helhesten*'s second volume.

Jorn's images for *Frem* are rendered in an amalgamation of Expressionism and satire. The sardonic scenes lampooned institutional power structures with acidic humor, depicting

²⁸ *Social Kunst* also produced volumes focusing on photomontage, Russian prints, and the work of Käthe Kollwitz, among others.

²⁹ Broby-Johansen was also editor of the Danish versions of *Clarté* (1926-1927) and *Monde* (1928-1931); the latter split in 1932 into *Frem* and the DKP publication *Planen* (*The Plan*, 1932-1935), led by Hans Kirk.

church and state as hypocritical advocates of war and economic gain at the expense of the working class. One of the images, for example, depicts an obese Danish priest who stands in front of waving Danish flags, clutching a bloody sword in one hand and a bayonet in the other. He urges the dead and dying on the battlefield, the caption tells us, “Up, you Christians, strengthen yourselves with the blood of the lamb.”³⁰ The images, which in their identical and serial format resemble action-packed comic strips, are primarily focused on the figure as a human response to unreasonable, indeed laughable, conflict.

Before traveling to Paris and coming into contact with Fernand Léger and Surrealism, Jorn contributed other politically polemical images in a similar Social Realist style during this time. In 1935 he wrote an article entitled, “Features from the faces of time: Grundtvig, Hitler, Karl Marx and LS,” for the newspaper of the Silkeborg Teacher’s College, where he was then enrolled. Jorn warned the local Farmer’s Union (Landbrugernes Sammenslutning, or LS) that their application of Grundtvigian nationalism to their cause was unserious and veered on the same type of superficial nationalism exploited by the Nazis.³¹ Even more incendiary than the text was the tiny caricature Jorn crafted to accompany the article, which featured Grundtvig’s head rising like a mountain underneath a swastika halo. The subheading over the cartoon asked, “Is Grundtvigianism Nazism?” Jorn’s perceptive questioning of rampant nationalism in this early example would be less explicit but just as piercing during the war.

Otto Gelsted was another *kulturradikale* critic who exemplified the multifaceted nature of Danish art criticism of the period. In addition to his work for *Klingen* and *Kritisk Revy*, Gelsted

³⁰ “Op, I kristne, ruster eder styrkede i lammets blod.” Asger Jorn, “Blasfemiske julesalmer,” *Frem* 2, no. 3 (December 1933): np.

³¹ See Asger Jorn, “Træk af tidens ansigt: Grundtvig, Hitler, Karl Marx og LS,” *Maale og Mærke: Skolebad for Silkeborg Seminarium* 23, no. 1 (October 1935): 1-2.

was closely tied to DKP publications *Land og Folk* (*Country and People*, 1945-1990) and *Arbejderbladet* (*Workers Newspaper*, 1921-1922; 1934-1941).³² While he had previously worked as a tutor, Gelsted started publishing articles in 1912 and wrote on everything from Marxism and music to theatre and art. He was a prolific public commentator on the latest local and international political developments, and his approach attempted to merge Marxist historical materialism with a neo-Kantian theory of knowledge.

Gelsted had published the booklet *Ekspressionisme* in 1919, identifying early on the label's multi-sided connotations in Denmark.³³ By the mid-1930s he had published widely on art, including books on the artists Oluf Høst (1934), Jørgen Thomsen (1935), and Svend Johansen (1937). These publications, which celebrated the Expressionist-inspired painters of the previous generation, reflect the general trend in *kulturradikalisme* art criticism to champion earlier manifestations of modernism over more avant-garde styles even while engaging with the latest radical politics. Though Gelsted could produce more sophisticated contemporary art criticism, for example with his aforementioned critique of Meyer and the Bauhaus in 1928, in major texts his work differed little from that which he had contributed to *Klingen* at least a decade before. In this way in 1934 he could celebrate the expressive naturalism of painter Oluf Høst for the way that “the color becomes the expression of reality and the image a symphonic, organic whole.”³⁴

Gelsted did positively, if inconclusively, review the work of many of the more abstract Linien artists such as Ejler Bille and Egill Jacobsen, but he was skeptical of their approach and admitted he did not understand more conventional Surrealists such as Wilhelm Freddie (1909-

³² Gelsted also started the periodical *Sirius* (1924-1925), which was a short-lived six-issue literary journal that was more or less an extension of *Klingen*. See Thing, *Kommunismens kultur*, vol. 1, 214-38.

³³ Otto Gelsted, *Ekspressionisme* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag, 1919).

³⁴ “Saadan bliver farven udtryk for virkelighed og billedet en symfonisk, ja organisk helhed.” Otto Gelsted, *Oluf Høst* (Copenhagen: 1934), 15. Cited in Thing, *Kommunismens Kultur*, vol. 1, 226.

1995). This was despite the fact that in 1920 Gelsted had been the first Dane to translate texts by Sigmund Freud into Danish, significantly impacting Danish artists' understanding of psychoanalysis.

The so-called *salonkommuniste* critics were anything but relegated to the salon. They readily shouldered Georg Brandes's mantle as critically engaged cultural radicals, while also forcefully voicing their political beliefs, which were rooted in Communism, a political movement they saw as capable of revitalizing conservative culture. In doing so, they formulated the unofficial cultural stance of the DKP, and maintained that aesthetic experimentation and an interest in international art was more important than any stylistic dictum. Despite this and the literary experimentation they themselves undertook in 1920s, the artwork that they felt most comfortable writing about was typically an earlier modernism. The *kulturradikale* critics' utilization of humor and concurrent roles as artists and poets, designers and novelists, as well as cultural critics and political agitators, set the standard for the *Linien*, *Konkretion*, and *Helhesten*. That these groups would formulate their ideological and aesthetic programs themselves in writing and through the medium of the journal, as well as via their artwork, was a direct result of the example set by these earlier *kulturradikale* polymaths.

“We Are No Clown Number in the Program”: *Linien* and *Konkretion*

The founders of *Linien* established their *kunstnersammenslutning* and journal with the aim of bringing Surrealism to bear on the Danish art world, and in the process, revolutionize the conservative Danish cultural environment.³⁵ The contents of *Linien* demonstrate, however, that

³⁵ While there were more traditional Surrealists who translated Surrealism in a more straightforward manner, such as Wilhelm Freddie and Franciska Clausen, these artists were only peripherally related to *Linien*, rarely wrote about their work, and had no involvement with *Helhesten*.

the artists' understanding of Surrealism was general and, at times, superficial. It was Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen and his journal *Konkretion*, in fact, which reflected the most nuanced understanding of French Surrealism as it was being debated in 1935-1936.

Art historians have picked up on the limits of the Danish artists' comprehension of Surrealism, arguing that Linien in particular was more effective in attacking official culture and disseminating international Surrealism to a Danish audience than in defining its own radical position.³⁶ But this interpretation, and the attendant focus on how Danish artists' misappropriated orthodox Surrealist tenets, focuses on the wrong set of issues, especially if we are to understand *how* the artists shifted from an advocacy of automatism in the mid-1930s to a critique of it during the war. Therefore, rather than an overview of the differences between the French Surrealism the Danish artists came into contact with and that developed by Linien and *Konkretion*, the following will examine what the Danish artists admired and what they ignored in order to propose how they arrived at fantastical gestural abstraction with *Helhesten* by 1941.

The writings of the artists in *Linien* and *Konkretion* reveal a surprising phenomenon. The Danish artists combined an exploration of automatist painting and drawing with a more painterly aesthetic approach to actually *break with* the expressive painterly tradition that had dominated Danish modernism since the Modern Breakthrough and which had been solidified with the Grønningen painters. While by 1934 an automatist drawing might have been seen as passé in Paris, in Copenhagen it was seen as a radical approach to art. The Linien artists harnessed Breton's definition of psychic automatism as a reflection of the unconscious, but emptied it of any specific Freudian connotations. In doing so, they tested the limits of intuitive aesthetic experimentation without abandoning a devotion to formalist concerns. The Danish artists,

³⁶ See Peter Shield, "Spontaneous Abstraction and its Aftermath in Cobra, 1931-51" (Phd diss., The Open University, 1984), 54-65.

moreover, were aware of and inspired by Surrealism's political commitment to Communism, but they had already identified with the Danish Communist Party *before* adopting Surrealism. Indeed, the DKP was much more accepting of experimental art than its French counterpart, and unlike the case of Breton, it never rejected the Linien artists. Consequently, the Linien artists' stylistic radicalism *was* their means of political critique, though the artists could be explicit at times, most notably with *Konkretion's* often polemical attacks on Fascism.

Linien was founded in 1934 by three school friends, Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, Ejler Bille, and Richard Mortensen. Linien's exhibitions took place in 1934, 1937, and 1939, in controversial shows that brought international Surrealism to Denmark for the first time. The journal's international focus and attack on the Danish art establishment was influenced by the Danish journals *Klingen* and *Kritisk Revy*. *Linien* also styled itself after the layout and contents of *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach* (1912), *Bauhaus*, *Minotaure*, *Cahiers d'Art* (1926-1960), and *Documents*. The journal was published in twelve issues from January 1934 until April 1935, in addition to two special numbers produced to coincide with the 1937 and 1939 exhibitions.³⁷

Linien's founders were from the middle class, were politically active, and they focused on Paris as the locus of the latest developments in art, though they all had significant contact with Germany.³⁸ Bjerke Petersen was the son of the influential art critic Carl V. Petersen. Bjerke Petersen had studied with Grønningen founder Harald Giersing in Denmark and was taught by the Norwegian painter and Académie Matisse graduate Axel Revold (1887-1962) in Oslo. He then attended the Dessau Bauhaus under Paul Klee and Kandinsky in 1930-1931. His father had a

³⁷ The complete contents of Linien's publication are reproduced in Jørgen Broch, ed. *Linien 1934-1939* (Esbjerg: Esbjerg Kunstforening, 1984).

³⁸ For a detailed overview of the art education and international activities of the Linien founders see Shield, "The New Ideas," in *Spontaneous Abstraction*, 31-44.

complete collection of Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm*, which the three friends would read avidly. Bjerke Petersen's small book, *Symbols in Abstract Art*, which he published in 1934 at the age of just twenty-two, established him as the major theorist of Surrealism in Denmark. In the book, he accounted for the development of Surrealism and posited that every person had the creative ability to become an artist and understand art.³⁹ The format was influenced by the Bauhaus-style booklets that took the form of teaching manuals, most notably *Point and Line to Plane* and Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook*.

In the book, Bjerke Petersen argued that abstract forms were symbols that had associative meanings in the unconscious that were common to all people. Even more than a theoretical overview of Surrealism, then, the book was a reaction against the Danish art world's devotion to naturalism, and a call for the relevance of abstraction to the ordinary person through the exploration of universal symbols. The idea of a connective thread among cultures, was typical throughout the text:

In the visual arts we must use symbols of much simpler character, because knowledge of the imagery is as nearly as widespread as knowledge of the spoken language. In other cultural periods, however, for example with ancient Chinese ornamentation that today we do not understand anything of, there is in reality a language of symbols, the cultural part of the Chinese population at that time understood.⁴⁰

The idea of symbols and forms that work on a common unconscious element in all people was something that would have paramount importance for the Helhesten artists. Although his ideas had a striking similarity to Carl Jung's (1875-1961) universal archetypes that arise from the collective unconscious, it is doubtful Bjerke Petersen had read Jung at this stage. Bjerke

³⁹ Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, *Symboler i abstrakt kunst* (Copenhagen: Illums Bogafdeling, 1933).

⁴⁰ "I billedkunsten maa vi bruge symboler af langt simplere karakter, fordi kendskabet til billedsproget ikke er nær saa udbredt som kendskabet til det talte sprog. I andre kulturperioder har der imidlertid været det, f. eks. var den gamle kinesiske ornamentik, som vi i dag ikke forstaar noget af, i virkligheden et billedsymbolsk sprog, den kulturelle del af befolkningen i kina dengang forstod." Ibid., 17.

Petersen's analysis of universal symbols was one of the key embryonic components that stimulated the Helhesten artists' development of the animal and creature associations of the Linien period into motifs of fantastical bestiary and repetition of simple shapes and forms.

Bjerke Petersen's co-founders were also responding to a wide range of stimuli when they established Linien. Richard Mortensen had initially studied psychiatry and psychoanalysis, while Ejler Bille trained at the Copenhagen School of Arts and Crafts, and worked concurrently on sculpture and painting. Mortensen and Bille traveled to Berlin together in 1931 where they saw works by Picasso, Gris, Kandinsky, and Klee and the artists would later meet Kandinsky in Paris. In 1932, the artists saw even more German art, in the "Recent German Art" exhibition at Den frie Udstilling; there, nine paintings by Emil Nolde, who was a Danish citizen, had a particular impact on Danish artists. In 1945 Bille would distill the ideas he had been exposed to during this period in the important text, *Picasso, Surrealism, Abstract Art*.⁴¹

When Linien was founded in 1934, only Bjerke Petersen had been to Paris. The artists, who had limited French, thus initially came into contact with Surrealism through the images reproduced in the foreign art journals in the book section of the Copenhagen department store Illum.⁴² Mortensen and Bille later went to Paris together on grants from the Ny Carlsberg Foundation in 1937-1938. While there they chose works for the Linien exhibitions from the artists they met with, who they also considered friends, including Hans Arp, Max Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, Kandinsky, and Yves Tanguy.⁴³ André Breton, who recognized the Danish artists as disciples, primarily had contact with Bjerke Petersen. In fact, along with Ernst, Breton co-

⁴¹ Ejler Bille, *Picasso, surrealisme, abstrakte kunst* (Copenhagen: Helios, 1945).

⁴² See Jepsersen, *De abstrakte*, 133.

⁴³ See Gunnar Jepsersen, *De abstrakte*: 39-40 and Shield, "Spontaneous Abstraction," and its Aftermath in Cobra, 80-85.

organized the French section of Bjerke Petersen's 1935 "Cubism-Surrealism" exhibition and wrote the foreword for exhibition catalogue, which was reprinted in the joint fifth and sixth number of the 1935 issue of *Cahiers d'Art*. In the text, Breton stated that Copenhagen, along with other cities, was an outpost of Surrealist development, and described Bille, Bjerke Petersen, and Mortensen as "friends...who have invited in a brotherly manner the Surrealist artists in France to join them."⁴⁴

There were attempts to differentiate Danish artists' methods from French Surrealism, which tended to emphasize artists' interest in expressive painterly abstraction. Richard Mortensen's article "Abstract Art and Surrealism" for the 1939 *Linien* exhibition catalogue, was focused on Surrealism but reminiscent in tone of German Expressionism:

One can easily see that already at this point the ground was prepared for concrete art (as we here in Denmark call abstract art) with its natural insistence upon subjugating painting as an art form, an art form with a knowledge of its expressive means and natural possibilities, as well as Surrealism with its over accentuation of the demands of inner reality, the demand for the content's mastery over the means of expression.⁴⁵

Mortensen's emphasis on inner reality was a new way of talking about art for Danish artists, but he was quick to note that this was an over emphasis that in effect subdued freer creative expression.

The contributions to *Linien*—almost all of which were written by the artists—spanned a range of cultural topics, including art, jazz, contemporary film, African sculpture, art history and criticism, fashion, and local and international exhibition reviews. The journal contained profiles

⁴⁴ "...venner...som broderligt har opfordret de surrealistiske Kunstnere i Frankrig at slutte sig til sig.", André Breton, "Forord," in *Kubisme-Surrealisme*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: Den frie Udstilling, 1935), 12.

⁴⁵ "Man ser let, at allerede her blev grunden lagt til den konkrete kunst (som vi herhjemme kalder den abstrakte) med sit naturlige krav om at underlægge sig maleriet som kunstart, en kunstart med en viden om sine udtryksmidler og naturlige Muligheder, samt Surrealismen med overbetoningen af den indre virkeligheds krav, kravet om indholdets overherredømme over udtryksmidlerne." Richard Mortensen, "Den abstrakte kunst og surrealismen," *Linien*, exh. cat. (December 1939), 14.

on figures such as Giorgio de Chirico, Ernst, Giacometti, André Gide, Harald Giersing, Picasso, and Arthur Rimbaud, along with productions of their works. *Linien* also presented translations in Danish—often the first in Denmark—of texts and quotations by Breton, Salvador Dalí, Paul Éluard, Kandinsky, Joan Miró, and Gisèle Prassinos. Poetry was also a considerable component, and featured the erotic verses of the Danish poet Jens August Schade (1903-1978) and the Danish poet and painter Gustaf Munch-Petersen (1912-1938), among others. Munch-Petersen would die fighting with the International Brigades in the Spanish civil war in 1938. His work would also feature posthumously in *Helhesten*. In *Linien*'s sixth issue in 1934 Munch-Petersen warned his fellow artists in his call to arms “Comrades!” that “An artist who is not a revolutionary, is not an artist,” reflecting a more explicit stance on political action that had little to do with stylistic reform.⁴⁶ The contributions to *Linien* by women were fairly minimal and mostly Danish, consisting of reproduced artwork by the Cercle et Carré member and Cubist painter Franciska Clausen (1899-1986) and the Surrealist Rita Kernn Larsen (1904-1998) (one work each), as well as three sculptures by sculptor Sonja Ferlov (1911-1984).⁴⁷ Written contributions included poems by Bodil Bech (1889-1942), Hulda Lütken (1894-1946), and the Swede Edith Södergran (1892-1923).

Linien's three founders were the main contributors to the journal, with Bille providing the most text with no less than twenty-six written pieces and thirteen drawings; Mortensen wrote twenty-one texts and reproduced sixteen drawings, and Bjerke Petersen supplied nine articles and three drawings. These images, which are discussed below in relation to specific articles,

⁴⁶ “En kunstner, som ikke er revolutionær, er ikke kunstner.” Gustaf Munch-Petersen, “Kammerater!” *Linien* 1, no. 2 (February 15, 1934): 6.

⁴⁷ Although Peter Shield states that Ferlov also contributed an unacknowledged piece to the sixth issue of *Linien*. It remains unclear which article it is. Shield, “Spontaneous Abstraction,” 58.

implemented a straightforward application of automatist drawing methods that was for the most part devoid of eroticism. In their painting and sculpture during the Linien period, however, under the influence of Kandinsky's abstraction, Nolde's expressive strokes, and Arp and Miró's imaginary beings, Mortensen and Bille moved away from a direct appropriation of automatism. Rather, they fluidly applied what art historian William Rubin described as biomorphic abstraction; that is, abstract forms stemming from human, animal, and plant shapes.⁴⁸ The Danish artists would utilize biomorphism, moreover, in their creation of fantastical subjects. Ultimately, they would reject veristic Surrealism, which Bjerke Petersen, whose work is discussed in relation to *Konkretion*, would remain devoted to, as well as an emphasis on dreams as a vehicle for visualizing repressed sexual desires.

Mortensen, and especially Bille, would both be involved with Helhesten and influence the group's developing aesthetic approaches. It is therefore helpful to examine the main trajectory of their artistic development during their tenure with Linien. This is no easy task, since both artists experimented prolifically during the 1930s. In general, however they both explored automatism and the unconscious as a means of a creative release that could bring about greater possibilities for material abstraction, rather than as a reflection of the artists' psyche or internal state.

Mortensen's stylistic approaches varied greatly during this period, but one can see a development from works such as the whimsical, intuitive Miró-inspired *Erotic Mystery*, 1933 (fig. 13), which was exhibited at Linien's first exhibition. Mortensen wrote about Miró in an issue of Linien in 1934, which featured the Spanish master's *Nude*, 1926 (Philadelphia Museum of Art) on the cover. Mortensen heralded Miró's recent work, writing, "one of [Miró's] latest stages, [is] a purified stage, where the 'new-mythological' content has found a spatial balance.

⁴⁸ See William Rubin, *Dada and Surrealist Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 17-22.

...The precision in drawing, material and color effects is almost supernatural.”⁴⁹ For the Danish artists, Miró’s dual engagement with the formal elements of the composition, along with his exploration of fantastical worlds and beings made him one of the most important Surrealist artists. Moreover, this would also influence the Helhesten artists’ development of the mask motif and iconography of playful beasts, which were nevertheless devoid of sexual or Freudian connotations.

Mortensen’s compositions did grow looser and his application of pigment more expressive, for example with an untitled work of 1937, which showcased the artist’s exploration of heavily applied bright color that evoke suggestions of a coiled snake or bird (fig. 14). The preoccupation with materiality would culminate during the occupation in works such as *Figure Picture*, 1942, in which biomorphic creature suggestions explode into a phantasmagoric field of energetic and dripping forms that bounce off of one another (fig. 15).

Ejler Bille’s painting during the Linien period was also deeply influenced by Miró. Miró’s series of automatic drawings, *Legends of the Minotaure*, was reproduced in *Minotaure*’s joint third and fourth issue in 1933 (fig. 16). Bille had seen Miró’s work in Berlin, and the Spanish artist exhibited at Linien’s exhibitions; in 1936 *Minotaure* also reproduced Miró’s *La Famille* (1924, Museum of Modern Art, New York), which no doubt influenced Bille’s early Surrealist compositions. One early work from 1933, *Fertilization on the Border Between Good and Evil*, 1933 (fig. 17), with its all-over composition, and eye and star motifs indicates the influence of Miró. The rather flat manifestation of bright colors and swirling forms would soon give way to much more inventive compositions that focused on the sensual tactility of the paint in works such as *Explosion* (fig. 18), which was exhibited in Linien’s 1939 exhibition. Both

⁴⁹ “et af hans sidste stadier, er afklaret stadia, hvor det ‘nymytologiske’ indhold har fundet en rumlig balance. ...Præcisionen i linieføring, stof og farvevirkning og rummodelering er næsten overnaturlig.” Richard Mortensen, “Fransk kunst paa Charlottenborg,” *Linien* 1, no. 7 (November 20, 1934): 3.

Ekspllosion and *Mask*, 1938 (fig. 19) expose the canvas to foreground the materiality of the pigment on the surface and call attention to the support in much the same way as Miró.

During the 1930s Bille worked concurrently on sculpture, which was heavily indebted to the biomorphic objects of Hans Arp. Although the *Linien* and *Helhesten* artists esteemed Giacometti as the most innovative Surrealist sculptor and wrote about him extensively, in their sculpture it was Arp who had the most significance. Indeed Danish sculptors like Bille and Sonja Ferlov emphasized the natural and organic aspects of their work and were uninterested in using their objects to explore the possibility of shock or eroticism. Bille's sculptures such as *Bird*, 1934, which was reproduced on the cover of the tenth number of *Linien*'s second volume, thus evoked associations of animals and imaginary creatures (fig. 20). Bille worked with plaster and clay to playfully and intuitively develop of biomorphic forms while nonetheless referencing elements of actual life and the found object with their animal iconography. Bille's sculpture at the time developed along similar lines to that of his close friend Ferlov, whose studio in Paris was in the same building as Giacometti's. Ferlov's *Living Branches* (1935, Museum Jorn, Silkeborg), which was published in the special Christmas issue of *Linien*, is further characteristic of the *Linien* artists' interest in organic shapes and materials that were used as a starting point for greater abstraction.

As already mentioned, before and during their trips to Paris, the Danish artists saw the work of the French Surrealists through reproductions in art journals, since with the exception of Bjerke Petersen, they read little French until they were in Paris. The French journals influenced the *Linien*'s format and provided the artists with models for content, and a checklist of galleries and artists to visit when they travelled to Paris.⁵⁰ The French periodicals also provided specific

⁵⁰ Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen cited *Documents* in his book *Surrealism*. See Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, *Surrealismen* (Copenhagen: Illums Bogafdeling, 1934), 74.

images that the Danes would reproduce in their own publications, such as photographs of Giacometti's sculptures.⁵¹ Most importantly, the reproductions of automatic images, especially in the works of Miró, André Masson, and Ernst, developed the Danish artists' understanding of automatism and intuitive art making as well as their interest in fantastical beings and motifs.

There were other models for *Linien* that were not French. *Klingen* and *Kritisk Revy* both influenced the alternation between articles on local cultural issues and contemporary international art, as well as the inclusion of poetry and criticism by the artists themselves that attacked the existing Danish cultural situation. The clear and succinct graphics of *Bauhaus*, the first issue of which published an excerpt from Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane*, also inspired the lowercase typeface and, as already mentioned, the layout of *Linien*'s covers. *Bauhaus* had abolished the use of capital letters in its publications, as a line on the bottom of Bauhaus stationary explained, "we only use small characters because it saves time. Moreover, why have 2 alphabets when one will do? why write capitals if we cannot speak capitals?"⁵² This was an ideological move to reject the conservative capitalization of nouns in German (the same grammatical style applied to written Danish in the 1930s) as well as allusion to the Bauhaus's call for the democratization of fine and applied art.

Linien also tended to include texts written in all lowercase letters, but this depended on the author and was purposefully unsystematic, while Bjerke Petersen's *Symbols in Abstract Art* was written entirely in lowercase. Artists' interest in the Bauhaus indicates just one aspect of the major influence of Kandinsky on Danish artists. The Russian's art and theory had a profound

⁵¹ The same photograph of Giacometti's *Palace at 4 a.m.* (1932, Museum of Modern Art, New York) that appeared in *Cahiers d'Art* 7, nos. 8-10 (1932), was reproduced in *Linien* 1, no. 2 (February 15, 1934): 3.

⁵² Translated in Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus 1919-1933* (Berlin: Taschen, 2006), 139.

impact on the Linien (and later Helhesten) figures.⁵³ Despite the apolitical nature of his work, for the Danes Kandinsky was the standard bearer for abstraction, experimentation in various media, the utopian liberation of color from description, and for his written theoretical work on color and abstraction.

Linien's title also had specifically Danish connotations. Carl V. Petersen's article "The Eckersberg Line" in *Linien's* first issue acknowledged the Danish foundations of the group's mission and artists' self-understanding as the latest manifestation of an authentic approach to art that began with Danish Golden Age painter C. W. Eckersberg (1783-1853). Petersen explained that the name of the group was symbolic of a "line" that extended from Eckersberg to the present. He wrote that:

It is by virtue of this...precisely realized principle of congruence between the foundation of experience, which for Eckersberg was the retinal image, but for contemporary artists is a conceptual image, and the pictorial expression for this experiential content, which for Eckersberg was spatial, for contemporary artists is functional...this new painting rightly sees and takes its place in the development as a fully flush, ideal continuation of the Eckersberg line.⁵⁴

That Petersen connected the Linien artists to Eckersberg, one of the most important painters in Danish history, highlights the Linien artists' purposeful positioning themselves as a continuation of, rather than break from the past—the latter characteristic more typical of Germany and France than of reformist Danish culture. The Linien artists therefore saw their project to reform culture from within. Even if they often found themselves on the periphery of the cultural establishment,

⁵³ Asger Jorn, for example, initially went to Paris to study with Kandinsky. When he found out Kandinsky didn't have a school, he chose Fernand Léger partly because of the latter's attachment to Communism.

⁵⁴ "Det er i kraft af denne...præcist realiserede principielle kongruens mellem oplevelsesgrundlaget, der for Eckersberg var nethindebilledet, men for vore dages kunstnere et forestillingsbillede, og det billedmæssige udtryk for dette oplevelsesindhold, der for Eckersberg var et rumligt-genstandsmæssigt, for vore dages kunstnere et flademæssigtfunktionelt...dette nye maleri med rette ser sin plads og tager sin plads i udviklingen som en fuldt flugtende ideal fortsættelse af den Eckersbergske linie." Carl V. Petersen, "Den Eckersbergske linie," *Linien* 1, no. 1: 11.

the small scale of the Danish art world meant that everyone knew one another and their work. Thus, even as *Linien* proclaimed itself as an avant-garde alternative to the mainstream Danish art world, it interacted regularly with and was circumscribed by the very establishment the artists' hoped to transform.

The ongoing political crises in Europe during the 1930s determined the *Linien* artists' engagement with politics. The journal attempted to critique the current situation and suggest better alternatives as a didactic mouthpiece for artists who saw themselves as cultural innovators. *Linien's* first issue, which marked the group's inaugural exhibition in 1934, included Richard Mortensen's article, "What are we to do about the old art? And what about the new?" in which he attacked Danish art critics for looking backward rather than at contemporary life. Mortensen proposed an instinctually created contemporary art that was actively connected to the world. He wrote that art was not something to be merely admired or passively observed: "What then are we to use the art of the present day for? Well, we should simply use it. There is an active connection between present day people and present day art. Art is expression. We speak, sing, love...our art speaks our own language of the things we experience."⁵⁵ Mortensen's article highlights the *Linien* artists' attempts to relate abstract art to everyday life. Yet his statement reveals that even if art engaged with contemporary life, for Mortensen it was still also a reflection of it. Helhesten would build on the importance of art to impact and merge with everyday life, in its advocacy for a "living" creativity.

In the article Mortensen also attempted to ameliorate the lack of understanding of Surrealism in Denmark by explaining the French artists' experimentation with non-art materials

⁵⁵ "Hvad skal vi da bruge nutidskunst til? Ja, den skal vi simpelt hen bruge. Der er nemlig en aktiv forbindelse mellem nutidsmennesker og nutidskunst. Kunst er udtryk. Vi taler, synger, elsker...vor kunst taler med vort eget sprog om de ting, vi oplever..." Richard Mortensen, "Hvad skal vi i det hele taget med den gamle kunst? –Og hvad med den nye?" *Linien* 1, no. 1: 8.

and likening Surrealist expression to chemistry and psychoanalysis. He challenged the Danish art world, which he described as predominantly consisting of naturalistic landscape artists and Social Realists, to expand its knowledge of international culture and be more open to untraditional types of art. The article appeared next to a small drawing, *Marriage*, by Bjerke Petersen, in which biomorphic shapes float within a multi-dimensional, indeterminate space (fig. 21). The shapes evoke forms of nature—an eye in the upper right corner, a bird in the lower left corner—while at the same time rejecting any one reading. A triangular creature points towards an eye, while a stingray-like form with a square halo hovers above a dark erect phallus. Bjerke Petersen’s scene is depicted with elegant and fluid lines that evoke the playfulness of daydream doodles and an indeterminacy of meaning that he argued for in his article. Undoubtedly Bjerke Petersen’s experimentation with automatic drawing was inspired by examples he saw in French journals such as Miró’s *Legends of the Minotaure*.

Bjerke Petersen’s 1934 essay “Abstract Surrealist Art” in the same number also championed Surrealism as a channel through which to actively engage with everyday life, and a catalyst for viewer participation—an idea that would become of prime importance to the Helhesten artists. He wrote:

Abstract Surrealist art...is to be experienced in a corresponding way to that in which experience occurs today; not passively observed but actively participated in. The viewer must enter into an abstract picture, move around in it and not observe, but experience the matter...in an abstract picture we are responsible participants.⁵⁶

The text was situated next to a poem and drawing by the painter, sculptor, and future Helhesten artist Henry Heerup (fig. 22). The poem suggested the use of garbage and everyday

⁵⁶ “Den abstrakte-surrealistiske kunst...skal opleves paa tilsvarende maade som selve oplevelserne foregaar i dag: ikke passivt betragtede—men aktivt deltagende. I et abstrakt billed maa beskueren træde ind, bevæge sig rundt i det og ikke betragte—men opleve stoffet...i det abstrakte billed er vi ansvarlige deltagere.” Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, “Den abstrakte surrealistiske kunst,” *Linien* 1, no. 1: 11.

products as the materials for sculpture and was written in Heerup's signature style of impish prose and the capitalization of every word in defiance of accepted writing styles. His simple automatic line drawing echoed the jovial nature of the text and consisted of simple shapes that evoke sexual penetration with the rising phallus. There are little erotic overtones to the image, however, as the phallus also resembles a playful lizard or snake.

In "What are we to do about the old art?" Richard Mortensen encouraged readers to "use" art and interact with the work. This idea, which many of the Linien artists were advocating, influenced Asger Jorn's Surrealist works of the period. His *Obtrusive Creatures Whose Right to Exist is Proved by their Existence*, appeared next to his article "The Creative Process" in the 1939 Linien exhibition catalogue (fig. 23). The image is characteristic of Jorn's work of the late 1930s, which were heavily inspired by Miró. The scene, which presents a cacophony of biomorphic beings that appear to be dancing across the canvas, is especially redolent of Miró's minotaure drawings, where the interpenetrating forms create a dynamic tension and movement.

In "The Creative Process," Jorn invited viewers to try and decipher different forms and creatures from works like *Obtrusive Creatures*. The Miró inspired scene presents a lyrical wonderland of beings that suggest human figures that never fully take shape. Artists hoped that by actively engaging with the imagery, viewers would discover new thoughts and ideas that they could possibly bring to their own daily lives.

The investment of artwork with a social function was imperative to Linien and underlay the artists' socio-political critique. Bjerke Petersen argued for social praxis in his 1934 article "Social Art? We would rather live!" in *Linien's* fourth issue, in which he lamented, "All have become passive observers under the tyranny of custom, aesthetes—admiring beauty and ideals—

instead of experiencing themselves in their own world in their own way.”⁵⁷ The article went on to criticize left-wing Social Realism as ineffective; he argued that it only preserved conservative values by reifying the existing power system that kept workers oppressed in the first place. The actual revolutionary art, he advocated, was Surrealism, because it was a way of life and allowed for an open rather than determined experience. He warned against any kind of set doctrine to determine experience—“no Lenin, no Picasso, no gods”—in favor of Surrealism’s instinctual connection to life as it was lived.⁵⁸ Despite his rejection of authoritarian systems, he concluded the article with the exhortation, “Become a Surrealist! And live!”⁵⁹

Ejler Bille’s articles for *Linien* presented Surrealism as a starting point for automatist abstraction and advocated play as a primary characteristic in creative expression. He also contributed articles that examined contemporary Danish cultural and political issues such as “The Danish Culture Crisis” in *Linien*’s sixth issue. Here he gave an overview of a debate held by *kulturradikale* Otto Gelsted at the Copenhagen Student Society. In the article he critiqued Gelsted for being too one-dimensional in his approach to social art, and applauded student Jørgen Neergaard’s view that “Marxism is no immutable fixed norm that life should adapt to—it is a living dialectic, determined from its surroundings.”⁶⁰ Bille went on to analyze the viewpoints of Danish cultural critic and later member of the wartime Freedom Council Arne Sørensen (1906-1978). Sørensen supported jazz, free living, and Functionalism, but Bille attacked him for

⁵⁷ “...alle er under vanens tyrani blevet passive betragtere, æsteter—beundring af skønhed og idealer—i stedet for selv at opleve i sin egen verden, paa sin egen made.” Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, “Social kunst? Lad os saa hellere leve!” *Linien* 1, no. 4 (April 15, 1934): 10.

⁵⁸ “...ingen Lenin, ingen Picasso, ingen guder.” Ibid.

⁵⁹ “Bliv surrealist! Og lev!” Ibid.

⁶⁰ “Marxismen er ingen uforanderlig fast norm tilværelsen skal indrette sig efter—den er en levende dialektik, der bestemmes ud fra sine omgivelser.” Ejler Bille, “Den danske kulturkrise,” *Linien* 1, no. 6 (October 15, 1934): 6-7.

his positivist views of Communism. He also criticized Sørensen’s superficial support of Surrealism, which he believed the critic only backed because it was the newest art form in Denmark. Bille also made sure to point out that the Student Society conversation had a tendency to become too focused on details rather than keeping the larger societal issues in mind, and compared the situation to German Communist debates before the Nazis rose to power.

Under the pseudonym “P. Jensen, baker,” Bille critiqued the Nazis in another article in the same 1934 issue entitled, “Sculpture in Whipped Cream, Rash Considerations for Popular Art.” He described Nazi ideology as “suppression and violence, false nationalism and empty phrases that threaten to pervade us.”⁶¹ The text is an early example of explicit anti-Nazi sentiments in *Linien*, which appeared several years before the occupation. The article was situated next to a Surrealist drawing by Mortensen, *The Birth of Cain*, in which the birth of the first human and first murderer, is depicted as a biomorphic blob seemingly made out of the whipped cream Bille described (fig. 24).

The same issue contained an enthusiastic review of *The 18th of April*, a collection of satirical poems by Communist poet Martin Jensen that mocked Nazi rhetoric; it also included a photomontage by Hans Scherfig. The journal reproduced multi-lingual, acrid excerpts from the book, such as:

aand over aander	spirit over spirits
kom ned fra det høje	came down from on high
aanden fra 48	spirit of ‘48
fra sedan	from Sedan
aanden fra alle bloddampende	the spirit of all blood steaming
slagmarker	battlefields
hør brusset fra orkestret	hear the rushing of the orchestra
dengang jeg drog afsted	when I went away
wacht am rhein	wake up Rhine

⁶¹ “Undertrykkelse og vold, falsk nationalisme og hule talemaader truer med at gennemsyre os.” Ejler Bille, “Skulptur i flødeskum hasarderede betragtinger over folkelig kunst,” *Linien* 1, no. 6: 2-3.

tipperary
stars and stripes⁶²

tipperary
stars and stripes

The poem and its reproduction in the journal elucidate that it is the context that determines meaning of images and ideology for the ideoscape. The book repurposed phrases that celebrate military prowess and bring to mind nationalism and pageantry, in short, the heroic aspects of war. The art journal, in turn, highlighted selection of these mocked signifiers, further isolating them from their original meaning and making them appear even more ridiculous and nonsensical by placing them with similar foreign phrases of once and current enemy nations. Further, the artists purposefully chose to include a poem that mentioned “48,” undoubtedly a reference to the First Schleswig War, which lasted from 1848 until 1851 and resulted in a Danish victory over Prussia and control over Schleswig-Holstein. The political rhetoric embedded within images and words that were once-patriotic phrases used to encourage and justify military prowess are isolated from their original time and place.

The poem excerpts appeared next to Bille’s article, “Art and Play” as well as a satirical caricature of Danish artists by the former actor and *Helhesten* contributor Robert Storm Petersen (1882-1949). The emphasis on elements of everyday life and popular art such as military slogans, was also represented by articles discussing jazz, cartoon films, and the fashion of ladies’ hats. A playful approach to both art and everyday life was reflective of the journal’s focus and informed by artists’ experimentation with kitsch art sources such as Henry Heerup’s *skraldeskulpturer*, or junk assemblages. These works, such as *Ironing Board Madonna*, 1937, which Heerup began during the Linien period, were an amalgamation of several of the concerns that were initiated with Linien and further developed by Helhesten (fig. 96). The democratic

⁶² “18. April, en politisk satire,” *Linien* 1, no. 6: 10-11.

interest in materials, whether it was a used bike tire or oil on canvas, accompanied a playful approach to intuitive art making rather than a strict adherence to automatist principles, and the tapping into the overlooked elements of everyday life as source material for fantastical imaginings.

There were other explicitly political condemnations in *Linien*. Richard Mortensen's satirical drawing of the Night of the Long Knives with a vomiting and disemboweled Hitler adamantly condemned Nazism *Linien's* joint eighth and ninth issue (fig. 25). His article in the 1939 *Linien* exhibition catalogue, with its ironic title "Art is Sickly," picked up where Carl V. Petersen had begun in 1934. He criticized the lack of any attempt by the public and critics to understand Surrealism, and promised that, "we are no clown number in the program, we have never sought to create sensation, we only wish to take our place in Danish art, as the historical conditions have allowed us."⁶³ The article took stock of the aims of the group, and forcefully argued for a position within the Danish art that was deadly serious.

For *Linien*, Surrealism represented a way of life that could battle aesthetic conservatism, political dogma, and cultural stagnation. The idea of a "living dialectic," which Bille had described in his article on the Danish cultural debate, perhaps best describes Danish artists' fluid relationship with Surrealism. They adopted certain Surrealist elements such as free association, the uninhibited mind, and the element of surprise, while rejecting notions of psychological truth, shock, and the prioritization of dreams. Further, the emphasis on reform from within, continuity, and openness to divergent views were all particularly Danish characteristics that directly

⁶³ "...vi er ikke et klovnenummer paa programmet, vi har aldrig forsøgt at skabe sensation om os, vi ønsker blot at tage den plads i dansk kunst, som de historiske forudsætninger har tildelt os." Richard Mortensen, "Kunsten er sygelig," *Linien*, exh. cat. (1939), 11-12.

contrasted Breton's dictatorial assertions and propensity for excommunicating those who did not tow the line.

Ironically, it was Bjerke Petersen's more direct engagement with André Breton's Surrealism and the emphasis on instinctual eroticism that led to him leaving *Linien*, the self-proclaimed conveyor of French Surrealism to Danish soil, in 1934. His book *Surrealism*, which was modeled after Breton's *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture* (1928), led to a dispute with Mortensen and Bille, who viewed his approach as dogmatic and too obsessed with sex.⁶⁴ Indeed, the book evolved within an increasing emphasis on sexual freedom in Denmark, which culminated in the Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich giving lectures in Copenhagen in 1933, which Asger Jorn, Richard Mortensen, Sigurjón Ólafsson, and several other artists involved with *Linien* and *Helhesten* had attended.

Bjerke Petersen viewed the potential for erotic liberation through an exploration of the unconscious as the most important use of automatism, proclaiming, "*The Surrealists consider the erotic to be by far the purest, truest and strongest force in man.*"⁶⁵ He cited Freud and Breton for the analysis of the sexual revelatory potential of dreams, stating:

Breton believes that in our dreams we have the only reality and overwhelming power, which is quite uninterested in thought and intellect bound to practical life's obeying games. Therefore, he requires a direct automatic transfer of dreams, without control of the mind, without aesthetic and moral considerations, common sense serves only the useful and practical, and stifle all freedom in its demand for practical purpose. In the dream, we are, by contrast, quite unchained, and we accept here an *ever so "absurd" phenomenon*. The modern psychologist will provide an analytical picture of the

⁶⁴ Bille and Mortensen disavowed the book in an article in *Linien's* seventh issue. See "Linien tager afstand fra Bjerke Petersen's bog: Surrealisme," *Linien* 1, no. 7 (November 20, 1934): 9. Bjerke Petersen also published the lavishly illustrated *Surrealismens billedverden* (Copenhagen: Arthur Jensens Forlag, 1937), which was a more thorough working out of the theories of his previous two books.

⁶⁵ "Surrealisterne anser erotikken for at være langt den reneste, sandeste og stærkeste magt i mennesket." Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, *Surrealismen* (Copenhagen: Illum, 1934), 30.

unconscious life, the Surrealistic artist will directly create those life's realities in material: words, tones, movements, colors or shapes, or in wholly new material that serves only the content... Surrealism is based on a general-humanistic basis, as the strong unconscious.⁶⁶

It was not that Mortensen or Bille were against dream analysis or shied away from sexual suggestiveness in their works; rather they rejected Bjerke Petersen's adherence to these principles over all else, and most importantly, they rejected his abandonment of abstraction for veristic Surrealism. Bjerke Petersen had argued that completely abstract art risked idealized beauty and diverged from the Surrealist reflection of the actual life of the unconscious. Yet his work, too, was inspired by the biomorphic abstraction of Miró, which suggests the split was also about personal as well as ideological differences.

Bjerke Petersen's *Alternate Erotic Landscape*, 1933 (fig. 26), for example, was inspired by Miró's sexually suggestive paintings, which were reproduced in *Linien*'s seventh issue (fig. 27). As with Bille and Mortensen, most likely Bjerke Petersen saw these works by Miró when they were in France selecting works for their exhibitions and before they were reproduced in the journal. Bjerke Petersen developed the composition from a series of automatic drawings. The white organism penetrates the four fields making up the composition, while its phallus penetrates the upper left quadrant, below which drip female breasts. The image is more playful than sexual, however, with its warm colors and what appears to be a beret sitting atop the organism's head.

Bjerke Petersen's later images were more explicitly veristic, such as *Romantic Paranoid*

⁶⁶ "Breton mener, at vi i drømmen har den eneste virkelige og altovervældende magt, der er ganske uinteresset i tankens og forstandens bundne og det praktiske livs adlydende spil. Derfor kræver han en direkte automatisk overførelse af drømmene, uden hver control af forstanden, uden æstetiske og moralske hensyn, fornuften tjener kun det nyttige og det praktiske og kvæler al frihed i sit krav om nyttiggørelse. I drømmen er vi derimod ganske ulænket, og vi akcepterer her en *hvilken som helst nok saa 'absurd' foreteelse*. Den moderne psykolog vil give et analytisk billed af det ubevidste liv, den sureallistiske kunstner vil direkte skabe dette livs realiteter i material: ord, toner, bevægelser, farver eller former, eller i helt nye materialet tjener kun indholdet... Surrealismen bygger paa et alment-menneskeligt grundlagt, idet det stærke ubevidsthedsbegreber." Ibid., 29.

Landscape, 1936 (fig. 28), a direct quote of Dalí's paranoiac-critical works. Here the desolate, eerily lit landscape emphasizes the isolation and longing of the three separate figures.

The scandal that *Surrealism* caused within the *Linien* circle has overshadowed the crucial significance of *Konkretion*, which Bjerke Petersen formed immediately after leaving the group in 1935. A pan-Scandinavian publication, which produced six issues between 1935 and 1936, *Konkretion* was published through the book division of the Copenhagen department store Illum. Though much of the text was in Danish, it included texts in French, German, Swedish, and Norwegian. Bjerke Petersen also published texts in foreign publications, such as his essay "Why I am a Surrealist" in *Cahiers d'Art* in 1935, in which he criticized the French Communist Party's rejection of Surrealism and affirmed his support for Breton. In the article, he argued that psychic automatism enabled him to approach "a free creation, which, without limitation, always brought unexpected situations. ... Surrealism delivers sexual imagination and invites it directly to flourish."⁶⁷

Konkretion was an even more text-heavy publication than *Linien*; the images that were reproduced were by Scandinavian artists and international figures such as Dalí, Wilhelm Freddie, and the Swede Harry Carlsson (1891-1968). The greater ratio of text to imagery for a publication about contemporary art perhaps partially accounts for the limited amount of attention it has received in the art historical literature when compared to *Linien*. In addition, although the journal featured numerous artists and different topics, *Konkretion* was primarily devoted to Surrealism in a veristic style that focused on dream imagery. None of the artists who featured in *Konkretion* were involved with Helhesten, and the journal's singular focus went against the tradition in Danish art journals to encompass a range of influences. Nevertheless, the acidic humor used in

⁶⁷ "d'une creation libre, laquelle, sans limitation aucune, apportait toujours des situations inattendues...Le surrealism deliver l'imagination sexuelle et invite ainsi directement á son épanouissement." Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, "Pourquoi je suis surréaliste." *Cahiers d'Art* 10, nos. 5-6 (1935): 136.

Konkretion to critique the concurrent cultural and political situation was a direct model for *Helhesten*; the *Helhesten* artists undoubtedly read its pages.

Konkretion's first issue included reproductions of work by the first Norwegian Surrealist artist Bjarne Rise (1904-1984), a poem in German by Arp, and a profile of the anarchist post-Impressionist Paul Signac (fig. 29). In addition to essays on French Surrealism, other *Konkretion* topics included contemporary British artists such as Barbara Hepworth, Tristram Hillier, Henry Moore, and Ben Nicholson, and the Swedish Halmstad Group, which introduced Surrealism to Sweden. The Halmstad Group included the artists Sven Jonson (1902-1981), Waldemar Lorentzon (1899-1984), Stellan Mörner (1896-1979), Axel Olson, Erik Olson (1899-1986), and Esaias Thorén (1901-1981). Like their Danish counterparts, these artists had spent time in Paris and Germany. The group's style was representative of that of the journal, with the Swedish artists painting in a veristic Surrealist idiom that focused on dreamlike imagery as reflections of and conduits for unconscious associations.

Konkretion had other contributions as well, including an explanation of Futurism and Dada by American museum director James Johnson Sweeney, exhibition reviews, and comments on a contemporaneous debate in the national newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* on insanity, Surrealism, and science. Danish translations of texts by Arp, Breton, Dalí, Paul Éluard, Kandinsky, André Lhote, René Magritte, Herbert Read, and Yves Tanguy could all be found, in addition to a translation of the "First English Manifesto of Surrealism." Poems by Breton, Dalí, Éluard, Georges Hugnet, and Benjamin Péret were also reproduced. Most of the texts were translated into Danish, representing some of the first translations of these writers' works in Denmark, while poems tended to appear in their original German and French.

Reproduced artworks by Hans Bellmer, Breton, Dalí, Otto Dix, Marcel Duchamp, Ernst, Hillier, Wyndham Lewis, Magritte, Moore, Nicholson, Picasso, and Man Ray, as well as by Bjerke Petersen and the Halmstad artists were also part of the mix. As with *Linien*, there were few contributions by women. They included a story by the French Surrealist writer Gisèle Prassinos, “The Persecution of a Young Girl,” which faced a full-page reproduction of Duchamp’s gender-questioning readymade *Monte Carlo Bond* (1924, Museum of Modern Art, New York). Claude Cahun’s *Place your Bets* was quoted, an article and reproduced artwork by the Norwegian painter Karen Holtzmark (1907-1988), and images of works by Sophie Taeuber Arp and Hepworth also appeared. The subjects demonstrate a more acute awareness of contemporary French and German art than in *Linien*, not least through Bjerke Petersen’s contacts with the Bauhaus and Parisian Surrealists, and reflect his deep understanding of Surrealist thought.

In addition to the amount of contemporary Surrealist art that was covered, the journal’s most compelling aspect was its editorial columns in the first two issues, which related the periodical to the cyclical reporting of mainstream newspapers. The columns included “From Naziland,” which provided information on and critiqued contemporaneous developments in Nazi cultural policy, “Air-Post,” which reviewed international Surrealist and avant-garde exhibitions, and “Art and Revolution,” a topic which was discussed theoretically. These headings alone highlight *Konkretion*’s provocative political engagement and relate it to *Kritisk Revy*. Articles’ polemical subject matter sat side by side with advertisements for galleries exhibiting long-standing modernists such as the Fynboerne (Funen painters). The inclusion of the dated preferences of the Danish art market along with reproductions of work by avant-garde artists such as Duchamp and Ernst indicates that *Konkretion* was very much part of the inclusive

purview of *kunstnersammenslutninger* publications. It also demonstrates that such galleries did not view advertising in an overtly Communist art journal as hindering their commercial aims.

Bjerke Petersen's columns are remarkable for their caustic treatment of National Socialism in Denmark in 1935-1936. Indeed, when one reads the unflinching disparagement of Nazi cultural policy, which was presented as ridiculous, irrational, and retrograde it is as if one is reading a Dada diatribe against government rather than a Surrealist art journal. The first "From Naziland" column recounted the Nazi closure of an exhibition of contemporary art in Munich, the removal of a Renoir nude on grounds of pornography, and the burning of a book of drawings by Klee. These developments prompted the rhetorical question to the reader, "Who is it then, who has the power in Germany?"⁶⁸ The second issue contained one of the most controversial columns, and included a subsection entitled "Hitler Talks About Art." The text described the "entirely stagnant" art life in Nazi Germany and compared it directly to the collection and exhibition policies of Statens Museum for Kunst director Leo Swane.⁶⁹ A "degenerate art" exhibition organized by Hermann Göring was reviewed, and the writers made sure to note that the Nazis were putting exceptional works of art of Expressionism, Dada, and Neue Sachlichkeit styles into a "chamber of horrors."⁷⁰ The column also reported that the German government had sold a work by Max Liebermann because he was Jewish. This was followed by a sardonic quotation of a German community art association's official statement that it had provided some painters free stays with the group's citizens and peasants so that they could "render landscapes,

⁶⁸ "Hvem er det saa, der har magten i Tyskland?" Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, "Fra naziland," *Konkretion* 1, no. 1 (September 15, 1935): 28.

⁶⁹ "Helt stagneret." "Fra naziland," *Konkretion* 1, no. 2 (October 15, 1935): 55.

⁷⁰ "Rædselskabinet." Ibid.

manufacturing plants, the animals, the plant world and, if possible, the face of the people.”⁷¹

Hitler’s views on art were also quoted in the same column in a similar satirical approach.

The column was accompanied by a full-page reproduction of a Bjerke Petersen modification of Otto Dix’s *War Cripples* (1920) (fig. 30). Bjerke Petersen’s photomontage superimposed photographs of the heads of major Nazi officials such as Hitler and Hermann Göring onto the bodies of Dix’s comically mutilated men, thereby amplifying the original sardonic nature of the image. As representative of the ideoscape, the work was a visual manifestation of conflicting political ideologies transposed through art. Bjerke Petersen used Dix’s Dada image, which was a response to World War One, to explicitly link that war’s atrocities with the policies of the German leaders promoting National Socialism in 1935. In doing so, he revealed the ideological power embedded in the symbol of military marches as hollow. Like the Dada artists such as Dix, Bjerke Petersen sought to use grotesque humor to highlight the real-life consequences of bourgeois society’s advocacy of military and political power. He thus cannily positioned the German figures’ heads as if they were directly attached to the damaged, semi-mechanical bodies and exploited the only slightly off-scale ratio of the heads to the bodies so that they are almost believable. Along with the Naziland columns, the montage demonstrated, moreover, that the Danes were more outspoken about Nazi cultural policy than the French Surrealists at this point.

Nevertheless, the first “Art and Revolution” column, most likely written by Bjerke Petersen, made evident that the circle around *Konkretion* was well aware of the latest polemics in Surrealist thought. Bjerke Petersen, of course, sided with Breton. The text, which was illustrated by a full-page image of a Max Ernst frottage, described the “Aragon affair,” when Louis Aragon

⁷¹ “At gengive landskaber, fabriksanlaeg, dyrene, planteverdenen og, om muligt, das gesicht der bevoelkerung.” Ibid., 55-56.

began writing in an overt propagandistic style in accordance with Communist Party standards. Bjerke Petersen presented responses by Claude Cahun (whom he mistakenly referred to as a man) and Breton. Quoting from Cahun's 1934 essay "Les paris sont ouverts" ("Place your Bets"), Bjerke Petersen highlighted Cahun's concept of "indirect action." Scholar Lizzie Thynne has explained that Cahun believed "indirect action" had authentic propagandistic potential because it demanded the readers' active participation in "divining the subtext of what is being said, and thus pushing them to advance to a higher level of comprehension, rather of questioning the status quo."⁷² Bjerke Petersen understood the subtlety and sophistication of indirect action, and not only expressed his support of such tactics, but undertaking the same in his own journal; this was also something that would be further developed by Helhesten during the occupation.

Below Cahun's text Bjerke Petersen printed an excerpt from Breton's response to the "International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture" which also argued for a similar type of indirect action:

From our standpoint...it is the subject of the poet and the artist to deepen the human problem in all its forms. ...If real poets transition to propaganda poetry of the usual external kind, it would for these poets mean a denial of the historical essence of poetry. The defense of culture consists primarily in taking care of everything, which is living, and which will continue to bear fruit. It is not through stereotypical statements against Fascism and war, that we will be successful in permanently liberating the spirit as little as the man of old shackles.⁷³

Bjerke Petersen purposefully chose to reproduce texts that questioned the validity of a propagandistic art that catered to the lowest common denominator such as Aragon's Soviet party

⁷² Lizzie Thynne, "Indirect Action: Politics and the Subversion of Identity in Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore's Resistance to the Occupation of Jersey," *Papers of Surrealism* 8 (Spring 2010): 6.

⁷³ "Ud fra vort standpunkt...det er digterens og kunstnerens sag at uddybe det menneskelige problem i alle dets former...Virkelige digteres overgang til propaganda-poesien af den sædvanlige udvendige slags vilde for disse digtere betyde en fornægtelse af selve poesien historiske bestemmelse. Forsvaret for kulturen bestaar først og fremmest i at tage vare paa alt det, som er levende, og som vil vedblive at bære frugt. Det er ikke ved stereotype erklæringer mod Fascism og krig, at det vil lykkes os for bestandig at befri aanden saa lidt som mennesket for de gamle lænker." Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, "Kunst og revolution," *Konkretion* 1, no. 1: 19.

line, challenged the relevance of Social Realism, and despite their ideological differences, mirrored the subtle cultural critique with which Linien was engaged.

That Bjerke Petersen was in favor of Breton and Cahun's view of Surrealism as *the* revolutionary art, and contrary to Aragon's stance, was made even clearer in the second "Art and Revolution" column, where he criticized the passive nature of critics and the superficial aspects of naturalism in addition to Fascism and Nazism. He contrasted the negative aspects of contemporary society with a revolutionary art that he defined as follows:

When I mention art and politics in the same breath it is because these two things can be said to be inseparable, it is not possible to put a boundary between the two manifestations. Art must necessarily reflect a philosophy of life, and as such become politically active. No art can be passive, for all art... must take a stand on moral and social norms. ...The revolutionary artwork contains new concepts, new modes and supports the revolution by encouraging people to free themselves from formalism. ...The revolutionary goals must be: *to exercise as much of the human as possible, to create a richer, greater human.* ...This is where surrealism comes in, as the only art of our day, that seeks to uncover the inner man and with every new result our knowledge goes a step further.⁷⁴

Bjerke Petersen argued that the unquestioning adherence to dogmatism was a detrimental side effect that could be found on both left and right, in both politics and the art world, and was both a historical and contemporary problem. Although his argument was circumscribed within Surrealism, Bjerke Petersen's demand for an active, politically engaged art would profoundly affect the Helhesten artists' views on the role of art as they came to terms with the changing conditions of the occupation.

⁷⁴ "Naar jeg nævner kunst og politik i samme aandedrag, er det fordi disse to ting maa siges at være uadskillelige, det er ikke muligt at sætte en grænse imellem de to manifestationsarter. Kunst maa nødvendigvis være udtryk for en livsanskuelse og bliver derved politisk aktiv. Ingen kunst kan være passiv, thi al kunst... maa tage standpunkt til moralske og sociale normer. ...Det revolutionære kunstværk rummer nye begreber, nye tilstande og støtter revolutionen ved at opfordre menneskene til at frigøre sig for det formelle. ...Det revolutionære maal maa være: *at bringe saa store dele af det menneskelige til udfoldelse som muligt, for at skabe et rigere, et større menneske.* ...Her sætter surrealismen ind, som den eneste kunst i vore dag, der søger at afdække det inderste menneske og som i ethvert nyt resultat bringer vor erkendelse et stykke videre." Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen, "Kunst og revolution," *Konkretion* 1, no. 2: 50.

The artists of *Linien* and *Konkretion* built upon the *kulturradikale* critics' progressive appropriation of existing cultural influences and their coupling of cultural and political critique. In doing so, they translated Surrealism in a manner that would be applicable to a Danish environment, whose reformist culture was averse to any kind of hegemonic dogma in cultural and political matters alike. That Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen's strict adherence to Breton's Surrealism cast him out of *Linien* and rendered him a singular player in the Danish art world is evidence of the insistence on multiplicity, as well as abstraction, as constituting avant-gardism by experimental Danish artists of the 1930s. The *Linien* artists explored automatism, universal symbols, and animal and biomorphic iconography that was more or less devoid of references to dreams, eroticism, or Freudian associations. The Danes experimented with these idioms through a creative process that emphasized a playful and intuitive approach to art making, which combined with an devotion to painterly abstraction, would develop into semi-figural fantastical creatures with *Helhesten*. During the war, *Helhesten* would also harness the emphasis on open viewer participation in the unfolding of meaning of the artwork that was an integral part of this creative process.

In the realm of the ideoscape, the inherent emphasis on multiplicity meant that the techniques and ideas of French Surrealism were combined with those of the Bauhaus, German Expressionism, and the Danish painting tradition in artists' aesthetic experimentation and political assessments. *Linien* and *Konkretion*'s sophisticated cultural critique was contingent upon skepticism towards any overarching system other than Communism (whose totalitarian reality they managed to conveniently ignore), and upon the scrupulous appropriation what artists saw as a Surrealist way of life to their more pragmatic Danish reality. Moreover, the devotion to the fundamental importance of a cultural dialogue formulated in writing between artists and

critics, and the utilization of the journal itself as an artistic medium in the dissemination and working out of artistic theory all would resurface with Helhesten.

In order to remedy the lack of a Danish art journal that reflects in equal measure the results of contemporary art and meaningful past cultural epochs, a circle of young artists and scientists have taken the initiative to publish the journal *Helhesten*. ... The journal is not narrowly sectarian-based, but represents various points of view, which together should reveal the living life of culture.¹

Helhesten 1, no. 1, March 13, 1941

CHAPTER 2

Helhesten and the Occupation

The inaugural issue of *Helhesten* appeared at the end of the first year of the Nazi occupation of Denmark. From the start, the artists saw the journal as a vehicle to elaborate their developing aesthetic approaches, as well as a means to transgress the Danish government's political policy that Danes should show restraint and display conformity towards the Germans. The artists' proclamation that they would "reveal the living life of culture," then, was no innocuous statement about art. Indeed, from the very first issue of the journal, the artists of *Helhesten* explicitly suffused their advocacy of a living art and culture that was reflective of the actual needs of human beings to engage in unrestricted imagination and creativity, and which had the potential to transform personal experience and stimulate political resistance. This living art, moreover, encompassed utopian and fantastical notions that nonetheless emphasized humanism and had links to the everyday life—a connection that paradoxically rendered *Helhesten*'s platform fairly incomprehensible to the general public and art critics.

The journal was established in 1941 amid a proliferation of cultural propaganda from the right and left that either condemned or championed abstraction as signs of degenerate or

¹ "For at afhjælpe savnet af et dansk kunstdidsskrift, der ligeligt belyser kunstens resultater i dag og betydningsfulde epoker indenfor ældre tiders kulturhistorie, har en kreds af unge kunstnere og videnskabsmænd taget initiativ til at udsende tidsskriftet *Helhesten*. ... Tidsskriftet er ikke snævert sektersk baseret, men repræsenterer forskellige anskuelser, der tilsammen skulde give brydningerne indenfor det levende kulturliv." *Helhesten* 1, no. 1 (March 13, 1941): 1.

enlightened culture. Therefore, visual culture during the occupation provides an important and unexplored context for examining Helhesten's dual ambition to develop a politically relevant art and an activist approach to everyday life under the Nazis. These so-called "culture wars" combined with the Danish artists' experiences in France and Germany in the late 1930s to influence their awareness of the attacks on avant-garde art, increase their understanding of the "degenerate art" label, and stimulate their desire to experiment with and promote such art as aesthetically progressive in Denmark. In doing so, Helhesten readily adapted the Brandesian practice of applying and remodeling pre-existing art styles that was part of the longstanding Danish tradition of journal-producing *kunstnersammenslutninger*.

For Helhesten, this mode of appropriation was one of radical reformulation, since its artists self-consciously drew from existing formulas only to re-articulate them provocatively into wholly new, open-ended approaches. As with *Linien*, it was the journal that provided artists with an experimental intellectual space in which to reflect upon and elaborate their ideas, and as such presented numerous examples of the ideoscape with its recontextualized ideas and images. Indeed, as the site of Helhesten's combined creative development, the journal undoubtedly serves as the collective's magnum opus. The following therefore examines the production and contents of *Helhesten* to probe how the journal structured the development of the group and the individual artists' work.

Edited and run by the architect Robert Dahlmann Olsen, the journal's other guiding force was Asger Jorn. Contributing artists had been involved with *Linien* and included Else Alfelt (1910-1974), Ejler Bille, Henry Heerup, Egon Mathiesen (1907-1976), Carl-Henning Pedersen, Erik Thommesen (1916-2008), and the Icelandic artists Svavar Guðnason (1909-1988) and Sigurjón Ólafsson (1908-1982). Artists were joined by figures from outside of the art world such

as archaeologist and later director of Denmark's National Museum of Antiquities, P. V. Glob (1911-1985), psychiatrist Sigurd Næsgaard (1885-1956), the poet Jens August Schade, future SI poet Jørgen Nash, as well as the critics Jan Zibrandtsen (1907-1982), Ole Sarvig (1921-1981), and Hans Scherfig, among others.

As a journal without institutional affiliation or official financial support that sought to bridge the spheres of art and politics in a consciously anti-academic manner, *Helhesten* set itself apart from *Linien*'s devotion to Surrealism, as well as the erudite subjects of the contemporaneous scholarly art journal *Aarstiderne* (*The Seasons*, 1941-1946). The lack of interest among contemporary critics contributed to *Helhesten*'s relative autonomy from the official art sphere, which gave artists the freedom to theorize about their aesthetic approaches. Therefore it was the artists themselves, rather than critics or art historians, who defined their own goals and ideas in writing throughout the journal's twelve issues.

Helhesten had an average print run of 800 copies.² Each issue sold for 1.75 kroner (about 30 cents in 1941), making it affordable to a general public, and later all of the issues could be bought as a set for 12 kroner (\$2.00). Artists created around fifty original lithographs, linocuts, and woodcuts for the journal. These were then sold as works of art to support journal costs in the same manner as *Die Brücke*. While components such as pagination and a table of contents rendered the format of the journal relatively conventional, the editors also experimented with a variety of novel layouts and typographical elements. Artists were not paid for their contributions; group dues and donations by contributors such as Jorn, funded the printing costs.³ *Helhesten* also

² Robert Dahlmann Olsen, *Danish Abstract Art*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: Danish Artists' Committee for Exhibitions Abroad, 1964), np.

³ Gunnar Jespersen, *De Abstrakte: Historien om en kunstnergeneration* (Copenhagen: Kunstbogklubben, 1991), 120-34.

produced two volumes of poetry in editions of 300 in 1945: *Dream Poems* by Carl-Henning Pedersen and *Salvi Dylvo* by Jørgen Nash (illustrated by Jorn). Rather unusually for a wartime publication, the journal was printed in color, which may have contributed to its lack of financial solvency after 1941. The financial problems led to uneven publication, so that while six issues came out in 1941, there was one in 1942, three in 1943, and two in 1944. It was *Helhesten's* growing financial debt, in fact, and not overt censorship by the Germans, that led to its closure in 1944.⁴

Helhesten drew from Denmark's history of reformist, non-violent political and social change and consensus democracy, and partook in a specifically Danish sense of humor to create a socially relevant art that artists believed had the potential to intervene into everyday life. Nevertheless, the group contested the nationalization of mythological and historical symbols such as the *helhest*, the Jelling Stone, and medieval Danish heroes, by emphasizing collective, universalizing methods and concepts. The journal thus featured contemporary Danish art as well as international modernism, indigenous folk art, non-Western objects, and popular culture. Article subjects included prehistoric Scandinavian rock carvings, Viking rune stones, Kabuki theater, avant-garde film, vernacular architecture, and medieval Scandinavian church frescos, while artists profiled one another as well as contemporary international artists such as Fernand Léger and Paul Klee. *Helhesten's* publication of articles on recent European art marked the group as internationally cosmopolitan, while the emphasis on everyday art forms, non-Western objects, and symbols common to all cultures communicated ideas of universalism and inclusivity.

⁴ Although the last issue stated the deficit as 1,200 kroner, Dahlmann Olsen later noted that the figure was actually 1,714 kroner. *Ibid.*, 130.

Helhesten undercut the Danish government's policy of not upsetting the Germans by openly courting a visual culture that the Nazis defined as "degenerate." The group's transformation of Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism into a socially relevant art emphasized naivety, open-endedness, participation, and incompleteness. Surrealism inspired the artists to experiment with, and ultimately elaborate, automatism into an aesthetic that emphasized subjectivity, spontaneity, and viewer interaction. They also deliberately looked to sources from Denmark's shared cultural history with Germany, including those from Nordic mythology, Northern Romanticism, the Bauhaus, Expressionism, and Dada to question established systems and histories.

Helhesten's collective vision was only realized through the efforts of its individual contributors. One of the most important of these was the journal's primary editor, Robert Dahlmann Olsen, who also served as the editor of the last issue of *Linien* and the first issue of *Cobra*. Without a doubt the most overlooked figure of the group, Dahlmann Olsen was a Diaghilev-esque impresario who single-handedly made the journal possible and was responsible for its continued existence. He was the adhesive that held the whole enterprise together, performing the day-to-day grunt work of record keeping, advertisement solicitation, public relations, exhibition promotion, article editing, social networking, correspondence, and even personal arbitration when different artists came to blows over aesthetic and monetary issues.⁵ Along with Jorn, Dahlmann Olsen made all of the decisions regarding the journal's content and was responsible for introducing Functionalism and the work of Le Corbusier to the group. The

⁵ The Robert Dahlmann Olsen Archive at Museum Jorn, Silkeborg, and the Helhesten Archive at the Danish Royal Library—both of which were gifted by the architect—contain countless examples his labors on behalf of the journal. For example, he contacted the Copenhagen daily *Berlingske Tidende* several times in 1941 to sell the newspaper advertising space in the journal, and sent *BT* issues of *Helhesten* to be reviewed. He also hired the newsclip service of the advertising agency A/S Bergenholz to collect news items regarding Helhesten in May 1941. See volume 2, Helhesten Archive, Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen (hereafter cited as Helhesten Archive).

architect was also the first person to write critically about Helhesten's project after the war, and he organized important international exhibitions involving the Helhesten artists from the 1930s through the 1960s.

Dahlmann Olsen later commented on Helhesten's founding:

Europe was at war, the Germans had broken their promise and occupied the country. The mere thought of getting money together in support of such a rash art venture...one that intended to concentrate on "entartete" art—seemed absurd to most people. But the external pressure increased the inner need amongst the artists involved to clarify, on the one hand, the original and fresh sources of their artistic activity, and on the other, the human values which their new art drew attention to. Together they wished to demonstrate that each person possesses art in himself, and that liberation from artistic prejudices could have undreamt of importance to society as a whole.⁶

Dahlmann Olsen's statement highlights that the Helhesten artists were highly interested in art's potential for social change from the moment the group was established, and the intense urgency they felt to explore the social implications of art during occupation.

Artists' interest in the socio-political impact of their creative activities reinforces the understanding of *Helhesten* as a resistance publication. Four months after *Helhesten* came out with its first issue, the Germans passed a law making the publication of resistance literature punishable by death, stating "Every editor will be answerable with his life for further attempts to poison the popular mind."⁷ The editorial work of the journal took place in P. V. Glob's office in the National Museum, in a seemingly "safe" space of an official state institution that also provided practical resources. Helhesten's contributors frequently omitted and refined both their personal correspondence and public texts in order not to be censored, silenced, or persecuted. In a June 1941 letter to Ejler Bille, Dahlmann Olsen noted that he had received a letter about

⁶ Dahlmann Olsen, *Danish Abstract Art*, np.

⁷ People charged with distributing Communist literature were charged under the August 1941 Law number 349 which banned Communist organizations and Communist activity. Nathaniel Hong, *Down with the Murderer Hitler! Illegal Communication Strategies during the First Period of the German Occupation of Denmark* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Journalism Monographs, 1994), 12.

Helhesten that had already been opened, reporting that he wouldn't write about it but would tell Bille in person.⁸ In August 1943, in response to a phone call, the content of which remains unknown, Dahlmann Olsen was ordered to send a copy of *Helhesten* to the Copenhagen police.⁹

Helhesten's first issue was produced in April 1941, during the first half of the war when the Danish government was actively collaborating with Germany. During this period resistance efforts were still marginal and lacked popular support; it was those with the least official influence, such as students, who non-systematically undertook resistance, and resistance literature was ephemeral and haphazard. In fact, the first illegal periodical press appeared in October 1941—five months *after* *Helhesten* was first published.¹⁰ It is therefore remarkable that *Helhesten* was put together so effectively so early, and this marks it—although it has never been given credit as such—as one of the first resistance publications to be produced during the occupation. In fact, nine of *Helhesten*'s twelve issues appeared *before* August 1943, the turning point in that marked widespread, organized Danish resistance. It is likely that the journal only produced three issues after this point not only because of growing financial problems, but also because its artists were engaged in more overt resistance activities elsewhere.

Helhesten's inauguration was thus a provocative maneuver during the first year of the occupation, especially since the Danish Nazi Party (Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Arbejderparti, or DNSAP) and Danish Communist Party (Danmarks Kommunistiske Parti, or DKP) had been using visual culture to vie for power since the 1930s. These “culture wars” set

⁸ Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Ejler Bille, June 12, 1941, volume 2, *Helhesten* Archive.

⁹ Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Police Assistant Henriksen, August 9, 1943. *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The illegal press reached a monthly level of 25,000 copies by March 1942 and 80,000 by that summer. It was not until 1943 that the central news agency Information was established as the only underground press service in an occupied country. Hong, *Down with the Murderer Hitler! Illegal Communication Strategies*, 3.

the stage for the Helhesten artists' understanding of the socio-political implications of art during the war and further radicalized their already left-leaning political beliefs.

**“The Battle Must Apply to All Culture’s Fronts”:
The Cultural Propaganda of the Right and Left**

The Helhesten artists formulated their program amidst a growing interest in culture as a political weapon by the parties of the left and right. During the first half of the war the Danish government's relationship with the German occupiers was successful in marginalizing any attempts by the extreme right and left from gaining any margin of political power. Yet the cultural policy of the Social Democrats during the late 1930s and 1940s was ambiguous and ill defined, and the party did not aim to regulate aesthetics or artistic style. It was in fact the government's ambivalent interest in culture that created an avenue for the Danish Communist and Nazi Parties to make ideological headway.

Denmark's Nazi Party was established in 1930 and was modeled after Hitler's National Socialist Party. From 1933 the DNSAP was led by Frits Clausen (1893-1947), who was born south of Denmark's former border with Germany, and who had fought for Germany during World War One. During the occupation the DNSAP increasingly attacked modern art, not only as a way to promote the party's beliefs about culture, but also as an attempt to expand its political platform and increase its power. Even so, the DNSAP's persecution of modern artists was less extreme than in Germany, not least because the cultural environment was small and intimate, so that everyone knew everyone else. Historian John T. Lauridsen has explained that DNSAP officials such as Clausen did not want to alienate more people than they already had

before the war, when the party consistently missed opportunities to exploit the potential of culture in its political program to attract new members.¹¹

Lauridsen has described the DNSAP's cultural policy during the late 1930s, which in Denmark was a popular front period led by the broad-based platform of the Social Democrats. He characterizes the DNSAP strategies at this time as either offensive, when the party expressed the values that people should follow, or defensive, in which it used cultural criticism to explain why modern art and culture was negative, sick, destructive, and should be destroyed.¹² Frits Clausen propagated the idea of a Mother Denmark and fervent nationalism while attacking modern art in the two main DNSAP publications *Fædrelandet* (*Fatherland*, 1939-1945) and *National Socialisten* (1931-1945). Clausen cited the historicist, National Romantic style of the architect Martin Nyrop (1849-1921), and the Golden Age artists H. W. Bissen (1798-1868), Christian Købke (1810-1848), and Bertel Thorvaldsen (1789-1838) as ideal models for contemporary artists to follow.

In 1939 Clausen published a series of six articles on Danish culture in *Fædrelandet*, collectively entitled "Denmark, Dream and Reality," which functioned as a culture guide for the party.¹³ In the article about art, Clausen linked artistic quality to a racially pure blood. He characterized the landscapes, interiors, and figure studies of Danish Golden Age artists as specifically Danish types that embodied his dictum—which all the Nazi art critics followed—that the best art was eternal, "understandable" to the common people, and nationalistic.¹⁴

¹¹ John T. Lauridsen, "Kulturkamp! DNSAP's opgøre med moderne kunst og kultur," in *Dansk nazisme: 1930-45, og derefter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2002), 289-317.

¹² *Ibid.*, 293.

¹³ Frits Clausen, "Danmark, drøm og virkligheden" consisted of "Teknik," "Kunst," "Tro," "Odin," "Thor," og "Njord," in *Fæderlandet* (September 8 – 14, 1939).

¹⁴ "Forståelige." Frits Clausen, "Danmark, drøm og virkligheden: Kunst," *Fæderlandet* (September 9, 1939): 3.

Critic Regnar Lodbrog's 1938 *National Socialisten* article "Eternal Art" similarly outlined the characteristics of the ideal Danish art by appropriating national traditions that looked back to historical Nordic models of greatness.¹⁵ The article endorsed the art of the recently deceased Naturalist painters and Den frie Udstilling (The Free Exhibition) founders Agnes (1863-1937) and Harald Slott-Møller (1864-1937). Lodbrog's text coincided with a retrospective of the Slott-Møllers in 1938 at the Charlottenborg Salon. In particular he highlighted Agnes Slott-Møller's historical portrait *Niels Ebbesen*, which idealized the medieval Danish warrior as a hero sitting stoically on his majestic horse in a rustic Danish landscape (fig. 31). Such images, Lodbrog argued, were part of the eternal model upon which the foundation of modern Denmark was established.

The resistance also made use of Ebbesen as an ideological symbol for its propaganda. In the fourteenth century Ebbesen had led a successful revolt against Germany that resulted in Danish independence. When Danish playwright Kaj Munk (1898-1944) wrote a nationalistic play about Ebbesen in 1942, it was seen as anti-Nazi and the Germans murdered him. The dual exploitation of the historical figure of Ebbesen by both the right and left is just one of many cases during the war that highlights the ambiguity of translating national symbols and stories from the Scandinavian past to the present. The DNSAP promotion of a simplistic, nationalizing foundation of Danish visual culture consisted of an amalgam of figures, events, and symbols that were simultaneously adopted by the mainstream government and the left. Interest in Scandinavian's cultural roots was part of the general revival of nationalism and focus on Danish history during the occupation. This was further stimulated by the reopening of the ethnographic collections of the Danish National Museum in 1938, which also had a great impact on the

¹⁵ Regnar Lodbrog, "Ewig kunst," *National Socialisten* (February 12, 1938): 3.

Helhesten artists. The Danish artists understood well that the power of symbols such as Ebbesen or the Jelling Stone was not inherent, but superimposed by specific political parties for particular reasons that had little to do with historical fact.

Even N. F. S. Grundtvig's ideas were up for grabs. An article by Critic Baldur Nielsen-Edwin (b. 1918) entitled "What is Social Art?" appeared in the DNSAP's monthly newsletter in 1941. Nielsen-Edwin argued that art should be democratic and be seen outside of the museum, thereby abolishing the need for such institutions and the bourgeois foundation upon which they were established.¹⁶ In this and other articles an emphasis on Grundtvig's *folkelighed*, or the popular, can be detected, something the DNSAP writers undoubtedly hoped would make their ideas more readily palatable to the average Dane. DNSAP propaganda posters thus attempted to assimilate Danish and National Socialist symbols to link the DNSAP's agenda with both the German party and Scandinavian history. One such poster, for a 1939 DNSAP rally in the Southern Jutland city of Kolding, depicts a range of symbols from German and Danish history that are redolent of the ideoscape's recontextualization of nationalistic ideology for political purposes (fig. 32). A swastika is placed directly after the DNSAP acronym in the same scale and color to associate the Danish party with its German counterpart. In the foreground, an idealized and helmeted Danish Viking blows a Bronze Age lur, several famous examples of which were on display at the National Museum in Copenhagen. The medieval royal castle of Kolding, Koldinghus, is depicted in the background as a picturesque yet monumental ruin. Conveniently and intentionally overlooked in this romanticized version is the fact that Koldinghus was the site of a major battle between Denmark and Germany during the First War of Schleswig in 1849.

¹⁶ Baldur Edwin Nielsen, "Hvad er 'social kunst'?" *Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Arbejderparti Maanedes Brev* 6, no. 5 (August 1941): 117-20.

The Danish Nazi Party had denounced modern art as early as 1933, condemned jazz by 1935, and lambasted Functionalist architecture in 1938. The Danish Nazis condemned these forms of modern culture in the same way as had Paul Schultze-Naumberg in his notorious 1928 book *Art and Race*. Like Schultze-Naumberg, DNSAP propaganda also accused modern art of being created by inferior races and mentally ill individuals. Bertolt Brecht, for example, who lived in exile in Denmark from 1933 to 1939, was targeted in the DNSAP press as a demented “Jewish Communist.”¹⁷ The Helhesten artists attended the staging of his works in Copenhagen while he was in exile on the Danish Island of Fyn, where Walter Benjamin, among others, visited the German playwright.¹⁸ A 1938 article in *National Socialisten* entitled “The Big Craze” similarly referred to Picasso’s *Guernica*, which was being exhibited in Denmark at the time:

This crazy mess...has recently been exhibited under the label “modern art” in Copenhagen. Generally healthy-minded people obviously cannot find meaning or beauty in this with its contorted human bodies, animal heads, electric lamps and cow bums painted on canvas. We have rarely been presented with such dung before, but nevertheless the cultural-bolshevist press writes long articles about the “deeper meaning of the insanity.” Denmark: wake up!¹⁹

The same *National Socialisten* edition also criticized the work being shown in the touring Degenerate Art Show in Germany as “perverted.”²⁰

As war loomed, the DNSAP focused on culture more consistently as a political weapon, which was underscored by Clausen in *Fædrelandet* in 1940:

¹⁷ “Jødiske kommunist.” Brecht, who put on various works in Copenhagen during this period, lived on the island of Fynen, where Walter Benjamin, among others, visited him. See Lauridsen, *Dansk nazisme*, 297-98.

¹⁸ I would like to thank Birgitta Spur, director of the Sigurjón Olafsson Museum, Reykjavik, for this information.

¹⁹ “Dette sindssyge makværk...har fornylig udstillet under betegnelsen ‘moderne kunst’ i København. Almindelige sundttænkende mennesker kan naturligvis hverken finde mening eller skønhed i dette med forvredne menneskekroppe, dyrehoveder, elektriske lamper og kohaler bemalte lærred. Noget værre møg har vi sjældent været præsenteret for, men ikke desto mindre skriver den kulturbolsjevistiske systempresse spaltelange artikler om den ‘dybere mening med sindssygen.’ Danmark—vaagn op!” “Den store dille,” *National Socialisten* (1938). Cited in Lauridsen, *Dansk nazisme*, 295.

²⁰ “Dilleristisk kunst,” *National Socialisten* (March 19, 1938): 3.

The battle must apply to all culture's fronts and it is not hopeless. ...The new age's spirit will help the real Danish [character] come to the surface, and most importantly: it will prove to be a surface, which is constant, because it corresponds to the core. Because the Danes are good enough deep down. The culture war is at hand.²¹

The DNSAP forged a much more aggressive and wide-ranging campaign against modernism during the occupation than it had before the war, becoming vitriolic and overtly racist. DNSAP writers repeatedly decried Danish and international contemporary art as “crazy,” while using the word *avant-garde* as a derogatory label.

The DNSAP's local targets were associated with *Linien*, *Konkretion*, and later, *Helhesten*. An article by artist Baldur Nielsen-Edwin in the DNSAP's June 1941 newsletter juxtaposed a large reproduction of a nude by the Danish modernist and *Helhesten* contributor Vilhelm Lundstrøm (1893-1950) with a work by the most visible Nazi artist and critic Gudmund Hentze (1875-1948) (fig. 33). While the publication meant such a juxtaposition to suit Hentze, if viewed in terms of Appadurai's ideoscape, if the same comparison had been shown in *Helhesten*, it would have had the opposite effect, rendering Hentze's work traditional and parochial when compared to his more modern counterpart.

The reproduced portrait was typical of Hentze's style, which was a nineteenth-century sentimental naturalism. He had had no influence in the art world until the occupation. The article addressed this, stating “Gudmund Hentze does not have any pictures in the art museum and is not a member of the academy circle, but for his whole life Gudmund Hentze has fought idealistically against degenerate art.”²² Nielsen-Edwin was implying that it was Hentze who

²¹ “Kampen maa gælde alle kulturens fronter, og den er ikke haabløs. ...Den nye tids aand vil hjælpe det virkelige danske frem til overfladen, og vigtigst af alt: det vil vise sig at være en overflade, som er konstant, fordi den svarer til kernen. For danskerne er god nok inderste inde. Kulturkampen forestaar.” Frits Clausen, “Nu skal den ægte danske paany sættes i højsædet,” *Fæderlandet: Propaganda nummer* (February 4, 1940): 12.

²² “Gudmund Hentze har ingen billeder paa kunstmuseet og er ikke medlem af akademiet, men Gudmund Hentze har hele sit liv kæmpet idealistisk mod den udartede kunst.” Baldur Edwin Nielsen, “Nationalsocialismen og kunsten,” *Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Arbejderparti Maanedes Brev* 6, no. 3 (June 1941): 64-65.

belonged in the academy, not Lundstrøm, who had been an influential artist ever since he exhibited his famous “packing case” assemblages in 1918. The image of Lundstrøm’s female, with her underbite, sagging breasts, and modern hairstyle, was painted in a simplified Purist style that was the opposite to the saccharine idealism represented by Hentze’s portraits. Lundstrøm’s portrait was very similar to the nudes he exhibited in Helhesten’s “Thirteen Artists in a Tent” exhibition in 1941. Hentze himself would attack Lundstrøm in a June 1941 *Fædrelandet* article, where he disparagingly linked Lundstrøm to Grønningen founder Harald Giersing. This did not prevent Hentze from cheekily inviting Lundstrøm to see the error of his ways and to join the Danish Nazi Party.²³

Hentze’s 1942 *Fædrelandet* article, “Degenerate Art,” is one of the most widely quoted texts on the Danish Nazi anti-modernist propaganda. Illustrated with a drawing by Ejler Bille, the article derided modernism: “But the inane silliness, which calls itself ‘abstract art,’ belongs to no home...National Socialism will take with a firm hand such nettles, pull them out and throw them into the fire like the weeds they are in the garden of art.”²⁴ Hentze’s text confirms that the Nazi view of Helhesten’s aesthetic was one of contempt, backed by the confidence that the general public would not take seriously the group’s abstraction.

In contrast to the DNSAP, during the war, although the Danish Communist Party did not have an official cultural policy, it embraced abstraction as a sign of its progressive modernism. After Germany attacked the Soviet Union and Communism was made illegal in Denmark in June 1941, the relations between the DKP and Moscow were severed. The DKP pursued a united,

²³ Gudmund Hentze, *Fæderlandet* (June 16, 1941).

²⁴ “Men det aandsforladte fjolleri, der nu under navn “abstrakt kunst” breder sig, hører ingensteds hjemme...National-Socialismen vil tage med fast Haand om saadanne nælder, rykke dem op og kaste dem paa ilden som det ukrudt de er i kunstens have, vær forvissat om det. Gudmund Hentze, “Vanartet kunst,” *Fædrelandet* (October 17, 1942): 7.

underground policy that sought alliances with any opposition to the official accommodation of the German occupation. This provided much of the structure and direction for the early resistance movement. Thus in 1943 the formerly marginal power of the party in the Social Democrat-led parliament shifted to one of more influence, initiating the DKP's most successful period, which lasted until 1947.

The DKP's interest in visual culture was evidenced in the pages of its official newspaper, *Arbejderbladet* (*Workers Newspaper*, 1921-1922; 1934-1941), to which the *kulturradikale* figures widely contributed.²⁵ In its pages the critics emphasized modern art styles such as German Expressionism and Cubism, and heralded Vilhelm Lundstrøm as one of Danish modernism's most important figures. That the DKP was open to and associated with the style of modern abstraction during the war—it would only attempt to promote Socialist Realism in line with Soviet dictums more seriously during the Cold War—was an important factor that strengthened the Helhesten artists' identification with Communism. Egill Jacobsen, who joined the DKP in 1933, later recalled, "Most of us abstract painters joined the Communist Party. Maybe it was because we were so poor. But it was also because we thought the DKP would work for art's freedom and the democratic, local communities, when the party came to power."²⁶

The Helhesten artists saw Communism as a set of egalitarian ideals that rejected hierarchical power, bourgeois society, and Fascism. Most of the Helhesten artists (unlike the artists of Linien, who were from the middle and upper middle classes) were from the working

²⁵ The editorial offices of *Arbejderbladet* were raided and its contributors arrested by the Danish police in June 1941.

²⁶ "De fleste af os abstrakte malere meldte os ind i kommunistpartiet. Det var måske fordi, vi var så fattige. Men det var også fordi, vi troede, DKP ville arbejde for kunstens frihed og det demokratiske, decentrale samfund, når partiet kom til magten." Egill Jacobsen, *Demokraten Weekend* (January 13, 1984). Cited in Morten Thing, *Kommunismens kultur: DKP og de intellektuelle 1918-1960*, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter, 1993), 705-06.

class and came to Communism through their involvement in student groups.²⁷ Though the support of Communism varied according to the individual, all of the Helhesten artists were committed Communists or identified with revolutionary politics by the mid-1930s, and they all participated in the resistance from 1942. Jacobsen had first met Carl-Henning Pedersen in 1935 at an anti-war demonstration. Pedersen had been an agitator for Danmarks Kommunistiske Ungdom (Danish Communist Youth Movement) and had spent ten days in jail for agitating in 1934. He also published one issue of a Communist magazine he called *Ilden (The Fire)*. His partner, Else Alfelt, had been fired from her job as a porcelain painter for trying to organize her colleagues; like Henry Heerup, the couple lived on social welfare until 1942.

Jorn was first exposed to Communism in rural Jutland in the early 1930s through the Syndicalist organizer Christian Christiansen.²⁸ For a time he was the secretary of the local branch of Friends of the Soviet Union and did work for the Danish Monde group. He was also treasurer of the Christianshavn section of the DKP (a position also held by Egill Jacobsen), made pro-republican propaganda posters for the Spanish Civil War, and assisted with publishing issues of the DKP newspaper *Land og Folk (Country and People, 1941-1990)*, even hiding a duplicator for it in his sofa during the war. Jorn was also known to give shelter to refugees.²⁹ When Jorn went to Paris, one of the reasons he chose to study with Léger was the latter's Communism; while there he retouched photos on behalf of the Spanish Republican Embassy pavilion at the 1937 International Art Exhibition. The following year in Paris he and Ejler Bille attended French

²⁷ For a detailed overview in English of the Helhesten artists' Communist activities see Peter Shield, "Spontaneous Abstraction and its Aftermath in Cobra, 1931-51" (Phd diss., The Open University, 1984), 228-29.

²⁸ For more on Jorn's Communist activities see Morten Thing, "Jorn and Communism," in *Expo Jorn: Art is a Festival!* eds. Karen Kurczynski and Karen Friis, exh. cat. (Silkeborg: Museum Jorn, 2014), 34-39.

²⁹ Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avant-garde Won't Give Up* (London: Ashgate, 2014), 13-22.

socialist rallies and he tried to persuade Bille to give his passport to a Spanish refugee.³⁰ Art historian Karen Kurczynski has documented that Jorn actually began as a political organizer and activist, not a cultural one. This helped him to occupy an outsider's role in both art and revolutionary class politics.³¹

The Helhesten artists actively contributed to Communist publications such as *Arbejderbladet*. Egill Jacobsen and Asger Jorn co-wrote the polemical article “Art against Reaction” in that newspaper in 1940, which was a tirade against Danish culture as well as the Social Democratic government. They blamed the art establishment for “advancing the special and difficult circumstances that have prevailed in this country since April 9 as an excuse for these attempts to forget the existence of modern art.”³² They went on to attack the Social Democrats: “*It is fraud*. They want to make us believe that it is the best of culture, one can acquire after a long tiring workday, which has sucked the power out of one... *Art only becomes folkelig by virtue of its quality*.”³³ The article was an explicit attack—note the date—on the government during a period when Danes had been ordered to exercise “loyal conduct” towards authority. Given their commitment to Communism and animosity towards the Copenhagen art establishment, it is unsurprising that Jorn, Jacobsen, and the other Helhesten artists would also draw upon the experiences they encountered abroad to devise their polemical art journal.

³⁰ Peter Shield, “The War Horses: The Danish Reaction to *Guernica*,” *Jong Holland 2* (1991): 12-13.

³¹ Karen Kurczynski, “Beyond Expressionism: Asger Jorn and the European Avant-Garde, 1941-1961,” (PhD diss., New York University, 2005), 54.

³² “...for disse forsøg paa at glemme eksistensen af den modern kunst, ynder man at fremføre de særlige og vanskelige forhold, der siden 9. April har hersket her i landet.” Asger Jorn and Egill Jacobsen, “Kunst contra reaktionen,” *Arbejderbladet* (December 15, 1940): 2.

³³ “*Det er bedrageri*. De vil bilde os ind, at det er det bedste af kulturen, man kan tilegne sig efter en lang trættende arbejdsdag, der har presset kraften ud af en... *En kunst bliver kun folkelig i kraft af sin kvalitet*.” Ibid.

“We Are Not Indifferent Spectators”: International Stimuli

By the late 1930s all of the Helhesten artists, most of whom were self-taught, had been involved with Linien and spent time in France and Germany. Between 1937 and 1939 Ejler Bille, Sonja Ferlov, Svavar Guðnason, Henry Heerup, Asger Jorn, Egon Mathiesen, Robert Dahlmann Olsen, and Carl-Henning Pedersen, had all lived in or visited Paris, while Egill Jacobsen had gone there in 1934. Jorn and Guðnason both studied with Fernand Léger in 1937. It was as Léger’s student that Jorn, along with French painter Pierre Wemaëre (1913-2010), worked on a mural of Léger’s design for Le Corbusier’s Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at the 1937 International Art Exhibition. While in Paris, the Danish artists met the major French Surrealists and saw the work of or met Dada artists and other figures such as Tristan Tzara and Pablo Picasso. Artists networked through already established relationships set up by Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, as well as by sheer proximity. Sonja Ferlov’s studio, for example, was located in the same building as Alberto Giacometti’s, and his work was a major influence on Bille, Ferlov, and Jorn at the time.

Although the artists’ activities in France have been well documented, they also were influenced by and wrote about their experiences in Germany. Bille, Dahlmann Olsen, Pedersen and Guðnason all visited Germany on their way to or return from France, and Pedersen saw the Degenerate Art Show in Frankfurt. The artists’ writings reflect their acute understanding of the consequences of the rise of National Socialism in the late 1930s, especially in terms of the limiting of personal and creative freedoms. When Dahlmann Olsen spent several days in Germany on his way to France, he recorded his experiences in a diary. His entries reveal his dual purpose was to see art and architecture as well as to better understand how ordinary Germans felt about National Socialism. He therefore not only recorded his experiences of visits to art

exhibitions and modern buildings, but also a number of conversations with German men and women that represented a range of responses to Hitler's government.³⁴ In his diary he explained that his encounters had challenged the general opinion in Denmark that most Germans were in favor of Hitler. He ended his German entries by writing that he had experienced a "wonderful tour through Germany."³⁵

The surviving letters Ejler Bille wrote to his mother from Paris conveyed similar perceptions of National Socialism and Fascism before the war. In late 1938 he described the heightened nervous environment in Paris because of Hitler's moves against Czechoslovakia, the increasingly chaotic situation in the city, and his growing concern about being able to travel through Germany to get back to Denmark.³⁶ Warning his mother not to tell anyone of his accounts or actions, he described how innocent Germans had been arrested in Paris, including friends who had been deported. For one of these, a painter called Graumann, Bille unsuccessfully tried to arrange passage to Denmark.³⁷ Bille and Dahlmann Olsen's accounts draw attention to the pains they made to distinguish between the experiences of ordinary people, and the decisions of their governments. In March 1939, for example, Bille noted that the majority of his discussions with friends in Paris was taken up by politics, but in secret; his Italian friends were afraid of the Fascists, while ordinary Germans were afraid of the Nazis, and they were careful

³⁴ These included a housekeeper who had a bronze head of Hitler in the corner of her bedroom and who told Dahlmann Olsen how great it was to live under Hitler because all the "Jewish Communists were now cleaned out." He recorded another German telling him that it would be impossible to overturn Hitler by a coup, while another man professed his hatred of Hitler's oppressive tactics. Robert Dahlmann Olsen, *Arkitektur og billedkunst i collageform: Dagbog 1938* (Dragør: 1990), 13-16.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

³⁶ Vibeke Cristofoli, ed., *Ejler Bille: Breve fra Paris 1937, 1938, 1939* (Copenhagen: Brødrene Brøndum, 2003), 49.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 50-53, and 58-65.

about talking openly.³⁸ The artists' understanding of the very real social ramifications of impending war was explicitly voiced in the last *Linien* exhibition catalogue when Egill Jacobsen wrote, "We artists collaborate with those who are working to make people happier and richer, spiritually and materially. We are not indifferent spectators to unavoidable tragedies."³⁹ The distinction between those with and without power as two very different realities would also be a crucial focus of *Helhesten*.

The *Helhesten* artists' experiences abroad greatly informed their understanding of modern and contemporary art, and played a decisive role in their fresh reshaping of French and German cultural sources. They viewed Surrealism as the most avant-garde art style of the preceding decade, because, according to Jorn, it had made it "possible to achieve truly vital and liberated art forms."⁴⁰ While the influence of French Surrealism was most profound with regard to artists' development of automatism already during their experience with *Linien*, the impact of Surrealism on the journal itself was not as direct. *Helhesten* did not advocate one ideological doctrine over another or attempt to shock readers, but invited them to embark on a journey of personal discovery and developing awareness that could initiate freer creative processes and ideas. Jorn's statement implies that Danish artists saw Surrealism, and especially psychic automatism, not as an end in itself, but a means with which artists could draw from and experiment.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁹ "Vi kunstnere samarbejder med dem, der arbejder paa at gøre menneskene lykkeligere og rigere, aandeligt og materielt. Vi er ikke ligegyldige tilskuere til uundgaaelige dramaer." Egill Jacobsen, "Vi maler," *Linien*, exh. cat. (December 1939), 4.

⁴⁰ Asger Jorn, "Face to Face" [1944]. Translated in Ruth Baumeister, ed., *Fraternité Avant Tout: Asger Jorn's Writing on Art and Architecture*, trans. Paul Larkin (Rotterdam: OIO Publishers, 2011), 71.

Helhesten engaged in a cultural critique that aspired to that of *Cahiers d'Art* (1926-1960), *Minotaure* (1933-1939), and *Documents* (1929-1930), but rejected the scope and refinement of those publications. Artists borrowed copies of the journals from the book department of the high-end department store Illum, bartering paintings for issues during the war. They had also bought copies when they were in Paris in the late 1930s.⁴¹ The layout and subject matter of the French journals influenced *Helhesten*'s emphasis on poetry and literature, features on specific artists, and the juxtaposition of "high" art with popular, ethnographic, and ancient cultural forms. However, unlike their French counterparts, *Helhesten* did not contain articles on art movements earlier than the 1920s, but focused on overlooked artifacts from ancient and non-Western cultures.

While both *Cahiers d'Art* and *Minotaure* provided Danish artists with a template for the emphasis on non-Western artifacts, it was *Minotaure*'s juxtaposition of ethnographic and ancient art forms with fine art that had a greater impact. *Minotaure*'s images tended to feature ethnographic objects in use or in natural settings, while contemporary art objects—many of them photographed by Brassai—used dynamic angles and lighting to create a dramatic atmosphere within which the object seemed to become animated whether within the artist's studio or in a natural setting. *Helhesten*'s reproduction of similar subjects almost always came from preexisting photographs or from photographs the artists took of each other's works at exhibitions (fig. 34). Images of ethnographic subjects usually were taken from the National Museum's collection, and therefore presented in a dry, almost scientific manner (fig. 35), while artist's sculptures were photographed as natural extensions of the landscape, or in a straightforward manner with the art object as specimen. *Helhesten* also reused specific images from *Minotaure*,

⁴¹ Robert Dahlmann Olsen, for example, noted buying an issue of *Documents* when he was in Paris in June 1938. Dahlmann Olsen, *Dagbog*, 44-45.

but usually its less dramatic examples. The French publication's photographs of Giacometti's sculptures, for example, were reproduced in *Helhesten*'s profile of the artist. Artists were also able to visit lawyer Carl Kjersmeier's (1889-1961) collection of more than 500 African art objects and use the existing reproductions of those works in *Helhesten*. This collection, which eventually numbered almost 1,500 works, was later donated to the National Museum and informed the Helhesten artists' development of the mask motif; Kjersmeier also contributed to *Helhesten*.

The preference for less jarring reproductions of sculpture in favor of photographs depicting works in more natural settings was extended to images of artists' studios. The photos of Picasso's studio in *Cahiers d'Art*, for example, presented haunting work-cluttered spaces, the unsettling character of which was emphasized by dramatic cropping. In contrast, in one of *Helhesten*'s few studio images, which accompanied a profile on Henry Heerup, the artist is shown sitting happily in his outdoor sculpture garden, surrounded by his works in a way that suggests an organic symbiosis between artist, artwork, and natural environment (fig. 36). These examples highlight that in general, when compared to *Minotaure* or *Cahiers*, images in *Helhesten* played a less prominent and provocative a role in shocking the viewer, so that rather than creating dramatic juxtapositions, they emerged as continuous and organically connected to the subjects of texts in order to coerce subtle responses from the reader. If we consider the ideological ramifications of this, as ideoscapes, the preexisting photos reproduced in *Helhesten* were repurposed to project harmony during wartime, rather than any overt drama or upheaval.

Although it has been overlooked in this context, Georges Bataille's journal *Documents* (1929-1930) did impact *Helhesten*, though with major differences. *Documents* influenced *Helhesten*'s penchant for ethnographic subjects and attack on the dominance of a Greco-Roman

cultural heritage in archeology in particular. Bataille's "bringing down of art" to level it with other objects and the journal's constant themes of archeology, ethnography and fine arts served as models for *Helhesten*.⁴² *Helhesten* also sought to destabilize the cultural politics of the time, but did so precisely by implementing visual corollaries between the ethnographic, archeological, and fine arts to draw out new visual connections and ideas in the reader. Instead of Bataille's more subversive attack on bourgeois values and Western rationalism, however, the Danes explored the ethnographic as a way of re-establishing human connection during the war. Ultimately *Helhesten* engaged in a cultural critique that was analogous to *Documents*' challenge to mainstream Surrealism. Similarly to Bataille, *Helhesten*'s artists did not agree with Breton's monolithic authority, the romantic notion of artistic genius, nor any kind of prescriptive notions of art making. Early on the Danes questioned Surrealism's metaphysical aspects and the limits of automatism, instead proposing spontaneity and adopting an explicitly populist stance that was more attentive to class dynamics.

What is perhaps most surprising is that Surrealism itself is hardly mentioned at all in *Helhesten*. While there is no mistaking the formal influence of automatism on artists' images from the period, in their *Helhesten* texts Danish artists almost never cite the French movement specifically, instead discussing local artists and examples. Even in profiles of artists such as Léger and Giacometti, Surrealism is only mentioned briefly. *Helhesten*'s artists—whether consciously or unconsciously—sensed that Surrealism's creative potential had been exhausted by 1941, and perhaps they understood its political failure in the context of wartime France. Therefore they chose to celebrate an inclusive and open consideration of all art forms as they redoubled their exploration of the creative possibilities of a new kind of art. This was proposed

⁴² See Simon Baker, "Doctrines: The Appearance of Things," in *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*, eds. Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 34-41.

from the outset by Helhesten's manifesto, "Objectivity and Mystery," which stated, "Talented or creative art often cuts across movements and lets itself be influenced by them all."⁴³ Jorn

followed suit in his 1941 *Helhesten* article "Intimate Banalities" by arguing:

We cannot inherit a fixed, immobile view of life and view of art from the older generation. The expressions of art are different in each epoch, just as our experiences are. A new experience creates a new form. We want to learn everything for which we have use from older generations but we will find out for ourselves what we have a use for.⁴⁴

Undoubtedly, Jorn was including Surrealism in his estimate of "older" art. The way that Danish artists chose to move beyond Surrealism to create something wholly new—by appropriating Danish and German sources of the past—was both unexpected and instrumental in their forging of semi-figural gestural abstraction and polemical activism.

Helhesten's mining of Denmark's shared cultural history with Germany was a salient aspect of its project of reformulation. This exploration and annexation of German sources for creative inspiration and socio-political agitation was minimized by artists after the war for political reasons and later overlooked by art historians.⁴⁵ But this does not diminish the effectiveness with which artists drew from German cultural precedents, precisely in order to challenge Nazi racist propaganda and its conception of *Volk*, caricature the idealized Nordic body, defy Hitler's attempts to assert a common Nordic heritage, and critique the National Socialist obsession with historical continuity and order. It was also a means for assailing the Danish government's concessions towards Germany. The journal implicitly and explicitly

⁴³ "Den talentfulde eller skabende kunst gaar ofte paa tværs af alle retninger og lader sig paavirke af dem alle." Egill Jacobsen, "Saglighed og mystik," *Helhesten* 1, no. 1: 21.

⁴⁴ "Vi kan ikke arve et fast, ubevægeligt livsyn og kunstsyn fra den ældre generation. Kunstens udtryk er i hvert tidsrum forskelligt, som vore oplevelser er det. En ny oplevelse skaber en ny form. Vi vil gerne lære alt, hvad vi har brug for fra ældre generationer, men vi skal nok selv finde ud af, hvad vi har brug for." Jorn, "Intime banaliteter," *Helhesten* 1, no. 2 (May 10, 1941): 38.

⁴⁵ From the 1950s onwards, Asger Jorn would champion the work of German Expressionists, which he described as "Nordic Expressionists," especially the work of Emil Nolde. See Karen Kurczynski, "Expressionism," in *Expo Jorn*, 228-29.

celebrated characteristics of the Northern European National Romantic period with its emphasis on *folk* and Nordic mythology; the colorful painterly abstraction and naïve aesthetic forms of German Expressionism and the corresponding focus on Nordic identity, myth, and the spiritual in art; and Berlin Dada's provocative attempts to merge art and life.

To understand this double play with Nordic culture, we must return to the early nineteenth-century Northern European National Romantic period, which encompassed the German Biedermeier and Danish Golden Age styles. These movements emphasized naturalism, universal commonalities, and the leveling of artistic hierarchies, which were informed by Grundtvig's concept of *folkelighed*, and German theologian Johann Gottfried Herder's notion of *Volk*. During the war, as part of a revived nationalism, interest in Grundtvig reinforced a sense of Danishness. Although as a form of passive anti-occupation tactics this would later be criticized by activists as one factor in delaying the rise of active resistance, the popularity of Grundtvig's ideas served to prevent a profound sense of defeat and hopelessness that German and domestic Nazis could have manipulated to their advantage.⁴⁶ In its articles, artist profiles, and reproduced images, *Helhesten* purposefully recalled these once common values shared by Denmark and Germany's separate yet linked cultures to evoke anti-nationalistic, universalizing themes that emphasized the humble, everyday qualities of the *folk*, with no ties to the racial Aryan ideology that the Nazis promoted.

The Northern Romantic era witnessed a flourishing of interest in Nordic mythology, which was similarly rekindled during the occupation through the celebration of distant foundational cultural figures, symbols, and ideas as models for national pride. *Helhesten* also explored Nordic mythology, but in order to promote connection and belonging, questioning what

⁴⁶ See Hong, *Down with the Murderer Hitler! Illegal Communication Strategies*, 24-25 and 42n89.

artists perceived to be superimposed constructs that only encouraged difference and separation.⁴⁷ This was most apparent in the choice of the name for the group and the journal. Asger Jorn had suggested the *helhest*, the iconic three-legged harbinger of death from Nordic mythology and folklore, which Egill Jacobsen recalled, was chosen specifically as a “...quite excellent name to flaunt under the noses of the Nazis.”⁴⁸ The hell-horse is first mentioned in the foundational source of Norse mythology, the Prose Edda, as the horse ridden by Hel, daughter of the god Loki and goddess of the world of the dead.⁴⁹ It has also been linked to Sleipnir, the god Odin’s eight-legged horse who is sometimes ridden to Hel, a place of evil and darkness.⁵⁰ The Old Norse term “hel” is etymologically related to the Germanic “halija,” which refers to someone who hides something.⁵¹ The hell-horse was popularized in the nineteenth century by Scandinavian and Germanic literature, most notably that of Hans Christian Andersen and Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm. In his *Teutonic Mythology*, Jacob Grimm wrote that in times of plague, “Hel rides about on a three-legged horse, destroying men.”⁵² Andersen, for his part, transformed the hell-horse from folklore to fairytale in stories such as “Folks Say,” writing, “They say that in the old days a

⁴⁷ For more on Helhesten’s approach to myth see “Painting as mythmaking,” in Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 41-49.

⁴⁸ Jespersen, *De abstrakte*, 102-03.

⁴⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Prose Edda* [1220], trans. Jesse L. Byock (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 12 and 136.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 49-52.

⁵¹ See “Hell,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=hell>, accessed July 5, 2012.

⁵² Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, 4th ed., vol. 2, trans. James Steven Stallybrass (London: George Bell, 1883), 844.

live horse was buried under most churches and came every night as a ghost, limping on three legs and standing outside each house where one must die.”⁵³

Helhesten’s evocation of an immediately identifiable mythological creature from beloved Scando-Germanic cultural sources was, as an ideoscape, a critique of the Danish establishment and the Danish and German Nazi Parties’ wartime strategy to promote Nordic mythology as a source for nationalism and political propaganda. In the journal’s third issue, caricaturist Robert Storm Petersen’s drawing of a *helhest* illustrated an advertisement for an upcoming series of publications of Danish and Grimm brothers’ fairytales (fig. 37). The cartoon character is hardly a messenger of death to be feared; rather Storm Petersen presents a smiling humanoid creature resembling a gangly teenage boy. *Helhesten*’s fourth issue also featured a poem about the *helhest* in its original nineteenth-century script by Danish national poet Steen Steensen Blicher (1782-1848), best known for his depictions of peasant life in rural Jutland.⁵⁴ The pairing of the *helhest*, often as an overtly satirical creature, with works by beloved German and Scandinavian writers, deliberately took aim at the Nazi aggrandizing of Nordic mythological symbols to promote difference and racial otherness.

Helhesten’s versions of the hell-horse had other connotations, such as the dying horse in Picasso’s *Guernica*. This was most explicitly illustrated with Ejler Bille’s cover for the fourth number of the journal’s second volume in 1943; Bille had seen the painting in Paris in 1937 and again in Copenhagen in 1938 (fig. 38).⁵⁵ The *helhest* also recalled the Blaue Reiter’s St. George and its Danish manifestation, two rearing horses on repeated covers of the modernist journal

⁵³ Hans Christian Andersen, “Folks Say,” in *The Complete Andersen*, trans. Jean Hersholt (London: British Library, 2005), 908.

⁵⁴ Steen Steensen Blicher, “E hælhæjst,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 4 (October 18, 1941): 89.

⁵⁵ For the Danish artists’ responses to *Guernica*, see Shield, “The War Horses”: 12-27.

Klingen (*The Blade*, 1917-1920). *Helhesten*'s versions of the hell-horse always appeared without a rider. This omission upended the traditional correlation of the horse and rider with classical equestrian military statuary and heroic leadership, and allowed for the *helhest* to suggest a greater spectrum of meanings, including chaos, anarchy, and lack of discipline. *Helhesten*'s articulation of the hell-horse thus was both redemptive and transgressive, promoting it as both a ridiculous creature and an agent of transformation that sent a message of untrammled freedom of expression.

In February 1941 Dahlmann Olsen asked the landscape painter Kaj Ejstrup (1902-1956) to contribute a drawing for a hell-horse cover, which appears to have never materialized. Dahlmann Olsen instructed that the image should be “A drawing of a hell-horse, with three legs, head, tail and body, the head can be dispensed with. It heralds death and is therefore *uhygge*lig.”⁵⁶ *Uhyggelig* is the antipode to the word *hyggelig*, a fundamental Danish cultural value with no direct translation. Danes use *hyggelig* to describe a cozy and pleasurable experience that is both socially intimate and occurs in everyday life. The closest translation to *uhygge*lig would be creepy and it is similar to the German *unheimlich*, or uncanny. *Uhyggelig* signifies everything Danes dislike, which suggests that early on *Helhesten*'s editors wanted the hell-horse to convey counter-cultural ideas, such as discomfort, confusion, absurdity, and disquiet.

An examination of several *Helhesten* covers demonstrates that it is impossible to characterize the journal by any one specific style or aesthetic approach. The covers also reveal the group's manifestation of the hell-horse as a symbol of transgression that satirized and sterilized the Nazi threat of death by making fun of it. Henry Heerup's cover for the first issue

⁵⁶ “En tegning af en helhest med tre ben, hoved, hale og krop, hovedet kan undværes. Den varsler død, og er altsaa uhyggelig.” Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Kaj Ejstrup, February 13, 1941, volume 2, *Helhesten* Archive.

set the improvisatory and provocative tone of the journal with his drawing of a canine-like *helhest* (fig. 39). The opposite a quick-witted hunting dog or powerful horse, Heerup's mongrel is an unthinking and happy dunce, an impression exaggerated by numerous sketch lines that depict the body. The makeshift quality of the image challenges the idea of the finished artwork and is at odds with the conventional typeface of the title. Covers ranged from comical storybook characters—Egon Mathiesen's smiling, sitting mare (fig. 40)—to the apocalyptic, such as Storm Petersen's wailing beast, which is recorded by the artist himself in the background (fig. 41). The reference to death was made explicit with *kulturradikale* artist and writer Hans Scherfig's (fig. 42) and designer Axel Salto's covers of skeletal corpse-horses (fig. 43). Other covers, such as Ejler Bille's wailing Guernica-inspired beast, made explicit artists' knowledge of "degenerate" artists such as Picasso. The group's penchant for fantastical settings, moreover, was referenced by Carl-Henning Pedersen cover for the final issue of the journal (fig. 44). Pedersen's giant rearing *helhest* contorts its body as if in pain over an imagined peasant village. The title's standard typeface has been replaced with a jagged script in a manner that visualized Asger Jorn's argument for the importance of handwriting as universal creative expression in his text "The Prophetic Harps" in the same issue.⁵⁷

The artists were well aware of the ideological connotations of the *helhest*. In a long letter that advised Jorn to avoid advertising and maintain a small circulation to avoid censorship, Bille warned Jorn that "There is something anarchistic in the devastation with 'helhesten' that I do not think fits for Marxists."⁵⁸ As art historian Karen Kurczynski has explained, *Helhesten*'s apotropaic hell-horse signified a "defiant persistence of a Danish *folk* whose cultural symbols

⁵⁷ Asger Jorn, "De profetiske harper," *Helhesten* 2, nos. 5-6 (November 11, 1944): 145-54.

⁵⁸ "Der er noget anarkistisk i det altødelæggende hos 'helhesten,' som jeg ikke synes passer for marxiskter." Ejler Bille to Asger Jorn, January 19, 1941, Museum Jorn Archive, Silkeborg.

had suddenly become contested ideological territory.”⁵⁹ Given her focus on Jorn, she has described the hell-horse in terms of that artist’s theory of myth, as a universal symbol that arose “over long periods from non-specific, collective, and non-rational sources, which defies the imposition of ideological systems of control.”⁶⁰ Jorn’s evolving theories about fundamental creative concepts such as myth, which began in the 1930s, took shape and were deeply rooted in his experience of the occupation, and developed in conversations with the other *Helhesten* contributors.

Like the hell-horse, artists’ explored myth as way of questioning, rather than reinforcing, existing identities, and it was a theme that could be found throughout the journal. Painter Niels Lergaard’s (1893-1982) essay, “Myth,” in the journal’s third issue, argued that an active, “creator of myth” was fundamental to meaningful art, which he contrasted with what he described as the passive “believer of myth” of political and artistic dogma. Lergaard, whose work the Danish Nazis targeted as an example of undesirable modern art and who provided the cover image for the first issue of *Helhesten*’s second volume, explicitly linked creative myth to the individual, the everyday, praxis, and fantasy.⁶¹ He wrote:

The believer of myth goes blindly through life in the belief of a virgin birth, while the creator of myth, through fantasy, momentarily experiences life in its free and primitive rhythms, a life rhythm, which is the undertone in all sympathetic people...and therefore the only basis upon which pacifism can be built...The believer of myth clings to dogma and is destroyed by it. Its focus is always on affirmative art, never creative.⁶²

⁵⁹ Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 27.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 89 and 245-46.

⁶¹ See Nielsen, “Hvad er ‘Social Kunst’?”: 119.

⁶² “Den mytetroende gaar blind gennem livet i troet paa en jomfrufødsel, medens den myteskabende, gennem fantasien, momentvis oplever livet i dets frie og primitive rytme, en livsrytme, som er undertonen i alle sympatier menneske...og derfor det eneste grundlag, hvorpaa pacifisme kan opbygges...Den mytetroende klamrer sig til dogmet og gaar til grunde med det. Hans Indstilling bliver altid af bekræftende art, aldrig skabende.” Niels Lergaard, “Myten,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 3 (September 17, 1941): 65.

In an increasingly unpredictable environment of censorship and violence, the Helhesten artists felt an urgent need to question established notions of identity and order as a way of questioning the political power structures that gave rise to them.

This was the opposite of the Nazi use of myth, which theorists Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have shown engendered a specific racial type by which all people had to measure themselves.⁶³ As they have explained, the National Socialists used myth as a political strategy and compensatory mechanism of nationalism for a country that only officially united as a nation at the end of the Franco Prussian War in 1871. National Socialism itself was a myth that consisted of a constructed ideology of communal identity based on blood. Moreover, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's analysis of Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930) and *Hitler's Mein Kampf* (1925) demonstrated that while Rosenberg argued that the myth becomes true through belief in a type, or model for identity, Hitler further located the source of the power of myth in race.⁶⁴ By using race rather than language, the Nazis could exclaim the source of racial purity to be the Aryans, as the bearers of the solar myth, and this allowed them to claim Nordic models as their own. The power of the race of the people, or the *völkisch* power, is through their adhesion to the myth, which for Aryans is the rare and impressive spectacle of the sun. The National Socialist myth, then, was based on an adherence to the idea of the superiority of a selected group based on the constructed idea, rather than any scientific basis, of race.

Helhesten argued for the complete opposite function of myth. Indeed, the artists interrogated the meaning of myth and the profound ambiguity of the word and idea, where venerable associations—myth as founding narrative, myth as high culture—actually obscured its

⁶³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Nazi Myth," trans. Brian Holmes, *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 306.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 307-08.

potentially nefarious uses. Myth was not, after all, historical fact but a story to be used, and one that could be appropriated by both the left and right to circumvent reality and construct binaries of good and evil, or those who “believe” and those who do not. By identifying myth as creative fantasy Helhesten essentially explored its core workings and made clear how myth was being used and abused by totalitarian regimes. Helhesten derided the pretense of myth to control populations by heightening the grotesque and excessive through humor, and thus redeemed its aspects which were also genuinely popular, communal, and apolitically celebratory.

The Helhesten artists’ mining of myth and fantasy was further developed from their knowledge of German Expressionism, which provided artists with a significant nexus of artistic values to appropriate and transform. Within the pages of the journal this meant a conscious celebration of “degenerate” art styles, an exploration of the social and political implications of bright colors, naïve styles, and gestural abstraction within graphic media, and a fascination with non-Western art forms. Artists mined these ideas to theorize in writing about how fantasy could be liberating and grounded in everyday experience, how individual expression could serve a collective humanistic whole, and how expression itself could provide the basis for a “living” art that merged with everyday life.

The journal actively promoted and reproduced work by so-called “degenerate” artists. Profiles of artists such as Giacometti and Marc Chagall (by Bille), Klee (by Pedersen), and Léger (by Mathiesen) were featured, while advertisements for Copenhagen galleries selling art by Edvard Munch, Picasso, and other international modernists could be found in every issue. In addition, the works of Danish artists criticized by the local Nazis such as Immanuel Ibsen, Niels Lergaard, Vilhelm Lundstrøm, and Hans Scherfig were reproduced and written about. The first translations of Franz Kafka in Danish (by Jorn) appeared in *Helhesten*, and several articles

discussed Dada, Constructivism, Cubism, Jazz, and German Expressionist films. Other articles included psychologist Jens Sigsgaard's text on the value of children's art, and psychoanalyst Sigurd Næsgaard's advocacy of the importance of the instinctual in art.

The influence of Expressionism occurred directly and indirectly on Helhesten artists. Artists were well aware of Expressionism via the Der Sturm exhibitions in Denmark in the years leading up to World War One, and their influence on Grønningen artists such as Harald Giersing, Edvard Weie (1879-1943), and Sigurd Swane, whose work they could see at the Statens Museum for Kunst. They could also see important Expressionist works in private collections.⁶⁵ Artists came into contact with Expressionism through time spent at the Bauhaus, where Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen had studied, and they saw reproductions of Expressionist work in the Danish journal *Klingen* and read Kandinsky. In addition to the Russian master, the Danish artists were particularly influenced by the fantastical images of Klee and the lucid, expressive brushwork of Nolde. Moreover, artists' experiences in Germany profoundly impacted their interest in Expressionism. Of his visit to the Degenerate Art Show in Frankfurt in 1937, Carl-Henning Pedersen's later recalled:

That was my first encounter with German Expressionism. I was obviously anti-Nazi and felt myself to be in solidarity with those Hitler wanted to *ausradieren*... The exhibition was of primary importance to me... Although war was still a fantasy, you felt that it was really in preparation there. Undoubtedly that famous exhibition played a deeper role for me than I realized at the time. Up until then, it had been Cubism which attracted me... But, having seen the exhibition, Expressionism began to fascinate me. There were greater possibilities in it for sensitivity. And I wonder how I could have continued to paint if I hadn't seen that exhibition. I have never visited any other exhibition which impressed me so much. Some of the pictures are still living in my memory.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Jorn and other artists visited the exiled German gallery owner Herbert von Garvens Garvensburg, who lived in Denmark from 1936 under the name George Smith. He knew and owned works by Kandinsky, Klee, Ensor, and Picasso, among others. See Troels Andersen, *Asger Jorn: En biografi 1914-53* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1994), 93-96.

⁶⁶ Translated in Jean-Clarence Lambert, *Cobra*, trans. Roberta Bailey (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 52.

Pedersen's statement reflects that the artists identified with Expressionism not only because of its expressive potential and Nordic cultural references, but also because of its condemnation by Hitler. Expressionism, cast out by the Third Reich as a perverted and contaminated indicator of modern artists' depravity, created an "other" to Nazi propaganda that was nonetheless authentically German.

The communication of psychological meaning through the colorful painterly abstraction of Kandinsky, Klee, and Nolde especially nourished Helhesten's development of fantastical subjects as transformative, connective, and grounded in the everyday. Texts in the journal reveal that what Pedersen called the "greater possibilities for sensitivity" of Expressionism encouraged Helhesten artists to think about their own abstract styles as providing moments of interactive imaginative thinking. Bright and messily applied color, rather than conveying a specific message to the viewer or reflecting the emotional state of the artist, opened itself up to varied responses. Egill Jacobsen's manifesto "Objectivity and Mystery," served as both a reckoning with the significance of international modernism as well as an overture towards something entirely new. Jacobsen warned against brandishing qualitative value judgments on different kinds of art and emphasized color as an integral component to interacting with aesthetics:

In order to understand art you do not need to know its history, it is most important to be unprejudiced...but to take up just as sympathetic a position as if it were Rembrandt or Picasso. You should be receptive to this world of color. Don't be offended by anything but try to understand the language of color...⁶⁷

Jacobsen was attempting not only to persuade *Helhesten's* readers to interact with the artwork reproduced in the journal openly and without prejudice, but also to view all forms of

⁶⁷ "For at forstaa kunst behøver man ikke at kende dens historie, vigtigst er det, at man er fordomsfri...men indtager en ligesaa sympatisk stilling, som var det en Rembrandt eller Picasso. Man bør være modtagelige for denne farveverden. Bliv ikke forarget over noget, men prøv at forstaa farvernes sprog..." Jacobsen, "Saglighed og mystik," 21.

culture in the same way. In the essay he explained the social significance of recent avant-garde movements, ultimately concluding that “All creative art, on the strength of its living fantasy, moves on the boundary between the known and the unknown, the conscious and the unconscious, of knowledge and mystery. ...Life should not just be thought and measured, it should also be lived.”⁶⁸

The exploration of fantasy was a simultaneously compensatory and utopian impulse to create idealistic images of communities of fantastical beings on canvas during the occupation. Thus Pedersen’s article on Paul Klee in *Helhesten*’s first issue described the Swiss-German artist and his work as “A fairytale world. Dream...colors, golden and streaming. ...He touched the innermost being of art, and made something living for us...from the first man’s creation in rock caves and the art of different nations, to the modern art of our time.”⁶⁹ The text, which transformed Klee’s very individual art style into a utopian vehicle through which viewers could experience a universal connection, appeared next to translated excerpts from the Swiss artist’s 1920 essay “Creative Confession.”⁷⁰ This essay, which developed from a series of lectures Klee gave at the Bauhaus, explained the theoretical foundations of his art. The excerpts reprinted in *Helhesten* emphasized Klee’s affinity with music, mysticism, and the poetic connections between about art, nature, and dreams. The images accompanying the text underscored these ideas by presenting childlike drawings of fantastical beings as well as his early painting *Full*

⁶⁸ “Al skabende kunst bevæger sig, i kraft af den levende fantasi, paa grænsen af det kendte og det ukendte, det bevidste og ubevidste, af erkendelse og mystic. ...Livet skal ikke blot tænkes og males, det skal leves.” Ibid.: 24.

⁶⁹ “En eventyrverden. Drømme...farver, gyldne og straalende. ...Han rørt eved det inderste af kunstens væsen, og gjort noget levende for os...fra de første menneskers skaben i klippehulerne og kunsten i de forskellige folkeslag, til den moderne kunst i vor tid.” Carl-Henning Pedersen, “Paul Klee,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 1: 2.

⁷⁰ Paul Klee, *Schöpferische Konfession* (Erik Reiss, 1920). The name of the essay is misspelled in *Helhesten*.

Moon, 1919, the luminous, kaleidoscopic composition of which hovers between graphic and painterly abstraction (fig. 45).

Carl-Henning Pedersen went further in his article “Abstract Art or Fantasy Art” in the fourth number of *Helhesten*’s second volume, proposing the word fantasy as the appropriate word to describe Helhesten’s abstraction. He wrote:

You cannot properly apply the word “abstract” to painting. ...What artists who are called “abstract” have in common is that they all work from the world of free fantasy. ...A better overall term for this kind of art is “fantasy art,” such a term would...show the links with primitive and oriental art and with the free exercise of the child. ...So long as the word “abstract” is used, people will think that artists have invented a new artistic language...that has to be learned, when instead “fantasy art” operates upon something central in people, something for which all have precedents which they can understand and react to instinctively.⁷¹

To Helhesten’s artists, fantasy functioned a space of free operation, not escapism.

Pedersen went on to argue for the use of universal symbols and signs to create such a language of fantasy. The universal, of course, was an affront to the ideal of Nazi art, which was defined as strictly Aryan and non-inclusive. The article was not illustrated, but the issue itself included images that reflected Pedersen’s argument. These ranged from painter Richard Mortensen’s wildly chaotic, Kandinsky-inspired lithograph (fig. 46), and artist Kaj Ejstrup’s roughly hewn Expressionist woodcut of two female models (fig. 47), to Henry Heerup’s *The Bombers*, with figures impaled by arrowhead-airplanes (fig. 48). Pedersen himself would frequently employ the same symbols or beings in his works. This is true for the lithograph he provided for the first issue

⁷¹ “Man kan ikke rigtig henføre ordet ‘abstrakt’ til maleriet. ...Det som er fælles for de kunstnere, der kaldes ‘abstrakte,’ er det, at de alle arbejder ud fra den frie fantasiverden. ...En bedre fællesbetegnelse for denne art kunst er ‘fantasikunst,’ et saadant ord vil...vise tilknytningen til den primitive og orientalske kunst og til barnets fri udfoldelse. ...Saalænge man bruger ordet ‘abstrakt’ tror folk, at kunstnerne har opfundet et nyt kunstnerisk sprog...det er noget man skal lære, i stedet for, at ‘fantasikunsten’ jo netop arbejder ud fra noget centralt hos menneskene, noget som alle har betingelser for uden viden at kunne forstaa og føle for.” Carl-Henning Pedersen, “Abstrakt kunst eller fantasikunst,” *Helhesten* 2, no. 4 (December 24, 1943): 92-93.

of *Helhesten*'s second volume, which included his characteristic bird-like creatures, dark sun, and large-eyed figures (fig. 49).

Along with Pedersen, it was Henry Heerup who most consistently repeated universal elemental symbols and signs in his work, such as hearts, stars, and crosses, as well as those rooted in everyday life such as the carpet beater, which he linked stylistically to the intertwined Viking decoration he had seen on the Jelling Stone (fig. 50). In a linocut in number three of *Helhesten*, Heerup combined these easily recognizable forms to suggest a friendly imaginary landscape, not one rooted in “blood and soil” typography (fig. 51). The use of bold primary colors and rudimentary decorative patterning in works such as *The Bombers* was visually similar to children’s doodles (described by Jens Sigsgaard in the fourth issue), ancient Scandinavian petroglyphs (in an article by P. V. Glob in the second issue), and Inuit masks (profiled by Gitz Johansen in the third issue).

In the fourth issue of *Helhesten*'s second volume, Heerup included instructions for creating a *skraldeskulptur* (junk sculpture—another medium with which he experimented), which he interspersed with images of forms he had seen on ancient rock carvings. His 1944 text “All Art Ought to Be Popular,” meanwhile, was even more emphatic in arguing for a truly democratic art rooted in universal symbols: “‘Popular art’ has in all its simplicity the ornament as archetype. . . . For many ornament is an appeal to fantasy and beauty.”⁷² The statement highlights the journal’s leitmotif of interweaving fantastical bestiary and mythical worlds with the everyday, which was possible because the vernacular sources of fantasy were to be found in folktales and myths.

⁷² “‘Folkelig kunst [har] i al sin enkelhed ornament som grundform. . . . For mange er ornamentet en appel til fantasien og skønheden.” Henry Heerup, “Al kunst bør være folkelig,” *Helhesten* 2, nos. 5-6: 111.

Another German influence on Helhesten was Dada, which informed the group's implicitly countercultural and interdisciplinary stance. Given its performative element, the influence of Dada is most readily apparent in Helhesten's 1941 "Thirteen Artists in a Tent" exhibition. But Dada also influenced the artists' writings and corresponding implicit political agitation, experimentation with typeface, and subversive image-to-text relationships of printed media. The content of the journal also emphasized nonsense and absurdity, which they distilled into a very specific Danish type of humor. Although it remains unclear if any of the Helhesten artists read Zurich's *Dada* (1916-1919) or Berlin's *Der Dada* (1919-1923)—although I believe they undoubtedly knew of them by 1941—the consciously unrefined nature of *Helhesten* situates the Danish journal more closely in format to these publications, and their Danish manifestations such as *Kritisk Revy*, than to any Surrealist journal.

Jacobsen attested to the Dada precedent, writing, "Dada broke down empty tradition and bourgeois reason and consistently introduced spontaneous expression."⁷³ While he was in Paris in 1938, Asger Jorn had attended one of the "Tribute to Dada" evenings organized by the Surrealist group Les Réverbères, which included performances of texts written by Tristan Tzara, among others, and was enthusiastic about John Heartfield's anti-Fascist collages in *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*.⁷⁴ In 1944 Jorn included a section about Dada in his essay "Face to Face," stating "Dadaism and Surrealism have liberated artistic creation from the cold, clammy and deadening embrace of aestheticism. ... Art has not just become engaged with life, it is now identical with life itself."⁷⁵ A year later Bille explained that Surrealism had developed from

⁷³ "...dadaismen nedbrød tom tradition og borgerlig fornuft og indførte konsekvent det spontane udtryk." Egill Jacobsen, "Saglighed og mystic," 23-24.

⁷⁴ See Andersen, *Asger Jorn: En biografi*, 36-48.

⁷⁵ Asger Jorn, "Face to Face," 66.

Dada's "negation of culture" and "artistic anarchy" in his book *Picasso, Surrealism, Abstract Art*, citing Tzara, Kurt Schwitters, and Marcel Duchamp as the movement's main figures and illustrating the text with images of works by the latter two artists.⁷⁶ Yet in counter distinction to Dada, *Helhesten* was goal-oriented. By virtue of its genesis and *raison d'être* during the occupation, its Dada-like qualities were not merely anarchic gestures of protest and anti anything related to bourgeois values, but a means of cultural resistance—organized and cohesive, under the pretext of seeming disorganization.

While at first glance the layout of *Helhesten* appears fairly conventional, a closer inspection of the pages of the journal reflects its contributors' delight in the undermining of order and logic with absurdity and randomness in both content and design. This included the conscious incorporation of advertising and mass media with "high" art, and an emphasis on political satire and subversive humor. There was never a consistent layout among issues, and no discernable connection from one contribution to the next within each issue. Articles are interspersed with poetry, different font sizes and styles are used haphazardly, and image size often seems counterintuitive. Two pages of Jorn's article "The Prophetic Harps" in the journal's last joint issue, for example, shows two smaller reproductions of automatic drawings, which face an enlarged Surrealist drawing that is blown up to a greater size than the other two and contains no caption (fig. 52). In addition, different colored paper was used frequently, most likely to set apart one section from another, though there is no discernible reason why one section is highlighted over another, and this does not occur in every issue (fig. 53).

Number three of *Helhesten* included a collective set of artists' statements, many of which had been published before, in typeface that varies in style, direction, size, and spacing (fig. 54).

⁷⁶ Ejler Bille, *Picasso, surrealisme, abstrakte kunst* (Copenhagen: Helios, 1945), 187-91.

The Helhesten Archive at the Danish Royal Library contains the original handwritten page (fig. 55). Ostensibly left up to the printer to replicate in some way according to each artist's original statement, the final typeset differs somewhat from the original. As much as it was a collective reflection of the group, the page also expressed artists' different artistic views within the larger statement about the general importance of art. Different typefaces and capitalization asserted each artist's individual approach, functioning as a kind of signature for each artist. Henry Heerup, for example, usually capitalized all words and wrote about the democratization of art in an emphatic style, while Pedersen tended to write poetically in all lowercase letters, and Jorn played with nonsensical juxtapositions of unlike words and ideas. The experimentation in capitalization styles was also a reaction against the use of all lower case letters in *Linien*, which itself was a Bauhaus-inspired response to conservatism.

Experimental typeface was also used in the joint second and third issues of the second volume with an advertisement for readers to join the Helhesten artists at a *vernissage* party to celebrate the opening of their second exhibition in 1943 (fig. 56). Facing a minimalist rendering of a female nude by Vilhelm Lundstrøm, a nexus of different fonts of various sizes float in three general directions, and mix offers for a cheap lunch with the enticement of listening to jazz, and drinking beer. This diversity causes the reader to spend more time on the words than normal, and provides a textual analogue to the rowdy pleasures being proffered.

It was the advertisements reproduced in the journal that were often the sites of the most radical imagery. Publicity for Oscar Davidsen's Restaurant appeared in almost every issue, with the provocative drawings provided by different Helhesten artists. Number two featured Jorn's clown-like visage, which grins demonically at the viewer (fig. 57).⁷⁷ The messy scribbles that

⁷⁷ Although the artist of the image is not documented in the journal, Dahlmann Olsen's records indicate it is by Jorn. Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Oscar Davidsen, May 8, 1941, volume 2, Helhesten Archive.

surround the floating mask, the scarification and stained teeth of the face, and the irregular, barely legible, haphazard text that surrounds it all belie the advertising of the services of one of Denmark's oldest restaurants. The words, which have nothing to do with a restaurant read, "They know, Oscar Davidsen is powerful," with the address scrawled in the lower right corner between the image and the text. The ad, with its chaotic carnival of quickly scratched lines, seems to mock the smaller and traditionally rendered advertisements on the facing page, which feature an art dealer, art supply store, children's toy store, and teashop.

Most of the graphic works in *Helhesten* were reproduced using linocuts, and a few of the linoleum sheets still exist, such as the one Henry Heerup used for the first cover. Though the cover was based on a sketch in the traditional preparatory method used for a fine art print, the drawing was quickly and only basically rendered on brown scrap paper (fig. 58), with Heerup adding the details only later as he carved into the linoleum. In his request for an image from the landscape painter Karl Bovin (1907-1985) in June 1941, Dahlmann Olsen did not even ask for a preliminary drawing, but instructed the artist to carve the image directly into the linoleum and send it to him within two weeks, suggesting that the editors favored the quickly rendered nature of the medium.⁷⁸

Like Heerup's image, almost all of the journal's covers presented the *helhest* crouching over or pouncing on a traditionally rendered journal title. The hovering of the horse over the name suggests that the beast could pounce on and obscure the text at any moment, and in later covers the title is subsumed into the overall composition in which the nature of the typeface matches the style of the image, rather than existing as a textual referent in a separate register.

⁷⁸ Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Karl Bovin, June 15, 1941, volume 2, Helhesten Archive.

The use of the linocut was both practical and ideological. It linked *Helhesten* to low-cost mass produced and ephemeral publications in general, and resistance publications in particular. Early resistance propaganda made use of the linocut for its cheap cost, availability and easily carved, malleable surface. Historian Nathaniel Hong has documented that the first printed media used to circumvent the state control of information during the Danish occupation actually took the form of leaflets and altered official posters in both Danish and German, which were reproduced using linocuts. One such Danish poster, which promoted the collection of metal for the war effort, was turned into a resistance work by modification through the addition the statement “Don’t give any to the Germans!” (fig. 59). Though the text is pasted across the central register of the composition, it replicates the geometric shapes and simple graphics of the image so that it at first it goes almost unnoticed in a deceptively simple modification of the existing text.

During the first two years of the occupation public buildings, posters, and other symbols of governmental power were more systematically defaced by the promotion of the “V” from June 1941 as an expression of anti-occupation sentiment (fig. 60). In Denmark, the “V” was associated most apparently with “we,” “win,” and Viking, and as V.V.V. stood for “Vi Vil Værne Kongen og Danmark,” or “We Will Protect the King and Denmark.”⁷⁹ The use of graffiti was a public provocation to state messages and a transgression of the power they represented through subversive marking. *Helhesten*’s satirical renderings of the mythological beast caricatured Nazi symbols of power in a similar manner to the altering and vandalizing of pro-collaboration posters. In addition to the *Helhesten* covers, there were other images in the journal that evoked the idea of transgressive marking, such as the photograph of two children scribbling

⁷⁹ See Hong, *Down with the Murderer Hitler! Illegal Communication Strategies*, 15-21.

on a brick school wall used to illustrate “Objectivity and Mystery” (fig. 61). Implied within the image of the free expression of childlike creativity was embedded one of vandalism of official structures, also suggested by the many children’s drawings reproduced in the journal.

Helhesten’s tactics of resistance, though not always blatant, could be explicit. The very first issue advertised Rene de Chambrun’s *I Saw France Fall*. Chambrun was Marshal Pétain’s godson and Pierre Laval’s son-in-law; he helped people to escape France before immigrating to New York. In addition, references to political persecution and the suppression of freedom were peppered throughout the journal, for example, artist Eyvind Olesen’s statement that, “A tombstone is proof, that there is one who is dead. And a picture should be proof that there is one who has survived,” or Gregers Jensen’s poem “On Freedom” in the joint fifth and sixth issue.⁸⁰ Such references to freedom and survival were motivated by the politics of the occupation. Within the context of *Helhesten*’s radical reformulation, they were also framed by and combined with elements drawn from Danish culture in the group’s approach to resistance.

“Smile at the World, and It Will Laugh at You”: *Helhesten* and Danish Culture

As a *kunstnersammenslutning*, *Helhesten* was influenced by the Danish value of *folkelighed* and its implicit insistence on the inherent dignity of the common man and importance of everyday life. *Folkelighed* undoubtedly informed the nature of the group’s creative output as well as artists’ identification of the collective as a crucial aspect of their project. The implications of *folkelighed* thus permeated the creative, critical, and social components of the journal and its production. *Folkelighed* was made manifest by *Helhesten*’s dynamic engagement with plurality,

⁸⁰ “En gravsten er beviset for, at der er en, der er død. Og et billede burde være beviset for, at det er en, der har levet.” Eyvind Olesen, *Helhesten* 1, no. 3: 66. Gregers Jensen, “Om frihed,” *Helhesten* 1, nos. 5-6: (November 18, 1941): 146.

the social aspect of collaborative creative production, and a specifically Danish sense of humor that lauded kitsch. Diversity was expressed through journal articles that espoused openness to stylistic difference, championed the breaking down of hierarchies between high and low art and different types of media, and called for the broadening of the types of sources relevant for contemporary visual culture. The generating of twelve issues of a detailed art journal during the war was an elaborate enterprise that evolved around, and depended on, sociality. Artists collaborated on texts and artworks, while editorial meetings and publication parties created a community to which artists belonged. What is more, aspects of *folkelighed* can be perceived in the Helhesten artists' use of humor, which experimented with debased comedy, satire, and absurdity in texts that celebrate, and themselves embody, kitsch art forms. This is something that has been completely overlooked in the literature, misleadingly suggesting that Jorn was the only innovator in this area. The commitment to diversity, social inclusivity, and kitsch was in fact the basis of the entire group's cultural resistance during the occupation.

Helhesten represented a wide variety of opinions about culture. For the fourth issue, for example, the editors sent out dozens of requests to art world figures asking them to name the best art in Danish private collections. Responses were submitted by a well-known museum director, a private collector, the *kulturradikale* critic and designer Poul Henningsen, a painter, and others. The same issue contained a range of topics dealt with in the journal: a nineteenth-century poem about the hell-horse, an illustrated article on Japanese Kabuki (as "folk" theater), contemporary poems, a profile on Jorn (by Egill Jacobsen), psychologist Jens Sigsgaard's article on children's drawings, and Jorn's translations of Kafka, among others.

Subjects ranged from ancient African ceramics and petroglyphs, fairytales, and Chinese Buddhist sculpture, to tattoo designs and Hollywood films. Archeologist and ethnologist Werner

Jacobsen's (1914-1979) exploration of ancient Siberian bronze sculpture in the first issue of *Helhesten*'s first issue was generously illustrated and emphasized the importance of art to nomadic peoples and questioned the dominance of the Greco-Roman tradition.⁸¹ Carl-Henning Pedersen's article on the recently uncovered medieval chalk frescoes in Danish churches appeared in the journal's last joint issue took a similar approach (fig. 62). Pedersen described the medieval artist's ability to capture the elemental forces of life in his art and suggestively aligned the whitewashing of such images to the suppressive cultural environment at the time: "They were painted over and forgotten for centuries. ...Paradoxically even now in our time there are several of the paintings that are too natural for our clergy to allow them to be seen...after restoration they have been whitewashed over again, and must wait for a time that is freer than our own to be able to show themselves to people again."⁸² Pedersen included a color lithograph that visually responded to the medieval bestiary he discussed. Pedersen's fluid application of bright pastel hues is at odds with the slightly sinister figure and presents a scene of disquiet that plays off the medieval artist's fascination with fear and the grotesque (fig. 63). Artists also studied photos of medieval frescos provided by P. V. Glob in the National Museum's archives. It was these experiences that stimulated Asger Jorn's lifelong fascination with ancient symbols and his later creation, with Glob, of the Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism.

The journal's presentation of undervalued art forms was aligned with a continuous questioning of established hierarchies. Egon Mathiesen's article "What Modern Art Is," for example, sought to undermine canonical cultural traditions by arguing that art could only be

⁸¹ Werner Jacobsen, "Sino-sibiriske broncer i nationalmuseets etnografiske samling," *Helhesten* 1, no. 1: 16-20.

⁸² "Det blev malet over og i aarhundredernes løb glemt. ...Paradoksalt nok er dog endnu i vor tid flere af malerierne for naturlige til at vort præsteskab kan tillade at de ses...de er efter restaureringen kalket over igen og maa vente paa en tid, der er friere end vor, for at kunne vise sig for menneskene." Carl-Henning Pedersen, "Middelalderens kalkmalerier," *Helhesten* 2, nos. 5-6: 102-10.

progressive if it had a democratic foundation.⁸³ Henry Heerup emphasized the unnoticed art forms of everyday life in the journal's last issue in his article "All Art Ought to Be Popular," in which he argued for the destabilization of the distinction between high and low art by relating the simple, expressive forms of "*folkelig kunst*" found in all authentic art, from vaudeville plays and the *commedia dell'arte*, to Denmark's Jelling Stone.⁸⁴ Almost all of Heerup's words (and sometimes within one word) were capitalized in a quasi-historical style reminiscent of nineteenth-century written Danish and German. But Heerup's purposefully free play with words asserted a democratic use of language by capitalizing every word regardless of its grammatical function—and sometimes leaving words lowercase—in a way that was also reminiscent of children's grappling with learning how to master adult spelling and grammar.

Dahlmann Olsen, for his part, contributed the article "Architecture's Psychic Function," in which his treatment of the development of historical architectural forms took aim at the gigantified Neoclassicism then being promoted throughout the Reich. The article was illustrated with photographs of rural Danish cottages and kitsch garden sculpture (fig. 64). He promoted these types of vernacular art forms as the most authentic type of design for meeting the needs of people in everyday life, rather than those that displayed monumentality or traditional notions of beauty.⁸⁵ In another article, "Towers and Tradition," Dahlmann Olsen argued that all great architecture, regardless of time period, culture, or function, stemmed from fundamental forms such as the tower.⁸⁶ He explained the tower as a universally resonant symbol that could be found in anything from Christmas trees and totems to the Eiffel Tower and castles, and it was this

⁸³ Egon Mathiesen, "Hvad moderne kunst er," *Helhesten* 1, no. 3: 82-86.

⁸⁴ Heerup, "Al kunst bør være folkelig," 111-12.

⁸⁵ Robert Dahlmann Olsen, "Arkitekturens psykiske funktion," *Helhesten* 2, no. 1 (October 30, 1942): 16-17.

⁸⁶ Robert Dahlmann Olsen, "Taarne & tradition," *Helhesten* 2, nos. 2-3 (March 10, 1943): 31-32.

crossing of style, time, and function that instilled the typology with significance for people. Dahlmann Olsen's contributions to the journal and his other writings from the time display a sophisticated understanding of contemporary art, architecture, and design, and like the other members of Helhesten, a commitment to quotidian art forms as the keys to creating a true art for the people.

The interest in a variety of ideas about and sources for art extended to media. Most of the Helhesten artists worked in different media their and articles highlighted film, western and non-Western theater, poetry, graphic media, painting, photography and sculpture as equally important art forms. While Jorn experimented with painting on wooden shutters, bathhouses, and barrels during the war, it was Heerup who was the most versatile in terms of media, consistently creating paintings, prints, granite sculptures, and junk assemblages simultaneously. His role as a multifaceted creator regardless of material or medium was reflected in his contributions for the aforementioned page of collective quotes. Indeed, he was the only one who submitted two statements, one for painting, and one for sculpture:

On painting: All colors and shapes have meaning. Fantasy does not make it more beautiful, but just puts it in place—The right one. On sculpture: A human does not resemble granite. Why should granite look like a man? And then on all the too high plinths. A tree has its roots in the earth.⁸⁷

Heerup's satirical and purposefully foolish language underscored his serious plea for an egalitarian approach to art media and materials

The desire to collaborate on the journal was a social mechanism of belonging for a group of Communist artists and cultural figures during the occupation, and it led to other social activities beyond the journal's publication. In fact, several Helhesten contributors had attempted

⁸⁷ "Om maleriet: Alle farver og former har betydning. Fantasien gør dem ikke smukkere, men sætter dem bare paa plads—Den rette. Om skulpturen: Et menneske ligner da ikke granit. Hvorfor skal granit saa ligne et menneske? Og saa de alt for høje sokler. Et træ har sine rødder i jorden." Henry Heerup, "Om maleriet," *Helhesten* 1, no. 3: 66.

collaborate with other artists to produce a journal before the war. In 1938 Bille, Jorn, and Dahlmann Olsen had tried to create a new art magazine when they were in Paris, *Le Serpent Emplumé (The Feathered Serpent)*, which they pitched unsuccessfully to André Breton.

The editorial meetings at P. V. Glob's office in the National Museum were virtual parties, with attendees always bringing their own refreshments.⁸⁸ A celebration was held at a local bar every time a new issue came out, the festive atmosphere of which the journal drew attention to in an advertisement for the bar where they were held (fig. 65). The ability to socialize and discuss art in a policed state was as much a subversive gesture it was a celebratory nod to Denmark's tradition of *hyggelig* sociality. There were also journeys together to see art, such as the trip Pedersen, Heerup, Jacobsen, and Jorn had taken to visit the medieval frescoes in village churches that Pederson then wrote about in the journal.

Helhesten's emphasis on sociality also invested collective art making with a social significance. In 1944 Jorn, Else Alfelt, Bille, Heerup, Pedersen, and Jacobsen, among others, decorated the kindergarten classrooms on the Copenhagen street Hjortøgade (fig. 66). Art historian Karen Kurczynski's apt description of Jorn as a "collective experimenter rather than an individual creator" can also be applied to the other Helhesten artists in projects such as this.⁸⁹ The jointly made murals—which still exist—depict playful walking Christmas trees and wide-eyed birds in pastel colors. They were not commissioned but presented as a gift by the artists who were photographed smiling and socializing together and with their own and others' children (fig. 67). The Hjortøgade project reflected the artists' ambition in creating whole environments

⁸⁸ Dahlmann Olsen, *Danish Abstract Art*, np.

⁸⁹ Kurczynski, "Beyond Expressionism," 53. For a nuanced account of the Hjortøgade murals and several of Jorn's other collective art-making experiments see "Communal Expressions," in Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 65-104.

that could integrate architecture and art with the daily functions of a space, in effect bridging the boundaries between art and life.

Socializing was important to the artists, and their gatherings at times channeled Dada debauchery. In the summer of 1943, Jorn, Bille, Dahlmann Olsen and others lived, worked, and played together on the island of Samsø (fig. 68).⁹⁰ There they dressed up as wild natives, partied, and created collective works such as a stone sculpture jointly carved and painted by sculptor Robert Jacobsen (1912-1993), Bille, and Jorn. Events such as these were significant precursors to Cobra's group experiments such as their collective painting of a house in the Copenhagen suburb of Bregnerød in 1949. The Helhesten artists also joined forces with other exhibition collectives, such as Grønningen, and Høst (Harvest, est. 1932)—the latter organization would be the site for the first group exhibition of the newly formed Cobra in 1948—to contribute to shows that reflected aesthetic diversity.

The other profound way in which *Helhesten* explored collective art making was, simply, with the journal itself. While the continual use of the pronoun “we” throughout the journal was typical enough, all of the artists contributed to the materialization of their ideas and art in print; Jorn and Dahlmann Olsen, for example, often edited and sometimes rewrote other artists' texts. The manifesto article in the *Helhesten*'s first issue, “Objectivity and Mystery,” though signed by Egill Jacobsen, was actually the product of the contributions of several artists.⁹¹ It thus served, like their final group statement “The New Realism,” as a collective written proclamation of the artists' common goals. The individual issues of *Helhesten* functioned as hermetic works of

⁹⁰ See Andersen, *Asger Jorn*, 96.

⁹¹ Per Hovdenakk states Jorn, Pedersen, Bille, Alfelt, and Guðnason all contributed to the text. Per Hovdenakk, *Danish Art*, 143-44.

creative collaboration, and taken as a whole, the journal embodied an organic artwork itself that documents a specific moment of creative collaboration for a wide group of cultural figures.

The visual and textual content of *Helhesten* revealed in a specifically Danish sense of humor that was similar to Dada in its attempts to destabilize established ideas, systems, and beliefs. The Danish sense of humor, with its *folkelige* roots, can best be described as absurd, ironic, sarcastic, and satirical, with the underlying belief that everyone has the basic right to communicate that humor in any context, regardless of the level of tastelessness. It was Danes' *folkelig* humor that stimulated the artists' interest in kitsch art forms. Within the issues of *Helhesten* this meant an emphasis on "low" cultural products such as tattoo designs and Hollywood films, and the reproduction of messy and childlike images as well as the drawings of children. The artists experimented with parody and wordplay in their texts to playfully yet acerbically challenge the established art world, bourgeois values, Nazi cultural ideology, and the Danish government's concessions to Germany.

The journal indulged in comical and witty images and texts in every issue. One of Egill Jacobsen's important mask paintings, for example, was used in as an advertisement for the art collectors and dentists Anna and Kresten Krestensen—most likely because his mask creatures often display prominent teeth (fig. 69). Storm P's aforementioned image of the *helhest* in the third issue evoked a goofy children's bedtime story. Even an article on the films of Danish Dada filmmaker Albert Mertz in the journal's second issue was illustrated by a still featuring the Marx Brothers, who are shown emerging ridiculously from under a circus tent.

The most significant use of ironic humor and provocative comedy was Jorn's "Intimate Banalities" in the journal's second issue. Jorn argued that the banal and kitsch were important source material for art and vehicles for greater human understanding by using semi-ridiculous,

folkelige examples. He illustrated the text with reproductions of tattoo designs from the seedy parlors of the Copenhagen harbor Nyhavn (fig. 70). Jorn also included images of Danish *trommesalsbilleder*, or “sofa” or kitsch paintings, of traditional Danish fishermen, and recounted a Hans Christian Andersen-like fairytale about creative suppression. Jorn chose examples that mixed light-hearted entertainment with darker undertones such as the sex and violence suggested by common tattoos, the saccharine quaintness of boating scenes that play off the daily threat of danger for Danish seamen, and the moral repercussions of the extinguishing of the creative freedom of entire communities embedded within a fictional folktale.

Jorn’s deceptively whimsical humor was always laced with a scathing critique of the world around him. His contribution for the aforementioned collective quotes page thus read, “Idleness is the root of all art. Smile at the world, and it will laugh at you. If one doesn’t go to extremes, there is no reason to go. One can easily have fantasy, even if one has a sense of reality.”⁹² On a page about the nature of good art, Jorn deliberately started with but then deemphasized the subject, instead using it as the springboard for a larger criticism of societal complacency and hypocrisy using a provocative and purposefully nonsensical style.

It was probably with the assistance of Jorn, who authored several pieces in the journal under different pseudonyms or anonymously, that Henry Heerup contributed “A Sad Announcement,” which was a spoof on the outdated traditions of the Danish art establishment in the form of a satirical death notice for the fictional painter Benjamin Beauty.⁹³ It stated:

⁹² “Lediggang er roden til al kunst. Smil til verden, og den vil grine ad dig. Gaar man ikke til yderlighederne, er der ingen grund til at gaa. Man kan godt have fantasi, selv om man har realitetssans.” Asger Jorn, “Lediggang er roden,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 3: 66.

⁹³ Friend of the artists and later SI member Jens Jørgen Thorsen has stated that it was Heerup who wrote the entry. See Jens Jørgen Thorsen, *Modernisme i dansk kunst, specielt efter 1940* (Copenhagen: Thaning og Appel, 1965), 68. I want to thank Anni Lave Nielsen, Director of the Heerup Museum, Rødovre, for drawing my attention to this. I believe that Jorn either edited or worked with Heerup on this text. Jorn’s manuscript folder in the Helhesten Archive contains some, but not all, of the pieces he authored. While “A Sad Announcement” is not there, he wrote all of the

Only 86 years old. With him we have lost one of our most moral and national twilight painters. He already arrived at the academy at seven years old with erstwhile Prof. Can. He made quick progress, then three years later he won the academy's major copper medal. This was followed by a trip abroad. Benjamin Beauty chose as his destination the beautiful, the major, the distant, distant Bornholm, the Baltic's mother and father of pearl. In his short career, however, he has been able to set a stake in Danish art. Who does not remember the adorable compositions with smoked herring. One could actually smell them. Who does not remember the sublime portrait of Mrs. Painter Pip Beauty. ...Or this adorable little picture: "Xanthippe breastfeeding baby Herod on New Year's Day." We remember the scintillating black child. The voluptuous Xanthippes' bosom and the beef-sauce-brown background. This picture was immediately purchased by the "Soda Foundation" for just 80,000 kroner. Not much for such a sterling artwork."⁹⁴

The entry was signed "Dane Fæ." *Fæ* is an Old Danish word that means fool, so that the signature reads "Foolish Dane." But as one word, *danefæ* means treasure trove, and is the label used for any notable archeological artifact that must be registered with the Danish authorities when found. The play with old and new words and traditions from high and low sources emphasized the satirical tone of the fictional obituary, which is filled with very Danish references such as herring, brown sauce, the provincial island of Bornholm, as well as those of "high" culture such as Ancient Greece and the Royal Academy. One senses that the sheer pleasure Heerup had in mocking centuries-old established traditions was only matched by his advocacy of those that had been forgotten. The stylistic and etymological experimentation

other entries listed in the "Notes" section of this issue, and the text is characteristic of his other writing at the time. See Jorn folder, volume 3, Helhesten Archive.

⁹⁴ "Kun 86 aar gammel. Med ham har vi mistet en af vore sædeligste og mest nationale tusmørke malere. Syv aar gammel kom han allerede paa akademiet hos saværende Prof. Kan. Han gjorde hurtigen fremgang, aaa han tre aar efter vandt akademiets store kobbermedajle. Med denne fulgte en udenlandsrejse. Benajmin Skønhede valgte som sit rejsemaal det skønne, det store, det fjerne, fjerne Bornholm Østersøens perlemor og perlefar. I sin korte løbetid har han dog naaet at sætte tøjrpæle i dansk kunst. Hvem husker ikke de henrivende opstillinger med røget sild. Man kunde ligefrem lugte dem. Hvem husker ikke det sublime paartræt af Fru Kunstmaler Pip Skønhed. ...Eller det henrivende lille billede: 'Xantippe ammer Herodes barn nyaarsmorgen.' Vi husker det tindrende sorte barn. Den yppige Xantippes skød og den bøfsovsbrune baggrund. Dette billede blev da osse straks købt af 'Sodavandsfondet' for smaa 80,000 Kr. Ikke meget for saa gedigent et kunstværk." Henry Heerup, "En sørgelig meddelelse," *Helhesten* 1, no. 3: inside back cover.

extended to Heerup's disregard for the proper usage of capitalization, grammar, and punctuation, just as the Marx-like portrait appears to be missing a nose and mouth.

In his cultivated role as the naïve Danish artist-*nisse*, or elf, Heerup self-consciously used humor and whimsy to define not only his writing about art, but also his life. "A Sad Announcement" is characteristic of Heerup's purposefully playful writing style, with which he also promoted openness to new forms of expression. His essay "All Art Should be Popular," in *Helhesten*'s final joint issue was a final clarion call for a truly *folkelig* art that all people could create, experience, and value. The entry can also be seen as a textual referent to his cover for *Helhesten*'s first number, in its frisky use of the written word, and nonsystematic capitalization and grammar:

Much "popular art" is homemade. It is not intended to be what we generally call art, but just ornamental...with the hand of nature in all degrees. But from ancient jars to [Danish silent film director] Ole Olsen's treasures it is a bit of a jump. It doesn't look as if he has had the sense for the singular and simple. Maybe it reminded him too strongly of his own miserable and poor childhood. The "naked" form for example undecorated is unwelcome. It has the antipathy of emptiness...⁹⁵

Heerup's satirical mixing of everyday Danish culture and grander ideological concepts allowed him to elaborate on the importance of an understanding of the universal foundations of art, and is characteristic of how Danish artists reformulated *folkelig* humor into a consciously naïve style that elevated personal agency into a form of occupation resistance.

"A Sad Announcement" was placed next to Jorn's "Hip, Hip, Kongens Nytorv," which was framed by a serial graphic of a racehorse. The entry, which sits under his criticism of contemporary Danish art critics, recounted a fictional attack on "high" art in the form of an

⁹⁵ "Megen 'folkelig kunst' er hjemmeArbejde. Er ikke tænkt som det vi i almindelighed kalder kunst, men bare som pryd...med haandens natur i alle grader. Men fra oltidskrukkenog til Ole Olsens Kostbarheder er et bitte spring. Derser ikke ud som han har haft sansen for det enkle og simple. Maaske har det mindet ham for stærkt om hans egen usle og fattige barndom. Den 'nøgne' form d.v.s. udekorerede er ikke velset. den har tomhedens antipati..." Heerup, "Al kunst bør være folkelig," 111.

equestrian statue in Kongens Nytorv (King's New Square) in the heart of Copenhagen, which was also the location of the hotel where high ranking Nazis lived during the occupation. He wrote:

It has been decided that art in Denmark must be raised, and the horse in Kongens Nytorv has begun to be raised. It had sunk a little into the pastures, the horse. [Conservative Danish art historian Vilhelm] Wanscher is strongly protesting against the commenced raising, as it will disrupt centuries-old perspectives. There should, however, be the possibility of a compromise. About its design much can be guessed. The initiative is at least good.⁹⁶

Jorn consciously chose the *helhest*'s more regal cousin, the equestrian monument, to playfully parody what the established art world chose to value as important, in one of Denmark's most historic—but also highly contested with its newly installed German inhabitants—public spaces.

Nathaniel Hong has explained that Danes often used humor, as a tactic that was fleeting and often initially confusing to Germans, to voice their resistance and animosity towards Germany. Small pranks and cleverly implicit rebellious actions such as wearing RAF-colored beanie hats knitted in the design of a target, and mocking Danish Nazis with subtle word play, gave Danes a momentary sense of relief and power during the occupation. Subversive word play was so popular it often could be found in forms other than written documents. Thus the doors of one butcher's van read "Salted down herring with sausages, salad, liverwurst. Kongensgade 205."⁹⁷ However, when only the left door was visible, it stated, "Down with the SA [Storm Troopers]. Long live the king." Such tongue-in-cheek and mischievous use of words allowed Danes to be able to claim that any underlying political critique was a harmless coincidence in the

⁹⁶ "Man har besluttet at kunsten i Danmark skal hæves, og er begyndt med at hæve hesten paa Kongens Nytorv. Den var sunket lidt i Koderne, hesten. Wanscher har nedlagt skarp protest imod den paabegyndte hævelse, da det vil bringe uorden i de aarhundredgamle fastlagte perspektiver. Der skulde dog stadig være mulighed for et kompromis. Om dettes udformning kan gisnes meget. Initiativet er i hvert fald godt." Asger Jorn, "Hyp, hyp, Kongens Nytorv," *Helhesten* 1, no. 3: inside back cover.

⁹⁷ Hong, *Occupied*, 114-15.

same way that the Helhesten artists could easily explain that their texts were only about art if they were ever threatened by the Nazis.

As a collective creative work, *Helhesten* provides the literal and conceptual framework with which to understand Danish artists' ways of sensing and representing the world during the occupation. The journal bears witness to the group's radical reformulation of earlier sources and styles into a defiant attitude towards hegemonic government, conservative culture, and tactics of military control. Indeed, *Helhesten's* contents created new avenues for the languages of high and low art to interact, which questioned the meaning of power itself. Artists' engagement with humor and interest in community and openness would also shape their approach to painting, sculpture, and exhibition practice in ways that were wholly new to Danish culture.

Experimental art in Denmark has gradually acquired a special character. ... We call our form of work *the spontaneous method of painterly expression*. ... Our art is a new realism, which unlike Renaissance painting, is not based on a structural idea, but on the material's natural design possibilities and free personal expression.¹

“The New Realism,” 1945

CHAPTER 3

The New Realism

Beginning in the late 1930s, the Helhesten artists had explicitly identified their development of semi-abstract, gestural, and naïve styles with formal innovation, creative freedom, and social engagement. With the occupation, their call for the social and political relevance of art intensified exponentially. In their work, the artists experimented with the aesthetic principles of German Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism, as well as that of the Danish painting tradition. Automatism stimulated spontaneous approaches to art making and a reckoning with the idea of creative release, through which Danish artists inverted Surrealist interiority into an emphasis on humanistic openness. Though artists tried to minimize the connection just after the war, German Expressionism influenced Helhesten's interest in “primitive” subjects, Nordic identity, myth, and the spiritual in art, as well as the use of heavily applied, bright color. These influences were joined by the artists' interest in landscape and daily life subjects, which they inherited from Danish modernism.

Ultimately, however, Helhesten's artists became acutely critical of Danish modernism, Expressionism, Dada, and Surrealism as they attempted to develop their own artistic language,

¹ “Den eksperimenterende kunst i Danmark har efterhaanden faaet en særlig karakter. ... Vi kan kalde vor arbejdsform *den spontane metode til malerisk udfoldelse*. ... Vor kunst er en ny realism, der ikke som i renaissancemaleriet er baseret paa en idestruktur, men paa materialets naturlige udformningmuligheder, og den fri menneskelige udfoelse.” The text was signed by Else Alfelt, Ejler Bille, Kujahn Blask, Henry Heerup, Egill Jacobsen, Robert Jacobsen, Johannes Jensen, Asger Jorn, Tage Møllerup, Richard Mortensen, Erik Orvad, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Viggo Rohde, and Erik Thommesen. “Den ny realisme,” *Høst*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: 1945), np.

and these earlier stylistic modes were distilled into something very different. Rather than sharing one specific style, the Helhesten artists promoted a set of cultural strategies through images that focused on semi-figural fantastical scenes of imagined creatures and worlds, and universal symbols and signs. These evoked ideas that were simultaneously compensatory, utopian, and critical. As a site of interaction between artist and viewer, and individual and the collective, the artwork itself, they maintained, became a junction or stimulatory prompt for the viewer to think and act anew in society. Helhesten's fostering of an art that the artists described as spontaneous, living, creative, and fantastical, was for them a "new realism" for a new society, the title that they gave their final collective manifesto in 1945.

Although "The New Realism" is always mentioned in the literature on Helhesten, the text itself does not provide much explanation as to what, as an aesthetic, this new realism actually was. The essay is more of an overview of what the Helhesten artists valued in earlier European styles and a call for international collaboration, rather than any in-depth consideration of the group's aesthetic methodology. To fully understand Helhesten's formulation of their new realism one must therefore look to artists' other writings of the period. In addition to Asger Jorn's "Intimate Banalities," which is discussed in chapter 4 in connection with the Tent exhibition, the key texts which delineate the new realism in *Helhesten* include the artists' profiles on one another, Egill Jacobsen's "Objectivity and Mystery," Ejler Bille's "On the Contemporary Basis for Creative Art," and Egon Mathiesen's "What Modern Art Is." In addition, Mathiesen's book *The Path of Painting* (1946) and Bille's essay "The Innovative," which appeared alongside "The New Realism" in the 1945 Høst exhibition catalogue, provide revealing insight into how the artists' developed their aesthetic.²

² Even though the artists cited Ejler Bille's book *Picasso, Surrealisme, Abstrakt Kunst* (Copenhagen: Helios, 1945) in "The New Realism" as explaining their approach, the book is included only briefly here because, like "The New

Just as the utopian, and at times romantic, rhetoric of these texts has led to a lack of any sustained critical analysis of the innovative nature of their content, the childlike forms and expressive, bright colors of the artists' images has obscured their seriousness and originality. Helhesten's images and sculptures in fact reflect a dual experimentation with formalism and socio-political critique. Though they created in various media, the Helhesten artists invested painting with the potential to generate a personal transformation in the viewer through creative reflection, which generated the potential for the individual to exist anew in the world, and in turn, question the societal norms around them. That Danish artists did not view painting as an outmoded medium was due to the fact that its relevance was never debated or questioned in Denmark before the war, and in the Danish tradition, artists were comfortable with enacting reform from within existing frameworks without worrying that this would detract from their avant-garde identity. Indeed, as art historian Karen Kurczynski has demonstrated, Helhesten's radicalizing of painting *was* an avant-garde critique, because it negated "the institutional artistic notions of unity of composition, finish, skill, the reified art object, and the passive viewing subject."³ Helhesten mobilized painting to bring about an active viewing experience that engendered creative and social freedom in the artist and the viewer.

Central to Helhesten's development of the new realism were four essential ideas that infused creative experimentation with social implications: to release, relate, subvert, and ultimately, recreate. The playful exploration of spontaneity emancipated creativity from intellectual thought as well as providing liberation from societal conditioning. This release thus

Realism," it was actually more of an elucidation of preexisting art movements than a theorization of the new realism itself.

³ Karen Kurczynski, "Beyond Expressionism: Asger Jorn and the European Avant-Garde, 1941-1961," (PhD diss., New York University, 2005), 110-12.

facilitated art's ability to relate to viewers across time, place, and ideology. Such lack of pretension and ease of accessibility encouraged social belonging. The desire to connect to others at a fundamental level stimulated artists' development of the motif of the mask in painting and organic and humanistic associations in sculpture. At the same time, the artists explored more subversive strategies through the gesture as transgressive mark, and the exploitation of humor and grimly comic themes, both of which often remained undetected behind the colorful imagery. The mark also physically indicated the presence of the artist, as an individual actively and freely creating during political occupation. The subversion of existing ideas and hegemonic systems opened up the possibility to create new ideas and concepts that probed fantasy and freedom. This exploration occurred through the animation of the pictorial ground with thick paint and the conjuring of fantastical worlds that encouraged ideas of openness, social agency, and community. These aspects of Helhesten's new realism coalesced to produce an original, experimental, and "living" aesthetic, the social ramifications of which were as important to the artists as its creative potential.

**Spontaneous Release:
"Our Art Is Free Personal Expression"**

Already in 1940 in their article "Art against Reaction," Jorn and Egill Jacobsen positioned Surrealism as something analogous to but also distinct from, their emerging style, stating that the mission of that year's Autumn Exhibition's was "to support the young and experimental art, whether its form is naturalistic, abstract, Surrealist, or later emerging forms of

expression.”⁴ By 1945, then, the Helhesten artists were explicitly historicizing Surrealism. They declared in “The New Realism” that automatism had:

...exploded the basis for the aesthetic view of artistic creation. Based on the thoughts of Freud, this demonstrated that the life of the unconscious instinct is the most fundamental power for an artistic creation. The question must then be: how does one free their mind in the most effective way for artistic creation?⁵

Their answer was spontaneity. Although of course spontaneity was always mediated, the artists described it as an instinctual and ceaseless creative resource that was achievable through an unmediated exploration of chance, fantasy, and the intrinsic physical properties of materials. Building on Surrealist aesthetics, they sought to make them less elite, less programmatically driven, and more available to the general public under the rubric of liberating, unselfconscious play.

The issues of *Helhesten* are filled with artworks that reflect the Danish artists’ exploration of automatism as a creative release, rather than a vehicle of Freudian analysis. At the same time, the imagery displays a steadfast preoccupation with fantastical motifs, and semi-figuration as catalysts for engaging the imagination of the viewer with archetypal motifs. The Helhesten artists’ ideas are resonant with Carl Jung’s theories of the collective unconscious and its attendant universal archetypes. However, there is no evidence that they were aware of Jung’s ideas during the war. Several of the Helhesten artists such as Egill Jacobsen and Asger Jorn did undergo psychoanalysis with Sigurd Næsgaard, a Freudian analyst who introduced psychoanalysis to Denmark and who had attended lectures by Jung in his youth; he also

⁴ “At støtte den unge og experimentende Kunst, hvad enten dens Form er naturalistisk, abstrakt, surrealistisk, eller senere fremkommende Udtryksformer.” Egill Jacobsen and Asger Jorn, “Kunst contra reaktionen,” *Arbejderbladet* (December 15, 1940): 2.

⁵ “...sprængt grundlaget for den æstetiske opfattelse af den kunstneriske skæbn. Paa basis af Freud paaviste den, at det ubevidste driftsliv er den fundamentale kraft i den kunstneriske production. Spørgsmaalet maatte da blive: hvordan frigør man sit sind paa den mest effektive maade i en kunstnerisk skaben?” “Den ny realisme.”

contributed to *Helhesten*. But psychoanalysis never resonated with the Danish artists in the same way as their American counterparts, and the Danes never saw it as a means for creative experimentation. Rather, the artists developed their ideas about universal symbols and a common humanistic experience of the world from Bjerke Petersen's *Symbols in Abstract Art*, and their interest in ancient artifacts, folk art, and fairytales, which was partially developed from the magical beings of Surrealists such as Joan Miró and the phantasmagoric subjects of Emil Nolde. Journal texts, meanwhile, bear out artists' love-hate relationship with Surrealism as the major stimulus for their approach to making art, while also betraying a strong desire to break away from what they saw as an increasingly doctrinaire method and limited approach to truly unhindered creativity. To be sure, the creative release that the artists often cite in their texts was as much about emancipation from the dominance of Surrealism as it was an exploration of spontaneity.

Ejler Bille was the major conduit for the elaboration of automatism for the other *Helhesten* artists. His drawing in the first issue of *Helhesten* presents a spherical wandering line that forms a double-eyed crouching being (fig. 71). The creature is penetrated by a spike resembling the armature of a military helmet or shield, which displays a nondenominational geometric insignia. The image is similar to a 1934 drawing, entitled *Man and Woman*, by Richard Mortensen that appeared in *Linien*'s third issue (fig. 72). If Mortensen's title is any indication, then the spike in both images could indicate sexual penetration, though the more overt erotic aspects of Mortensen's image, with its pubic hair and crevices, are absent in Bille's composition. Although the details are sparse, Bille nonetheless articulates one or more seeing creatures, as well as suggesting objects from actual life. In the first issue of *Helhesten*'s second

volume, Bille defined Surrealism as another type of realism, even proposing the label the artists would later use to describe their approach:

Attempts have been made to provide a realistic view against the idealistic definition of the word “Surrealism.”...In the word *surrealism* lays a reaction against the belief that it is something abstract. Surrealism recognizes its descent from Romanticism, in which it sees “the release of dreams,” which incidentally is also what the Cubists did. But at the same time one perceives it as realism. The word “new realism” has been suggested.⁶

Bille’s statement reflects the artists’ interest in the creation of another reality, one that was individually subjective but also available to anyone; such a new reality could be released by spontaneity and related through the resulting recognizable image. This was a kind of collective imagery known to western cultures since childhood with particular reference to Nordic bestiaries and mythologies. This idea nourished the artists’ transition to a more expressive and whimsical experimentation with automatism. A lithograph by Bille in *Helhesten*’s last issue demonstrates this shift when compared to the earlier image (fig. 73). The scene is playful and humorous, filled with eyes, flowers, and a sun. These shapes interact with stripes and triangles to create what could be one or several creatures. Forms are organic and rounded, and waver between simple signs everyone knows, such as flowers or clouds, evoking a child’s rendering of a springtime landscape, and the nonrepresentational forms of another universe. The marks made with the lithographic crayon are heavy and thick, imprecise, and uneven, underscoring the presence of the stroke as much as the scene it describes.

Releasing fantastical associations derived from everyday sources—just as spontaneity could unleash a freer expression of creativity—expedited the departure from automatism.

⁶ “Man har forsøgt at stille en realistisk opfattelse op mod den idealistiske i definitionen af ordet ‘surrealisme.’...I ordet *surrealism* ligger en reaction mod troen paa noget abstrakt. Surrealisme: anerkender sin afstamning fra romantikken, hvori den ser ‘drømmens frigørelse,’ hvad iøvrigt ogsaa kubisterne gjorde. Men samtidigt opfatter man den som realisme. Man havde foreslaaet ordet ‘nyrealisme.’” Ejler Bille, “Om nutidens grundlag for en skabende kunst,” *Helhesten* 2, no. 1 (October 30, 1942): 12.

Visually this was reflected in the predilection for populating scenes with eyes, double faces, and the pairing of abstract shapes with the easily recognizable symbols of daily life such as hearts or houses. Carl-Henning Pedersen's illustration advertising Oscar Davidsen's café in *Helhesten*'s fourth issue exploited automatism for marketing purposes, wedding the "high" art of abstraction to commodity (fig. 74). Pedersen's humorous, sun-eyed figure happily eats a striped egg, which replicates the shape of the head and is rendered in the same style as the torso, amidst childlike writing that encourages readers to "eat themselves happy". The character's right eye also serves as an eye for a dragon-like creature in profile facing to the left side of the image, the lines of which both formulate and dissolve the more easily readable smiling head of the larger figure.

A mask by Jorn reproduced in the first issue of *Helhesten*'s second volume displayed the group's proclivity for formal and conceptual doubling, here in an automatist-inspired mode that emphasized gestural distortion (fig. 75). The mask consists of two larger and several smaller eyes that stare out at the viewer and create a female face in the lower right quadrant of the figure, which is about to be eaten by an open-mouthed snake. A central "X" growing from the largest eyes divides the mask into two halves, creating mirrored profiles that face one another. The hastily added, artless scribbles suggest the carefree markings of children and graffiti, as well as chaotic movement encompassing the mask. Pleasure results from the recognition factor that unfolds with the random, then controlled, doodling—both on the part of the creator and the viewer.

Eyes dominate many of Jorn's images of the period and reflect an iconography of seeing and the gaze, and empathetic projection that also ensured a direct address to the viewer. *Tearful Eyes* (1940, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen), which was reproduced with Egill Jacobsen's profile on Jorn in *Helhesten*'s fourth number, depicts a crying female with huge sun-

like eyes. The motif is related to one of the several book projects Jorn undertook during the period, *The Jade Flute* (1940-1943), where he experimented with uniting image and text into a visual whole (fig. 76). The book contained Jorn's Danish translations of Chinese poems, which he had read in French. The focus is on the luminous yet vacuous eyes which bore straight ahead from underneath large, sunray lashes. The Surrealist lines that create the girl's face become a starting point of the surrounding rough patches of non-descriptive and overlapping color.

Jorn later wrote about his probing of automatism, which he undertook while struggling to disengage himself from the "strict discipline" he learned while studying with Léger. Jorn also emphasized the influence of Ejler Bille on his work in his description of the genesis of his painting *The Blue Picture* (1940, oil on canvas, private collection):

The picture is not composed according to a principle. All the little forms are heaped across the picture. The composition came by itself. I just began to paint from the edge, putting down one shape after another until the whole picture was filled. It was Bille, I believe, who started this over here. I was tremendously surprised that one could make a picture in this way, by going from one form to the next and getting along without paying attention to the picture as a unified whole... It was derived from my immediate impression of Danish art at the time, not really Kandinsky, although his pictures were at the back of my mind, but rather Bille and Richard Mortensen and the others. But I chose the colors to express directly what I had in mind, but the French school also influenced my choice of colors. I don't really feel that I'm a colorist, unlike Egill Jacobsen. Of course it's all where one places the emphasis.⁷

Jorn's emphasis on the unexpected emergence of a composition is strikingly similar to Miró's recounting of the genesis of his painting *The Birth of the World* of 1925 (Museum of Modern

⁷ "Der er ikke noget kompositionsprincip i billedet. Alle de smaa former ligger saadan hobet ned gennem billedet. Kompositionen er kommet af sig selv. Jeg har simpelthen malet løs fra det ene hjørne. Jeg lagde en form til og en form til og saadan videre, indtil hele billedet var fyldt. Det var vist noget Bille begyndte med herhjemme. Det forbavsede mig kolossalt, at man saadan kunde gaa gennem billedet fra form til form og faktisk komme igennem uden at tage hensyn til, at billedet er en helhed... Det er lavet under umiddelbart indtryk af den tids danske kunst, ikke egentlig af Kandinsky, selvom hans billeder jo laa mig bag i nakken, men mere fra Bille altsaa og Richard Mortensen og de andre. Men farverne valgte jeg jo, saa de direkte udtrykte noget i mit sind, men ogsaa den franske skole har paavirket mit farvelag. Men egentlig føler jeg mig ikke som kolorist, saadan som Egill Jacobsen. Det er jo forskelligt, hvor man lægger hovedvægten." Asger Jorn, "Asger Jorn om sig selv," *Kunst* 1, no. 1 (September 1953): 9.

Art, New York). The Spanish artist wrote, “Rather than setting out to paint something I began painting and as I paint the picture begins to assert itself, or suggest itself under my brush. ...The first stage is free, unconscious.”⁸

The Blue Picture was a compendium to Jorn’s *Fantasy Fairground*, which appeared in Egill Jacobsen’s profile of Jorn in *Helhesten*’s fourth issue in 1941 (fig. 77, fig. 78). Both paintings demonstrate Jorn’s description of allowing of forms to emerge and be released onto the canvas spontaneously as they appeared to him was another iteration of the guided automatism of Miró. The colorful shapes, some with faces, are connected by an elegant flowing line that both outlines and penetrates biomorphic creatures depending on how one views them within the crowded floating matrix.

Jorn explained the need build from what he saw as automatism’s constraints in his 1949 article “Address to the Penguins,” stating:

Breton’s Surrealists want to externalize. What is it that they want to externalize? *Pure* thought. That is, the only metaphysical world, *reflection*. But from a materialist point of view thought is a *reflection of matter*—as in a mirror. The metaphysical world is not able to supersede the material world which produces it. One has to think of some *thing*. But for thought to be dialectical, its object, its “thing,” must cease to be attached to everyday life. ...Breton’s Surrealism was more concerned with the way in which thought functions rather than its function, but they started out on an idealistic basis. But can we extract nothing from Breton’s definition of automatism? Our experiments seek to allow thought to express itself spontaneously without the control exercised by reason. By means of this irrational spontaneity we reach the vital source of life. ...But in contrast to Breton we believe that behind the false ethical and aesthetic, and even *metaphysical* conceptions which do not correspond to the vital human interests, we find true morality and true *materialist* aesthetics. The one is our instinctive *needs*, the other an expression of our sensorial *desires*. It is precisely in order to liberate true morality and true aesthetics that we make use of automatism.⁹

⁸ William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 68.

⁹ Asger Jorn, “Discours aux pingouins,” *Cobra* 1, no. 1 (1949): 8. Translated in Per Hovdenakk, *Danish Art 1930-50* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1999), 184-85.

The statement highlighted that the Helhesten artists did not necessarily view automatism's limitations as creative ones. Rather they adopted a devotion to spontaneous creative expression as a way of engaging social interests, which for them, Breton's automatism was incapable of taking into account. The Helhesten artists were uninterested in theorizing an art that lived only in the individual unconscious or closed circle of artists and writers, but to open up possibilities in the viewer for more authentic ways to relate to life as it was lived.

This was additionally explored through an open experimentation with kitsch and the detritus of everyday life as the source material for art, as well as the inclusion of everyday items in artists' compositions. The artists' also often allowed the physical nature of the support, such as canvas, stone, wood, or found object, to assert its own material presence by leaving parts unpainted or sculpted. Like Miró's purposefully exposed canvases of the 1930s, as mentioned earlier, the Danish artists such as Ejler Bille also explored the various parts of the artwork, reversing the relationship of paint to canvas, to activate the surface in surprising ways (fig. 118). For the Danes this was also to remind viewers that the artwork before them had originally existed as a blank canvas or barrel, or piece of wood or block of stone, signaling notions of the everyday and natural world that played off of the fantastical associations (fig. 79).

As with Miró initial method for *The Birth of the World*, where he poured and flung paint onto the canvas, Jorn also experimented with chance. When he was in Paris in 1937, he dropped paint onto paper to create accidental compositions. He did this from sculptor Sonja Ferlov's studio balcony; the building also housed Giacometti's studio, where Jorn also experimented with making spray paintings (fig. 80). Egill Jacobsen's profile on Jorn in *Helhesten* described Jorn's works as playfully created sites where new worlds existed. Jacobsen wrote, "In his painting he is

alive, gathering up all the apparently trivial things in series of quite small canvases.”¹⁰ In addition to *Tearful Eyes*, Jacobsen’s profile was illustrated with several works that display hybrid forms that indicate the influence of Surrealism, and artists such as Klee, Picasso, and especially Miró. *An Animal (Et Dyr)* and *Figure*, for example, present unplanned messy swathes of scabrous layers of pigment that call attention to their materiality.

While the images reproduced in *Helhesten* indicate Jorn’s growing interest in the physical presence of paint, Jacobsen’s profile highlighted the relationship between Jorn’s exploitation of the fantastical associations suggested by the figures and creatures that organically emerged from the image’s abstraction as arousing social ideas:

If we wish to understand Asger Jørgensen we must go out into the great cosmic night, where small beings, many small beings fight a continuous battle, in order to become participants in the big drama, which always will be inevitable for those, who are seers, for those, who want continue to break away from the forces of death, which try to prevent us from *liberating* ourselves in the material and spiritual world, which is one world, closely connected... We must go out in the big cosmic night, not to sleep a heavy, dreamless sleep, but in order to experience the senses, the tiny beings of desire, as they move between dream and reality. They move in that rhythm corresponding to the dreaming state, in that rhythm that leads from the dreaming state towards a richer reality.¹¹

Jacobsen’s whimsical language seems more suited for the relaying of a Hans Christian Andersen fairytale rather than an informed description of abstraction in 1941. But the employing of fantastical motifs was a similar device to Miró’s development of his *Constellation* series as he fled the Germans. The dramatic metaphors were purposefully employed to mirror the fantastical

¹⁰ “I sit maleri er han levende, samlende alt det tilsyneladende ligegyldige i serier af ganske smaa lærreder.” Egill Jacobsen, “Asger Jørgensen,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 4 (October 18, 1941): 104.

¹¹ “Naar vi vil forstaa Asger Jørgensen, maa vi gaa ud i den store kosmiske nat, hvor smaa væsener, mange smaa væsener kæmper en uafbrudt kamp for at blive deltager i det store drama, som altid vil være uungaaeligt for dem, der er seere, for dem som vil videre for at løsrive sig fra dødens kræfter, der prøver paa at forhindre os at *befri* os i den materielle og aandelige verden, der er en verden nøje forbundet. Vi maa ud i den store kosmiske nat, ikke for at sove en tung drømmeløs søvn, men ud for at opleve drifternes, begærets smaa væsener, som de er i overgangen mellem drøm og virkelighed. De bevæger sig i den rytme, der svarer til den drømmende tilstand, i den rytme, der fører fra drømmen mod en rigere virkelighed.” Ibid.: 104-05.

associations of the images and give agency to the artwork, make a causal link between everyday reality and the fantastical subjects depicted in the paintings, and critique the repressive “forces of death” that could be found in occupied Denmark. Jacobsen’s statement also points to the artists’ understanding of reality that would be described as the new realism in 1945.

Other artists wrote about the importance of spontaneity, as both a mechanism for making art as well as for releasing existing ideas. In his article “The Innovative” in the 1945 Høst exhibition catalogue, Ejler Bille described the essence of “living expression” by highlighting freedom, imaginative liberation, and the experience of process as an aesthetic principle. He wrote:

A common denominator does exist, in which all contemporary artistic efforts are included. It is the *composition*...it can be said that the painter constantly takes his starting point in the composition. He sees the landscape as a composition, the figure as a composition. He even breaks up the self-portrait and sees in it a composition. The still life is no longer for him “dead nature,” but a living expression, which serves as a starting point for his visionary experience. From the free arrangement it is not much further to *pure vision*—or to *abstraction* (this is truly an impossible word, which has been superimposed on left-wing artists). One could say that abstract artists create compositions directly on the canvas. They do not replenish from a composition on the table or a view of the landscape. What they follow are fantasy images—the reflection of the landscape of “the soul” or “the mind.”¹²

Carl-Henning Pedersen echoed Bille’s definition of spontaneity rather than structure as the primary aesthetic experience in his article “Abstract Art or Fantasy Art” in *Helhesten*’s second to last issue. He also stressed that it was the leap of faith and intuition that drove the process of image making, like the release of pure energy:

¹² “Der findes nemlig en fællesnævner, hvori alle nutidens kunstneriske bestræbelser indgaar. Det er *opsillingen*...det kan siges, at maleren i alt tar sit udgangspunkt i opstillingen. Han ser landskabet som en opstilling, figuren som en opstilling. Selv portrætet opløser han og ser deri en opstilling. Heller ikke nature mortet er for ham længere ‘død natur,’ men et levende udtryk, det tjener som udgangspunkt for hans visionære oplevelse. Fra den frie opstilling er der ikke langt til den *rene vision*—eller til *abstraktionen* (dette i virkeligheden umulige ord, der nu engang er blevet paaklistret kunstnere af venster fløjen). Man kan sige, de abstrakte kunstnere skaber opstillingen direkte paa lærredet. De henter altsaa ikke forraad ud af en opstabling paa bordet eller fra et øjekast udover landskabet. Hvad de følger er fantasiens billeder—genspejlingen af ‘sjælens’ eller ‘sindets’ landskab.” Ejler Bille, “Det nyskabende,” *Høst*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: 1945), np.

The making of a painting is a process that occurs by standing in one spot and making a leap out into the air, only to fall back again. When you begin on the next one, you try to make the leap better, further, and so it goes on, always from the beginning again. Imperceptibly the place from which one leaps moves but is always felt to be the same spot. In this, everyone is alike. No one is so great that he does not have to leap from the beginning again all the time.¹³

Pedersen viewed abstraction as a continual and open creative process, rather than a distillation or moving away from the natural world. The unplanned unfolding of the making of the work could then generate new experiences in the viewer, leaving the realm of inner solipsistic subjectivity and becoming a conduit of imaginative interaction and communion.

The experimentation with spontaneity as a means and metaphor of liberation was theorized by Egon Mathiesen in his article “What Modern Art Is” in *Helhesten*’s third issue. He wrote. “What then is revolutionary and innovative in contemporary art? ...[W]here there is at the same time talk of a painterly release, [which] is where the real revolutionary action happens. In all directions today, which release and renew themselves in a painterly manner, the revolutionary is located.”¹⁴ Mathiesen wrote this statement in the fall of 1941. There is no doubt that the artist was not only relating the idea of creative release with social agency—he also invested such emancipation with the power to bring cultural transformation.

Mathiesen was one of the few *Helhesten* artists to work in a completely abstract style during the war. The 1943 *Helhesten* profile on him in the second volume’s fourth number was written by none other than the *kulturradikale* critic Poul Henningsen, who signed the text under

¹³ “At lave et maleri er en process, som sker ved, at man staar paa et sted og gør et spring ud i luften, for saa at falde tilbage, og naar man begynder paa det næste, forsøger man at gøre springet endnu bedre, naa endnu længere ud, og saadan bliver det ved, stadig forfra. Umærkeligt flyttes stedet, hvorfra man springer, men det fornemmes, som det er det samem sted. I dette er alle lige. Ingen er saa stor, at han ikke stadig maa springe forfra.” Carl-Henning Pedersen, “Abstrakt kunst eller fantasikunst,” *Helhesten* 2, no. 4 (December 24, 1943): 92.

¹⁴ “Hvad er da den revolutionerende og fornyende indsats i nutidens kunst? ...[H]vor der samtidig er tale om en malerisk frigørelse, sker den virkelige revolutionære indsats. I alle de retninger idag, der frigør og fornyer sig malerisk, ligger det revolutionære.” Egon Mathiesen, “Hvad moderne Kunst er,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 3 (September 17, 1941): 82.

the pseudonym “Functionalist.” The works that were reproduced with Henningsen’s text, such as *Nature Morte* (fig. 81), 1943, and an untitled lithograph (fig. 82) betray a debt to the still-lives of Danish modernist Vilhelm Lundstrøm, as they emphasize an interest in color itself as a physical building block that determines the composition. The description of nonrepresentational forms with thick slabs of pure color was manifested three dimensionally in organic materials in *Wood Sculpture* (1941, whereabouts unknown), an image of which also accompanied the text. Here Mathiesen randomly stacked brightly painted pieces of wood on top of one another. Mathiesen described color as central to contemporary art in his book *The Path of Painting*:

Painting today, when it’s good, is not a fashionable orgy of pretty colors, color for color’s sake, *but an acknowledgment of the color’s own capacity for expression and understanding of it as painting’s innermost core.* Anyone who wants to understand modern art, must go the same way and not be scared of the colors in order to believe, that they have engulfed up all human values.¹⁵

Mathiesen’s book consisted of a series of essays he had written from 1937 through 1945. In the text, he differentiated Danish artists’ approach to color from earlier art movements and argued that it was the emotional valence of colors that constituted the potential of the image to embody social values.

Elsewhere in *The Path of Painting* Mathiesen likened spontaneous artistic creation to musical improvisation and thus to the performative:

In a way the fantasy can be illustrated by comparing it with the music. ...Just like the musician improvises over the melody, so that it disappears and is only an inner sense through the whole piece, the painter improvises his motif, so that the *experience of reality* is a feeling placed throughout the entire image, while the *representation of reality* disappears.”¹⁶

¹⁵ “Maleriet i dag er ikke, naar det er godt, et modeorgie af kønne farver, kulør for kulørens skyld, *men en erkendelse af farvens egen evne til udtryk og forstaaelse af den som malerkunstens inderste kerne.* Den, der vil forstaa moderne kunst, maa gaa samme vej og ikke lade sig forskrække af farverne til at tro, at de har opslugt alle menneskelig værdier.” Egon Mathiesen, “Den gode smag” [1943], in *Maleriets vej* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1946), 176.

¹⁶ “Paa en maade kan fantasien anskueliggøres ved at sammenligne med musikken. ...Ligesom musikken improviserer over sin melodi, saa at den forsvinder og kun ligger som en indre fornemmelse gennem hele stykket,

As with the theory of American action painting, Mathiesen was positing unplanned and instinctual creativity as the release necessary to producing a new kind realism that was not an imitation of life, but directly engaged with life itself. Henningsen highlighted Mathiesen's connection to Lundstrøm, and also compared the younger artist's work to music:

The color pattern means so much to him and he feels just about the same when he paints just as jazz gets one to dance. ...But the picture is the reality, and the motif is only a pretext like it is with music...he maintains the major form, which at first possibly could present something poster-like in color. Today he works to get color to stretch, nuance, live.¹⁷

Though Henningsen's analogies reek of a modernism long since past, he understood Mathiesen's free and unconstrained handling of color as the starting point for abstraction.

Henningsen statement also reveals that he keenly grasped the Helhesten artists' relating their art to the idea of life, and their description of their works as "living," as perceptually alive as the vibrant eyes and faces that emerge out of the raw colors and gesturalism of the painterly material. That they produced this art theory during the occupation underscores the politics of imparting greater autonomy to abstraction. The potential to engage, even if by affronting sensibilities, or by throwing one off guard with childlike doodles, stimulated the viewer's ability to relate to new ideas and, ideally to other human beings more openly and humanistically.

improviserer maleren over sit motiv, saa at *oplevelsen af virkeligheden* ligger som en fornemmelse gennem hele billedet, mens *gengivelsen af virkeligheden* forsvinder." Mathiesen, "Under to slags øjne" [1943], in *ibid.*, 68.

¹⁷ "Farvens rytme betyder saa meget for ham, og han føler noget nær det samme, naar han maler, som naar jazzen faar en til at danse. ...Men billedet er realiteten, og motivet er kun paaskud ganske som i musikken...han fastholder den store form, som fra først af maaske kunde gi noget plakatagtigt i farven. I dag arbejder han med at faa farven til at spænde, nuancere, leve." Poul Henningsen, "Egon Mathiesen," *Helhesten* 2, no. 4: 84.

**Art as Interface:
“Build Up a New Picture That is Completely Your Own”**

In the same 1940 article “Art against Reaction” in which Jacobsen and Jorn had historicized Surrealism, the authors also emphasized that the art they had exhibited at the Autumn Exhibition that year had social agency. They wrote, “In the struggle for artistic freedom, against the reactionary forces, the autumn exhibition occupies the most meaningful place among the country’s exhibitions. Here the art that debuted and developed proved itself to be *living*, that is to say *creating* art.”¹⁸ The concept of the “living” artwork saturates Helhesten artists’ writing of the period. Central to this idea was the urge to instill the work with the ability to relate—artist to work, work to viewer, and ultimately to other people and new ideas. While the making visible of process was once such conduit, the other was the instilling of work with aspects that needed to be actively deciphered and related to, almost like a puzzle, to generate meaning. The first motif with which artists fully explored this interaction was the mask. Initially introduced by Egill Jacobsen, the mask played a seminal role in Helhesten’s development of the image as interface, as both conduit and depository, for reflections on the artist as individual and as part of a greater community, which could be reflected through the work.

Jacobsen’s mask pictures debuted at the 1936 Artists’ Autumn Exhibition, and catalyzed the other Helhesten artists to explore spontaneity and fantastical imagery through the structure of the mask. He had traveled to Paris via the Netherlands in 1934, after which he abandoned his earlier, more naturalistic style in favor of developing a series semi-abstract masks that are less

¹⁸ “I kampen for kunstnerisk frihed, imod de reaktionære kræfter, indtager efteraarsudstillingen den betydningsfuldeste plads blandt landets udstillinger. Her debuterede og udvikledes den kunst, som viste sig at være den *levende*, det vil sige den *skabende* kunst.” Jacobsen and Jorn, “Kunst contra reaktionen”: 2.

decorations for a visage than creatures in themselves that inhabit, and sometimes merge with, matrix-like surroundings.¹⁹ He later stated:

The journey was a dividing line. When I returned home, I felt that everything that hitherto had been just vague indications and feelings was beginning to take on form and contours. I could suddenly discern the things before me. Therefore I began, full of optimism, to encompass my own painting, and in the course of that autumn and winter I painted myself into my first mask pictures.²⁰

Jacobsen's development of the mask motif was shaped by Edvard Munch's self-portraits, which he saw in Copenhagen exhibitions in 1935 and 1936, and they are also redolent of Emile Nolde's searing visages, which he saw in Germany. Jacobsen was further influenced by the ethnographic collections of the Danish National Museum from the late 1930s and during the war, which all of the Helhesten artists visited. Examples of the types of masks the artists saw there were reproduced in artist Gitz Johansen's article "East Greenlandic Magic Masks" in *Helhesten*'s third issue (fig. 35). The masks that appeared in the article display the distorted, semi-naturalistic features that had been inspiring modern artists' formal experimentation for decades. The organic quality of these masks, with their pronounced wood grain and polished forms, also stimulated the Helhesten sculptors' predilection for natural materials and an emphasis on those materials' inherent qualities such as the rough edge of granite or the patterns made by wood's natural striations.

The Helhesten artists explained the importance of the mask in "The New Realism," writing:

¹⁹ According to Per Hovdenakk, the six extant masks exhibited at this show include 1935/1-3 and 1936/1,4,5. See Per Hovdenakk, *Egill Jacobsen*, vol. 1, trans. Peter Shield (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1980), 163-64.

²⁰ "Rejsen satte skel. Da jeg kom hjem, følte jeg, at alt det, som hidtil kun havde været vage antydninger og fornemmelser, nu var ved at få former og konturer. Jeg kunne pludselig se tingene for mig. Derefter begyndte jeg fuld af optimisme at indkredse mit eget maleri, og i løbet af efteråret og vinteren malede jeg mig frem til mine første maskebilleder." Gunnar Jespersen, *De abstrakte: Historien om en kunstnergeneration* (Copenhagen: Kunstbogklubben, 1991), 34.

Our art is based on the fantastically created phantom instead of the human model or still lifes, in contrast to for example Picasso. On this point we feel closer to artists such as Klee and Miró, but on the other hand our painting method is based on Picasso's immediate painterly spontaneity and textural brushwork. As the painter Egill Jacobsen has remarked: Brushwork is the painting's vibration. This, our working method and artistic perspective means that we, to a quite extensive degree, have cultivated a fantasy world around the mask concept and in some cases have called paintings mask pictures directly.²¹

As the artists' collective statement makes clear, the mask was the springboard for their visual exploration of fantasy. Traditionally, masks are worn on the face to hide or alter someone's identity during performances or rituals. But this is not how the mask functioned for Helhesten; therefore the word "mask" is not entirely accurate. The mask was less a facial simulacrum or subjective reflection of the artist than a channel of communication, identification, and association with the viewer, as well as an armature with which to experiment formally. For Helhesten, the mask did not hide something beneath but revealed and related directly, and was a means by which the artists experimented with doubling and mirroring. Jacobsen later recalled:

Whenever I think of the mask it is not to conceal or to frighten but to express inner and outer experiences, and *to free these experiences and pass them on*. The eyes look inwards, trying to recognize something, and look outwards to unite it with its surroundings. It is inward turned self-recognition and outward turned liberation for the drama, seeking the whole, a poetic synthesis. Why paint masks? We painters must have a starting point, a skeleton, a structure... Since Freud, it [the mask] cannot conceal, but with the artist it reveals the human expression. It unites realism and imagination.²²

Jacobsen viewed the mask as both a mirror and a window—a portal for self-reflection and inner exploration as well as an aperture to view the authentic aspects of humanity in hopes of a more

²¹ "Vi gaar i vor kunst ud fra det fantasiskabte fantom istedet for den menneskelige model, eller nature morten i modsætning til for eksempel Picasso. Paa dette punkt føler vi os i nærmere kontakt med kunstnere som Klee og Miro, men arbejder til gengæld i vor malemaade paa basis af Picassos umiddelbare maleriske spontanitet og stofflige penselføring. Som maleren Egill Jacobsen har bemærket: Penselføringen er maleriets vibrato. Denne, vor arbejdsform og kunstneriske indstilling, har bevirket, at vi i ret omfattende grad har dyrket en fantasiverden omkring maskebegrebet, og i vise tilfælde direkte har kaldt malerier maskebilleder." "Den ny realisme."

²² My emphasis. Egill Jacobsen to Per Hovdenakk [June 5, 1979]. Translated in Hovdenakk, *Egill Jacobsen*, vol. 1, 64-65.

genuine relation to it. It also served as an agent through which the artists attempted to actively engage the viewer. The specific mention of the eye speaks to this. The Helhesten artists built off of the Surrealist use of archetypal imagery such as Miró's use of eyes and stars, which they populated their images with in order to suggest associative meanings of watching and being watched, though they would not invest the same kind of Freudian content into symbols as their French counterparts.

As we have seen with Jorn, disembodied eyes operate as a kind of "mask," too; reassuringly familiar elements such as eyes instill images with immediacy while also conveying associations about looking and the gaze. But these motifs were also emphasized as a means of connection during the occupation. No longer just a Surrealist vehicle with which to protest bourgeois apathy, the engagement with floating eyes, and suggestive mask-like forms gave rise to "creaturely" associations that were at once familiar and easily identifiable, as much as they were avenues of fantastical imagining. Identifiable amidst the heave and sensuous flux of the paint, and suggestive of looking or being looked at, the semi-humanistic, semi-otherworldly eyes thus acted on two levels—at once serving as a self-reflective mechanism upon the viewer while allowing for new creative ideas that were projected outward.

Art historian Hal Foster has recently described the development of the creature, or "the creaturely" as he identifies it, as one of the defining aspects of the work of Asger Jorn and Cobra during the postwar period. Foster rightly credits Helhesten with initially developing this motif of "unbridled expression of revolutionary passion" but frames the creaturely as an intervention in the postwar debate about humanism and attack on the classical tradition.²³ Foster builds on scholar Eric Santner's positing of the creaturely as a kind of abandonment of normal life for the

²³ Hal Foster, "Creaturely Cobra," *October* 141 (Summer 2012): 7.

“state of exception” or emergency.²⁴ To be sure, Cobra’s art was formulated very much in response to the war amidst the burgeoning Cold War, and, as Foster argues, the depiction of often frightening or even grotesque creatures signaled underlying issues of trauma.

The critical issue regarding the manifestation of the creaturely by Cobra is that the fascination with the creature, which began with Egill Jacobsen’s mask images in the mid-1930s, was a *fully developed* idiom by 1945 and occurred *during* the state of exception, in philosopher Carl Schmitt’s terms, not as an ensuing response to it. The Danish government’s concessions to Germany as a puppet government and overriding of normal political procedures in order to uphold its political power and keep the extreme right—and the left—out of government, was a state of exception for Denmark during World War Two.²⁵ The Danish artists’ preoccupation with make-believe beings in their art was precisely because of the ability of the motif to encompass dual meanings of familiar and strange and engage paradox. Further, even while artists explored darker themes in their works, they simultaneously allowed for utopian readings. Helhesten’s artists were continuously motivated by this double-play in their images—to project fantasy and have a foot in the real world, to exploit the naïve and playful for sophisticated and serious ends—investing their art with the kind of varied experiences that also occur in real life. During the Danish state of exception, moreover, the artists seized upon the very things they were told not to—silliness, humor, nonsense, and provocation—as a means of rejecting the Danish government’s stance of inaction and acceptance as well as Germany’s controlling and suppressive policies.

²⁴ Ibid., 19 and Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke/Benjamin/Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 22.

²⁵ See Carl Schmitt, “The Problem of Sovereignty as the Problem of the Legal Form and of the Decision,” in *Political Theology* (1922), trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 16-35.

Jacobsen's masks of the 1930s and 1940s unfold in three chronological stages. His first images appear as monumental totems that are positioned, either frontally or in profile, floating before ambiguous landscapes and featuring predominant eyes (fig. 83). By 1937, these looming figures began to morph into comically sinister beings in works such as *Orange Object*, 1940 (fig. 84). The creatures in images such as this often rise like tidal waves out of the bottom of the canvas, ghoulishly grinning or staring at some unknown entity. Finally, in the 1940s, in works such as *Grasshopper Dance*, 1940, the single creatures multiply into multi-figure compositions where the angular beings resemble ancient ritual objects situated within a visual screen parallel to the picture plane (fig. 134).

Orange Object and *Grasshopper Dance* were reproduced in Robert Dahlmann Olsen's profile of the artist in *Helhesten*'s second issue. Also appearing in the article was Jacobsen's best-known mask, *Accumulation*, 1938 (fig. 85). Traditionally posited as an aberration in Jacobsen's oeuvre, this picture, which was painted in response to the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, is actually characteristic of many of the themes that engrossed the artist, and should be seen as a seminal transition work (fig. 86). *Accumulation* reflects Jacobsen's continued interest in the motifs of the mask and the screen, and use of heavily applied gestural pigment. In addition, there are other, lesser-known images of the period in which Jacobsen also worked in a purposefully unskilled, fluid, and aggressive application of paint. Works such as *Mask*, 1936 (fig. 87), indicate that *Accumulation* is not such an anomaly after all.

Accumulation was an explosive introduction to gestural abstraction for the other Helhesten artists, with its agitated application of undiluted pigment, the spontaneous emerging of fantastical creatures, and the insinuation of darker underlying associations. The critic Poul

Henningsen highlighted the trauma suggested by in the image by claiming it was Jacobsen's own *Guernica*, which the artist would have seen by 1938.

The scatological splatters and streaks in *Accumulation* build up a multi-layered, chaotic landscape before which stands a giant bird-like creature. The dripping body of the foreground being changes shape and secretes its contents depending how one deciphers the interpenetrating forms. Whether it stands frontally or in profile, or whether the barb-like black screen protects it from or confines it within the troubled chaos of the background, Jacobsen's encrusted pictorial surface refuses any one meaning. The caption that appeared with the image in *Helhesten*'s second issue stated, "Concentrated colors, conquered fear," emphasizing the acts of both creating and active looking as routes for overcoming trauma.²⁶ The image presents a continuous reformulation of a range of associations, from rainbow mucous and bomb-like clouds of color to bullet holes. These impressions are further suggested by the tactility of messily applied pigment, engaging the viewer in a process of deciphering that was meant to be both challenging and liberating.

Jacobsen's turn around 1938 to mask images with prominent eyes and mouths, often with teeth and holding eggs, toyed with grotesque humor. Antagonistic elements such as danger and cheer, origins and destruction, life and death, with cannibalistic mothers eating or protecting their young, coexist in one image while organic and geometric shapes, and light and dark tones compete for attention. The creature in *Orange Object* stands monumentally in profile like an aquatic monster rising from the sea with its prey in its mouth. The possible victim or sheltered progeny is an egg, which is precariously balanced between dull top teeth and a sharp-toothed jaw, life in transition before it is about to be either preserved or destroyed. The egg, fin-like

²⁶ "Koncentreret farve, overvunden angst." Robert Dahlmann Olsen, "Egill Jacobsen," *Helhesten* 1, no. 2 (May 10, 1941): 40.

object in the bottom right corner, and rounded contours throughout the composition evoke a natural world that is formally at odds with the geometric shapes of the dark background screen. The orb motif is repeated throughout the composition, most clearly in the shape of the egg and the figure's head, as well as the spinning spheres of its flower-eye.

The visual paralleling of antithetical elements is the actual theme of *Orange Object*, which is highlighted by the title itself. What is the orange object? The egg is light blue. The only orange form is the creature, which is depicted as a living being, and only an object if one considers it the subject of a painting. Jacobsen's probing of paradox was described by Christian Dotremont as "both-and," which he described as a specifically Danish characteristic:

The mask...is a mixture of sumptuous excess and great simplicity...Jacobsen, who, as a Dane, believes in the principle "both-and," manages to express both the laughable and the serious, both the scream and the joy, both the wildness and the dance, in a laconic way. ...He has a feeling for all the values at once.²⁷

Dotremont's conceptualization of "both-and" is the best apparatus through which to understand the function of the mask for Danish artists, rather than as a motif that was adopted from the symbolist grotesque (as with James Ensor), or pre-war German Expressionism (as with Emil Nolde) with an interest in non-Western sources. The mask motif was not intended as a variant on the subjective self-portrait of the artist. Rather, it functioned as a repository mechanism for reflection and a mode of communication with the viewer: Danish artists utilized its humanistic and humorous connotations, two predominant characteristics found in Danish popular culture. The mask allowed for the further elaboration of fantastical creatures that were otherworldly and suggestive of non-rational associations, while their more human elements made them identifiable and relatable.

²⁷ Christian Dotremont, "Foreword," *Egill Jacobsen*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: Kunsternes Kunsthandel, 1962). Translated in Hovdenakk, *Egill Jacobsen*, vol. 1, 57.

The motif of the mask also opened up whole new avenues in which to experiment with the sensual materiality of color on surface as stimulating a personal experience between the work and the viewer. Dahlmann Olsen's profile on Jacobsen highlighted this idea:

In contrast to the formally bound abstract art, his paintings are independent of any compositional law of surface and color changes, and [his paintings] require a whole new assessment of the image. The color has become a script, with which the artist's experience is written down and the picture is a document for reading. These are the conditions of the conscious use of color's psychological, expressive opportunities, to get the color to scream and rage, to cheer and cry, to hum and caress, and let it completely materialize out of one's inner moods.²⁸

While Dahlmann Olsen's text appears to adopt a German Expressionist rhetoric, there is fundamental difference. As he describes it, Jacobsen's exploiting of the expressive properties of color was not to communicate the emotions of the artist. Rather, the choice of color as well as its physical presence was a way of transforming the artist's experience into suggestions—often oppositional ones—that the viewer could adopt or reject at will, continuously recombining them in new ways depending on how the forms interacted with others. Moreover, by virtue of its materiality, the colored pigment existed in its own realm across the surface of the pictorial ground.

Jacobsen's *Exotic Mask*, 1939, was also reproduced with Dahlmann Olsen's profile (fig. 88). But it is not really a mask at all. A creature spreads its wing-like body across the canvas, and foreground and background divisions are obscured. The red pupil-less eyes stare out at the viewer. They eerily contrast the verdant tones of the rest of the composition, while the sprouts of short hair across the forehead give the being a comical quality. Yet, as Dahlmann Olsen

²⁸ "I modsætning til den formelt budne abstrakte kunst er hans billeder uafhængige af enhver kompositionel lov om fladeopdeling og farveforskydning og kræver en hel ny billedvurdering. Farven er bleven en skrift, hvormed kunstnerens oplevelse nedskrives, og billedet et document til aflæsning. Dette betinger den bevidste udnyttelse af farvens psykologiske udtryksmulighed, at faa farven til at skriige og rase, til at juble og græde, at nynne og kærtogne, og helt lade den konkretisere ens inderste stemninger." Dahlmann Olsen, "Egill Jacobsen," 41.

explained, the composition was less a scene of a make-believe creature than an abstract composition made up of varying textures and colors across the surface. The sensory associations of the colors, Dahlmann Olsen argued, was aroused through the unplanned modulations in the texture of the paint. He wrote:

The contradictions in content, the soft against the brutal, the warm against the cold, etc., is expressed in variations of color and texture, line and form. The repetition of color tones is unnecessary here, the pictures display an uninterrupted intimacy, thus a thing living in one color and dying in another. A great deal of sensitivity is expressed in the brushstrokes' different modulation, this means, that the same color can have a wide variety of content and new tones... Jacobsen has in his painting understood to preserve the freshness of the free impulse.²⁹

In 1945 Jacobsen, Jorn, and Bille contributed to poet Ole Sarvig's (1921-1981) "A Lecture on Abstract Art," which was written on the occasion of Jacobsen's one-man show at Copenhagen Kunstforeningen (Art Association), and later published as a book. In the text, Sarvig described Jacobsen's masks as the means by which artists' had finally broken from Surrealism. He wrote:

One has reached the complete liberation of color. A freshness, a positivity, based on vital, organic forms has been achieved, so that not only the apocalyptic mood of the twenties and Surrealism's doom has been overcome, but also the painting as it is painted demonstrates the ability to exist in a new dimension, the painting has taken care to portray. ... One has reached a thought world of complete freedom which no longer contains clichés of earlier times nor the apathy of Surrealism.³⁰

²⁹ "Modsætningerne i indhold, det blide mod det brutale, det varme mod det kolde o.s.v. udtrykkes i variationer af farve og stoflighed, linie og form. Gentagelse af farveklange er her unødvendig, billederne viser en uafbrudt intimitet, derfor lever en ting i een farve og dør i en anden. En stor følsomhed udtrykkes i penselstrøgenes forskellige modulation, dette bevirker, at den samme farve kan faa et saa vidt forskelligt indhold, og ny klang. Jacobsen har i sit maleri forstaaet at bevare friskheden af de frie indfald." Ibid.

³⁰ "Man har opnaaet farvens fuldstændige frigørelse. Man har vundet en friskhed, en positivitet, baseret paa vitale, organiske former, saaledes at ikke blot tyvernes og surrealismens undergangstemning er overvundet, men ogsaa maleriet som maleri viser evne til at bestaa i den nye dimension, maleriet har taget sig for at skildre. ... Man er naaet til en forestillingensverden af fuldstændig frihed, som ikke mere rummer tidligere tiders klicheer og heller ikke surrealismens apati." Ole Sarvig, *Et foredrag om abstrakt kunst* (Copenhagen: Helios, 1945), 51.

As much as the mask was a gateway for creative, intellectual, and social liberation, it was also the means by which Danish artists emancipated their work from Surrealism and began focusing on the materiality of the medium itself with an almost baroque or sometimes scatological exuberance.

Upon seeing Jacobsen's masks, the other Helhesten artists immediately began working with the motif to explore their own approaches to a new form of painterly abstraction. In his lecture, Sarvig described it this way: "...the mask, the uninhibited expression of direct painterly activity, in itself a direct expression, that covers both the new art's collective character (the mask is something collective, something everyone can wear)—and at the same time its self-profound irony."³¹ He went on:

The mask, which may appear primitive, is...rather a sign of a widespread commitment to collectivity. One can wonder why the abstract painters, who individually represent full painterly freedom, however, are so similar. One can actually find common symbols in their pictures and in any case a completely common artistic outlook.³²

This statement suggests that rather than feeling the need to compete, the Helhesten artists saw the mask as another way in which to work collectively, this time dealing with similar subjects and encouraging the development of the same theme in one another's works.

Several mask images were reproduced in the journal, including one of Ejler Bille's most important paintings, which appeared with Carl-Henning Pedersen's profile of the artist in *Helhesten's* joint second and third number of the second volume in 1943 (fig. 89). The central

³¹ "...masken, det uhæmmede udtryk for malerisk direkte aktivitet, et i sig selv direkte udtryk, dækker baade den nye kunsts kollektive karakter (masken er jo noget kollektivt, noget alle kan bære)—og samtidig dens selvbespottende ironi." Ibid., 37.

³² "Masken, som kan forekomme primitiv, er...snarere et tegn paa en udbredt vilje til kollektivitet. Man kan undre sig over, at de abstrakte malere, der jo hver især repræsenterer den fulde individuelle maleriske frihed, dog ligner hinanden saa meget. Man kan ligefrem finde fælles symboler i deres billeder og ialfald en fuldstændig fælles kunstnerisk livsanskuelse..." Ibid., 41.

figure, with its prominent multi-eyed head, appears to advance toward the viewer from a multi-compartment space. Bille wrote about the mask in *Picasso, Surrealism, Abstract Art*:

Where the portrait dissolves, we glimpse the mask. It is a countenance beyond us. If it is the face of a god, then it rarely meets us with the mild gaze of a father, but it can happen that it could be distorted, showing its teeth and resembling the thunder god... [the mask's features] are first and foremost an expression of seriousness. They can simultaneously appear fantastical, comical, like the clown's eternally crying heart.³³

The romantic tone belies Bille's explanation of the mask as having little to do with personal identity. Rather, the text reveals that the artists realized the mask's ability to embody and reflect paradox. Despite its stylistic difference to Jacobsen's masks, Bille's work displays all of the characteristics that were relevant to the Helhesten's artists, such as the attributing semi-human characteristics to ambiguous creatures, the deploying of organic and geometric forms to create compositional tension, and the variation of textures and painterly facture in one composition.

Asger Jorn painted one of his most literal depictions of the mask in 1945 (fig. 90). The simultaneously frontal and profiled visage inhabits almost the entirety of the image, emerging from the bottom of the canvas in a wave of roughly applied opaque gray and blue streaks that threaten to obscure it. The prominent lashed eye glares ahead while a smaller, half-closed red-yellow eye is a blurry cataract. Heavy dark vertical lines comprise a screen that creates the body while also dissolving it. The most prominent feature of the work is the tactility of the paint, which establishes its own physical presence across the plywood, threatening to become independent of the composition. Sharp zigzags, dripping strokes, scratches revealing the wood beneath, and the blending of various hues mixed directly on the wood signal the hand and

³³ "Hvor portrættet opløses, skimter vi masken. Den er et aasyn udenfor os selv. Er det guds ansigt, møder det os i hvert fald sjældent med en fars milde blik, men det kan ske, det er forvredent, viser tænder og ligner tordenguden... [the mask] er først og fremmest udtryk for alvor. Samtidig kan de nok virke fantastiske, komiske, som klovnene med det evigt grædende hjerte." Ejler Bille, *Picasso, surrealisme, abstrakte kunst* (Copenhagen: Helios, 1945), 265-66.

creative process of the artist. As with the simultaneous use of complimentary colors, and jagged and geometric lines with curved and organic shapes, one reading combats another—anxiety, fear, energy, and humor all coexist.

In 1939 Jorn had advised viewers to “Look at my pictures and add new values to it, just as I add new values to it every time I see it. Build up a new picture that is completely your own.”³⁴ It was the mask that stimulated Helhesten to envision the creative process as a participatory one. The mask was a conduit for imaginative as much as aesthetic exploration, and the means by which the artists shifted from automatism to spontaneity, promoting dynamic viewer interaction in the process. The mask called forth the interaction of the viewer as a determiner of the meaning of the image, which was not prescribed or fixed but open to individual interpretation. The interest in viewer-artwork interaction would prefigure Cobra’s experiments in which artists would undertake what Jorn called the “miracle of the transformation of the motif” by discerning different discrete forms in each other’s works, with the result of elaborating the meaning and visual impact of the image.

Painting was not the only to medium in which the Helhesten artists experimented with provocative abstraction and invested with the potential to activate and relate to the viewer. Sculpture was an integral—and integrative—component of Helhesten’s aspirations to use art as an apparatus for empathy and personal identification. The four main sculptors of the group, Ejler Bille, Henry Heerup, the Icelandic artist Sigurjón Ólafsson, and Erik Thommesen, imbued their abstract sculptures with humanistic properties through playful subjects, human scale, tactile textures, and the use of organic and natural materials. Both Bille and Heerup worked

³⁴ “Se paa mit billed og tilføj det nye værdier, ligesom jeg føjer nye værdier til det, hver gang jeg ser paa det. Byg et nyt billed op, der helt og holdent er dit eget.” Asger Jorn, “Skabelses processen,” *Linien*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: 1939), 3.

simultaneously on painting and sculpture, while other painters such as Jorn and Mathiesen experimented with sculpture and other media during the war. There were also artists not directly involved with Helhesten but part of the group's larger social circle, such as Robert Jacobsen and Sonja Ferlov, whose sculpture displayed analogous qualities and were discussed in the journal.

Contemporary Danish sculpture was the subject of a major article by Bille in *Helhesten's* last issue (fig. 91). In the text, Bille explained the basis for Danish artists' work with three-dimensional abstract forms in a manner that was quite similar to how he wrote about painting. In fact, he explicitly linked the two: "What we are witnessing in sculpture is an artistic *revolution* equivalent to what we know in painting."³⁵ Though Bille quoted Rodin (twice) to justify Danish sculptors' emphasis on dynamic movement generated by the shifting planes and textures of sculptural form, he theorized their approach to sculpture as something that was totally new, entirely Danish, and the result of an organic process of creation akin to giving birth. He wrote, "Abstract sculpture in Denmark is a growing art form. A number of sculptors, who are free from academic tradition, have followed their artistic visions and created a kind of sculpture, in which one does not attempt to remember, but to innovate."³⁶ Bille endowed the creation of sculpture as an additive process, which generated new forms that presented fresh opportunities—for the artist during the process, and the viewer in interaction with the work—to alter existing perceptions.

Bille emphasized the magical quality of creation when physically forging abstract forms, which for him was a process of self-discovery: "You have breathed life into a piece of clay or stone, but still, what you have created, is even totally new to you... With the same instinct that

³⁵ "Hvad vi er vidne til i skulpturen er en kunstnerisk *revolution* sidestillet med, hvad vi kender indenfor maleriet." Ejler Bille, "Abstrakt dansk skulptur," *Helhesten* 2, nos. 5-6 (November 11, 1944): 158-60.

³⁶ "Abstrakt skulptur i Danmark er en kunstart i vækst. En række billedhuggere, der er fri for akademisk tradition, har fulgt deres kunstneriske visioner og skabt en skulptur, hvor man ikke forsøger at erindre, men at nyskabe." Ibid.: 158.

you admire in animals, you have followed a trail, and you confront a world that is expanding.”³⁷

The application of the birth metaphor, though unoriginal, was typical of the *Helhesten* artists’ romantic writing style. It was a rhetoric that spanned texts on art, archeology, literature, and popular culture. In his article “Baskets and Ceramics” in *Helhesten*’s first issue, for example, archeologist P. V. Glob argued that it was women who discovered how to make sculpture out of their daily domestic tasks. He described women’s forming of vessels by hand as one of the earliest forms of expression, which he argued was a fundamental characteristic to foundational cultures across the globe from Africa to Denmark. Glob also related the idea of organicism and birth to the magical and fantastical function of the first sculptures:

The oldest known figures formed in clay until now are naturalistic animal images...In order to bring about luck for the hunt these oldest sculptures in clay were marked with symbolic arrow shots. The same connection between hunting magic and art is shown in contemporary polychrome wall paintings and the oldest naturalistic Nordic petroglyphs. In the mythology of many different areas of culture, clay is designated as the material, from which the gods themselves and the first humans were formed.³⁸

The quote was representative of the entire essay, which attempted to use the idea of crafting a three-dimensional object by hand as a common denominator that related everyday tasks to the imagination, and linked people of the past and present.

In Bille’s *Helhesten* article, the insistence on the natural and instinctual was also a means by which to make abstract sculpture, such as his outwardly childish *Sculpture in Cardboard* (fig. 92), or Erik Thommesen’s seemingly abstruse *Wood Sculpture*, accessible to a person not well-versed in “high” art abstraction. For these artists, every human, from the Stone Age until the

³⁷ “Du har pustet liv i et stykke ler eller en sten, men endnu er det, du har skabt, selv saa nyt for dig...Du har med det samme instinkt, du beundrer hos dyrene, fulgt et spor, og du staar overfor en verden der udvider sig.” Ibid.

³⁸ “De ældste hidtil kendte figurer formet i ler er naturalistiske dyrebilleder...For at bringe jagtlykke blev disse ældste dskulpturer i ler mærket med symbolsk pileskud. Den samme forbindelse mellem jagtmagi og kunst viser de samtidige polykrome vægmalerier og de ældste nordiske, naturalistiske helleristinger. I mytologien fra mange forskellige kulturomraader betegnes leret som det stof, hvoraf guderne selv og de første mennesker blev formet.” P. V. Glob, “Kurve og keramik,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 1: 12.

present, was capable of creating something new and meaningful by the use of the hands, as it was a universal quality of being alive. In this way sculpture could create understanding and identification among people from different backgrounds and cultures. Every example of sculpture in *Helhesten*, whether ancient or contemporary, or western or non-Western, thus emphasized natural or human qualities. This was true not only for Bille and Glob's articles, but for National Museum archeologist Werner Jacobsen's texts "Sino-Siberian Bronzes in the National Museum's Ethnographic Collection" and "Buddhist Sculpture in China" in *Helhesten's* first and second issues, respectively; Johansen's "East Greenlandic Magic Masks" (fig. 35), and Bille's "Sculpture from Cypress" in *Helhesten's* joint fifth and sixth issues (fig. 93). The images reflect a penchant for human and animal figures, which convey the authors' championing of the relatable qualities of objects from throughout time and across the nations, rather than focusing on what made them different or exotic.

In typical *Helhesten* fashion, the generous illustrations accompanying Ejler Bille's article on contemporary sculpture featured objects by artists from within and outside of the collective in a range of settings—from natural and casual environments such as the landscape to the rarified space of the fine art exhibition. The images convey *Helhesten* artists' understanding of the power and immediacy inherent in the three-dimensionality of sculpture—that sculpture was an physical mechanism that could inhabit and operate from within and between socially constructed spheres an immediately corporeal way.

The full-page photograph of Erik Thommesen's life-size *Woman*, 1943, in Bille's article underscored the monumentality of the abstracted female torso in the landscape, which was further emphasized by framing the object with a viewpoint that replicated a child looking up at an adult. The rough grain of the wood can be seen in the photograph, suggesting an ancient tree trunk,

which was placed in the open air among the grass and trees. *Woman* was typical of Thommesen's work of the period. His fascination with mass was given form mostly in wood, and his sculptures are both bulky and elegant, with long lines that echo the grain of the material and suggest human proportions.

On the page opposite to Thommesen's *Woman* was sculptor Robert Jacobsen's *Fabulous Monster*, 1940 (fig. 94), which was photographed in a gallery, with one of the artist's paintings serving as a backdrop. The highly polished creature is all swells and curves, head rising over what could be a phallus or tongue. Though Jacobsen would shift to geometric abstraction after the war, during this period he worked in an organic abstract style with materials such as stone and wood. Another of Jacobsen's works, *The Drunken Seaman*, 1943, was also reproduced with the article, which Ejler Bille could have been talking about in his text (fig. 95):

Robert Jacobsen sculpts mostly in stone, what he seeks is to regard the stone as *plastic*. Like Heerup he has maintained the material, unpolished, which is the raw stone's nature. In a single sculpture I have spotted a dragon head from Viking times, which steeply and defiantly rises from the ship's bow.³⁹

Jacobsen's mixing of natural elements, along with quotidian subject matter such as a satiated sailor, was characteristic of the Helhesten artists' understanding of sculpture as a necessary component of everyday life since the times of their forebears.

The theme of inherent natural relationships, such as that between a mother and child, was the leitmotif of several of the Helhesten sculptors. Dan Sterup Hansen's profile of Henry Heerup's sculpture in the fourth issue of the journal's second volume, for example, was illustrated with a photograph of Heerup's *Ironing Board Madonna* (fig. 96). The work was a hybrid of Heerup's *skraldeskulptur*, or junk assemblages, which are discussed in chapter 4, and

³⁹ "Robert Jacobsen hugger mest i sten, hvad han søger er at opfatte stenen som *plastic*. Som Heerup har han bevaret det stoflige, upolerede, der er den raa stens natur. I en enkelt skulptur har jeg øjnet dragehovedet fra vikingetiden, der stejlt og trodsigt løfter sig i skibsstævnen." Bille, "Abstrakt dansk skulptur," 165.

his naïve, brightly colored paintings. The colorfully painted wood was attached to a makeshift ironing board, the lunette shape of which resembles that of a Christian altarpiece. The subject, which features Heerup's wife and young son, was a common one for him, and reflects his celebration of motherhood as a natural and timeless process of regeneration and growth while also linking such an organic bond to the common aspects of daily life such as laundry and housework. Motherhood also dominated the other photograph appearing with the *Helhesten* article, which featured Heerup in his Vanløse sculpture garden flanked by two early portraits of his mother, a frequent subject and one of his most significant personal relationships (fig. 36). Heerup is pictured also as a generator of life, sitting before a crate that doubled as a worktable, his yet-to-be-carved rune stone in his hands, at the moment before it will be transformed into something unique through his creative process.

The photograph highlighting Heerup's garden in the suburb of Copenhagen was purposeful. The space behind his house functioned as a working open-air studio and sculpture park, and is indicative of his promotion of himself as an artist that worked on the edge—of the art market (he never used a dealer or owned a car, using his bicycle to go everywhere even as an old man), of established cultural circles in Copenhagen (he knew and socialized with the most important artists in Denmark, but never aligned himself with any one ideology or group), and of existing notions of how a work of art should be presented, preserved, and interacted with. Heerup's sculpture gardens, which he maintained his entire life, were open to visitors including children, who he encouraged to climb on and play with his works, while sculptures sat outside exposed to the elements year round, and he sold them directly to interested buyers.

Sterup Hansen's *Helhesten* article highlighted Heerup's straddling of the spheres of fine art and everyday life, noting, "Heerup stands with his feet firmly on the earth; but in his heart

and his head, he lives in the land of fantasy. To Heerup the Danish elf is among other things an idea just as realistic and living as the police constable and garbage man, and just as decisive for his treatment [of art] as these fantasy characters of reality.”⁴⁰ Sterup Hansen also likened Heerup to that other great Danish artist who could seamlessly meld the absurdity of everyday life into humorous entertainment, Hans Christian Andersen:

Just like Hans Christian Andersen’s “Darning Needle,” a top and a ball finds enough reality to create a large and varied expression of life, in the same way Heerup creates from the fieldstone, the colors from the paint tube and the tin box, the tree branch, and the razor blades his reality-based works, which speak just as strongly to us by the manner in which they are made, as by what they envision.⁴¹

Sterup Hansen’s comparison emphasized Heerup as both “of the people” or *danske folk*, simultaneously with his role as an avant-garde innovator of new forms of expression. Sterup Hansen thus stressed the idea of authenticity in Heerup’s work, arguing that his sculptures were created “with a Simplicity of Expression and the Intimacy, which can only arise through strong and genuine Experience.”⁴² It was through the physical art object that the natural relationship between Heerup and his work could be shared with the viewer. The garden photo of Heerup purposefully included an audience of semi-figural works in stone and wood, which stand in as a crowd like *danske folk* surrounding the storyteller Heerup.

Heerup was best known for his work in granite, of which *Carnival Troll*, 1943, is characteristic (fig. 97). Sometimes painted in bright primary colors, these roughly carved stones,

⁴⁰ “Heerup staar med fødderne fast paa jorden; men fra hjertet og helt op over hovedet lever han i fantasiens land. For Heerup er blandt andet nissen et begreb lige saa realistisk og levende som betjenten og skraldemanden, og lige saa bestemmende for hans handlinger [of art] som disse virkelighedens fantasifigurer.” Dan Sterup Hansen, “Henry Heerup,” *Helhesten* 2, no. 4: 73.

⁴¹ “Ligesom H. C. Andersen i en stoppenaal, en top og en bold finder virkelighed nok til at skabe et stort og nuanceret livsudtryk, saaledes skaber Heerup af stenen fra marken, kulørerne fra tuben og blikæsken, grenen og barberbladene sine virkelighedsstærke værker, der taler ligesaa stærkt til os ved den maade, de er gjort, som ved det de forestiller.” Ibid.

⁴² “...med en enkelhed i udtrykket og den intimitet, der kun opstaar ved stærk og ægte oplevelse.” Ibid.

with their rounded forms, humanistic connotations, and comical elements, concurrently evoke ancient and modern art forms. His stone sculptures also allowed for the physical mass of the stone to be equally asserted along with the subject, similarly to the emphasis on facture in the group's paintings. Sterup Hansen explained:

When Heerup has made a sparrow out of a block of Granite, it is still a block of granite with all of its natural character, but at the same time, the stone is in itself a life, which faces us with the sparrow's properties. There is thus one duality in stone, which the more it is both the opposite thing, the more it fills our mind and satisfies our craving for experience.⁴³

Like the mask, Heerup's sculptures revolved around paradox. The interplay of quotidian (carnival) and fantastical (troll) subject matter, old (the evoking of Viking rune stones) and new (Heerup's painting of the stone with bright abstract forms and modern patterns) art forms, and natural and manmade materials created a dynamic formal and conceptual tension that was analogous to human experience itself. During the occupation, the understanding of the painted or sculpted artwork as an interface encouraged viewer interaction and raised the stakes for viewer accountability to participate in the formulation of the work's meaning.

“Here There Is No Simile, No Mock Beauty”: The Impulse to Subvert

The aim to relate to others was a redemptive and compensatory reaction to the political upheaval of the 1930s and the unpredictability of the occupation. But there was another facet of Helhesten's new realism—one that was deliberately agitational and subversive. This aspect has gone relatively unnoticed because of artists' favoring of bright colors, whimsical creatures, and naïve painting styles. Yet it was these very characteristics artists developed to deface, mock, and

⁴³ “Naar Heerup af en granitblok har lavet en graaspurv, er det stadigvæk en granitblok med hele dens naturlige karakter, men samtidigt har stenen i sig et liv, der vender sig mod os med spurvens egenskaber. Der er altsaa en dobbelthed i stenen, som jo hellere den er begge de modsatte ting, jo mere fylder den vort sind og mætter vor oplevelsestrang.” Ibid.: 73-74.

critique the existing cultural and political environments while also asserting their own presence through visual reminders of the creative process. For artists such as Else Alfelt, Asger Jorn, and Egon Mathiesen this meant an increasing application of aggressive swathes of pigment and, at times, experimentation with non-fine art materials. For other artists, such as Carl-Henning Pedersen and Henry Heerup, the apparently joyful message conveyed by imaginative creatures and easily recognizable symbols actually veiled far more critical and darker subtexts. The inherent vandalism and caustic humor embedded in Helhesten's images disrupted and critiqued the established order even while they suggested fantastical alternatives.

The developing emphasis on the trace of the artist's gesture in the work served several functions for Danish artists. The gesture of course signaled the presence of the artist, though this was less about the artist's own importance for the meaning of the work than an indication that the artist was an agent in its creation. As Ejler Bille had stated in 1939, "Each work of art reflects its executant. All his struggle, his doubt, his confidence is reflected there."⁴⁴ Especially during the first half of the occupation, where public spaces were controlled and the government was advising Danes not to make any trouble, the Helhesten artists were boldly asserting their right to exist and the power of creative freedom in the same way as children did when they scribbled on school walls and ancient hunters who marked the earth. Both topics were covered in the journal, most notably with the photograph of children making graffiti to illustrate the group's founding manifesto "Objectivity and Mystery" (fig. 61). Moreover, the emphasis on the transgressive mark, through the purposefully unskilled and aggressive application of pigment, functioned as an illicit defacement of a range of traditional modes such as compositional finish and existing socio-political mores.

⁴⁴ "Ethvert kunstværk afspejler udøveren, al hans kamp, hans tvivl og tillid afspejles der." Ejler Bille, "To slags kunst," *Linien*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: 1939), 2.

Works made for and reproduced in the journal itself often displayed a high degree of gestural experimentation. Else Alfelt's lyrical abstraction encouraged pensive contemplation akin to her creative process, which she described as a kind of meditation. The works she contributed to the journal, however, present agitated compositions that explode with movement and even suggest violence (fig. 98). Alfelt's untitled lithograph in *Helhesten*'s final joint issue for the first volume consists of chaotic interweaving blue lines that form peaks that seem to burst into one another beneath three scribbled blue-red suns. Meanwhile, Svavar Guðnason's untitled lithograph in the same issue (fig. 99), which appeared next to his poem "Near and Far," displayed a freer application of color and line than in his paintings of the period. The messy, unrefined, and purposefully unsure squiggles of color in the lithograph deviated quite drastically from his more elegantly painted works such as *Midsummer Night's Dream* (fig. 137).

The last three issues of *Helhesten* included the most examples of images in which the artist's gesture predominated. Poul Henningsen's aforementioned profile on Egon Mathiesen in the journal's final joint issue included an untitled color lithograph in which the individual marks of the lithographic crayon animates the forms with a pulsating energy while also creating visual confusion with the use of different streaks, scribbles, and scratches of overlapping complimentary colors (fig. 82). The same issue also included several full-page reproductions of children's drawings, which display the doodles of school children that do not depend on any rules of perspective or believability, but rather the naïve visualizations of children (fig. 100). Psychologist Jens Sigsgaard's article, "When Children Draw," in *Helhesten*'s fourth issue, explained:

The decisive thing is whether children's drawings are able to evoke experience in certain people...this is valid for all artistic creation. The art/not-art concept is a dogma that limits

most people's experience of art, which is based upon belief in authority more than on original feeling for the picture. The child does not have this belief in authority.⁴⁵

Sigsgaard positioned the unskilled and unconstrained visual indicators of the child's imagination as valuable for their ability to question accepted conventions and social conditioning. His article argued that art's value was also related to its ability to convey and facilitate personal experience.

Helhesten's fourth number also included an article on painter and Linien cofounder Richard Mortensen, who because of a rivalry with Jorn had declined to join *Helhesten* (fig. 101).⁴⁶ But Mortensen had remained close to Bille and several other *Helhesten* artists, and it was actually Jorn who worked to include him in the last issue. Mortensen's color lithograph displays scribbles and random stains of color, which form no overall whole, appear uncontrolled and uncontrollable, and destabilize any notions of a coherent composition. The erratic scrawls also reveal the influence of André Masson on the Danish artist during the war period; Mortensen knew the French artist when he was in Paris in 1937.

The *Helhesten* article on Mortensen actually took the form of a conversation between him and the onetime Surrealist poet and later diabetes physician Knud Lundbæk (1912-1995). An installation shot of mechanized abstract paintings Mortensen had made for an exhibition at the Applied Arts Museum in Copenhagen was reproduced with the article. Lundbæk asked Mortensen why he had made them. Mortensen responded that, "I wanted to try to paint a painting

⁴⁵ "Det afgørende er, om børnetegninger er i stand til hos visse mennesker at fremkalde oplevelse... det gælder forøvrigt al kunstnerisk skaben. Begrebet kunst—ikke kunst er et dogme, der begrænser de fleste menneskers kunstoplevelse, som er baseret paa autoritetstro mere end paa oprindelig følelse over for billedet. Barnet har ikke denne autoritetstro." Jens Sigsgaard, "Naar børn tegner," *Helhesten* 1, no. 4: 117.

⁴⁶ Mortensen declined from officially joining the group, most likely because he expected a leadership position and he was skeptical about Jorn's dominance. He thus contributed to the more academic journal *Aarstiderne*. Mortensen would later become critical of gestural abstraction and work in a geometric style.

in which the colors were moving relative to each other.”⁴⁷ Mortensen could easily have been describing his approach to the composition of his lithograph, which is a two-dimensional representation of screaming, wandering, and pulsating color. Mortensen went on to lament how the “doubter”—the typical exhibition and museum visitor—failed to understand his images. He explained that the picture was a record of what he called (in English) a “process.” The only way for viewers to understand images, he argued, was to watch them being made. He advised, “If people had been present while the picture was being made, they would have been able to understand it, then it would have been clear to them why this image came out as it did. There must be something with the phases in the creation of the image.”⁴⁸ The semi-figural associations of Mortensen’s print are reminiscent of the being in Egill Jacobsen’s *Accumulation*, here vacillating between the suggestion of a clawed looming creature and complete abstraction. The unrefined application of pigment served not just as record of the artist’s gesture, but also as a potent reminder of the unfolding of the art making process itself as an engaged act of creative freedom materialized.

It is no accident that the final joint issue of *Helhesten* included Asger Jorn’s article “The Prophetic Harps,” which was a passionate assertion of writing’s fundamental significance as a creative act. He wrote: “Art and writing are the same. An image is written and handwriting is

⁴⁷ “saa fik jeg lyst til at prøve at male et maleri, hvor farverne bevægede sig i forhold til hverandre.” Richard Mortensen, “Samtale om Maleri mellem Richard Mortensen og Knud Lundbæk,” *Helhesten* 2, nos. 5-6: 117.

⁴⁸ “Hvis de mennesker havde været til stede, mens billedet blev til, saa havde de kunnet forstaa det, saa vilde det have været klart for dem, hvorfor dette billed netop maatte komme til at se saadan ud. Der maa være noget med faserne i et billedes tilblivelse.” Ibid.: 118.

made up of images...there is nevertheless a handwriting, a graphic element, in every image just as there is an image in every piece of handwriting.”⁴⁹ He went on:

...a letter is not just part of a word, as a passage in a combination of sounds...it can also be something else, an image. Just as a violin’s sonority is dependent upon the multitude of harmonics that lay behind the true notes we hear, so is the whole series of unconscious associations that we have to a sign, the reasons why its meaning becomes richer and more intense for us.⁵⁰

Along with an argument for the equalization of fine and applied art and the democratization of compositional components, Jorn was contending that the idea of marking itself was a fundamental creative human characteristic.

An untitled color lithograph by Jorn appeared in the same issue as “The Prophetic Harps” (fig. 102). It displays his understanding of singular marks and shapes as autonomous visual elements in the composition. The floating creatures consist of shapes and strokes often more conspicuous than the beings they comprise. This, the jagged borders, and the white areas within the blue background, suggest a spontaneous coloring in of semi-accidental forms that the artist discovered as he worked. Jorn’s painting *Toy Picture* (fig. 103) is similar in style to the *Helhesten* lithograph, and displays a riotous cacophony of thick brushstrokes to be read as individual elements as signifiers of the artist’s creative process. However, the bright colors at first veil a more subversive scene, where masks, birds, fish, and other creatures, with their sharp features and vacuous eyes seem to battle one another within a scatological field of brown. The bulky strokes of thick paint disturb this seeming fairytale as they reverberate abrasively across

⁴⁹ “Billedkunst og skrift er det samme. Et billed er skrevet, og skrift er billeder...Men alligevel er der en haandskrift, en grafik i ethvert billed, som der er et billed i enhver haandskrift.” Asger Jorn, “De profetiske harper,” *Helhesten 2*, nos. 5-6: 145.

⁵⁰ “...et bogstav er ikke alene en del af et ord, en passage i en lydcombination...Det kan ogsaa være noget andet: et billed. Lige som en violins klangfylde er afhængig af den mængde af bitoner, der ligger bag ved den egentlige tone, vi hører, saadan er hele den række af ubevidste associationer, vi har til et tegn, aarsagen til, at dens betydning for os bliver rigere og voldsommere.” *Ibid.*, 145-46.

the canvas, creating an agitated scene that undermines the idea of happiness associated with children's toys and bright colors.

The more transgressive evocations of Jorn's *Toy Picture* were typical of the frequent undercurrent in Helhesten's images the projected foreboding, danger, and acerbic humor. These seditious aspects of the works created during the war add a complexity and depth to what initially seem to be happy, simple, and whimsical subjects. Artists' instilling of agitational elements in their works stemmed from their interest in visualizing paradox, and vested single images with dual expressions of optimism and disturbance.

Carl-Henning Pedersen's wondrous landscapes were often filled with predatory looming creatures with sharp teeth and zombie-like figures that float uncontrollably in turbulent surroundings. Pedersen's painting *Pink Sun* features rich, thickly applied complimentary colors that become garish in contrast to one another (fig. 104). Four figures and two red birds hover haphazardly over a bright orange landscape in a stormy, dark blue sky. Although the pink sun is large and appears to shine, the figures are all in shadow and no real light emanates from sun's blue rays. Vacant eyes stare forth from slack bodies as they are blown by the wind. Egill Jacobsen's *Helhesten* profile on Pedersen emphasized the fantastical nature of Pedersen's scenes. But Jacobsen also made sure emphasize that just because Pedersen's work was related to fables and fairytales, it didn't mean that all was pleasant and peaceful, writing:

Here there is no simile, no mock beauty. He creates his pictures based on his own mind. The beautiful is beautiful, the ugly ugly, the evil evil, the good good, the weak weak, the strong strong. ...He struggles to develop himself, and he understands, that all development is related to the whole of humanity's development. ...He knows that the simile throws its false luster over most of the world. He knows, that the false power will unveil itself as with the emperor's new clothes. ...The gods that People do not have use for will be thrown away. Fantasy will escape from its prison. Fantasy and reality will be one.⁵¹

⁵¹ "Her er intet simili, ingen forloren skønhed. Han skaber sine billeder ud fra sit ægte sind. Det smukke er smukt, det grimme grimt, det onde ondt, det gode godt, det svage svagt, det stærke stærkt. ...Han kæmper for at udvikle sig

Jacobsen's championing of the realism inherent in Pedersen's fantasy images was also a call for them to be taken seriously. His emperor reference—"kejseren" in Danish—was also a not so subtle allusion to the German occupying government.

Even works with mythical titles such as *The Golden Horse at Dawn* belie a deep uneasiness (fig. 105). Pedersen's childlike village scene features a toy horse with the characteristic staring eye, along with a crying figure and zombie-like insect, all of which are contained by an embryonic sac of pink dawn light. The light doesn't emanate from the dark blue sun, however, and separates the figures from the town in the background. The thick application of paint creates a muddied, mucous-like opaqueness in the colors. The creatures themselves are off balance and positioned precariously within the landscape. The same sense of foreboding and eeriness emanates from a slightly earlier work, *The Gluttons*, which depicts a floating figure squeezed into the upper register of a sky with two suns (fig. 106). The creature directly ogles the viewer while in the landscape below it a three-legged lizard greedily chomps away at another creature with which it also appears to be having sex. Simple shapes stand on their own, as Jorn had described in "The Prophetic Harps," as motifs that visually relate to one another, such as an eye, an egg, or a sun. Despite the rich, jeweled tones of the image and the childlike rendering of the stick figures, the scene is one of disquiet and violence.

Pedersen did a series of ink drawings of the hell-horse during the war that experimented with the tragicomic aspects of the mythical beast. *Hell-Horses* is typical of the sketches, which resemble children's drawings with their simple compositions, unsure lines, and lack of

selv, og han forstaar, at al udvikling hænger sammen med hele menneskehedens udvikling. ...Han ved, at similien kaster sin falske glans over det meste af verdenen. Han ved, at den falske pragt vil afsløre sig som i kejserens nye klæder. ...De guder, som menneskene ikke har brug for, vil blive kastet væk. Fantasien vil sprænge sit fængsel. Fantasi og virkelighed vil være ét." Egill Jacobsen, "Introduktion til Carl-Henning Pedersens billeder," *Helhesten* 1, no. 3: 74, 77.

perspective (fig. 107). The drawing portrays two hell-horses, the larger, top horse with a large fin on its back and barbed, blade-like tongue. The smaller hell-horse below draws or has knocked down the human figure to the left. The prominent, comical beady eyes on all of the creatures repeat the shape of the sun-moon in the sky and lend a frightening aspect to the scene. Life is being sucked away by these horses, can be initially perceived as funny.

Henry Heerup's deceptively naïve paintings also consistently presented scenes that were critical and ridiculed existing socio-political dogma. His experimentation with humor, whimsy, and fantasy was sourced from daily-life subjects that he recycled into grandiose compositions. Heerup's humor could be obvious or subtle, kitschy or dark—but it can be found in all of his images of the period, as could his interest in universal life themes such as birth and death, and love and sex. *Ole and Punch*, 1934-1943, depicts Heerup's son Ole watching the Victorian puppet show, with the ridiculous Punch in his jester's cap, pushing down a skull with his left arm (fig. 108). Ole smiles despite wearing opaque glasses. He also wears a beanie knitted in the shape of a target with the colors of the British RAF. The wearing of "RAF caps" was a popular way that Danes provoked the Germans during the first years of the occupation, until it was outlawed. Although it is unclear whether it is carved or an actual hat, an RAF cap was also placed on Heerup's stone bust of Ole in the *Helhesten* photo of the artist in his sculpture garden (fig. 36). *Ole and Punch* also included trees behind the puppet stage, which form a sickle with airplane smoke radiating from the left—emblems Heerup often featured during this period.

A painting from 1943, *The Senses*, features some of Heerup's characteristic symbols (fig. 109). The central baby divides the composition and holds an unseeing eye and a golden helix, the coil of which is mirrored by the ear-horn on the right side of the composition. The ear-horn is mirrored visually by a Viking helmet-nose sticking out a red tongue on the left. Nature is evoked

with the verdant green background and central tree trunk reminiscent of Paul Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* (1889), while the small but prominent cross on the right side of the composition, stands for death rather than any religious belief. The protruding tongue, Viking helmet, and positioning of a Christian cross in the extreme background, all suggest ideas of ridicule and rebelliousness towards organized political and religious power.

The theme of life and death dominated Heerup's paintings in the mid-1940s, which display so much kitsch they verge on being camp. But Heerup reveled in stimulating uneasiness in viewers and any notions "high" art, repeating themes and symbols over and over. The enormous *The Peace Bell*, 1944, displays several motifs of the period, including the Viking hammer/war plane, the Janus-infant, and the cross, which is balanced by the two wheels of life in the bottom left corner; another commonly used element include the pre-Fall Adam and Eve couple who are capable of renewing the world through their pure sexuality (fig. 110). Heerup's celebration of the cheap and cheeky as indicators of authentic culture can be seen as a visual analogue to Asger Jorn's celebration of kitsch in his article 1941 *Helhesten* article "Intimate Banalities." Like Jorn, Heerup's cheerful violation of notions of "high" art and refinement was a strategic assault on good taste and bourgeois morals during the occupation.

Heerup painted several works to commemorate the end of the war. The most explicit reference to this was *The Liberation of Denmark*, 1945 (fig. 111). Here Viking hammers/war planes fly above an ostentatious scene that features a swastika, with the head of Hitler, among others, while King Christian X, kneels before Bernard Montgomery, the liberator of Denmark. The garishness of the scene is matched by *War Mother*, 1945, which repeated the fertility and regeneration themes (fig. 112). The scene presents a copulating couple underneath a war bomber, the shape of which mirrors that of a white embryo/yin-yang form. The mournful totem-like war

mother births floating babies who are society's future. Heerup's delight in depicting babies and copulating couples also points to the most significant aspect of Helhesten's new realism, that is, investing art with agency to create fantastical worlds and ideas, and in doing so, to recreate existing notions of reality into something new.

Recreate the World: The New Realism

“Yet we must seek to find our own time's reality, which not only lies around us, but is part of our being. In the artist's case it happens in the artwork, not through laborious training of thought, but in the glimpses of experience, where he perceives the outline of the whole.”⁵² Ejler Bille thus expounded the Helhesten artists' aim for using art to embody—and recreate—experience in his 1945 article “The Innovative,” which appeared in Høst's exhibition catalogue along with “The New Realism.” Both texts were a summation of the ideas that artists had been writing about since the late 1930s, and emphasized fantasy and imagination as essential components in the development of their new realism. Artists' creation of fantastical worlds encouraged formal and social freedom and allowed them to generate new experiences for themselves and viewers. The investing of fantasy with the potential to recreate experience was an innovative approach to art, as Bille argued, but it also served a compensatory and redemptive function during the occupation.

Of all of the Helhesten artists, Carl-Henning Pedersen most consistently created images of fantasy worlds filled with humanoid and anthropomorphic creatures. In his *Helhesten* profile on the Pedersen, Egill Jacobsen described the artist as a painter of fantasy and fairytales, whose

⁵² “Alligevel maa vi søge at finde ind til vor egen tids virkelighed, den der ikke blot ligger udenom os, men er en del af vort væsen. Det sker for kunstnerens vedkommende i kunstværket, ikke gennem omstændelig tanketrænen, men i glimt af oplevelse, hvor han øjner helhedens omrids.” Bille, “Det nyskabende,” np.

work was “life in itself...as fables are in our culture. It is a bridge over prejudice and anxiety, stupidity and dark forces...so the picture too...becomes an independent world, open and full of meaning.”⁵³ Jacobsen was asserting the artwork not as some modern magical talisman, but as an everyday tool that was an essential aspect of daily life, just as the folktale functioned for people in previous centuries for relating to others, socializing, and the learning of life’s lessons.

Pedersen in fact proposed the word fantasy as a more appropriate descriptor than abstraction in his article “Abstract Art or Fantasy Art—The Work of a Painter,” in the fourth issue of *Helhesten*’s second volume in 1943. He wrote:

You cannot properly apply the word “abstract” to painting, even when the painting makes its effect not by recognizable things but with the expression of color and the sensitivity of line. What artists who are called “abstract” have in common is that they all work from the world of free fantasy. Each artist’s work turns out differently just as people are different one from another. A better overall term for this kind of art is “fantasy art.”...As long as the word “abstract” is used, people will think that artists have invented a new artistic language that has to be learned, when instead “fantasy art” operates upon something central in people, something for which all have precedents which they can understand and react to instinctively. Something they have been through themselves as children, but which they forgot when they thought that they had to grow up and follow poor traditions in society.⁵⁴

Pedersen’s preference for the word fantasy was not just an elaboration of the Expressionist approach to emotion or the Surrealist exploration of free thought. He was arguing for the relevance of abstraction because of its ability to stimulate a potential imaginative experience. In

⁵³ “Men liv i sig selv...som fablerne er det i vor kultur. Den er en bro over fordom og angst, over dumhed of mørke kræfter...saadan er billedet ogsaa...blevet en selvstændig verden, aaben og betydningsfuld.” Jacobsen, “Introduktion til Carl-Henning Pedersens billeder,” 73-77.

⁵⁴ “Man kan ikke rigtig henføre ordet “abstrakt” til maleriet, selv hvor maleriet arbejder uden genkendende ting, med farvens udtryk og linjens folsømhed. Det som er fælles for de kunstnere, der kaldes “abstrakte,” er det, at de alle arbejder ud fra den frie fantasiverden. Hver kunstners ting bliver forskellige, saa forskellig som mennesker er fra hinanden. En bedre fællesbetegnelse for denne art kunst er “fantasikunst.”...Saa længe man bruger ordet “abstrakt” tror folk, at kunstnerne har opfundet et nyt kunstnerisk sprog, som de ingen betingelser har for at forstaa. De tror, det er noget man skal lære, i stedet for, at “fantasikunsten” jo netop arbejder ud fra noget centralt hos menneskene, noget som alle har betingelser for uden viden at kune forstaa og føle for. Noget de selv har været igennem som børn, men har glemt, da de troede, de skulde være voksne og fulgte daarligere traditioner i samfundet.” Pedersen, “Abstrakt kunst eller fantasikunst—en malers arbejde,” 92-93.

choosing the word fantasy, Pedersen was also trying to erase any links between abstraction and intellectual thought and “high” art, instead proposing fantasy as a democratic and organic conduit that made Helhesten’s aesthetic more accessible.

Pedersen went on to explain how painting could accomplish this:

If you now wish to create a painting as freely as possible, why not stick to pure painting? A painting without things that can be recognized. Why do some of you populate your pictures with fantastic beings, people and animals? Because pictures are magic too, in the new sense of that word. One person communicates to another in the language of the senses, giving his message a particular character. A magical character that catches the other’s eye, shouting in its silent tongue of its presence. Or silently expressing a peace that seeps out into the atmosphere.⁵⁵

Art historian Karen Kurczynski has demonstrated that Helhesten’s development of fantastical subjects allowed for an even greater liberatory potential of abstraction because they were already non-representational and beyond narrative, enabling the painter and viewer to concentrate on material qualities of the image. As artists mined fantasy, they began to endow the physical presence of color and forms with their own importance that could exist as meaningful independent elements.

Yet rather than labeling their style as fantastical in their final collective manifesto, the Helhesten’s artists chose a seemingly contradictory label, realism. There were several reasons for this that are indicative of Helhesten’s strong attachment to international avant-gardes, as well as Danish traditions, and the group’s investment in exploring the sensual nature of material for its own sake. One source was Fernand Léger’s “new realism,” was what the French artist used to describe the importance of color as having its own reality for abstraction; it was also part of the

⁵⁵ “Naar nu i vil skabe et saa frit maleri som mulig, hvorfor bliver i saa ikke i det rene maleri. Et maleri uden genkendende ting? Hvorfor befolker nogen af jer billederne med fantasivæsener, mennesker og dyr. Fordi billeder ogsaa er magi, i dette ords nye betydning. Et menneske meddeler sig i sansernes sprog til andre og giver sit budskab en bestemt karakter. En magisk karakter, som fanger andres øjne, raaber i sit stumme sprog om sin tilstedeværelse. Eller ytrer sig stille i en fred, som siver ud i luften.” Ibid.: 93.

debate about realism in Paris in 1936 during the Popular Front.⁵⁶ Asger Jorn was well aware of Léger's participation in that debate, and he cited Léger's formalist approach to color in his 1944 article "Face to Face," quoting Léger: "Color is a vital necessity. It is a basic element just like fire and water...Color is, within its own right, an evolving reality."⁵⁷ Jorn went on to explain:

Another significant event has occurred—an expansion of the arena in which the visual arts are created and found...For this expansion has created the opportunity for the full exploitation of direct creativity—imaginative art that is non-representational. It has afforded us the opportunity to use color as a free language.⁵⁸

Jorn's theorization of the significance of color in the creative act also drew from the physical materiality of pigment, as well as its spontaneous application to a surface to create imagined realities.

The new realism had other sources as well. The label was a play off of Surrealism. As an adjective in Danish it can appear as one word, *nyrealisme*, and was an attempt to reclaim the idea of another, more authentic but unseen reality from the Surrealists. Danish artists specifically used a phrase that was translatable in several languages and easily recognizable so that anyone could understand it. The use of the straightforward adjective "new" drew from the Danish tradition of heralding the most progressive art as young, or new, while realism betrayed the Danish reliance on the idea of *konkrete* art, or something tangible, which had been used to describe abstraction since the 1930s. Helhesten emancipation of realism from the Surrealist notion of an inner subjective reality reformulated the idea into a universal concept available to all people that was

⁵⁶ Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avant-garde Won't Give Up* (London: Ashgate, 2014), 39.

⁵⁷ Asger Jorn, "Face to Face" [1944]. Translated in Ruth Baumeister, ed., *Fraternité Avant Tout: Asger Jorn's Writing on Art and Architecture*, trans. Paul Larkin (Rotterdam: OIO Publishers, 2011), 68.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

both imaginary and grounded in material daily life. In *The Path of Painting*, Mathiesen described it this way:

But one can hardly measure the concrete content of art by the imitation of nature, just as one cannot measure water with a ruler. ... We alone have been concrete, and it sounds wrong. ... What matters is the way in which things are seen, sensed and thought. The resemblance is only something external, which in itself may well cover an abstract content.⁵⁹

The experimentation with the materiality of the paint can be seen in works such as Pedersen's *Pink Sun* (fig. 104), in which deep colors physically swell atop of the canvas just as the image's beings float across the sky. Bodies and shapes are discernible but vague, drawing our attention to individual strokes of color and raising questions about the world the creatures inhabit. The scene's swirling movement provides an invitation for the viewer to imagine stepping into this world and floating with these creatures. Nonetheless, a connection to the quotidian is maintained through the suggestion of village homes in the lower left corner. Though Pedersen's style shifted from the more defined features of works like *Gluttons* (fig. 106), to the loosely applied, thick bands of bright pigment in works such as *Pink Sun*, his equal attention to the formal and imaginative aspects of the image remained constant. This was the case with an untitled work from 1944 (fig. 113), which like the earlier works, also displays a heavy application of bright, complimentary tones that call attention to the individual layers of paint. The interplay of warm and cool colors enhances the picture's fantastical associations and scrambles the cementing of any precise interpretations. This Atlantis seethes with gentle pastel seahorses and fish that also display teeth. They are caught in a swirling aquatic world, where

⁵⁹ "Men man kan lige saa lidt maale kunstens konkrete indhold med naturefterligning, som vand med en tommestok. ... Vi alene har været konkrete, og det lyder forkert. ... Det afgørende er maaden, hvorpaa tingene er oplevet, fornemmet og tænkt. Ligheden er kun noget ydre, der i og for sig godt kan dække over et abstrakt indhold." Egon Mathiesen, "Kunst of Krise" [1940] in Egon Mathiesen, *Maleriets vej* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1946), 23-24.

heads become fins, fins become water, and water becomes sky—all existing as suggestions that only materialize in the tactility of the paint and the viewer’s own imagination.

Pedersen aligned the exploration of fantastical forms with the way medieval artists worked in his *Helhesten* article on medieval church frescoes in the journal’s last joint issue (figs. 62-63). It was the medieval artist’s ability to use his imagination that gave his images life, rather than using naturalism to merely copy something that was living:

He has worked with a freely creative method. . . . When these things are drawn in a naturalistically drawn face, they just become a copy of something living. Here it is life itself that is created from the painter’s fantasy.⁶⁰

Rather than viewing the fresco creatures as the product of a simpler and god-fearing medieval mind, Pedersen was arguing for the images’ relevance as more authentic expressions of imagination that could physically manifest and inhabit their own worlds on the walls of the church.

Egon Mathiesen similarly cited the importance of fantasy and its roots in familiar, commonplace sources such as folk art and fables for the development of abstraction in *The Path of Painting*. He explained:

[The painter] moves around the whole, allows fantasy to shape it into a regularity, which discloses itself in the picture during the process. The painting has rediscovered folk art. It must not be understood to mean that it is folk art that causes the painting to be what it is. The development has happened in indissoluble connection with all the conditions that determine culture. After the intervention of the technique the fantasy has grown further and further. It’s quite natural, that the artists thus turn the eyes to art that has the immediate and coloristic fantasy intact, namely folk art.⁶¹

⁶⁰ “Han har arbejdet ud fra den fri skabende metode. . . . Naar disse ting tegnes i et naturalistisk tegnet ansigt, bliver de blot til en kopi af noget levende. Her bliver det selv liv, skabt ud af malerens fantasi.” Carl-Henning Pedersen, “Middelalderens kalkmalerier,” *Helhesten* 2, nos. 5-6: 102-06.

⁶¹ “Han flytter rundt paa det hele, lader fantasien forme det i en lovmæssighed, der fremstaar i selve billedet under udarbejdelsen. Maleriet har genopdaget folkekunsten. Det maa ikke forstaaes derhen, at det er folkekunstens skyld, at maleriet er som det er. Udviklingen er sket i uadskillelig forbindelse med alle forhold, der bestemmer kulturen. Efter teknikkens indgriben er fantasien vokset mere og mere frem. Det er ganske naturligt, at kunstnerne saa vender øjnene mod den kunst, der har den umiddelbare og farvemæssige fantasi i behold, nemlig folkekunsten.” Egon Mathiesen, “Under to slags øjne” [1943], in *Maleriets vej*, 69.

Mathiesen again related the formal qualities of the abstract image with the exploration of fantasy when he wrote, “The major values, which are recovered, are that the freedom to play has been furthered and the fantasy has emerged, the neglected fantasy, not only in motif, but in design, color and shape.”⁶² The stimulus of folk art was thus not as a source for subject matter or formal inspiration, but as an idea about how art could function in the world, allowing the Helhesten artists the opportunity to focus on the material, compositional, and metaphorical qualities of pigment individually and within the whole.

Asger Jorn’s *Titania II*, 1940-1941, refers to a foundational myth, fairytale world, and classical literature all rolled into one (fig. 114). The title refers to Shakespeare’s fairy queen Titania from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Titania’s name also refers to the Greek mythological Titans, who were part of the family of gods who unsuccessfully battled the Olympian gods for the world. Art historian Helle Brøns has suggested that the top of Jorn’s painting depicts the Titans battling the Olympians, while the bottom half of the composition represents their defeat into the underworld.⁶³ The horizontality of brighter forms on the upper half and the verticality of the darker, lower forms supports this interpretation. Yet beyond any specific narrative, the image presents a cacophony of interpenetrating, floating, and swirling beings in a suggestive landscape with a sky and red sun. But colors float too, literally across the surface of the painting and through other forms, such as the white cloud in the upper left corner. We are presented with a fantastical world, or worlds, stimulated by all sorts of associations of life, birth, and death.

⁶² “De store værdier, der er indvundet, er, at spillerummet er blevet videre og fantasien er dukket op, den forsømte fantasi, ikke kun i motiv, men i udformning, i farven og formen.” Mathiesen, “Kunst og krise” [1940], in *Malteriets Vej*, 27.

⁶³ See Helle Brøns, *Asger Jorn* (Humblebæk: Louisiana Library, 2009), 28-31.

Karen Kurczynski has described Jorn's focus on the material qualities of the image as prompting a sensory response from the viewer.⁶⁴ His *Both Worlds* of 1944, for example, depicts several angular creatures, one of which sits in the center foreground with a composite-view wide-open eye (fig. 115). The larger biomorphic forms to its left and right surge upwards, as if they are circling the more pensive, sitting figure. Meanwhile, two darker figures, most likely in the background, are copulating. The image is chaotic and agitated, which is enhanced by the contrast of blood red and almost fluorescent tones and visible brushstrokes and scratches throughout the image that seem to leap off of the surface of the image.

The 1945 Høst catalogue was illustrated with several paintings that reflect Helhesten's experiments with the materiality of paint and its contribution to the element of vivid fantasy. Jorn's *Tolitikuja*, 1945, which appeared in the catalogue, is formally similar to the *Didaska* series he was working on at the same time, which was stimulated by the romantic relationship he was having with the collector and artist Elna Fønnesbech-Sandberg (fig. 116). The title is presumably one that he made up, inspired by the childish babbling of his young son. It also evokes the mythological connotations of a mythical beast in some ancient fable. The bulbous creatures—maybe two, maybe four—contain eyes and eggs, and reproduce like cells, with one orb breaking off from the next. The garish contrast of bright complementary colors emphasizes the sensual presence of the individual brushstrokes throughout the image, as does the appearance of bare canvas in the outer regions of the composition.

Also featured in the catalogue was a painting by Ejler Bille, whose work at the time shifted between Kandinsky-inspired "compositions" and painterly Cubist masks (fig. 117). Bille's *Komposition* displays thick, visibly layered brushstrokes that assemble a double-eyed

⁶⁴ Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 199-201.

mask. Another work of the period, *Human Figure, Bird, and Mask*, 1943, is an image that pulsates with sloppy squiggles, dabs, jabs, and lumps of heavy pigment (fig. 118). Eyes, wheels, and faces physically emerge from the irregular patches of paint and call forth associations of an imaginary carnival or circus.

A persistent subtext can be found in the above artists' texts about fantasy and imagination in their new realism that existed along with their ideas about formal and material experimentation with color and pigment. Fantasy not only served as a scaffolding for abstraction, it also provided a redemptive outlet for imagining a different type of world during a time of conflict. Despite the fact that on one level daily life remained seemingly unaffected, at least during the first half of the war, the artists' ardent Communist beliefs and participation in resistance activities meant that the recreating reality through and within art was also a coping mechanism as the war progressed, serving a compensatory function. Texts and images envisioned otherworldly communities of belonging and creativity that also allowed for diversity and dissent, and in doing so implicitly critiqued the concurrent oppressive political situation. Helhesten's ideas of communality and collective society were a direct response to and purposefully contradicted the Nazi—and Communist—concept of the masses as large group of non-individualized types. Mathiesen emphasized this in 1939 when he wrote:

The *folkelige* is what all parties say they want, and it is therefore worthwhile to understand that *folkelighed* in contemporary ideology is two things. Nazi law commands culture to be traditional, one must not dance jazz anymore but old folk dances, and the brush must only follow the traditional classic tracks. It is a spiritual direction from above, which inhibits the masses from developing. Spiritual development would be a danger. *Folkelighed* in democracy goes the other way and makes room for all the options and considers the information necessary to move forward. It is necessary, that the art that might not be understood by many [people], because it is located ahead of the wide sector [of people], is made intelligible to them. It is one of the spiritual aspects of people's development, that they do it for themselves materially. It is among other things a deeply *folkelig* thing that the colors have been pouring into the painting again, and one can easily measure the style's substantial value by looking at the benefit society has nevertheless

been able to draw from it. ...Modern art assumes the *original aspects of human nature*, so that one has good reason to speak of its *folkelige* content.⁶⁵

Mathiesen's explicit contrast of the *folkelige* aspects of popular culture with the controlling dogma of Nazi masses was rooted in the understanding of abstract art's ability to provide both a reflection of true humanity, as well as an avenue for a more authentic sense of community and belonging.

In their partially abstract works the Helhesten artists thus utilized fantasy to stimulate viewer praxis. Artist Niels Lergaard's article on myth in *Helhesten*'s third number explained the idea of the active role of fantasy in everyday life. He described Helhesten's art as part of a "creating myth," which he contrasted to the "passive myth" used by power regimes to control ordinary people. He wrote:

Against this stands the myth with its deep right, because it has its source in people's desire to connect their own little second to the universe's large orbit. People's longing, hopes, fears and happiness gives the fantasy creative power, and myth comes into existence. It doesn't mean, that one should live their life according to mythical beliefs, on the contrary, the *believing myth* is an abyss of negativity, and a usable tool in every myth swindle, whether it is of religious, political, scientific or artistic nature, while the *myth-creating* fantasy is itself life's positivity, by which one can outlive the materialistic void.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ "Det folkelige er det, alle parter siger, de vil, og det er derfor værd at forstaa, at folkelighed i nutidens ideology er to ting. Nazismen lovbefaler kulturen at være traditionel, man maa ikke danse jazz mere, men kun gammel folkedans, og penslen maa kun følge traditionelle klassiske baner. Det er en aandelig direktion fra oven, som hæmmer massen i at udvikle sig. Aandelig udvikling vilde være en fare. Folkelighed i demokratiet gaar den anden vej og giver plads for alle muligheder og betragter netop oplysning fremefter som nødvendighed. Det er nødvendigt, at den kunst, der muligvis ikke forstaaes af ret mange, fordi den ligger foran det brede lag, gøres forstaaelig for det. Den er en af aandelige sider ved den udvikling, folk selv gør materielt. Det er bla. a. en dyb folkelig ting, at farverne er strømmet ind i maleriet igen, og man kan jo nemt maale stilens omfattende værdi ved at se paa den nytte, samfundet alligevel har forstaaet at drage af den. ...Den modern kunst gaar ud fra *oprindeligesider ved den menneskelige natur*, saa at man med god grund kan tale om dens folkelige indhold." Egon Mathiesen, "Maleriet" [1939], in *Maleriets vej*, 16-17.

⁶⁶ "Herimod staar myten med sin dybe ret, fordi den har sit udspring i menneskets trang til at knytte sit eget lille sekund til universets store kredsløb. Menneskets længsel, haab, angst og glæde giver fantasien skabende kraft, og myten opstaar. Det betyder ikke, at man skal leve sit liv paa mytetro, tværtimod, men *mytetroende* er en afgrund af negativitet, og et brugbart redskab i enhver mytesvindel, enten denne er af religiøs, politisk, videnskabelig eller kunstnerisk art, medens den *myteskabende* fantasi er selve livets positivitet, hvorpaa man kan overleve de materialistiske tomrum." Niels Lergaard, "Myten," *Helhesten* 1, no. 3: 65.

Lergaard invested the creative myth with the very real power to resist political repression and bourgeois apathy, which he explicitly attacked:

Systems will always be estimated historically out of the degree of intellectual freedom that was given and which dogmatic abominations were used. Were they allowed to put people in dogma's straightjacket and make them into believers, or was the system so optimistic, that it opened itself for people's individual, myth-creating fantasies?⁶⁷

The ability to fantasize, as stimulated by art, was therefore an alternative to the reality of the occupation, as well as an implicit act of resistance.

The other Helhesten artists continuously wrote about the use of fantasy to stimulate viewer engagement and engender redemptive communities. Not giving enough credit to the viewer was what both Constructivism and Social Realism had gotten wrong, Egill Jacobsen argued in "Objectivity and Mystery." Jacobsen disparaged those movements as empty and overly intellectualized abstraction on the one hand, and lacking a true understanding of the common worker on the other:

Common to these two movements is their intellectual basis, where the factor of feeling, the psychological content, is undervalued. ... So-called Social Realism has, therefore, mainly found adherents amongst socially interested intellectuals. ... Its greatest meaning is intended to be political, in support of the working classes, but here its value is very doubtful, as not the form but the content is most important. The workers' position is most often depicted as hopeless and this has the opposite effect to that intended. Well, this is an impossibility when figure painting is depicted in certain newspapers as social and human. It can be both or either, but free the workers and, for the artists' sake, the painting from these dogmas. All art, except the superficial, has significance for development, be it figure painting or abstraction.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ "Systemer vil historisk altid blive vurderet ud fra den grad af aandelig frihed, de gav plads for, og hvilke dogmatiske djævelskaber, de tog i brug. Maatte de lægge folket i dogmatikens spændetroje og gøre det troende, eller var systemet saa livsbekræftende, at det aabnede sig for menneskets individuelle, myteskabende fantasi?" Ibid.

⁶⁸ "Fælles for disse to retninger er deres intellektuelle basis, hvor følelsesmomentet, det psykologiske indhold, undervurderes. ... Derfor har den saakaldte sociale realisme væsentlig fundet tilhængere blandt socialt interesserede intellektuelle. ... Dens største betydning skulde være af politisk art, til støtte for arbejderklassen, men her er dens værdi ret tvivlsom, da ikke formen, men indholdet er det vigtigste. Oftest skildrer man arbejderens stilling som haabløs, det er da den modsatte virkning end den tilsigtede. Det er nu engang umulighed, naar man i visse blade skildrer figurmaleriet som socialt og menneskeligt. Det kan være baade det ene eller det andet; men fritag for arbejderne og kunstnernes skyld maleriet for disse dogmer. Al kunst, undtagen den overfladiske, har betydning for udviklingen, hvad enten det saa er figurmaleri eller abstrakt." Egill Jacobsen, "Saglighed og mystik," *Helhesten* 1, no. 1: 23.

He went on to describe Constructivism as, “enlivening with its cleansing out of old clamminess and its clarified forms of expression and concentrated color, but in the long run it was dangerous because its painters had a tendency to become rigid emotionally. It hampered fantasy. It was superficial and in itself unable to create new content.”⁶⁹ Jacobsen’s critique of social limitations of Social Realism, and the empty formal revolution of Constructivism highlights the Helhesten artists’ interest in abstraction in their form of materially dense, image-laden abstraction as the paradoxical foundation of a new realism.

Ejler Bille similarly explained Helhesten’s understanding of art’s potential for revolutionizing culture in the real world in his Høst article “The Innovative”:

Experimental contemporary art is revolutionary, because it expresses a spiritual liberation. I am not talking here about a social liberation, which must be reached by direct political means. What the young art desires from the future is a world, where spiritual and social freedom becomes communal property.⁷⁰

The utopian tone does not diminish Bille’s acute understanding of art’s fundamentally socio-political implications in the world as it was lived, and the need for more authentic and communal social groups in reaching art’s potential for social transformation. In his article “Face to Face,” Jorn riffed off of Le Corbusier’s concept of a synthesis in the arts to urge for evolving the idea of synthesis beyond art and architecture to art’s role in daily life:

A new era has begun—the era of solidarity. Solidarity—an expression of everything that points to cohesion in life. All things, that is, which are infused with the ethos of solidarity—*people*, the spirit they possess, the hearts that beat within them; the inspiration that this produces; the heart and its sensitivity; the motivation and the potential to realize all of this in practice; the potential for taking ownership, the quality of

⁶⁹ “...forfriskende ved sin udrensning af gammel lummerhed, afklaret udtryksform og koncentreret farve; men i det lange løb var den farlig, dens malere havde en tilbøjelighed for følelsesmæssigt at stivne. Den var fantasihæmmende. Den var overfladisk og i sig selv ude af stand til at skabe nyt indhold.” Ibid.

⁷⁰ “Den eksperimentelle nutidskunst er revolutionær, fordi den udtrykker en aandelig frigørelse. Der er ikke her tale om social frigørelse, den maa naas ad direkte politisk vej. Hvad den unge kunst ønsker af fremtiden er en verden, hvor aandelig og social frihed blir fælles eje.” Bille, “Det nyskabende,” np.

things produced, the rising self-esteem of people in the fulfillment of the demands made in all of the above. *Rampant egotism is no longer possible.*⁷¹

Despite the grandiose inflection, Jorn's new era was not one of *rapprochement*, or a restoration of harmony, but one in which art facilitated the creation of a new collective environment that included within it a potential for dissention, agitation, and difference.

Though the Helhesten's artists worked in styles and themes that were individual to each artist, the group's approach to art was undeniably collective. The group shared a set of common goals that revolved around the social significance of art. The underlying ideological aims of their aesthetic approach—to release, relate, subvert, and recreate—was a redemptive reformulation of spontaneity and fantasy into conduits for social change, and a “new realism” for a new world as it was lived. The group was confident that their experiment would extend successfully to the exhibition of their work in 1941, as well as align them with international artists in a series of collaborations in the postwar moment.

⁷¹ Asger Jorn, “Face to Face,” 60.

The Tent exhibition at Bellevue in Klampenborg has been a great artistic success of abstract experimental art. The vigor and vitality that characterizes this exhibition, in view of the time, has surprised many people.¹

Robert Dahlmann Olsen

CHAPTER 4

Thirteen Artists in a Tent

In May 1941, as the war tightened its grip on Europe and Danish citizens were preparing themselves for their second summer under German occupation, a strange sight could be seen in the forest grounds of Dyrehaven, or Deer Park, a large forest park north of Copenhagen (fig. 119). The extant photos of the exhibition depict the Helhesten artists excitedly raising a striped circus tent (fig. 120), painting their colorful abstract paintings in the sun (fig. 121), and pausing from the installation to drink beer with broad smiles (fig. 122, fig. 123). The images suggest the artists were oblivious to the hostility surrounding them. The charming, even quaint, character of the photographs and reviews of Helhesten's "Bellevue: 13 Kunstnere i Telt" (Thirteen Artists in a Tent) exhibition—the most radical of all Danish exhibitions attempted during the war—belie the significance of the endeavor. It was *precisely* the exhibition's emphasis on play, humor, and fantasy that promoted creative freedom and socio-political critique in the public realm, challenging more traditional Danish exhibitions and marking the show as inherently transgressive during the occupation.

Despite its virtual absence in the literature, as the first truly avant-garde exhibition in Denmark to attempt to merge art and life, the Tent exhibition is an event of seminal importance

¹ "Teltudstillingen ved Bellevue i Klampenborg har været en stor kunstnerisk succes for den abstrakt eksperimenterende kunst. Den kraft og vitalitet der præger denne udstilling har, paa baggrund af tiden, forbavset mange mennesker." Robert Dahlmann Olsen, undated and unpublished text, volume 3, Helhesten Archive, Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen (hereafter cited as Helhesten Archive).

for the history of Danish art.² Taking place from May 17 to June 15, 1941 in a popular recreational destination for working class Copenhageners, the exhibition was Helhesten's most visible manifestation of artists' experimentation with Dada events and subversive humor, and Surrealism's interest in vernacular juxtapositions.³ The Tent exhibition presents a unique opportunity to examine an early turning point in the Helhesten artists' work from Surrealist-inspired styles of the late 1930s to the participatory and humanistic implications of the spontaneous gestural abstraction of the 1940s. In its pluralistic approach to experimental art, utilization of the collective, and aspirations for cultural intervention, the exhibition served as a prototype for artists' later involvement in Cobra and the Situationist International, and it signifies the broader but often ignored relevance of Danish contributions to pan-European avant-garde exhibitions.

When the organization, aims and reception of the show are scrutinized, it becomes clear that the exhibition has been misunderstood from almost the moment it opened. A varied framework of referents reveals the wide-ranging nexus within which Helhesten was operating. Artists distilled local and international manifestations of Dada, Surrealism, and Functionalism into a singular approach to exhibition design, viewer subjectivity, and the performative role of the artist, which imbued the idea of the exhibition as an organic and dynamic living system on the threshold between art and its public. Such participatory aims reinforced artists' ideas of the

² There are three texts that discuss the Tent exhibition: Gunnar Jespersen, *De abstrakte: Historien om en kunstnergeneration* (Copenhagen: Kunstbogklubben, 1991); Karen Kurczynski, "Beyond Expressionism: Asger Jorn and the European Avant-Garde, 1941-1961," (PhD diss., New York University, 2005), and Troels Andersen, *Asger Jorn: En Biografi* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1994). Helhesten had one other group exhibition, at Thorkild Hansen's (1927-1989) small basement gallery Pustervig Kunstnerhandel on Kompagnistræde in Copenhagen, from February 13-25, 1943. Hansen was a young student at the time and later became an important Danish writer. Presumably the exhibition was to raise money for the debt-ridden journal. I have been unable to find any information about this exhibition.

³ The Tent exhibition is publicized as ending June 8, but it was extended another week to try and lessen the overall debt it caused the group. Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Ejler Bille, June 12, 1941, volume 2, Helhesten Archive.

exhibition as capable of critiquing and transforming everyday life, even if that transformation was undertaken mostly within the ludic space of the tent. *Helhesten*'s second issue, which was published to coincide with the show, included Asger Jorn's most important early text, "Intimate Banalities," and Egon Mathiesen's glowing review of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Both texts illuminate the aims of the exhibition and foreground how "Thirteen Artists a Tent" functioned as a counter exhibition to the contemporaneous "Danish Painting and Sculpture Today" at the Statens Museum for Kunst.

A rereading of the Tent exhibition ascribes it a more important role in the understanding of Danish art, exhibition history, and narratives of avant-garde art groups. The exhibition was part of the Danish *kunstnersammenslutning* (artists' society) tradition, and was influenced by its two most immediate precursors, Grønningen (The Common, est. 1915) and Linien (The Line, 1934-1939). These *kunstnersammenslutninger* provided *Helhesten* with models of radicalism based on notions of the "primitive," youth, and an awareness of contemporary international art currents. In contrast to earlier studies, which emphasize Linien's Surrealist shows, I argue that it was in fact Grønningen's 1915 inaugural exhibition that was the most important model for *Helhesten*'s exhibition.

The Danish cultural context for *Helhesten*'s exhibition was augmented by Danish artists' exposure to international exhibitions while they were abroad and through reproductions of display in art journals. The 1938 reopening of the ethnographic collections at the National Museum in Copenhagen as well as those of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris expanded the *Helhesten* artists' interest in the vernacular, which had been introduced to them by Grønningen and Linien. Both of these institutions' similar approaches to the presentation of ethnographic objects, which were displayed to evoke a common humanistic foundation among peoples,

spurred the Danish artists to reshape Grønningen's typically modernistic treatment of the "primitive other" into ideas that encouraged connection and universal characteristics. In their articles on the Musée de l'Homme, Robert Dahlmann Olsen, Asger Jorn, and Ejler Bille considered the nature of the display of objects as producing an experience—a first in Danish art criticism. Dada and Surrealist exhibitions, the Degenerate Art shows, and Le Corbusier's Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at the 1937 International Art Exhibition in Paris additionally affected Helhesten artists' ideas about the exhibition of their work. It was in fact Dada, even more than Surrealism, which affected the idea of the Tent exhibition as a carnivalesque proto-happening.

The hybrid nature of exhibition design and practice and the fact that the Helhesten artists would not have characterized what they were doing as either design or a practice, complicate how to assess "Thirteen Artists in a Tent." Another problem is the rarity of critiques from the period that discuss the idea of an exhibition as an experience for those who encountered it. An exhibition, by definition, disappears, and there is always an estrangement between its original manifestation and its existence through documentation. Yet it is the extant photographs and artists' writings about exhibitions and display, along with the texts in *Helhesten's* second issue, which reveal the artists' understanding of the Tent exhibition as a transformational social enterprise as much as it was a display for artwork. The photos suggest that the exhibition presented the opportunity for artists to engage in a specific kind of collective sociality that was a delayed response to their international and local experiences of the late 1930s and activated by the conditions of the occupation.

Such sociality informed the creation of the ludic space inside the tent and its carnivalesque destabilizing of established hierarchies. In this way Helhesten's approach to the

Tent exhibition has much in common with Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's theories of play and Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas about the carnival.⁴ Although the Helhesten artists claim to not have read either of these authors until after the war, the remarkable affinities between the context and content of Helhesten's project and these scholars' writings make them productive tools with which to understand the aims of the exhibition. Like Helhesten, both of these theorists worked out their ideas about alternative spaces within which certain behaviors and practices question and experiment with normative boundaries during the rise of Nazism, and inform my reading of the tent as a space of implicit resistance.

“Spring Is Here”: “Thirteen Artists in a Tent” in Context

From the beginning of the formation of Helhesten, the artists had also envisioned a related exhibition to display their artwork. The exhibition included the painters Else Alfelt, Ejler Bille, Egill Jacobsen, Asger Jorn, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Egon Mathiesen and his wife Else Fischer-Hansen, the Icelandic painter Svavar Guðnason, and the Danish author and naïve painter and *kulturradikale* critic Hans Scherfig (fig. 124). Contributing sculptors included Henry Heerup, Erik Thommesen, and the Icelandic sculptor Sigurjón Ólafsson. Perhaps the most unusual exhibitor was the modern artist Vilhelm Lundstrøm, who was a generation older than the rest of the group and had made his name in 1918 with his Dada “packing case” assemblages, and who by 1941 had long been working in a subdued Purist style.⁵

⁴ See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* [1938] (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* [1965], trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁵ An undated list of artists in the exhibition in Egon Mathiesen's handwriting included the names of the more conservative landscape artists Victor Brockdorff and Kaj Ejstrup. It is unclear why they did not ultimately participate. Egon Mathiesen folder, volume 3, Helhesten Archive.

The exhibition took place during the Pentecostal holiday Whit Sunday, at the physical intersection of three of Denmark's most popular summer recreational destinations, to create a more visible profile with the general public. Indeed, at that moment the exhibition could not have been situated in a more widely visited place in all of Denmark. Dyrehaven, an eleven-square-kilometer open-air park that was a Danish archeological site and had served as hunting grounds for seventeenth-century Danish rulers. *Helhesten* contributor and the National Museum's archeologist and later director, P. V. Glob published two texts about Dyrehaven, one in 1948 and another in 1973.⁶ In the latter text, he cited acclaimed Danish author Johannes V. Jensen's 1931 statement that Dyrehaven was the "most beautiful place in the world [and] the heart of Denmark."⁷ Glob presented the park as a foundational source for Danish culture, full of important ancient artifacts and a physical record of the everyday lives of the Danish people.

Also on the Dyrehaven grounds was the Baroque Eremitage Palace, a royal hunting lodge built for King Christian VI in the eighteenth century and often the scene of notable political decisions, such as the signing of the new Danish Constitution in 1849, which ended absolute monarchy in Denmark. By 1941, however, it was better known as a destination for Danes who wanted to try their luck at Bakken (The Hill), the world's oldest amusement park. Situated just inside the main entrance to Dyrehaven, Bakken is known for its tented game spaces, and with its long history of working class entertainment it is considered a more affordable, local alternative to the famous Tivoli pleasure gardens in Copenhagen. Bellevue Beach, whose "beautiful view" the name of the exhibition directly referenced, is located on the Øresund coast across the street from Dyrehaven. As the most visited beach in Denmark, Bellevue became even more famous

⁶ See P. V. Glob, *Fortidens Spor: Dyrehaven og Jægersborg Hegn* (Copenhagen: Lindhardt og Ringhof, 1973), and *Oltidsminder i Kongens Lyngby og Dyrehaven* (Copenhagen: 1948).

⁷ Glob, *Fortidens Spor*, epigraph page.

from 1932 with its whimsical lifeguard stations and beachside hotel and theatre, all designed by the architect and designer Arne Jacobsen (1902-1971) who is most famous for his Egg and Swan chairs. Thus, as an all-encompassing locus of the multiple signifiers of “Danish-ness,” Dyrehaven was the ideal place for Helhesten to enact its cultural critique. With such a strategic location, the artists hoped to expose—and sell—their works to as many people as possible.

The catalogue was a typically Danish one, with artists listed alphabetically with their addresses next to each name. Even during the occupation, exhibitions continued this practice, either in naïve defiance or ignorance of possible consequences for exhibiting art that would have been considered “degenerate” in Germany. The poster used to publicize the show was, possibly for this reason, conservative, with no hint as to the kind of art one might find there (fig. 125). The exhibition had been advertised in the journal’s second issue, which linked the exhibition with spring and summer fun, beginning the notice with “spring is here.”⁸

The idea for the tent was inspired by Le Corbusier’s Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, to which Jorn, as one of Fernand Léger’s students, had contributed. The Danish designer Finn Juhl (1912-1989) procured the pre-manufactured ten-by-forty-meter event tent from a business in Aarhus.⁹ Visitors entered the striped marquee via a makeshift wood footbridge designed by Juhl, who worked out a deal to have a carpenter colleague named Svend Storm construct it and the interior wall dividers. Bordering each end of Juhl’s bridge were large psychedelic disks painted by Else Fischer-Hansen in bright colors that recalled carnival spinning wheels.¹⁰ After crossing

⁸ “Nu kommer foraaet.” Robert Dahlmann Olsen, ed. “Sommerens store udstilling,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 2 (May 10, 1941): inside back cover.

⁹ Jespersen, *De abstrakte*, 134-35.

¹⁰ See “Else Fischer-Hansen,” in *Dansk kvindebiografisk leksikon*, <http://www.kvinfo.dk/side/597/bio/661/origin/170/>, accessed July 19, 2014. I would like to thank Karen Kurczynski for pointing me to this source.

the bridge, visitors entered the tent via a makeshift introductory space that was marked off from the structure's central area by a wooden partition (fig. 126). Here visitors were offered a copy of one of *Helhesten*'s first two issues, a bonus included in the 50-øre entrance fee. The journals and guestbook were displayed on a cheap card table that was situated next to a cot. The cot served as a bench for visitors during the day and at night functioned as a bed for artists to sleep on while they were guarding the artwork. Life-sized reproductions of *Helhesten*'s first two covers by Heerup and Mathiesen were hung in the entryway amid graffiti advertising the journal in a manner that was similar to the Degenerate Art show. The text and images appear to have been painted either directly onto canvas or boards that were then affixed to the tent's peripheral fabric walls.¹¹

The central space of the tent was left open on one side, while paintings were hung on several lumber partitions that bisected the other half of the space and sat on posts about a foot off of the dirt floor (fig. 127, fig. 128). The exhibition was dominated by paintings by men (no works on paper were included), but two women, who contributed twenty paintings total, and three sculptors also participated. Henry Heerup was the only artist to contribute both paintings and sculpture. Jorn contributed the most works to the show with twenty-four paintings, yet, like those by Bille and Jacobsen, none were for sale. Most of the ninety-two paintings on display were large and generously spaced at eye level with no labels (fig. 129). The layout of the space was grouped by artist, so that there must have been at least eleven discreet but fluid areas for paintings. The large, brightly lit area was also punctuated by thirty-two abstract sculptures in organic materials of stone and wood, which were placed directly on the ground or on simple

¹¹ Heerup's hell-horse on the wall of the tent differs slightly from his journal cover image.

supports (fig. 130). The bases, made from the same lumber that constructed the bridge and walls, were most likely also built by Svend Storm with the help of the artists.

The exhibition showcases a transitional moment for Helhesten artists' move towards gestural abstraction; works on display openly appropriated the vibrant colors and playful themes of nearby the Bakken amusement part. This can be seen most clearly in the works Jorn exhibited. Many of the paintings he contributed reflect a lyrical Surrealist abstraction influenced by Joan Miró and Paul Klee. The fluid patterns of *Ulysses*, 1940 (fig. 131), and *Nocturne*, 1939-1940 (fig. 132), certainly reflect the influence automatism Jorn witnessed while he was in Paris. Yet when looking more closely at the latter work, we can see an aggressive handling of the thickly administered pigment, which threatens to seep and spill over the elegant lines beneath.

Other works broke completely with automatism in favor of spontaneously applied paint, such as *The Star Girl*, 1940, in which a child's doll emerges like a shooting star from the almost encrusted layers of pigment (fig. 133). The coagulated streaks of white paint articulate her flaming hair, while Jorn scratched through the muddy blue body to create what could be either legs or arms. He playfully finished the figure off with two blue-dot eyes and a dab of red for her smile. Art historian has Karen Kurczynski has demonstrated that for Jorn, the theme of the little girl was a metaphor for unimpeded creativity.¹² As one of three young girl motifs he exhibited, Jorn was also linking the innocent creative expression of a child to experimental gestural abstraction.

That at least half of the works Jorn exhibited were figural or semi-figural was characteristic of many of the paintings on display, including the five paintings Egill Jacobsen contributed. His famous *Grasshopper Dance*, 1941 (fig. 134), was included in the show and also

¹² Kurczynski, "Beyond Expressionism," 129.

reproduced in Dahlmann Olsen's profile of the artist in *Helhesten*'s second issue. The image depicts male and female beings composed of basic geometric shapes in a shallow abstract landscape, which Dahlmann Olsen described as: "Two animal-humans. Their green bodies harmonize with the green world they live in. Only their red eyes stand out, and look out at the viewer puzzled. 'We are new and excited,' they say, 'because we have only recently been born, so we have the right to rejoice of life.'" ¹³ Like the title, which refers to the insect's mating ritual, Dahlmann Olsen emphasized their verdant nature and fertility. These creatures' fantastical cosmos mirrored the wondrous space of the tent and suggested different realities viewers might contemplate inhabiting. Yet Jacobsen deliberately presented ambiguous ideas in his images during the war, giving them double meanings that pair happy and sad, light and dark, and fun and serious elements. The title perhaps also refers to the derogative nickname Danes gave to German soldiers during the occupation, presumably because of green in their uniforms. In this context the figures suddenly seem to be in peril, running within a frenetic and disturbed scene.

Carl-Henning Pedersen exhibited six paintings in the tent. His *Mother and Child*, 1940, also depicts two figures made up of simple geometric shapes set frontally in a shallow landscape (fig. 135). Like Jacobsen's copulating couple, Pedersen depicts another universal human bond, one of a mother and her offspring. But this is not an image of a loving, reassuring Madonna and child. Pedersen's luminous, bright colors are at odds with the zombie-like figures. Their penetrating gazes and blade-like hair, the mother's toothy grimace, and the child's third-eye diadem create an eerily frozen scene of a foreboding ritualistic game.

The five large figural paintings provided by Henry Heerup were characterized by themes of pleasure and entertainment. Heerup, who had made a sensitive study of clowns from Bakken

¹³ "To dyremennesker. Deres grønne kroppe harmonerer med den grønne verden de lever i. Kun deres røde øjne bryder, og kigger forundret ud paa beskueren. 'Vi er nye og glade,' siger de, 'for vi er først for nylig født, saa vi har ret til at glæde os over livet.'" Robert Dahlmann Olsen, "Egill Jacobsen," *Helhesten* 1, no. 2: 43.

in 1930, provided a composition called *Circus*, which appears to depict a brilliantly lit show horse balanced on balls in the circus ring (fig. 136). In the images he displayed in the tent, ubiquitous symbols like peace signs and clovers combine with colorful figurative elements such as children and daily activities to create child-like scenes that are about both universal and everyday life. In their simplistic aesthetic and bright colors, they are the closest in style to the six naïve paintings of forests and animals exhibited by Hans Scherfig.

Completely abstract paintings were also on display. The works Svavar Guðnason and Else Alfelt exhibited were characteristic of their all-over compositions, which suggest of fantastical landscapes. Guðnason's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1941, one of eight paintings he contributed to the show, presents a whirlpool of colorful organic forms bisected by a central diagonal line (fig. 137). The André Masson inspired composition provides only a hint of a background in the lower left quadrant, while the swirling blobs of color seem to be being sucked into the upper left corner. Guðnason would have seen Masson's works in Paris when he studied with Fernand Léger. He also exhibited what was most likely a purposefully unfinished work, where the abstract shapes are only partially filled in with diluted color and exposed canvas takes up most of the image. Else Alfelt provided eight compositions with sharply pointed, upward surging shapes, which she created through an intuitive, rhythmic use of color to form the overall image.¹⁴ Else Fischer-Hansen contributed twelve paintings, while Egon Mathiesen contributed eight, and Ejler Bille exhibited five.¹⁵

¹⁴ It remains unclear which specific works Alfelt exhibited.

¹⁵ None of the five paintings submitted by Bille were for sale. At the time they belonged to Elna Fønnesbech-Sandberg and Spencer Kristiansen; it is unclear where the works are now. Robert Dahmann Olsen to Ejler Bille, June 19, 1941, volume 2, Helhesten Archive.

A diverse group of people was involved in the Tent exhibition—the Helhesten artists were ready, willing, and able to reach outside their inner circle to involve other talented figures. As the group’s major collective work in addition to the journal, the exhibition was organized and maintained by all of the artists. Mathiesen and Lundstrøm had obtained permission from a park forester named Martensen Larsen to exhibit on the Dyrehaven grounds, more precisely, the bus parking lot between the park and Bellevue Beach.¹⁶ Mathiesen played a major role in the exhibition and provided two texts for the corresponding journal issue.¹⁷ In addition to helping to organize and install the exhibition, Finn Juhl also bought the artists’ works during the war. He was a leading proponent of modern Danish design, later designing the Trusteeship Council Chamber of the United Nations headquarters in New York City. Also involved were established figures such as Lundstrøm and Scherfig, who was better known as a *kulturradikale* writer. Such fluid associations also allowed for Helhesten artists to exhibit with other *kunstnersammenslutninger* such as Corner (est. 1932), Høst (Harvest, est. 1932), and Grønningen, in shows that also included different kinds of styles.¹⁸

This overview of Helhesten’s Tent exhibition challenges the conclusions of earlier art historians, who argue that the show was a last-minute enterprise hastily put together on the tail end of the exhibition season so that the artists could sell their works. Both Peter Shield and Gunnar Jespersen characterize the exhibition as an amusing but unsuccessful one-off, with Shield describing it as a “fiasco” because it did not realize the artists’ intention of creating a

¹⁶ Jespersen, *De abstrakte*, 134-35.

¹⁷ Dahlmann Olsen stated that it was Mathiesen who extended the exhibition. Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Ejler Bille, June 12, 1941, volume 2, Helhesten Archive.

¹⁸ Corner and Høst combined into one group from 1936 until 1942. The Helhesten artists started exhibiting with Corner and Høst in 1938. The 1948 Høst exhibition would be the first one in which Cobra exhibited as a group.

popular art. These authors base their interpretations on the low attendance— all authors cite a figure of 30 visitors—and that the exhibition registered a loss of 5,000 kroner.¹⁹

But these interpretations are wrong. In actual fact, over 2,400 people attended the exhibition's opening weekend alone.²⁰ Further, the exhibition was covered by no less than eighteen news items. At least one-third of the works were not for sale. The considerable time and expense of printing advertisement posters and an exhibition catalogue, as well as the procurement of a huge tent from a city several hours away and the additional construction it required, all challenge any notion of a casual approach to the organization of the exhibition. Neither is the choice of its location straightforward. The site was ten miles outside of Copenhagen, the center of the Danish art world, and as an immensely popular tourist destination, the Dyrehaven area also attracted one of the largest concentrations of Nazis who were also in pursuit of leisure entertainment that summer. The huge crowds, moreover, required heightened policing of the site. "Bellevue: Thirteen Artists in a Tent" was a deliberate attempt at cultural critique and exploration of the idea of the exhibition as an inclusive, experiential event during the war. It soon becomes clear that there was far more at stake for Helhesten with this exhibition than increasing the group's exposure and expanding its market.

¹⁹ This figure comes from Jespersen who, according to art historian Peter Shield, was given "verbatim observations" by Egon Mathiesen. See Jespersen, *De abstrakte*, 134-35 and Peter Shield, "Spontaneous Abstraction and its Aftermath in Cobra, 1931-51" (Phd diss., The Open University, 1984), 121. Shield compares the exhibition's attendance to that of a Wilhelm Freddie exhibition the year before, which attracted 20,000 visitors to the Copenhagen town hall.

²⁰ "I strandpyjamas til kunstudstilling: Den nye udstilling i Klampenborg har succes." Undated newspaper clipping in the scrapbook of Sigurjón Ólafsson, Sigurjón Ólafsson Museum Archive, Reykjavik.

The Most Youthful Danish Art? The Fluid Radicalism of the Grønningen and Linien Exhibitions

The advertisement for the Tent exhibition in *Helhesten*'s second issue stated, "Dyrehaven's big tent exhibition will have works representing the most youthful Danish art."²¹ It emphasized verdant springtime, a "primitive" otherness, and youth—all themes that had been used to signify radical art in Denmark since the formation of what is considered the first avant-garde *kunstnersammenslutning*, Grønningen, in 1915. In *Helhesten*'s notice, this connection was made explicit: "Not since Grønningen's first year has anyone attempted to realize a connection with the outdoor areas sought after by the city's populace."²² *Helhesten*'s direct reference to Grønningen in its only advertisement for the show disclosed a link to the 1915 exhibition that is much more substantial than has been traditionally understood. In actuality, Grønningen's exhibition set several important precedents for the Tent exhibition. The radicalism of both exhibitions was predicated on "primitivizing" associations that existed outside of institutional boundaries, which obscured the stylistic plurality of the works on display. As such, Grønningen is crucial for understanding *Helhesten*'s appropriation of the primitive as a part of their cultural critique. In addition, in both cases critics' misleadingly focused on the utopian aspirations of the exhibitions and the structures within which they took place as signifying an avant-garde status, rather understanding either group's transgressive elements.

Established during the favorable cultural climate of World War One Copenhagen, Grønningen's inaugural exhibition was a secession from the established Den frie Udstilling (The Free Exhibition), which itself had broken from the Royal Academy in 1891. The show took place

²¹ "den store teltudstilling ved Dyrehaven, med arbejder der repræsenterer linjen i den yngste danske kunst." Dahlmann Olsen, ed., "Sommerens store udstilling," inside back cover.

²² "Ikke siden Grønningens første aar har man prøvet dette, nu forsøger man at realisere tanken i tilknytning til de friluftsomraader, der søges af byens store befolkning." Ibid.

in a temporary wood shack nicknamed the “Indian Hut” because it was ostentatiously painted in brightly colored abstract patterns (fig. 138). Grønningen’s artists sold works directly from the exhibition, produced their own catalogue, and published articles theorizing their art. The group had created advanced publicity by publishing a drawing of the building in the major Copenhagen newspapers, and they sold advertisement space in the catalogue—a first for Danish exhibitions.

The building instantly became a symbol of the exhibition’s primitivism with its reference to both African tribal huts and the American Wild West. A critic for *Tiderne* (*The Times*) was characteristic in his description:

“The Indian House”...contains the rebels’ exhibition. It is smeared with bright-colored ornaments, which convey thoughts of Indian tattooing. And the introduction of the wilderness of the prairie and primitive forest thickets blends with the ringing of streetcars and howling of motorcars here in the midst of our highly cultivated capital.²³

Grønningen was typical of modern artists’ groups with the reference to vague notions of the primitive as an unrefined “other” upon which a range of associations could be grafted.²⁴ The bright colors of the painted motifs on the walls of Grønningen’s wood building evoked ambiguous ideas of perceived exotic and wild characteristics of Native American and African tribes. Red-lacquer gargoyle-like creatures by Jean Gauguin (1881-1961), the son of Paul Gauguin and his Danish wife Mette Gad, were placed outside the Indian Hut’s entrance. Gauguin’s *Idols* functioned as apotropaic creatures, guarding the work inside and setting a clear boundary between exterior and interior environments.

²³ “‘Indianerhuset’...rummer rebellernes udstilling. Skuret er oversmurt med kraftig farvede Ornamenter, der fører Tankerne hen paa Indianernes Tatovering. Og forestillinger om præriens Ødemarker og Urskovens Tykning blander sig med Sporvognenes Kimen og Bildernes Tuden her midt i den højt kultiverede Hovedstad.” Joh. Elbek, “Fra Foraarudstillingerne,” *Tiderne* (June 4, 1915): np.

²⁴ On the problematic relationship between “primitive” objects, modern art, and primitivism, see William Rubin and Kirk Varnedo, eds., *Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984); James Knapp, “Primitivism and the Modern,” *Boundary 2* 15, nos.1-2 (Winter 1987): 365-79, and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Grønningen was made up of artists from the earlier group Ung dansk Kunst (Young Danish Art), such as Harald Giersing, Sigurd Swane, and Edvard Weie. The use of expressive, thickly applied bright color positioned the group's style somewhere between Fauvism and German Expressionism. By the time they had established Grønningen in 1915, these artists had partaken in a sustained internationalism that marked modern Danish artists' training. From 1905 until the outbreak of World War One, Ung dansk Kunst artists had studied and lived in France and Germany, which informed their efforts to reconcile the newest European stylistic trends with the reformation of artist groups and exhibiting practices in Copenhagen.²⁵

While the impact of the Fauvism of Matisse has been well documented, and Danish artists of the period certainly voiced a preference for French art above all others, this does not mean that German Expressionism and Futurism had no impact. The brightly painted Die Brücke-inspired wooden exhibition building alone is evidence of this. What artists often vociferously proclaim not to be influenced by is precisely what emerges in their work. Herwarth Walden's Der Sturm exhibitions, which travelled to Denmark from 1912 through World War One and exposed Danish artists to the latest international styles during a period when Copenhagen dealers showed mostly late-nineteenth-century European art. In 1912 Der Sturm traveled a slightly reduced version of the debut Futurist exhibition to Copenhagen, and Harald Giersing translated F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto into Danish. This show was followed by Walden's "Expressionists and Cubists" exhibition in 1913. These exhibitions, as well as Danish artists' contact with the Scandinavian pupils of the Académie Matisse in Paris, provided them with stylistic models, as well as examples of alternative artists' groups that were built on an image of rebellion as an assault upon predominant cultural values. As early as 1909 Giersing drew on his

²⁵ See Henrik Bramsen and Knud Voss, "Vort eget aarhundrede efter 1900," in *Dansk kunsthistorie: Billedkunst og skulptur*, vol. 5, eds. A. Poulsen and E. Lassen (Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag, 1975), 349-50.

exposure with French Fauvism and German Expressionism to react against the trend towards realism in earlier Danish art, proposing color as the most important element in painting when he reviewed that year's Berlin Secession.²⁶

Works exhibited in the wood shack such as Giersing's *The Soldier*, 1914 (fig. 139), Albert Naur's *Jupiter and Danae*, 1914 (fig. 140), and Sigurd Swane's *Bornholm Rocks*, 1914 (fig. 141), emphasized the fluid application of bright, semi-naturalistic color in their works. The Helhesten artists recognized their stylistic connection to Grønningen's artists as early as 1939, when Bille had cited Giersing as painting a "living art," that was a model for contemporary artists' approach to abstraction.²⁷ Another connection to Grønningen was the collector Elise Johansen, who was also Ejler Bille's aunt. Her Nyhavn apartment served as a wartime salon for the Helhesten artists, where they met other cultural figures. Her collection contained many important works by the earlier group, which the Helhesten artists saw and discussed openly when visiting.

For its part, Grønningen linked the roughly applied bright color of works by artists such as Giersing to ideas of growth, energy, and freedom, which informed the group's self-conscious image as a tribal brotherhood acting out a collective revolt. The Grønningen artists emphasized the concept of youth, appropriated from Die Brücke and the Futurists, as contributing to its radicalism and promoted the idea that it was the youngest artists who created the newest art in defiance of the academic tradition of experience and training. Danish artists were first made aware of Die Brücke with the group's exhibition in Copenhagen in 1908, and they would have been familiar with Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's manifesto, which attempted to position the group as

²⁶ Giersing also traveled to Berlin to review the secession, actually exhibiting with the group in 1912. See Harald Giersing, "Sezessionen i Berlin," *Kunstbladet* (August 1909): 187-88.

²⁷ "...virkelig levende kunst." Ejler Bille, "To slags kunst," *Linien*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: December 1939), 1-2.

a part of a new generation of artists who “want freedom in our work and in our lives, [and] independence from older, established forces.”²⁸ As art historian Reinhold Heller has explained, rather than the actual age of artists, the concept of youth during this period referred to a distinction between stylistic generations, and identified the artists who were open to new styles and in opposition to the art that had preceded theirs.²⁹

Although Grønningen conformed to this larger modernist discourse linking youth and aesthetic radicalism, the group’s rhetoric and self-managed image obscured the fact that the 1915 exhibition actually encompassed more traditional styles and was supported officially. The temporary hut was built on a plot of land donated by the Copenhagen government, and the Statens Museum for Kunst bought works from the show. The Impressionist-inspired landscapes of the older Fynen painters Peter Hansen (1869-1928), Fritz Syberg (1869-1932), and Johannes Larsen (1867-1961), who had helped establish Den frie Udstilling twenty-five years before, made up a third of the exhibition. Neither Grønningen’s artists nor its critics viewed links to more conservative styles and official patronage as problematic for the group’s independent position within Danish culture.

By 1941 the adjective “young,” stripped of its German and Italian heritage, more than any other word in Denmark, had come to signify avant-garde status of artists. Helhesten’s advertising of its show as “representing the most youthful Danish art,” was in this way wholly inscribed within a modernist tradition that had begun at least a generation before. The tent’s display of more conservative and radical styles within one exhibition is evident with the work of

²⁸ Die Brücke exhibited at Kleis’s gallery, which was the first appearance of the group outside of German-speaking territories. The exhibition was received negatively in the Danish press. Marit Werenskiold, *The Concept of Expressionism: Origin and Metamorphoses*, trans. Ronald Walford (Oslo: Univeritetsforlaget, 1984), 166.

²⁹ Reinhold Heller, “Confronting Contradictions: Artists and their Institutions in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany,” in *Art in Germany 1909-1936: From Expressionism to Resistance, the Marvin and Janet Fishman Collection*, ed. Reinhold Heller, exh. cat. (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1990): 19.

Scherfig and Lundstrøm. These artists' involvement further problematizes the traditional but misleading collective label applied to the Helhesten artists as *abstrakte* by art historians. Artists would not have viewed the measured solidity of Lundstrøm's Purist still lifes or the self-taught Scherfig's naïve pictures as interfering with the aims of the gestural abstraction of other works.³⁰ As one of Denmark's first avant-garde artists, Lundstrøm gave the exhibition credibility in a way that was similar to Grønningen's Fynen artists. He has also contributed a lithograph of a nude to *Helhesten's* joint second and third issue from its second year, and was greatly admired by the group.³¹ Most likely Egon Mathiesen orchestrated Lundstrøm's inclusion, without the intercession of a dealer, from what the artist had on hand. Mathiesen was close with the artist and had written an article featuring his work in 1934.³²

The uncritical reception of Grønningen foreshadowed that of "Thirteen Artists in a Tent," especially with the focus on the physical container of the exhibition as a signifier of avant-garde radicalism. Publicity for the Tent exhibition was coordinated by Dahlmann Olsen, who was also working to secure advertisers, printers, subscribers, and contributors to the newly established journal, despite the fact that he had just been ordered to perform mandatory military service. He had sent a sample of the first issue of the journal to the major Copenhagen daily *Berlingske Tidende* and pursued securing advertisement space and reviews. However, he was most successful in garnering press attention with the Tent exhibition, about which approximately eighteen articles appeared. The responses, however, reflected the Danish critics' lack of

³⁰ One work Lundstrøm exhibited is listed as #270 in Preben Wilmann and Marianne Brøns's catalogue raisonné. See Preben Wilmann and Marianne Brøns, *Vilhelm Lundstrøm* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1977), 370.

³¹ Egill Jacobsen insightfully described Lundstrøm's 1918 wood and cardboard "packing case" assemblages as Dada, arguing that these reliefs, which traditionally have been viewed as heralding the delayed influence of Cubism in Denmark, were actually primarily influenced by Dada. See Egill Jacobsen, "Saglighed og mystik," *Helhesten* 1, no. 1 (March 13, 1941): 23-24.

³² See Egon Mathiesen, "Mosaik," *Nyt Tidsskrift for Kunstindustri* 4 (April 1934): 50-54.

understanding of Helhesten's provocative experimentation, despite honing in on the group's utopian aspirations.

Almost all of the news items about the Tent exhibition highlighted the tent itself as a cheerful summer novelty that Danes could visit as they would Tivoli or Bakken. A review in *Politiken* was almost entirely focused on the structure of the tent, and included no information about the art on display except to describe it as “young and colorful”:³³

[I]t is probably the first time in this country that an art exhibition has been held in a tent, which alone makes their enterprise an event out of the ordinary. It even turns out that such a tent is the perfect exhibition location. The lighting is as excellent for the paintings as the sculptures. In this way the sunlight is filtered through the tent canvas, and falls evenly and equally over the artwork. The colors glow...and the tent's easy and primitive character makes the whole thing wonderfully unpretentious. We have hardly ever seen before modern art in more flattering light.³⁴

The reviewer went on to explain how the tent was constructed and described Juhl's bridge in detail.

Two days later *Politiken* published another article entitled “Young Art in the Forest,” which was illustrated with a satirical drawing that featured a wild deer viewing artworks in the tent (fig. 142). Like the other reviews, this article emphasized the exhibition as a social event while also poking fun at the artists. The caricature was thus ironically titled, “back to nature” with the deer declaring, “I think the Dyrehaven painters are better!”³⁵ The reference to a group of naturalistic painters who used the park as their subject matter, along with the smiling deer ogling

³³ “Ung og farveglad kunst.” dan., “Kunsten i teltet: Sommerudstillingen ‘Bellevue’ har fernisering i dag,” *Politiken* (May 17, 1941): 3. Most likely the article derived from Dahlmann Olsen's request to the Sunday supplement editor. Robert Dahlmann Olsen to A/S Bergenholz, May 1941, volume 2, Helhesten Archive.

³⁴ “[D]et vistnok er første gang, der her til lands har været afholdt kunstudstilling i et telt, gør deres forehavende til en begivenhed ud over det almindelige. Det viser sig oven i købet, at saadan et telt er det helt rigtige udstillingslokale. Belysningen er fortrinlig til malerier som til skulpturer, sollyset ligesom filtreres gennem teltugen og falder jævnt og ligeligt over kunstværkerne. Farverne gløder...og selve teltets lette og primitive karakter gør det hele saa dejligt uhøjtideligt. Vi har næppe før set modern kunst i mere flatterende belysning.” Ibid.

³⁵ “Saa synes jeg, Dyrehavemalerne er bedre!” “Tilbage til nature,” *Politiken* (May 19, 1941): 10.

cartoon renderings of works by Lundstrøm, Heerup, and Pedersen, diminished any potential seriousness in the review. The only artwork that was described, in fact, was that of *kulturradikale* painter Hans Scherfig, whose jungle scenes were likened to the forest setting of the exhibition. Similar caricatures appeared in other newspapers, including one of dumbfounded viewers faced with abstract artworks appeared in the May 28 edition of *Berlingske Tidende* by none other than Robert Storm Petersen, who would also contribute a *Helhesten* cover (fig. 143).

Berlingske Tidende featured a four-part series in *Berlingske Tidende* at the end of May called “Do you know the painter?” The series took the form of a contest by reproducing four paintings from the show and challenged readers to identify the painter by visiting the exhibition. Visitors could then enter the raffle in which they were eligible to win the same four paintings.³⁶ This series, which was predominantly featured in the arts and culture section, undoubtedly attracted visitors to the exhibition.

Kulturradikale critic Otto Gelsted’s article on the Tent exhibition in the Communist *Arbejderbladet* also proselytized the structure, stating “An experience in itself is the large, oblong tent...which in the sunshine has a beautiful, pearly bright tone, crossed with blue shade trees and foliage shade! A series of pines masts support the tent and look like golden, slender pillars.”³⁷ The overly cheerful tone of these descriptions, which cannot seem to get past the provocative packaging to examine the content within, reveals that while the few critics who wrote about the exhibition understood the festive and quotidian associations of the tent, they

³⁶ At least one work was by Carl-Henning Pedersen. The article states it is a four-part contest but I found only two news items featuring it. “Er der malerikender?” *Berlingske Tidende* (May 28-29, 1941).

³⁷ “En oplevelse i sig selv er det store, aflange telt...som i solskinnet har en dejlig, perleagtig lysende tone med blå skyggetræer og skyggeløv indover! En række fyrremaster bærer teltugen og ligner gyldne, slanke søjler.” Otto Gelsted, “To sommer udstillinger: Statens Museum & Bellevue,” *Arbejderbladet* (June 1, 1941): 3.

stopped short of actually analyzing the works of art whose abstraction they did not take seriously.

The striking similarities between the responses to “Thirteen Artists in a Tent” and Grønningen’s 1915 show are just one aspect that linked the two exhibitions. As with the Tent exhibition, Grønningen was a response to Denmark’s conservative cultural politics during wartime and functioned as a showcase for avant-garde artists, yet the more subversive aspects of the show and artists’ links with German culture were in both instances ignored by critics in favor of focusing on more utopian elements of the artists’ styles. Helhesten would expand Grønningen’s cultural critique into an implicitly socio-political one and mine the “primitive other” to restore the positive aspects of the primitive that the Nazis were attempting to eradicate during the occupation.

It was not until the 1930s that another *kunstnersammenslutning* would take up Grønningen’s avant-garde mantle and would provide an environment within which the Helhesten artists would begin to formulate their own network. *Linien*’s advocacy of Surrealism as the antidote to revitalize Danish culture was manifested rather traditionally in its three exhibitions in 1934, 1937, and 1939, all of which lacked any notions of Surrealist shock in their displays. The artists explained in the 1937 special issue of *Linien*, “Interest [in Surrealism] in this country could be far greater, if the Danish art world were able to follow developments through exhibitions here in this country.”³⁸ Rather than adopting any experimental display tactics, it seems as though Danish artists viewed the display of the artwork alone as sufficient to convey Surrealist ideas.

³⁸ “...at interessen her i landet kunde være langt større, hvis den danske kunstverden havde haft lejlighed til at følge udviklingen gennem udstillinger herhjemme.” Ejler Bille, et al., “Liniens Sammenslutning 1937,” *Linien*, exh. cat. (1937), 2.

Linien's 1934 exhibition in Den frie's building was the first major display of Surrealism in Denmark, presenting the European Surrealists the journal championed, such as Max Ernst and Hans Arp, as well as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, along with Danish artists such as Heerup, Bille, Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen, and Richard Mortensen. While the exhibition was hung traditionally, the artists played jazz on an old gramophone, and openly discussed their works with visitors. The artists viewed the exhibition as inspiring a fluid dialogue between their work and that of the foreign artists, rather than directly affecting their style. Of the 167 works shown, hardly anything sold.

When Bjerke Petersen left Linien in 1935, he organized his own exhibition of Surrealism with the help of his father, the influential art critic Carl V. Petersen, called "Cubism-Surrealism." Also held in Den frie's building, this exhibition similarly juxtaposed international Surrealist works with those by Danish and Norwegian artists. André Breton (who wrote the foreword to the catalogue) and Max Ernst arranged the French section, while the Danish contingent was made up of veristic Surrealist artists such as Wilhelm Freddie. Artists included Salvador Dalí, Valentine Hugo, Arp, Victor Brauner, Ernst, Alberto Giacometti, Klee, Rene Magritte, Miró, Man Ray, Meret Oppenheim, and Yves Tanguy. The Scandinavian section also included works by Harry Carlsson, Franciska Clausen, Heerup, and Bjerke-Petersen, among others. It is remarkable that, despite the overtly sexual nature of many of the works from both the French and Scandinavian contributors, like the Linien shows, the exhibition garnered little serious attention by critics and the mainstream press.³⁹

Linien's 1937 exhibition, "Post-Expressionism, Abstract Art, Neoplasticism, Surrealism," was again held in Den frie's building, and expanded upon Bjerke Petersen's show with more

³⁹ André Breton, et al., *Kubisme-surrealisme international kunstudstilling*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: Den frie Udstilling, January 1935).

than 250 works, a quarter of which were by foreign artists (fig. 144). The exhibition was a result of the efforts of Bille, Richard Mortensen, and the painter Hans Øllgaard (1911-1969); when the three were in Paris that year they used the time to meet a number of Surrealists to obtain works for the exhibition. Interestingly, Bille brought photographs of Linien's first exhibition to give artists an understanding of what the display would look like. The exhibition augmented recent international and Scandinavian Surrealism with works by more conservative Danish landscape artists. The hanging was utterly conventional, and again, the exhibition was relatively ignored. The works exhibited included some from private collections, but for those that were for sale, visitors could get a bargain for works by the Danish artists with prices ten times lower than their international colleagues. Despite this, there were few visitors and no sales, which was also due to currency restrictions imposed by the Danish government for buying foreign works of art.⁴⁰

In the introduction to the accompanying special number of *Linien*, the artists professed their aim to bring Surrealist art to Denmark to garner greater awareness of European avant-garde art and stimulate a more sophisticated cultural debate in Denmark. The artists emphasized the diversity of the art on display, and used the word "young" as an overarching term to describe the exhibition: "...where young artists with widely differing points of view are united in inviting those who have made the breakthrough in modern European art."⁴¹ This stress on the acceptance of different styles, rather than any polemical stance, was partially also due artists' advocacy of populism as explicitly anti-Fascist.

⁴⁰ The loss of 3,000 kroner was covered by the independently wealthy Øllgaard. Shield, "Spontaneous Abstraction," 84. After the exhibition Dahlmann Olsen managed to contact Kandinsky and purchased a watercolor by the artist.

⁴¹ "...denne udstilling, hvor unge kunstnere med vidt forskellige synspunkter staar enige om at invitere den moderne europæiske kunsts gennembruds mænd." Ejler Bille, et al., "Liniens Sammenslutning 1937," 2.

Linien's final exhibition in 1939 built on the interest in international art that would prove to be influential for Helhesten. The exhibition, which took place at the Copenhagen University Students' Union, would be the last international show before the outbreak of the war and differed little from the earlier exhibitions. In the exhibition catalogue, Bille continued the themes of the earlier *Linien* texts and argued that avant-garde artists could exhibit unproblematically with more conservative painters, while simultaneously urging critics to make an effort to understand how their seemingly incomprehensible aesthetic was more relevant than more conservative Danish art.⁴²

The traditional hanging of Linien's exhibitions in established exhibition venues highlights that while the influence of Surrealism permeated the group's stylistic and theoretical ideas about art, it did not extend to methods of display. This is somewhat surprising since Linien's artists were very familiar with Dada events and the more subversive Surrealist showcases. Avant-garde provocation within the mode of the *kunstnersammenslutning* exhibition, it seems, began and ended with Grønningen, and would only be taken up again with Helhesten. While they were exhibiting with Linien, Helhesten's artists were more focused on travelling abroad than reforming exhibition practices at home. Until the war, the presence of Grønningen and Linien, not to mention Corner and Høst, precluded any real import to form yet another *kunstnersammenslutning*. The Helhesten artists' exposure to international exhibitions and installations in the late 1930s would further catalyse them to raise their tent.

⁴² There were also several other shows in 1939 that would mark the emergence of Helhesten's artists and their messy gestural abstraction in Danish culture. "The Scandinavians" at the Charlottenborg Salon included works by Jorn, Alfelt, Pedersen, Guðnason, and Thommesen. Even the small presence of these artists in the annual salon attests to both the ongoing plurality in Danish exhibition life and their emergence as established artists. There were two further exhibitions at the Students' Union that cemented Helhesten artists' presence in the exhibition scene: a joint show featuring Pedersen and Alfelt and a solo exhibition dedicated to Heerup.

**“Organic Space Is the Language of the New Age”:
Helhesten’s Exposure to International Displays and Exhibition Practice**

During the late 1930s Helhesten artists’ evolving understanding of displays and exhibition practice abroad came by way of art journals, discussions with other artists, and by either visiting or taking part in (in the case of Jorn) a number of exhibitions in France and Germany. Indeed, while they were abroad, it seems that Danish artists spent the majority of their time visiting exhibitions.⁴³ Much of what we know about the artists’ activities and their thoughts on exhibitions comes from the articles they wrote. As was the case with the development of their theories about art, Helhesten’s artists were also prolific critics of exhibitions. Artists’ personal correspondence and diaries, much of which has not been examined critically, also reveal a great deal about how they experienced exhibitions; they also constitute some of the first instances in which the concept of installation is considered seriously in Danish art criticism.

Helhesten’s exposure to international exhibitions combined with the occupation to bring about a new politically active identity for artists. While the refurbished galleries of the Musée de l’Homme in Paris and the National Museum in Copenhagen were factors in Helhesten’s reformulation of ideas of the “primitive” introduced by Grønningen, exposure to Dada and Surrealist exhibitions shifted their ideas about creative display and collective events into praxis. This meant a new focus on the performative role of the artist and the viewer’s experience within a dynamic artistic space that was participatory, open-ended, and revelatory. In addition, two of the most polemical art displays of the late 1930s, the Degenerate Art shows in Germany, and the

⁴³ During his trip to Germany and France from May to July 1938, Robert Dahlmann Olsen records visiting at least 20 different galleries, often more than once, and many times with friends. See Robert Dahlmann Olsen, *Arkitektur og billedkunst i collageform: Dagbog 1938* (Dragør: 1990), 14-23. Ejler Bille also reviewed several museum and gallery exhibitions he visited in the spring of 1937. See Ejler Bille, “Udstiller i Paris: Foraaret 1937,” *Samleren* 14, no. 10 (October: 1937): 196-97.

International Art Exhibition in Paris, further propelled Helhesten's artists to realize the value of inserting an artistic space into the public realm that was capable of socio-political critique.

The new installations at the Musée de l'Homme presented ethnographic objects as products of a common humanity, something that the Danish artists immediately understood when they visited shortly after the museum reopened.⁴⁴ These encounters stimulated artists' interest in emphasizing inclusive, collective, and universal associations they saw as embedded in vernacular objects, folk art, and artifacts from the distant past. In their 1939 article "The People's Museum: Installation and Décor of the Newly Opened Musée de l'Homme" for the *New Journal for Applied Arts*, Jorn and Dahlmann Olsen praised the building, layout, and displays of the revamped collections, which both had visited several times. The article was generously illustrated with photographs of different installations of the museum.⁴⁵ While their article dealt with the layout and design of the displays, Ejler Bille's text in the same issue examined specific objects on display.⁴⁶ It too was well illustrated, with reproductions of several figural sculptures. These texts' highlight several characteristics of Danish cultural criticism at the time. As contributions written by newly emerged artists to a non-fine art journal about a concurrent foreign ethnographic installation, the articles demonstrate the long-standing non-hierarchical penchant in Danish cultural criticism to encompass new and emerging artists and local and foreign subjects. The 1939 articles also reveal that the artists understood immediately the underlying aims of the new Musée de l'Homme in its strategies of display.

⁴⁴ Bille, Dahlmann Olsen, Heerup, and Jorn all visited the museum at one time or another between 1937 and 1939. Jorn made a sketchbook full of studies there, which is now in the collection of Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.

⁴⁵ The photos included the entrance's large globe, austere vitrines containing photography of different faces, the museum's cinema, and a relief panel of the Arctic.

⁴⁶ The reproductions accompanying Bille's article included fetish sculptures from the Congo, Mexican stone figures, a mask from New Guinea, a war god from Hawaii, as well as the expedition installation.

In their article Jorn and Dahlmann Olsen explained how the museum had achieved its “*folkelig*” organization:

The goal for a popular museum must be to give information on the subjects it deals with as clearly and understandably and as easily accessible as possible. This is achieved by the selection of the most characteristic objects and to exhibit these in the easiest foreseeable way. The mistake...of either accumulating as many objects as possible that can be collected together, or exhibiting the most important and special examples, usually with inadequate or incomprehensible text, is avoided here.⁴⁷

The use of the Danish term *folkelig* imbued their understanding of the museum as an attempt to authentically represent common people. Central to a *folkelig* display, the authors argued, was clarity, understanding, and accessibility. They extolled the accessibility of information made available to the visitor while also pointing out that the sleek, streamlined display methods allowed for as little impediment as possible in seeing objects on their own terms so that they could be interacted with one on one or within the larger framework of the originating culture. The museum, they argued, successfully expressed its “interest in people, regardless of whether they are black or white or have a straight or curved nose, to show the humanistic attitude that surely is of vital meaning for culture’s further development.”⁴⁸ In his diary Dahlmann Olsen privately concurred that, “both the idea and its execution are excellent, despite the hideous outer shell.”⁴⁹ Both privately and in the article he and Jorn criticized the exterior architecture as

⁴⁷ “Formaalet for et folkeligt museum maa være at give oplysninger om de emner det behandler saa klart og forstaaeligt og let tilgængeligt som muligt. Det opnaas ved udvælgelse af de mest karakteristiske objekter og at udstille disse paa den lettest overskuelige made. De fejl...enten at ophobe saa mange genstande som der overhovedet kan samles sammen eller at udstille de mest sjældne eller specielle eksemplarer, som regel med mangelfuld eller udforstaaelig tekst, er her undgaaet”. Asger Jorn and Robert Dahlmann Olsen, “Menneskets museum: Opdeling og indretning af det nyåbnede Musée de l’Homme i Trocadero, Paris,” *Nyt Tidsskrift for Kunstindustri* 7 (Copenhagen: 1939): 5.

⁴⁸ “...interessen for mennesket, uden hensyn til om dette saa er sort eller hvidt eller har lige eller krum næse, viser en humanistisk indstilling, der sikkert era f vital betydning for kulturens videreudvikling.” *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁹ “Både idéen og dens udførelse er fortræffelig, trods den ret hæslelige ydre skal...” Dahlmann Olsen, *Dagbog*, 59-60.

pseudo-historicist and superficial pastiche not representative of the innovative nature of the displays inside.

Ejler Bille's article on the French museum similarly emphasized the museum's humanistic themes, but focused on the objects on display:

The people's museum confronts us with all sorts of alien cultural perceptions. In the exhibition...we read the following: "Any art is an expression of a civilization." ...In this floor can be found some old stone figures from the Marquesa Islands. ...If we look long at them, the word awakens within us with a whole new meaning...it is one of the experiences at the museum, which is due both to the choice and space requirements, that overall one feels how strongly the races and life forms speak through things.⁵⁰

Bille had visited the Parisian museum in February 1939 with Danish sculptor Sonja Ferlov and in a letter to his mother raved about how the new museum contained a "freely created and direct" kind of art that was "not naturalistic in an old fashioned sense, but rhythmic and full of expression."⁵¹ Here Bille was arguing that strange objects could summon inherent, elemental associations within the viewer that were at once linked to the original culture of the work but that could also summon new meanings in the contemporary viewer. He purposefully used the word *feel* to describe how these objects worked on the viewer—that is, on a sensory rather than intellectual level. The idea of objects as vehicles of connection would resurface in the tent.

That Jorn and Dahlmann Olsen praised the Musée de l'Homme as *folkelig* was a direct influence of their exposure to the ethnographic collection in the renovated galleries of the Danish National Museum—a mammoth Rococo palace in the center of Copenhagen that once was the

⁵⁰ "Menneskets museum stiller os overfor alle mullige fremmede kulturopfattelser. I udstillingssalen...læser vi følgende: 'Enhver kunst er udtryk for en civilization.' ...I denne sal findes fra Marquesaerne nogle gamle stenfigurer. ...Ser vi længe paa dem, vaagner ordet i os med en hel ny betydning...det er en af oplevelserne ved museet, hvad der skyldes baade udvalget og pladsforholdene, at man overalt føler, hvor stærkt racerne og livsformerne taler gennem tingene." Ejler Bille, "Kunstindtryk fra 'menneskets museum,'" *Nyt Tidsskrift for Kunstindustri* 7 (Copenhagen: 1939): 6.

⁵¹ "en fri skaben og i udtrykket direkte...Der er intet naturalistisk i gammeldags forstand, men det er rytmisk og udtryksfuldt..." Ejler Bille, letter to his mother [February 2, 1939], in *Ejler Bille: Breve fra Paris 1937, 1938, 1939*, ed. Vibeke Cristofoli (Copenhagen: Brødrene Brøndum, 2003), 75.

official residence of the crown prince. The Helhesten artists were extremely familiar with the Danish collections through their close friendship with P. V. Glob. Their exposure to the collections developing the artists' interest in non-Western and ancient cultures as a source for their art; they were also partaking in the wartime resurgent nationalism that affected the entire Danish population. This is evidenced by the rise in visits to the National Museum during the war, which rose from 125,000 in 1940 to 175,000 in 1942.⁵²

Though it was somewhat more traditional than its French counterpart, with the collections divided chronologically and regionally, the Danish museum also created installations that promoted a universal humanity that crossed temporal and geographic boundaries.⁵³ The anthropologist and soon-to-be director of the ethnography collection, Kaj Birket-Smith (1893-1977), explained the relevance of the collection by comparing it to a fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen. He argued that the museum's collections and fairytales were creative stimuli that affected children and adults alike: "Ethnography is cultural history, and even a very democratic kind of cultural history, for it is not about individuals and individual events, but the working people overall."⁵⁴ Birket-Smith attempted to promote the objects on display as representative of a common foundational link between all people that was capable of arousing the imagination:

What is the significance of the ethnographic collection? ...It addresses itself to the artist who seeks a fresh stimulus and...indigenous people are functionalist in the purist sense, because the form and intent, to them, always cover each other. Ethnography in fact

⁵² Cited in Shield, "Spontaneous Abstraction," 222.

⁵³ For an overview of the plans for the renovation see Mogens Clemmensen, "Det nye nationalmuseum: bygningernes udformning," *Arkitekten* 40 (1938): 33-52.

⁵⁴ "Etnografi er kulturhistorie, og tilmed en meget demokratisk form for kulturhistorie, for den handler ikke om enkeltpersoner og enkelte begivenheder, men om det store arbejdende folk." Kaj Birket-Smith, "Den etnografiske samling: Udvikling og nyordning," *Tilskueren*, special number (1937): 99.

addresses itself to everyone. It opens up new and foreign worlds and sets imagination in motion. And we all need imagination.⁵⁵

Like the Helhesten artists' texts, Birket-Smith's association the idea of everyday *folk* to imagination and creativity, similarly positioned vernacular objects as vehicles through which to stimulate and possibly generate new ideas in the imagination.

Although actual ethnographic objects were not displayed in the tent, artist's promotion of the idea of a common humanistic foundation was actualized on several levels, not least with the creation of a *folkelig* atmosphere. The fantastical subject matter and fluid and naïve styles of the paintings, the magical and universal associations conjured by the organic sculptures' shapes and materials, and the insistent focus on quotidian art forms suggested by the tent sought to relate to other people across time and space as a way of re-establishing human connection during the war. Visitors were to interact with sculptures just as they would people, with curiosity stimulated by unfamiliar abstraction that was nonetheless reassuringly familiar because of their human scale, natural shapes, and textures. The Helhesten artists rejected any kind of taxonomic classification or modern display cases in favor of dissolving the boundary between the physical object and the visitor. The natural evocations of the tent's sculptures invited viewers to contemplate the art forms and rituals of cultures removed in time and location from war-torn Europe.

The organic sculptures by Erik Thommesen and Sigurjón Ólafsson were based on the human figure but abstracted in tactile materials such as wood, plaster, and stone, summoning associations that ranged from African tribal sculpture to Viking decoration. Ólafsson's *Man and Woman*, 1939, was one of the artist's first abstract sculptures and one of seven he contributed to

⁵⁵ "Hvad betydning har den etnografiske samling? ...Den henvender sig til kunstneren, som søger friske impulser og ...at man hos naturfolkene finder den reneste funktionalisme i ordets bedste betydning, fordi form og hensigt hos dem altid nøje dækker hinanden. Etnografien henvender sig i virkeligheden til alle. Den slår porten op til nye og fremmede verdener og sætter fantasien i bevægelse. Og vi har alle brug for fantasi." Ibid., 112.

the exhibition (fig. 145). The contrast of oak and linden wood, vertical and horizontal axes, and angular and curvilinear planes referenced the differences between the two sexes while also intimately relating them through scale and material into an organic whole. This, and other works such as *The Family*, 1939, with its natural materials and human scale, conjured associations of the basic humanity shared by all people (fig. 146). Ólafsson's concrete and wood *The Dragon*, 1939-1940, sprawled like a gigantic insect or three-dimensional anthropomorphic Surrealist blob at the far end of the tent (fig. 147). The fantastical creature, which sat atop an Arp-like biomorphic base in the tent, combined organic and industrial materials with natural and geometric shapes in one work. Ólafsson created the object in response to the spread of Hitler in 1939. The foreboding the artist felt is reflected by the dragon, which creeps over the vertical wooden support that forms an embracing couple and which is about to be split apart and destroyed by the creature.

While most of Ólafsson's sculptures sat directly on the mossy ground, the majority of the ten sculptures Thommesen contributed, all of which related to the human figure, were set on simple plinths, which resembled packing crates. The three narrow plaster figures on display in the middle of the space evoke plant stems and the ritual totems of ancient cultures, as well as human bones, and they paralleled the supporting posts of the tent and its canvas stripes (fig. 148). These works in particular are also indebted to Max Ernst's sculptures such as *Lunar Asparagus*, 1935. The preference for flowing, curved lines and natural materials in Thommesen and Ólafsson's work also connected it to the organic characteristics of works by Danish Modern designers of the period such as Juhl.

Several of the fifteen roughly carved, brightly painted granite sculptures Henry Heerup contributed to the tent can be seen in fig. 136, and continued the intermixing of themes of

familial bonding and ethnographic objects. Heerup's sculptures summoned associations with Viking rune stones, which fascinated him throughout his life. The tactility of his sculptures attracted the touch, which was something Heerup encouraged, just as he allowed children to play on his larger sculptures, most of which remained outside and exposed to the elements. Heerup chiseled the stone allowing chance to reveal the underlying sculpture in a process he saw that led all the way back to the ancient Danish Jelling stones, which he had chosen to visit instead of Paris when he received a travel scholarship in 1935.⁵⁶ The monumental tenth-century Jelling stones, facsimiles of which were placed in the courtyard of the newly reopened National Museum, were considered the foundational document of Denmark as a nation and its conversion from Viking paganism to Christianity. In his typical tongue-in-cheek style, Heerup wrote of his trip:

On the way...we had brought chocolate for Hans Christian Andersen. But he was not home, so we ate the chocolate ourselves. Finally we came to the burial mounds with the famous granite stone between them. It was photographed near and far. It was measured with a tape measure and by the eye. Paved over well. I gave it a little push. Actually the ornament looks like an old-fashioned carpet beater. Close up the surface has an irregular, dented and mottled effect. But at a distance it gathers into a clear whole. A kind of Impressionism...but it must be said that graves with iron latticework around them disfigure the hills and jelling stones.⁵⁷

This comical recounting nonetheless reveals Heerup's interest in such iconic cultural artifacts was due to their importance for cultural memory and as a source for contemporary art. Heerup's utilization of a culturally significant Viking symbol inverted the racist nationalism the Nazis

⁵⁶ Heerup received a stipend from Christen Dalsgaard Scholarship.

⁵⁷ "Paa vejen...vi havde chokolade med til H. C. Andersen. Men han var ikke hjemme, saa aad vi selv chokoladen. Endelig kom vi til gravhøjene med den berømte granitstenen imellem sig. Den blev fotograferet naer og fjern. Blev maalt med baandmaal og øjemaal. Godt overgramset. Jeg skubbede en lille smule til den. Egentlig ligner ornamentikken en gammeldags taeppebanker. Naerved har overfladen en uregelmaessig, bulet og knopret virkning. Men paa afstand samler den sig til helhed og klarhed. En slags impressionisme...men det skal siges, at gravsteder med jerngitter omkring skamskaender højene og jellingstenen." Henry Heerup, "Rejsen til Jelling," *Heerups Rejser*, exh. cat. (Rødovre: Heerup Museum, 2006), np.

located in such objects by linking the Nordic to the simple, unsophisticated, and everyday. He thus mentioned the carpet beater, the curvilinear design of which he related to Viking decorative style; like other symbols and objects, the carpet beater functioned as a mediatory sign between everyday life and distant cultural history (fig. 50).

Enthusiasm for the vernacular also informed Helhesten artists' interest in Surrealist displays, which they first came to terms with through photographs in the art journals *Minotaure*, *Documents*, and *Cahiers d'Art*.⁵⁸ While almost no photos of Surrealist exhibitions were reproduced in these journals, the emphasis on depicting ethnographic objects in use in journal illustrations and Brassai's photographs of sculpture cluttered in artists' studios or casually placed in a landscape, informed Helhesten's ideas about sculpture as modern objects of daily life that, although they had no real practical use, could serve as vehicles of creative contemplation. Surrealism stimulated Helhesten's interest in the ethnographic, but for the Danish artists it would be toward different ends. As historian James Clifford has demonstrated, for both Surrealism and ethnography, seemingly "primitive" objects presented another reality that existed below (psychologically) and beyond (geographically).⁵⁹ The Helhesten artists were in fact more closely aligned with the modern ethnographer, who according to Clifford, sought to make the unfamiliar comprehensible and find the universal in the local. Thus while Surrealist juxtaposition of unlike elements sought to "make the familiar strange," Helhesten presented objects in the Tent exhibition as tools of re-familiarization with a lost common humanity.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ These journals also provided the itinerary for which galleries artists would visit when they were in Paris.

⁵⁹ Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 120.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 3-10.

The Helhesten artists were made aware of Surrealist approaches to exhibition display in other ways as well. They undoubtedly knew of the 1936 Exhibition of Surrealist Objects at Charles Ratton's gallery in Paris. The exhibition's juxtaposition of "high" art side by side with found objects in sterile vitrines was meant to stimulate an unexpected jolt in the viewer's consciousness. Art historian Janine Mileaf has demonstrated that this approach in effect mimicked the taxonomic display methods of the Musée de l'Homme, but with no discernible narrative or message, the exhibition unleashed irrationality through disturbance, thereby reflecting the Surrealist conception of political intervention.⁶¹ While none of the Helhesten artists visited the show, they were familiar with and visited Charles Ratton's gallery. When in Paris in June 1938, Dahlmann Olsen made a point to see an "extremely excellent" exhibition of African, Oceanic, and Pre-Columbian art displayed with modern art at the gallery. In his diary he described seeing the exhibition as a "major" experience and he noted that the gallery looked like a private home.⁶²

Jorn, Bille, and Dahlmann Olsen were all well aware of the 1938 International Exhibition of Surrealism at Georges Wildenstein's Galerie Beaux-Arts. Although it occurred after the Tent exhibition, in his 1944 article "Face to Face," Jorn included a photo of the main room of the exhibition with Duchamp's coal bags hanging from the ceiling.⁶³ For their part, Bille and Dahlmann Olsen had had an in-depth discussion about the exhibition with Kandinsky when they visited the artist at his home in Paris. According to the Danes, Kandinsky discussed his relationship to Surrealism and his experience of visiting the exhibition two days after it opened.

⁶¹ See Janine Mileaf, "Body to Politics: Surrealist Exhibitions of the Tribal and the Modern at the Anti-Imperialist Exhibition and Galerie Charles Ratton," *Res* 40 (Autumn 2001): 239-55.

⁶² "Overordentlig fortræffelig." Dahlmann Olsen, *Dagbog*, 55.

⁶³ See Asger Jorn, "Ansigt til ansigt," *A5* 2, no. 5 (January-February 1944): 3.

This “glorious report” most likely involved a description of the show’s space, which evoked the dream world of the unconscious and activated visitor participation as one attempted to make one’s way through the dark spaces.⁶⁴ The Tent exhibition modified such Surrealist grotto-like spaces into an environment of openness. The tent’s brilliantly lit space emphasized clarity rather than obscurity, belonging instead of dislocation, connection instead of estrangement, and collective experience rather than an individual one.

Artists’ interest in Surrealist exhibitions was piqued at least as early as 1935, when an image of the 1934 Surrealist exhibition in Brussels was reproduced in *Linien*’s tenth issue (fig. 149). The photo depicts a corner of the exhibition, which deceptively appears as if it is a domestic interior. Upon closer inspection, the objects that inhabit this corner, including Salvador Dalí’s *Retrospective Bust of a Woman*, 1933, are strange and not what they seem. The juxtaposition of natural elements with the overly painted female face and exposed breasts parallel the way that Surrealist objects in the photo hover between “high” art and those to be consumed by the masses. They mimic the cheap prints and everyday objects cluttered in the corner of the room. Although *Linien* included no text commenting upon the image directly, it is one of the first visual reproductions of an exhibition installation to be reproduced in a Danish publication. The photo appeared above a review by Ejler Bille of Vilhelm Bjerke-Petersen’s 1935 “Cubism-Surrealism” exhibition.

Though the Helhesten artists’ links with Surrealism at first appear to be more specific and tangible, Dada exhibitions and events actually had a significant impact on how the artists conceived of the exhibition and other collective experiments during the war, as temporal performative, and social phenomena that expanded the potential of socio-political and cultural

⁶⁴ “Herlig beretning.” *Ibid.*, 30.

critique. Helhesten artists first wrote about Dada in 1937, but most likely they knew about Dada festivals as early as 1932; Jorn certainly was well aware of Dada by 1934.⁶⁵ Helhesten's prolific reading of *Cahiers d'Art* meant that they would have seen several examples of German and Paris Dada events. Accompanying an article on German Dada in a 1932 edition of *Cahiers d'Art* were reproductions of work by George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, and John Heartfield, as well as a photo of Grosz and Heartfield at the First Dada Messe.⁶⁶ In the photo the artists, who stand in front of their assemblage mannequin *The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild*, 1920, hold a sign proclaiming that art is dead. The image emphasizes the role of the artist as political agitator not just by the content of the work, but through joint social actions and the potential of the display of the artwork as a site of disruption.

In 1934 the first four numbers of *Cahiers d'Art* were dedicated to Paris Dada, and featured photographs of Dada artists performing for the camera.⁶⁷ A text describing the scandalous Dada festival of May 26, 1920 at Salle Gaveau included photos of Breton in placards for Francis Picabia's "Far-Sighted Festival Manifesto" as well as Breton and Philippe Soupault's sketch "You will forget me." In the latter photo, the figures form a human sculpture, smirking at the camera and posing in ridiculous outfits. Other photos depict a Dada production on stage and artists posed like circus performers hanging on a ladder in front of a Max Ernst exhibition. In the image Soupault holds a bike under which Jacques Rigaut hangs upside down. These images provided Danish artists with a model of the artist as playful provocateur, who through his actions, playing a role, could question the status quo and "high" art.

⁶⁵ Karen Kurczynski, "Politics," in *Expo Jorn: Art is a Festival!* eds. Karen Kurczynski and Karen Friis, exh. cat. (Silkeborg: Museum Jorn, 2014), 22-23.

⁶⁶ See Georges Hugnet, "L'esprit dada dans la peinture," *Cahiers d'Art* 7, nos. 6-7 (1932): 281-85.

⁶⁷ See *Cahiers d'Art* 9, nos. 1-4 (1934).

There were also examples of subversive Dada performances closer to home. These included the provocative anti-performances of the Danish poets Frederik Nygaard (1897-1958) and Emil Bønnelycke (1893-1953), and the political activism of the Communist New Student Society, which had contact with Berlin Dada and which organized a series of “Dada parties” in 1922-1923.⁶⁸ Culture historian Torben Jelsbak has recently shown that Danish Dadaists focused more on the performative aspects of events and happenings rather than the creation of physical works.⁶⁹ Partly as a subversive reaction to the highly publicized debate over the lack of mental stability of modern artists initiated by the Danish bacteriologist Carl Julius Salomonsen (1849-1924), the figures involved with the journal *Klingen* organized a number of sold-out Dada soirees in 1919. Funded and promoted by the left-wing Copenhagen daily newspaper *Politiken*, the events combined traditional and avant-garde performances of artists ranging from Gustav Mahler and Maurice Ravel to vaudeville and the atonal music of Arnold Schönberg. The father of Linien co-founder Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen, Carl V. Petersen, provided lectures on modern art. During these events Nygaard and Bønnelycke performed their “hyper Expressionist” poetry, including Bønnelycke’s prose poem dedicated to the recently murdered Rosa Luxemburg. The recital, which was accompanied by images of violence and murder, culminated with Bønnelycke shooting an actual gun. Nygaard’s sound poems combined Expressionist and Futurist elements; one performance included exercising gymnasts surrounding the poet, who recited a nonsense monologue under a green spotlight while monotonous piano music consistently increased in volume until an explosion of chords were randomly played at the end.

⁶⁸ Torben Jelsbak, “Dada Copenhagen,” in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries, 1900-1925*, ed. Hubert van den Berg (New York: Rodopi, 2012): 401-08.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 403.

According to Jelsbak, these Dada productions utilized political events for shock value and were interpreted as political provocations, but this understanding obscured the actual apolitical nature of the contributors to *Klingen*.⁷⁰ Yet the Danes' reference to radical German political figures, so unique to Danish culture at the time, and comprehension of the disruptive potential of art, can still be viewed as a politically critical gesture undertaken by the artists. Indeed, Nygaard and Bønnelycke's transgressive stance initiated a socio-political awareness that went against the grain of contemporary Danish culture between the wars, something that would only resurface in the 1930s with *Linien*, *Konkretion*, and later *Helhesten*.

In 1922 a more politically engaged group, the Communist New Student Society, was established in Copenhagen. Their "Dada parties," which were often accompanied by political pamphlets, reportedly involved nonsense poetry and took place in locations such as the attic of a horse stable, which was decorated with photomontages. Although the *kulturradikale* writers Rudolph Broby-Johansen and Harald Landt Momberg (1896-1975) would move on from their Dada poetry phase, their work was very familiar to the *Helhesten* artists.

The *Helhesten* artists' belief in the utopian elements of Communism and potential for collective agitation would inform a more playful approach to provocation than earlier Danish Dada precedents. An examination of the extant photographs of "Thirteen Artists in a Tent" reveal the exhibition as a social proto-happening that called attention to itself as a transgressive yet accessible event in the public sphere. The photos also communicate an image of the exhibition as a hermetic work that was as much about and for the artists' own participation and experience, as it was about reaching visitors.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 405-07.

Of the fifteen extant photos of the exhibition, only five depict installation shots featuring the artwork alone, while smiling, laughing, and socializing artists are the focus of ten of the photos. Of these, four actually contain no artwork at all, and six photos depict the artists outside of the tent. The fact that the exhibition was so well documented is uncharacteristic of Danish exhibitions before 1945, which were usually photographed with one or two people-less installation shots, and a fairly bold move by the artists during the occupation. Typically, it was Dahlmann Olsen who arranged the photography, hiring the photography firm Jonals (which also bought advertising space in *Helhesten*) to “shoot the pictures with the different artists.”⁷¹ It seems that documentation of the exhibition as a collective event was paramount, with the architect going so far as to reassure Jorn that “Of course I had taken some photographs of the exhibition even before you wrote, about 20, but I will take more this week.”⁷²

In one photograph, Egon Mathiesen grins as he pulls the rope to raise the tent like a traveling circus performer (fig. 120). This image, along with several others, all picture the exhibition as an event in the making. Other photos hint at the construction of the space, such as the yet-to-be-used lumber Jorn sits on in fig. 123. This photo presents Ólafsson, Thommesen, and Jorn all smirking at the camera. The two sculptors lounge against the side of the tent, while Ólafsson lazily stuffs his pipe and Jorn holds a beer with a cigarette between his lips. The photographs emphasize the exhibition as a constructed experience and collective event coming into being through the participation and efforts of the artists. Each exhibitor had a different role in the setting up and maintaining of the show, while the advertisement for the exhibition

⁷¹ Although I have found photos from various sources, I believe they were all commissioned, arranged, or taken by Dahlmann Olsen. “Angaaende fotograferingen i dyrehaven lørdag kl. 13, beder jeg dem om kun at fotografere til et billede med de forsk. kunstnere.” Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Herman Bente Jonals Co., May 16, 1941, volume 2, Helhesten Archive.

⁷² “Selvfølgelig havde jeg taget en del fotografier af udstillingen allerede inden de skrev, ca., 20 stk, men jeg vil tage flere i denne uge.” Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Asger Jorn, June 11, 1941, volume 2, Helhesten Archive.

promised visitors a free tour of the park by the artists themselves, who inhabited the tent outside of exhibition hours.⁷³

Other photos also focus on the playful nature of venture and the collaborative social aspects it required. The interior image of the entry space of the tent in fig. 126 features Mathiesen and Fischer-Hansen's daughter, who is gesticulating to the three other figures. Another group portrait, which was taken by Dahlmann Olsen from an extremely low angle, includes all of the exhibitors except Jorn, Alfelt, and Scherfig (fig. 124). Perched playfully over Juhl's immaculately constructed bridge, with a glimpse of Dyrehaven's famous ancient trees in the background, the men and women peer down at us with expressions of gloating amusement and excited anticipation.

Perhaps more than any other Helhesten artist, it was Henry Heerup who appropriated the idea of the artist as performer. His purposeful impishness, nonsense-talking, and tongue-in-cheek antics came through his role as a Danish elf, or *nisse*. Rather than a politically critical or purposefully shocking character, as Denmark's artist-*nisse* Heerup imbued the role of the avant-garde artist with social and playful elements that exploited humor, the child-like, and whimsy to interrogate notions of high and low culture and expand ideas of what a creative experience could be. From the 1930s he consistently wore a red *nisse* cap and rode his bicycle everywhere, even into the galleries of the 1934 Linien exhibition. Heerup identified with the idea of the elf and clown as playful personas that, through their creative and childlike approach to life, questioned the established standards around them. Heerup's purposeful silliness, and later work as a prolific graphic artist with Danish advertisements and with public art, has overshadowed the avant-garde nature of his work, resulting in few critical studies of his work.

⁷³ Dahlmann Olsen states that when the exhibition was extended, it would be manned day and night by the artists who were still in Copenhagen. Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Ejler Bille, June 12, 1941, volume 2, Helhesten Archive.

Yet the artwork Heerup exhibited in the tent reflects the profound influence of Dada on his sculpture and his egalitarian approach to materials. In addition to thirteen granite sculptures and five paintings, Heerup exhibited two *skraldeskulptur*, or junk sculptures. He had started out making Surrealist sculptures with found objects such as *Marie Antoinette*, 1932 (location unknown), in which a rock was penetrated by razorblades and placed under a glass cheese dish like an appetizing meal, or *Rotten*, 1933, which consisted of a mummified rat nailed to a makeshift crucifix (fig. 150). Heerup then started making more abstract objects in stone, which he worked on concurrently with junk assemblages made with found pieces of wood, plastic, and metal, along with discarded everyday items such as pipes, nails, and tires. Writing in the fourth issue of the second volume of *Helhesten*, Heerup had presented a recipe for his *skraldeskulptur*: “No precious materials are necessary here...anybody can make his own junk sculpture. *Start now*.”⁷⁴ The democratic focus on materials, creation, and interaction with the work highlights Heerup’s lifelong aim to creating a truly popular art for the people.

One of the junk sculptures Heerup included in the show (they were his cheapest works for sale at 50 kroner each), *Don Q Saco*, refers to Don Quixote and his sidekick Sancho Panza, the heroes of the novel that serves as a foundational source for Spanish culture, and which Heerup read and used as the subject of his works several times (fig. 151).⁷⁵ In the novel, Don Quixote attempts to reestablish the chivalric characteristics of society through his personal fantasies. Heerup was no doubt interested in the tragicomic nature of the main characters of the epic novel. The sculpture’s wandering hero is depicted as a pathetic birdman holding a giant

⁷⁴ “Her er ingen ædle materialer nødvendige...Ethvert menneske laver sin ‘Skraldemodel.’ *Begynd nu*.” Henry Heerup, “Skraldemand & ‘Skraldemodel,’” *Helhesten* 2, no. 4: 94.

⁷⁵ A copy of *Don Quixote* was in Heerup’s personal library when he died, and he often spoke of his love for the story. A photo of another junk sculpture of the same subject from 1945 is reproduced in Henry Heerup, “Om Skraldemodeller,” *Signum* 3, no. 2 (1963): 2-18.

lance atop a headless horse. The choice of the inclusion of the word Saco refers to Sancho, who appears as a broken toy soldier with his ill-fitting helmet, sitting on a mechanical horse-car that attempts to make its way up an incline. The loyal but unlucky sidekick, who is given a fantasy governorship in the novel, eerily suggests the still intact but highly compromised Danish government, while the farcical nature of the two pseudo-warriors links them to the *helhest*.

Don Q Saco was photographed as a kind of amusing trophy placed before what could be a group portrait of Bakken game winners. Standing in front of the unmistakable stripes of the circus tent, from left to right are Thommesen, Mathiesen, Lundstrøm, and Ólafsson. Heerup's knickknack warriors stand in for the artist: someone has playfully flung Heerup's *nisse* hat onto Don Quixote's lance. The photo also includes the two other sculptors in the show, Thommesen and Ólafsson, who slyly smirk at the object before them. Mathiesen, as one of the exhibition's principle organizers, is also present, along with the older Lundstrøm, whose packing case assemblages served as a direct precedent for all three sculptors' works. The artists look not at the viewer, but at the work, modeling the playful spectatorship they hoped to bring about in the viewer.

Two seemingly unrelated exhibitions in the late 1930s further influenced how the Helhesten artists forged the Tent show as a counter-site to official cultural policy: Hitler's Degenerate Art shows in Germany and Le Corbusier's Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at the International Art Exhibition in Paris in 1937. The Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich, and its subsequent iterations across Germany, heightened the Helhesten artists' awareness of the power of the display of art as political propaganda and advocacy of so-called degenerate art, and stimulated their utilization of the tent space to encourage interactive subjectivity in wartime viewers. Le Corbusier's temporary pavilion and the architect's related theories about architecture

catalyzed the Helhesten artists to formulate an exhibition structure that was as important as the art on display in its formation of a dynamic hybrid environment that mediated between public and private zones and attempted to assimilate with everyday life. These international exhibitions were also related to the Tent exhibition by their status as counter shows. Like them, “Thirteen Artists in a Tent” also presented alternatives to an official display—the Statens Museum for Kunst’s major exhibition that year, “Danish Painting and Sculpture Today”—serving as a transgressive site of resistance during the first year of the occupation.

The Tent exhibition sought to restore the annihilation of viewer contemplation that had been promoted by the Degenerate Art show in Munich. As one of the most visited exhibitions in history, the show was a quickly assembled selection of more than 600 works of modern art seized from museums throughout Germany that was organized as part of the National Socialist cultural campaign against modern abstraction, and German Expressionism in particular.⁷⁶ As scholar Neil Levi has argued, the curatorial strategies of the Degenerate Art show should not be assessed as those of a modern art exhibition, but as a vehicle of propaganda and a counter point to the Great German Art exhibition. Levi has demonstrated that it was the Nazi goal to promote modern art as symptomatic product of a contaminated political past. As another iteration of the Nazi mass spectacle, the Degenerate Art exhibitions were political events that acted as sites that encouraged visitors “witnessing themselves as horrified ‘decent Germans’ and deceived ‘German working Volk’...to ‘judge for themselves’ under...precisely the kinds of conditions that make autonomous reflection impossible.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ On the Degenerate Art shows see Stephanie Barron, ed. “*Degenerate Art*”: *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991).

⁷⁷ Neil Levi, “‘Judge for Yourselves!’ The Degenerate Art Exhibition as Political Spectacle,” *October* 85 (Summer 1998): 64.

The Helhesten artists were well aware of the Degenerate art shows, which also served as another vehicle through which they learned about avant-garde art. Ejler Bille repeatedly referred to the effect of Germany's political and cultural policies in letters to his mother during the summer and fall of 1938 when he was in Paris.⁷⁸ Jorn wrote of Germany "burning" modern cultural values in an article on the Spanish Republic in 1938.⁷⁹ Carl-Henning Pedersen had visited the show's Frankfurt am Main installation in 1939, which profoundly affected his work.⁸⁰ Photographs of the Frankfurt installation illustrate what Pedersen would have seen when he visited it.⁸¹ Works by artists such as Marc Chagall and Kurt Schwitters were stuffed in a corner and illustrated with crooked, childlike labels that highlighted the prices paid for the works. Like nearly every photo of the German exhibitions, this image highlights the Nazi emphasis on the haste of putting together their displays in order to convey what they saw as the carelessness and irrationality of modern artists. The Degenerate art shows thus purposefully orchestrated viewing spaces such as these to produce uncertainty and confusion in the viewer.

Inside the Tent, in contrast, the Helhesten artists emphasized the unartful and childlike in the works on display and the ephemeral and quickly organized nature of their exhibition to encourage openness and freedom of response, and in doing so attempted to reclaim spontaneity from the Nazis as a prompt for viewer subjectivity. While the Degenerate shows nullified any individual viewer-artwork experience, since the viewer's response, the Tent exhibition promoted an engaged and interactive viewer subjectivity through the celebration of the very kind of gestural abstraction artists knew was being persecuted abroad. The monumental, completely

⁷⁸ See Ejler Bille, *Brev fra Paris*.

⁷⁹ See Asger Jorn, "Den spanske republik og kunsten," *Arbejderbladets Kronik* (April 30, 1938): np.

⁸⁰ The Frankfurt show took place from June 30 to July 30, 1939. See Christoph Zuschlag, "An 'Educational Exhibition': The Precursors of Entartete Kunst and Its Individual Venues," in Barron, "*Degenerate Art*", 83-104.

⁸¹ For an installation photo of the Frankfurt exhibition see *ibid.*, 94.

abstract tondos placed along Juhl's bridge acted as signposts for the circus-like atmosphere the artists had created in the tent. Once inside, the enlarged covers of the *helhest*, and the childlike writing on the walls created a welcoming and casual atmosphere inviting viewers to peruse the catalogues and visit the show. The informal atmosphere of the Tent encouraged viewers to actively decipher new meanings from the displayed artwork in a liberating process that imbued painting with the power to transform their experience.

The second issue of *Helhesten* analogously promoted "degenerate" themes in a positive and liberatory fashion. The issue included a full-page reproduction of Jacobsen's gestural *Accumulation*, 1938 (fig. 86), with its dripping, secreting birdlike creature, while the notice for the Tent exhibition appeared next to a gallery advertisement for the work of the Edvard Munch. The journal's second issue also contained a profile on Sherwood Anderson, poems by Franz Kafka, references to James Joyce, and an analysis of the Dada filmmaker Albert Mertz (1920-1990), illustrated with a photo still from a Marx Brothers film. All of these references deliberately explored cultural elements condemned by the Nazis and ignored by the conservative Danish art establishment.

The Tent exhibition's organizers took into account the kind of spectator that would be visiting their space in the summer of 1941. They were aware that visitors would be different from those to exhibitions from before the war. They knew that visitors to their show would have a very short attention span for anything grave, overly serious, or shocking. The artists therefore tried to erode the idea that attending the exhibition was a serious cultural activity by promoting the show as a fun pastime that was similar to going to the beach or taking an amusement park ride; it was an experience that could stimulate a similar type of relaxed and even euphoric response. The space therefore encouraged aimless meandering and resting in its open, brilliantly

lit, and festive space that was nonetheless quiet enough to promote contemplation. The tent's carnival atmosphere invited viewers to embark on an interactive process of personal experimentation and creative discovery that could bring about greater awareness and human connection. Instead of the "forgetting" of historical knowledge implicit in the Nazis' staged incomprehension of "degenerate" art on exhibition that Levi describes, Helhesten utilized the space of the tent to promote an indeterminate "remembering" of universal roots and commonalities that was not historical but atemporal and unlimited.⁸² In doing so the Tent exhibition sought to break down boundaries between visitor and artist, high and low art, and public and private space to create a site of inclusion, experimentation, and indeterminate meanings.

By now it is clear that the physical enclosure of the Tent exhibition was of paramount importance to Helhesten's artists as a symbol of their collective aims. The direct inspiration for the tent was Le Corbusier's Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at the International Art Exhibition in Paris in 1937.⁸³ Although, as architecture historian Danilo Udovicki-Selb has shown, Le Corbusier was actually being accommodated by the French government much more than was initially understood, at the time Danish artists understood his tent-like structure to be a gesture of transgression against official institutional frameworks.⁸⁴ Art historian Romy Golan has documented that Le Corbusier's pavilion as somewhere in between a private Surrealist object

⁸² Levi, "Judge for Yourself," 63-64.

⁸³ The International Art Exhibition was held from May 25 – November 25, 1937. Gunnar Jespersen states that it was Mathiesen who suggested the idea for the tent—Jespersen got this idea either from his conversation with Egon Mathiesen or Robert Dahlmann Olsen. See also Robert Dahlmann Olsen, *Danish Abstract Art*. It is likely, however, that it was also Jorn, who if not the initiator of the idea, at least further developed it. Jespersen mistakenly states that the tent was inspired by Le Corbusier's Porte Maillol (1950) project. Jespersen, *De abstrakte*, 134-35.

⁸⁴ See Danilo Udovicki-Selb, "Le Corbusier and the Paris Exhibition of 1937: The Temps Nouveaux Pavilion," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 56, no. 1 (March 1997): 42-63.

exhibition and a public expo.⁸⁵ The idea of the pavilion's fabric enclosure came from Le Corbusier's cousin Pierre Jeanneret, who had experimented with temporary structures for the Communist Party's Fête de l'Humanité. Inside, Le Corbusier utilized the photomural to convey themes of urbanism, anti-war propaganda, and the unfettered creativity of children, though as Golan has demonstrated, he also took some of slogans from the right.⁸⁶

The pavilion, like Helhesten's tent, was made up a fabric enclosure whose structure was revealed as part of the display: while Le Corbusier allowed the exterior cables to remain visible, the rope supports of the Helhesten marquee further infused it with notions of a travelling circus tent (fig. 120). The organic connotations of Le Corbusier's yellow granite floor, meanwhile, was pushed further with by the tent's mossy dirt ground. These qualities of impermanence highlight the element of nomadism reflected by Helhesten tent, which the Danish artists developed from Le Corbusier's pavilion. Golan has shown the emphasis on nomadism during and after World War Two represented a shift toward impermanence in the arts, especially that of the mural, which served varying political agendas of both the left and right at different times. The non-monumental and transient connotations of Le Corbusier's pavilion, for example, would be harnessed by the architect and others as a way of emphasizing humanism and synthesis after the war as part of recovery.⁸⁷

The reference to Le Corbusier signified the Helhesten artists' knowledge of contemporary international architecture, and they appropriated the pavilion's nomadic

⁸⁵ Romy Golan, "Paris: A Cardboard Promenade," in *Le Corbusier: An Atlas of Modern Landscapes*, ed. Jean-Louis Cohen, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 282-89.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 284-85.

⁸⁷ Romy Golan, "All-Redeeming Synthesis," in *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 181-247.

connotations of humanism and goal of uniting art and architecture, but they did so during military occupation and the eye of the storm itself. The Helhesten artists viewed Le Corbusier as the most important contemporary architect, and he was especially relevant for their views on architecture, its relationship to art and people, and the design of an exhibition space. As with Surrealism, however, Le Corbusier's functionalism became a polemic to which Danish artists—especially Jorn—would respond critically.

The International Art Exhibition was heavily covered by the Danish art press and in journals the artists read such as *Cahiers d'Art*.⁸⁸ As one of Léger's students, Jorn had contributed, along with Pierre Wemaëre, to Léger's design the mural *Le transport des forces* (*Power Transmission*) for the Palais de la Découverte. After Léger introduced them, Le Corbusier commissioned Jorn to produce the mural *Les Moissons* (The Harvest Season) and a city scene of traffic called *Les encombrements de la Place de l'Opéra* that Jorn enlarged from a drawing by a twelve-year-old child named Laureau. While they were in Paris, Bille had visited the exhibition, while Bille, Jorn, and Dahlmann Olsen all met with Le Corbusier and Jeanneret, and Jorn and Dahlmann Olsen both reviewed the exhibition and wrote about Corbusier's work. Mathiesen, moreover, knew about Le Corbusier and his work at least by 1937 when he visited the exhibition in Paris, and the Danish artist devoted a chapter to Functionalism in his 1946 book *The Path of Painting*.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ For example, the *Samleren* issue in which Bille's article appeared included a preview for the next issue's focus on the International Exhibition, with a photo of the modern art pavilion. Numbers 1-3 of *Cahiers d'Art* in 1937 featured an article on *Guernica* and the Spanish pavilion, and Alvar Alto's Finnish pavilion. The Danish pavilion was reviewed and reproduced in *Samleren* 5 (1937). Denmark's entry to the exhibition consisted mainly of work by older Danish landscape artists along with modern Danish design.

⁸⁹ See Egon Mathiesen, "Funktionalisme" [1944] in *Maleriets vej* (Copenhagen, Gyldendahl, 1946) 192-205.

As an architect, Dahlmann Olsen was particularly interested in Le Corbusier, who he espoused as “standard bearer” for architecture.⁹⁰ When he returned to Denmark from Paris he gave a radio lecture describing contemporary French art and architecture, criticizing what he saw as the superficial architectural decoration of the 1937 International Exhibition buildings. He posited Le Corbusier as the antidote to what he called the artificial “skin disease” of the exhibition’s architecture.⁹¹ Dahlmann Olsen’s writings suggest that while he admired what he saw as Le Corbusier’s creative use of industrial technology and use of decorative art, the Dane’s own version of an integrated architecture space was more organic and fluid than the Swiss architect’s machine for living. For example, in his radio talk Dahlmann Olsen cited the freedom of circulation and movement in Le Corbusier’s Swiss dormitory at the Cité Internationale Universitaire in Paris, which he had visited, and took into consideration the decoration of such structures. The decorative arts, the Dane argued, was an integral component in creating a successful building and one of the hallmarks of Le Corbusier’s talent. Therefore in his description of his visit to Villa La Roche, he made pains to describe Ozenfant and Léger’s paintings, which he posited as appropriate decoration because of their exploration of surface planes.⁹²

Dahlmann Olsen’s call for the assimilation of art and architecture was part of his conviction that architectural form should reflect the function of the building. In his 1938 article

⁹⁰ “Fanebærer.” Robert Dahlmann Olsen, “Arkitektur, maleri og skulptur” (November 14, 1938), reprinted in Dahlmann Olsen, *Dagbog*, 70. While in Paris Dahlmann Olsen visited and photographed several Le Corbusier buildings, and along with Bille and Jorn, met with Le Corbusier and Jeanneret at their design studio. Dahlmann Olsen reported that Le Corbusier was less than friendly, but that Jeanneret was very helpful and took the time to discuss architecture with him. See Dahlmann Olsen, *Dagbog*, 23-26 and 50-51. He later reviewed the book *Le Corbusier: Architect, Painter, Writer* (New York, 1948) in *Arkitekten* (1948): 218.

⁹¹ “Slags Hudsygdome.” Dahlmann Olsen, “Arkitektur, maleri og skulptur,” 70. Dahlmann Olsen had traveled to Paris via Germany on a national travel grant; presumably the lecture, given on the state broadcasting radio, was part of the terms of his award.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 71-72.

“Architecture, Respect and Decay,” he judged the success of various Danish buildings in achieving this, writing that, one must “remember that the house’s function is to serve as a place for people to dwell.”⁹³ In the article, which directly followed an overview of Albert Speer’s urban planning for the “new Berlin,” Dahlmann Olsen argued for an architecture in which the function and purpose of the interior was reflected by exterior facades. The lack of functional transparency of exterior decoration fed his criticism of the new Danish National Museum in particular, which had combined several historic palace buildings into one structure. This, he argued, had created a “formless mass” that deceived the everyday person about its internal structural system.⁹⁴

Jorn shared Dahlmann Olsen’s view of the importance of Le Corbusier for contemporary architecture, especially the architect’s attempts to assimilate art and architecture into an organic whole, but Jorn was also much more critical of the Swiss master. Jorn published a number of articles on the relationship between art and architecture throughout the 1940s, often criticizing both functionalism and Le Corbusier. While he applauded what he saw as Le Corbusier’s heroic attempts to synthesize a complete architectural space, he lamented functionalism’s sterility and lack of equal collaboration between artists and architects.⁹⁵ In his 1944 article “Face to Face,” Jorn critiqued Le Corbusier’s Pavillon in particular as a failure to integrate architectural space and everyday life. The article reproduced no less than three large photographs of the exterior and interior of the pavilion.

⁹³ “og husk stadigvæk paa at husenes opgave er at tjene til ophold for mennesker.” Robert Dahlmann Olsen, “Arkitektur, hensyn og hensygnen,” *Bygmesteren* 31, no. 1 (1938): 125.

⁹⁴ “en uformelig masse, og bedrager derved...jaevne mand.” *Ibid.*, 127.

⁹⁵ See Asger Jorn, “Architecture Is Not Art” [1943], and “Face to Face” [1944], translated in Ruth Baumeister, ed. *Fraternité Avant Tout: Asger Jorn’s Writing on Art and Architecture*, trans. Paul Larkin (Rotterdam: OIO Publishers, 2011), 48-53 and 54-78, respectively. For more on Jorn and Le Corbusier see Nicola Pezolet, “Bauhaus Ideas: Jorn, Max Bille, and Reconstruction Culture,” *October* 141 (Summer 2012): 87-110.

In 1945 Jorn wrote about the ideal architectural space: “Organic space, the space that grows and develops, just as today’s abstract paintings...evolve like a living organism...that is the language of the new age.”⁹⁶ In contrast to what Jorn saw as Le Corbusier’s artificial attempt to impose a predetermined set of aesthetic values on the everyday lives of people, in 1941 the easily built, practical, and ephemeral tent openly appropriated the working class games and leisure of Bakken—an area known for its tented game spaces. Constructed and maintained by all of the artists, the tent literally created a temporal and spatial circus-like atmosphere with its peaked tops and striped walls that was fluid, relaxed, fun, and bright. As thousands of revelers entered the park that summer to willfully ignore the Nazi presence by picnicking at beer gardens or pursuing cheap thrills at Bakken, Helhesten’s soft enclosure would have blended in perfectly with its festive surroundings and implicitly promoted fun and feckless pleasure inside the tent. The carnivalesque space presented viewers with the opportunity to experience the dissolving, not only of the division between art and architecture, but also that of art and life.

**“Say It with Flowers”:
“Thirteen Artists in a Tent” as Counter-Exhibition**

Asger Jorn’s most important text before Cobra, “Intimate Banalities,” appeared in *Helhesten*’s second issue. The article’s celebration of the quotidian and cheap as overlooked indicators of authentic culture capable of stimulating socio-political awareness was a clarion call for Helhesten’s *raison d’être*. Because of its importance for Jorn’s theory, as well as its contemporaneously diametric position to Clement Greenberg’s 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and

⁹⁶ Asger Jorn, “Notes on the Way” [1945], translated in Baumeister, 83.

Kitsch,” scholars have examined “Intimate Banalities” at length.⁹⁷ Yet the context of the essay—it was written during the early years of the war and published to coincide with the exhibition—has never been fully investigated.⁹⁸ At the very moment Jorn was writing, the occupation was about to take on graver consequences with the banning of Communism and the arrest of many DKP members. Jorn also wrote the text during a time in which he was simultaneously formulating the parameters of the newly established journal as well as planning the first and most important showcase for the group’s artwork. In this way, “Intimate Banalities” presciently illuminates the themes explored in the Tent exhibition.

In the text, Jorn argued that rather than being trivial inanities, the overlooked characteristics of the creations of everyday people, such as kitsch, the banal, and *folkelig*, were the true indicators of humanity and an essential component for art.

It is typical that those who have lost connection with the fundamental in art also lack a sense for the banal...the ability to understand the artistic value of banality. Its fundamental significance for art. There are multitudes of anonymous banalities which have an actuality that extends through centuries and surpasses any work of genius by one of our so-called great personalities. *The great work of art is a complete banality...*⁹⁹

For Jorn, the banal acted as both a window and a mirror, since it was capable of creating an opportunity to better understand cultures of the past while simultaneously promoting self-

⁹⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): 34-49. For discussions of “Intimate Banalities” see Graham M. Birtwistle, “Dionysos and Dialectics—from Helhesten to Jorn’s ‘Lundberg Articles,’” in Graham M. Birtwistle, *Living Art: Asger Jorn’s Comprehensive Theory of Art between Helhesten and Cobra, 1946-1949* (Utrecht: Reflex, 1986), 20-42, and Karen Kurczynski, “Asger Jorn, Popular Art, and the Kitsch-Avant-Garde,” in *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. Monica Kjellman-Chapin (London: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013), 65-103.

⁹⁸ Jorn had written at least a part of the article by January 19, 1941, when Ejler Bille expressed his interest in reading Jorn’s article on “banalities.” Ejler Bille to Asger Jorn, January 19, 1941, Jorn correspondence, Jorn Archive, Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.

⁹⁹ “Det er typisk, at den der har mistet forbindelsen med det fundamentale i kunsten ogsaa mangler sansen for det banale...evnen til at forstaa banalitetens kunstneriske værdi. Ja dens fundamentale betydning for kunsten. Der er mængder af anonyme banaliteter, der har en aktualitet, der strækker sig gennem aarhundreder og overgaar enhver genial præstation af vore saakaldte store personligheder. *Det store kunstværk er den fuldendte banalitet.*” Jorn, “Intime banaliteter,” *Helhesten* 1, no. 2: 33.

reflection. The banal connected high to low, the local to the international, and the past to the present. Jorn argued that the current popular marketing messages of Paris such as of “Say it, with flowers” were, like Hans Christian Andersen’s fairytales, the seeds for authentic contemporary art. It was “precisely the eternal generalities” that were “the basis of art...the facile and the cheap, things that in reality turn out to be our dearest and most indispensable properties.”¹⁰⁰ Jorn’s recognition of the power of the banal to have the ability to level and reorder ordinarily disparate categories grew out of experimentation with Surrealist juxtapositions as well as Danish artists’ interest in kitsch in the 1930s. Rather than create a moment of profane illumination, however, Jorn’s abutments of dissimilar cultural products in the article utilized humor and whimsy to lessen any estrangement in the reader and promote accessibility to his ideas.

Art historian Karen Kurczynski has documented that Jorn’s definition of kitsch, which she describes as:

...neither exactly avant-garde nor kitsch as Greenberg defined them. Rather, he formulated a conception of popular expression allied with kitsch because it opposed the elitism of the avant-garde. Jorn espoused the expressive character of the handmade exemplified in traditional folk production, but also embraced the possibility of making creative use of mechanical reproduction alongside handmade elements.¹⁰¹

“Intimate Banalities” itself exemplified this idea, with its combination of folktales, marketing slogans, and pulp fiction illustrations. Kurczynski has demonstrated that Jorn’s call for popular art through kitsch rejected high modernism as much as it did Socialist Realism, and in doing so, looked toward post-modernism in 1941.

Jorn purposefully chose the word banal because it was equally recognizable in Danish, English, German, and French, in keeping with Helhesten’s mission to reach an audience

¹⁰⁰ “...at kunstens fundament netop er de evindelige almindeligheder, det letkøbte og billige, der i virkeligheden viser sig at være vore dyreste og mest uundværlige ejendele.” Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Kurczynski, “Asger Jorn, Popular Art, and the Kitsch-Avant-Garde,” 65.

regardless of race, nationality, or class.¹⁰² The other word in the title, intimate, was also recognizable in several languages and deliberately multidimensional. Its associations with love, sex, familiarity, and naturalness softened Jorn's polemical argument while simultaneously locating responsibility in the reader. This was made crystal clear when he concluded: "The reckoning attempted here deals with questions of such an intimate nature that everyone is implicated. No one can withdraw his personality from this. *The spectator does not and cannot exist in our days.*"¹⁰³ In an early handwritten draft of the text, Jorn had added the phrase "nor with art" at the end of the last sentence.¹⁰⁴ But this addition did not make it to later versions of the text. It appears that Jorn wanted to remove any specificity so that his argument retained broader cultural and political implications.

Jorn's juxtaposition of unlike elements throughout the text such as Danish poets, French marketing slogans, and made-up fables, similarly utilized illustrations to problematize traditional value judgments. The title was presented so that intimate was set in the classically titular typeface normally used to begin chapters in nineteenth-century literature. Instead of the traditional application to just the first letter, however, the elegant foliate scripts were used for every letter in the word. In contrast, banalities appeared in a streamlined, starkly modern font. The text was illustrated with *trommesalsbilleder*, literally sofa or kitsch paintings, of weathered Scandinavian fishermen and a cropped reproduction of Raphael's Sistine angels, which by 1941 were better known as saccharine-sweet infants than a part of a work of "high" art (fig. 70). An entire page featuring tattoo designs was appropriated from the seedy harbor shops found on the

¹⁰² Jorn also published the text in the Swedish art journal *Paletten* in 1941.

¹⁰³ "Den her forsøgte redegørelse behandler spørgsmaal af saa intim art, at ethvert menneske er impliceret. Ingen kan trække sin personlighed tilbage herfra. *Tilskueren eksisterer ikke og kan ikke eksistere i vore dage.*" Jorn, "Intime banaliteter," 38.

¹⁰⁴ "heller ikke i kunsten." Jorn folder, volume 3, Helhesten Archive.

famous Nyhavn canal in Copenhagen. The tattoos Jorn chose referenced Danish sea life, and were dominated by images of pin-up nudes and implied violence, such as a bloody dagger through a naked female breast. Other illustrations were taken from popular culture and combined humor with impending violence. One cartoon presented the disembodied hands of a monster appearing out of the shadows to attack an almost grotesquely terrified beauty, while a film still from *King Kong* presents the beast, starlet in hand, raging through New York City (fig. 152).

Jorn cunningly embedded political critique into his juxtapositions. Hollywood film stills and comic-horror scenes implicitly critiqued the spectacularization of violence in contemporaneous popular entertainment, and by extension, daily life. During the first year of the occupation, underneath the seeming normality of daily life, Danes were continuously made aware that violence could erupt at any time if they did not behave according to Danish government regulations of restraint and accommodation of authority. Jorn recounted a pseudo folk tale whose silly moralizing could have been written by Hans Christian Andersen. In it he described the suppression of a village whose population enjoyed playing creative, unharmonious sounds on cheap flutes:

Only when influential citizens got the police to step in against the troublemakers, to prohibit the sale of the flutes and arrest all who were found in possession of the infamous celluloid device, did great anxiety quite slowly again take hold of the population of the little town, so one could return to normal—and for peace of mind and the serene social system so valuable depressions.¹⁰⁵

Jorn also included a poem by the recently deceased Surrealist poet Gustaf Munch-Petersen in the text. As one of the few Danish cultural figures to fight—and die—for the Spanish Republican

¹⁰⁵ “Først da indflydelsesrige borgere formaaede at faa politet til at skride ind overfor urostifterne, indføre forbud mod salg af fløjterne og arrestere alle, der fandtes i besiddelse af det famøse celluloidapparat, greb den store angst igen Ganske langsomt befolkningen i den lille by, saa man kunde vende tilbage til normale, og for sjælsroen og den afklarede samfundsform saa værdifulde depressioner.” Jorn, “Intime Banaliteter,” 34.

cause, Munch-Petersen was a strategic choice and the inclusion would have been understood as another implicit indictment of Fascism.

In Danish, the term banal encompasses a range of associative meanings that includes the hackneyed, trite, and commonplace—all characteristics of country fairs, the circus, and summertime recreation. The text's combination of the banal with "high" art scrambled any existing notions of high and low art and questioned any attempt at wholeness just as the tent's evocation of a carnival-like environment recalled the popular entertainment of Bakken and created a space in which existing hierarchies were questioned. The literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin theorized the ways that such leveling occurred during carnival.¹⁰⁶ Although it was not published until 1965, Bakhtin, whose work has been described as a "banal humanism," formulated his theories about the carnivalesque in his dissertation submitted to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in 1940—the same moment Jorn was writing "Intimate Banalities."¹⁰⁷ Both Bakhtin and Jorn considered literary forms as potential sites of resistance to authority and the place where cultural change could take place. Helhesten's circus tent, and its direct referencing of the Bakken amusement park and its roots in working class and folk entertainment, was a spatial extension of such textual resistance to authority.

As it is so related, Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque has been used before to interpret Jorn's artwork. Art historian Stine Høholt has applied Bakhtin's theory to elucidate the connections between the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and *folkelighed* that are embedded in

¹⁰⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* [1941] (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

¹⁰⁷ Caryl Emerson, "Getting Bakhtin, Right and Left," *Comparative Literature* 46 (1994): 296. Cited in Peter Barta, "Beginning the Dialogue: Bakhtin and Others," in *Carnivalizing Difference: Bakhtin and the Other*, ed. Peter Barta (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1.

Jorn's paintings such as *Night Party*, 1945 (private collection).¹⁰⁸ While Bakhtin's ideas undoubtedly lend new insight into Jorn's artwork, they are also particularly relevant for "Intimate Banalities" and Jorn's approach to exhibition practice in 1941. The tent exhibition's activation of Bakhtin's characteristics of the "carnavalesque" as a mode of disruption, or a world upside-down that tests and contests established truths, informed its formulation of the exhibition space as a ludic one where play became an act of transgression.

According to Bakhtin, the carnival was, as opposed to an official feast or event:

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance...all were considered equal during carnival...free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. ...People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced.¹⁰⁹

The exhibition created an actual environment where Bakhtin's four categories of this carnivalistic sense of the world could be experienced. During carnival, according to Bakhtin, familiar and free interaction between unlikely people encourages an unrestrained and united expression. The Danish artists' casual approach to inhabiting the tent stimulated visitors to interact with them in relaxed and natural ways. Moreover, the placing of the human-scale organic sculptures throughout the space directly on the ground also encouraged visitors to interact with the works as if they would people as they meandered through the space, as way of breaking down any kind of boundary between "us and them" or art and real life. In "Intimate Banalities" Jorn explained the *folkelige* roots of high art as a connective thread that humanistically united people across time and medium, stating:

¹⁰⁸ Stine Høholt, "Det karnevaleske som kunstnerisk strategi," in *Asger Jorn*, Per Hovdenakk, et al., exh cat. (Ishøj: Arken Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 35.

¹⁰⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10.

We do not even know the laws of aesthetics. That old idea of selection according to the principle of beauty, lovely-unsightly, like the ethical noble-sinful, is dead to us, for whom the beautiful is also ugly and everything ugly is invested with beauty. Behind comedy and tragedy we find only life's dramas uniting both parts, not in noble heroes and false villains, but just people.¹¹⁰

Another concept of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, misalliances, proposed that during carnival everything that may normally be separated is allowed to reunite. In the tent, commonly contrary states such as young and old, and beauty and ugliness were fused. The sloppy and messy gestural abstraction of the works on display was painted in beautiful bright colors and recalled children's doodles as well as Surrealist automatism. The subjects of the works further questioned the idea of aesthetic hierarchy. Reminiscent of Bakken's hackneyed pastimes while also conjuring ideas of summer leisure and pleasure embodied by Bellevue Beach, titles included words such as play (two works by Alfelt), summer, circus, and carnival (three works by Heerup), Fastelavn (Denmark's carnival, a work by Mathiesen), fantasy (a work by Heerup and two by Pedersen), flower (a work each by Heerup, Alfelt, and Jorn), sun (a work by Guðnason), mask (a work each by Bille, Guðnason, Mathiesen, Ólafsson, and Pedersen), bird (a work each by Heerup and Pedersen and two by Jorn), and organic and cosmic (each by Guðnason). There were also several works whose titles were made up of nonsense words, such as Jorn's *Krip*, *Krap*, *Kresto*, which was the result of his experimenting with his young son's babbling.

Jorn extended the implications of this type of aesthetic leveling to the social sphere, stating, "We know that the man who reads about criminals, reads something about himself. Beautiful dances and movements do not exist, just expressions."¹¹¹ The idea that every person

¹¹⁰ "Vi kender ikke engang æstetikens love. Denne gamle idé om udvælgelse efter skønhedsprincippet smukt—uskønt, som det etiske ædelt—syndigt er død for os, for hvem det skønne ogsaa er grimt forlenet med skønhed. Bag komediespillet og tragedien finder vi kun livets dramaer, der forener begge dele, ikke i ædle helte og falske skurke, kun mennesker." Jorn, "Intime banaliteter": 37.

¹¹¹ "Vi ved, at den mand, der læser om forbrydere, læser om noget i sig selv. Der eksisterer ikke smukke danse og bevægelser, kun udtryk." Ibid.

could not only identify with rational but also irrational behavior, was encompassed by a third of Bakhtin's categories, that during carnival, eccentric and natural behavior is encouraged without social conditioning or consequences. Sleeping inside of the tent, drinking and smoking, and offering to engage viewers within and outside of the tent with discussions and wagon rides, all emboldened playful and even grotesque behavior during the occupation. The artists were also using humor and meandering throughout the tent to elicit unplanned responses to subvert and liberate the assumptions of the proper atmosphere of exhibition viewing. Eccentric behavior was also related to Bakhtin's fourth idea, that during carnival sacrilegious events can occur without the need for punishment. The tent was satirical of official culture, and protected artists and visitors from the eyes of the Germans as well as the official Danish stance.

Structuring the carnivalesque leveling in the tent was the Helhesten artists' exploration of play and playfulness as implicit cultural critique. This was an idea concurrently espoused by the Dutch cultural theorist Johan Huizinga in his 1938 text *Homo Ludens*. Though the Helhesten artists have stated they were not aware of Huizinga's text during the war, the similarities between their approach and Huizinga's idea of play as a democratic impulse fundamental to all people are striking.¹¹² In fact, the Tent exhibition assuredly engaged with each of the five characteristics of play defined by Huizinga: play is free; it is not "real" life; it is distinct from real life in location and duration; it creates order, and it is not connected with material interest or profit.¹¹³ Although there are differences between Huizinga and Helhesten—Huizinga was cultivating a theory of play in the context of child development in the social order that will impact adult lives, and the

¹¹² Jorn and Guy Debord would open the December 1952 chapter of *Mémoires* with a quote from Huizinga's *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, first published in 1919. In Jorn's personal library there are two editions of *Homo Ludens*, one in German (1960), and one in Danish (1963). The texts of both are heavily marked in Jorn's hand throughout.

¹¹³ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 7-13.

Helhesten artists' interest in play and spontaneity was as an essential part of actual adult life—during the occupation, the artists' interest in these qualities *was* a way of creating order. The celebration of disorder and open-endedness and ludic activities was not only an avant-garde response to Surrealism and Dada, it was a way of coping during the war, in effect inverting the overly controlled reality around them into something livable.

That play involves a certain level of freedom—that is, it is free of determinism and never imposed as a moral duty—aligns to the open-endedness and spontaneity of Helhesten's approach to art making and the potential for art to arouse an undetermined yet transformative experience in both artist and viewer. Huizinga contrasted the freedom of play with the rules and cultural functions of ceremonies, implying that the dictatorial approach of the Nazis was eradicating the play element in society.¹¹⁴ As an informal gathering space where there were no rules about how to act and creative thought was encouraged, the Tent exhibition was a subversive alternative to the rigidly regulated choreography of the Nazi mass spectacles and parades, which also took place in Denmark. The exhibition engaged with the idea of play during a time of impossibility of any real political action, a condition Huizinga cited as stimulating a greater need for play.¹¹⁵ Helhesten was asserting to a general public Huizinga's dictum that even in oppressed conditions, play is not lost to the people.

Ejler Bille had similarly written about play in his article “Art and Play” (the text appeared next to the review of *The 18th of April*, the collection of satirical poems that mocked Nazi rhetoric) in an issue of *Linien* in 1934:

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 101. While National Socialism is not mentioned specifically, *Homo Ludens* is undoubtedly a negative assessment of the German government. A less thinly veiled critique can be found in his *In de schaduwen van morgen* (*In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, 1935-1936). Huizinga gave a lecture criticizing the German influence on Dutch science in 1941 and was subsequently arrested by the Nazis, dying in detention in 1945.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 16.

The human being plays. ...Some can still love, some can still go down a street and say: here I am—I am a free mammal, I breathe with my lungs...despite everything, despite Heil Hitler, standardization, discipline, such and such to order—Jawohl. ...Despite everything there are still people, cultivators of life...who vibrant, sensitive to every mood feel existence bubbling and fizzing within them. ...These people are true artists. They feel life...and take firm hold of it and express it in thought, color or form. This is the true creative human being—the artist, who shapes life. Art is actually play. The child plays, but the grown human being creates, in order to live spiritually and materially—play has taken on a practical purpose.¹¹⁶

Like a playground, carnival, or magic circle, play is limited in time and space. The Tent exhibition's transient nature and enclosed space separated it from the daily operations of the surrounding park, while inside the artists were able to create a sense of control and order over the uncontrollable. This being “apart-together,” Huizinga argued, is a communal ideal in an exceptional situation in which the game players create order and provide meaning inside the circle of the game where the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer apply.¹¹⁷

Like many of the exhibitions discussed in this chapter, the “Thirteen Artists in a Tent” was a counter exhibition—it was held concurrently with the largest art show that summer in one of Copenhagen's largest and most historic buildings, the Statens Museum for Kunst. The national gallery's exhibition “Danish Painting and Sculpture Today” was the official showcase of the Danish cultural establishment, with over 400 paintings and sculptures by more than 100 artists.¹¹⁸ Despite its title, the art on display was predominantly by artists of earlier generations, such as those who had exhibited in Grønningen's inaugural exhibition twenty-five years before.

¹¹⁶ “Mennesket leger...Nogle kan endnu elske, nogle kan endnu gaa gennem en gade og sige: her er jeg—jeg er et frit pattedyr, jeg aander ved lunger...endnu trods alt, trods heil hitler, ensrettethed, disciplin, saadan og saadan pr. komando—jawohl...Trods alt er der mennesker, livsdyrkere...vibrerende, givende efter for enhver sindsstemning føler tilværelsen bruse og boble i sig...Disse mennesker er sande kunstnere. Disse, der føler livet...holder det fast og giver det udtryk i tanke, farve eller form. Dette er det skabende menneske—kunstneren, der former livet. Kunst er egentlig leg. Barnet leger, men det voksende menneske skaber, for at leve aandeligt og materielt—legen har faaet et praktisk formaal.” Ejler Bille, “Kunst og leg,” *Linien* 1, no. 6 (October 15, 1934): 10.

¹¹⁷ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11-12.

¹¹⁸ “Dansk maleri og skulptur i dag,” Statens Museum for Kunst, May 7 – September 7, 1941.

Rather surprisingly, the exhibition has not been examined in the art historical literature. This is perhaps because it differed little from director Leo Swane's shows from before the war. Swane, who was the brother of Grønningen artist Sigurd Swane and subject of Giersing's *Soldier* painting (fig. 180), had conservative taste and favored the semi-naturalistic landscapes of established Danish artists over avant-garde art. The Statens exhibition most likely took up the entire main floor of the historicist-Renaissance building, which by 1941 had become the locus of the backward-looking Danish cultural bureaucracy and its roots in the Danish Golden Age. Dominated by works depicting brightly painted landscapes, quiet domestic interiors, and naturalistic figural sculpture, the Statens exhibition functioned as a nationalistic and nostalgic enterprise during the occupation for Danes who wanted to see familiar artists and reassuring subjects.

The Helhesten artists had different ideas about what constituted the ideal showcase for contemporary art. In *Helhesten*'s second issue immediately following "Intimate Banalities," Egon Mathiesen espoused the Museum of Modern Art in New York for understanding that "contemporary art is alive."¹¹⁹ Much of what he wrote described the dissolving of boundaries, which was realized in the Tent exhibition. He applauded the MoMA as a place that was "a laboratory [where] the public are invited to participate in its experiments" and where "it is against placing [art] upon an immovable plinth. Continuity, movement, dependence, and relativity before absolutism seem to be important words for their work."¹²⁰ Whether or not Mathiesen was accurate in his interpretation of MoMA's policies, he was aiming his argument at

¹¹⁹ "at nutidskunst er levende." Egon Mathiesen, "Et museum med liv i: Museum of Modern Art," *Helhesten* 1, no. 2: 39.

¹²⁰ Here Mathiesen states he is quoting from MoMA's management. "Museet er et laboratorium: publikum indbydes til at tage del i eksperimenterne" and "...er imod at sætte kunsten op paa en urokelig sokkel. Kontinuitet, bevægelse, afhængighed, relativitet, fremfor absolutisme, synes at være vigtige paroler for arbejdet." Ibid.

Danish cultural figures such as Swane. His advocacy of a “living” contemporary art that was essential to everyday life must be made accessible everyday people. It was this belief that informed his vision of the Tent exhibition as interact with its surrounding public.

Despite the overall conservative nature of the Statens exhibition, in light of the Danish *kunstnersammenslutninger* tradition, it should not be surprising to learn that Henry Heerup, Egill Jacobsen, Asger Jorn, and Vilhelm Lundstrøm all exhibited works in the show. This suggests that the Helhesten artists were making some, if minor, inroads into the cultural establishment they hoped to transform. The average price for a painting in the exhibition was over 1,000 kroner, about three to five times that of those in the Tent exhibition. While the three paintings Jacobsen contributed were not for sale, the two granite sculptures and one plaster relief Heerup exhibited ranged from 300 to 400 kroner, less than other sculptors in the show but about 100 kroner more than similar works displayed in the tent. Lundstrøm’s two figure and one still life compositions were priced between 3,000 and 4,000 kroner, costing ten times that of the Helhesten artists’ works and double what he charged for work shown in the tent.¹²¹ The two paintings Jorn contributed to the Statens show, *Harisar Man*, 1939-1940 (private collection), and *Small Things*, 1940 (KUNSTEN Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg) were not for sale and were painted in a Surrealist vein.¹²²

The playful experimentation with humor, games, and a deliberate non-seriousness made the Tent exhibition a transgressive space in Hitler’s “model protectorate” in 1941. The notion of a geography, or space of resistance is valuable when assessing the aims of the Tent exhibition because it expands the idea of resistance within situations of domination to other forms that are

¹²¹ These works are listed as #309 (#246 in the 1941 Statens exhibition) and #312 (#247) in Wilmann and Brøns, *Lundstrøm*.

¹²² At the time they belonged to a Director F. C. Boldsen, and Elna Fonnesbech-Sandberg, respectively.

not necessarily immediately visible or straightforward. Geographers Steve Pile and Michael Keith have expanded upon traditional theories of resistance, which often consist of unambiguous ratios of power, to argue that resistance always takes place in space and has its own distinct spatialities. Their exploration of these “geographies of resistance” attempts to remap resistance through a more fluid understanding of power relations, political identity, and actual experience that, they contend, must always take place somewhere. To fully understand resistance, then, we need to examine the “ways in which geography makes possible or impossible certain forms of resistance.”¹²³ In Denmark in the summer of 1941, Germany’s power over the Danish people was feared but not clear, and the Danish government’s policies toward Germany and its own subjects were often vague and went against popular sentiments. The Tent exhibition was part of the fragmentary and uneven ways in which Danes carried out forms of resistance during this period, before any proper resistance movement had even started. Sitting in a highly polemical location, the tent physically created a space where ideas about art and life could be debated and explored freely in the public realm and inherently questioned power relations during the occupation.

While the Statens Museum sits adjacent to the oldest park in Copenhagen, Kongens Have (The King’s Park), the manicured gardens of which are the site of the Renaissance Rosenborg Castle, Helhesten’s show, although also in a royal park, purposefully contrasted the historicism embedded in the Statens Museum by partaking in the informality and working-class aspect Dyrehaven was known for. The subheading for Helhesten’s notice, which urged readers to “take the train to Klampenborg,” emphasized their location as one on the outskirts of the usual locations of official culture.¹²⁴ The Helhesten artists knowingly set up their show, the first

¹²³ Steve Pile and Michael Keith, eds., *Geographies of Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.

¹²⁴ “Tag toget til Klampenborg.” Dahlman Olsen, ed., “Sommerens store udstilling.”

playful intervention into the public sphere since Grønningen, outside of institutional frameworks in a highly populated public space. They could have easily sought out another more accessible and traditional space like Den frie's building or the Student Union, where they had been exhibiting regularly for years and which would have been the most obvious sites. Their choice of raising a tent in Dyrehaven was therefore not just about expediency but a strategic move during the occupation that literally sought to move out into the open and in sight of both working-class Danes and the Germans.

Dyrehaven was a site of both the state and the people, and of high culture and history, as well as quotidian entertainment and leisure pastimes. Unlike the officially protected confines of the Statens Museum, the Helhesten artists knew well that the Dyrehaven complex would have one of the highest concentrations of Nazis that summer, whether they were on duty or seeking entertainment. The exhibition appropriated Bakken as a bawdy site for cheap thrills and burlesque entertainment not subject to the rules of everyday life. In 1943 Bakken became a site of Nazi cultural attacks when several people were arrested there for wearing hats and pins in support of the British RAF. When the arrests were made hundreds of the park-going public stood outside and vented their indignation.¹²⁵ While Bakken was not damaged during the war, its sister site, the Tivoli pleasure gardens in Copenhagen, was burned by Nazis in June 1944 because of perceived risqué nature of the cabaret dances, leading to many Danish deaths.¹²⁶ Pile and Keith maintain that resistance is also about insinuation:

Resistance does not just act on topographies imposed through the spatial technologies of domination, it moves across them under the noses of the enemy, seeing to create new meanings out of imposed meanings, to rework and divert space to other ends.

¹²⁵ Nathaniel Hong, *Occupied* (Copenhagen: Danish Resistance Museum, 2012), 166-67.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 251 and 269-70.

...Resistance then not only takes place in place, but also seeks to appropriate space, to make new spaces.”¹²⁷

Given that the Helhesten artists knowingly left Copenhagen and entered a site known for pleasure where everyday rules could be left behind by both Danes—and Germans—demonstrates that resistance groups do not have to act on the terms and in the spaces defined by the state. “.

The tent also served as a gathering space for artists and their families and an oasis for creative experimentation that was rooted in collective interaction. The idea of empathy and inclusion, both personal and universal, was central to the exhibition. Dahlmann Olsen reported several non-Helhesten artists and their friends visiting the space. In a letter to Ejler Bille in June 1941, he described going on a long bike ride in Dyrehaven with Svavar Guðnason and his wife, after which, at 3:00 a.m., they visited Henry Heerup, whose turn it was to sleep in the tent. They stayed and socialized together until 5:00 a.m.¹²⁸ Similarly, visitors to the tent could drift throughout the space and interact with the artists and their friends and families, or take a tour of the park with the artists. This being “apart-together,” as described by Huizinga, was an underlying reason for the exhibition. Historian Nathaniel Hong has explained similar kinds of passive resistance that manifested being “apart-together,” which were popular in Denmark from the fall of 1940.¹²⁹ In its spontaneous and fleeting nature where cultural critique was veiled by amusement and satire, the exhibition undertook passive resistance comparable to the Danish *Alsang* movement during the war, in which huge amounts of people would collectively sing impromptu, seemingly innocent popular nationalistic songs in public, usually in public parks,

¹²⁷ Pile and Keith, *Geographies of Resistance*, 16.

¹²⁸ Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Ejler Bille, June 19, 1941, volume 2, Helhesten Archive.

¹²⁹ Hong, *Occupied*, 45. Being “apart-together” is similar to Karen Kurczynski’s understanding of collective projects such as the decoration of the Copenhagen kindergarten by Helhesten as “singular-collective” creation. See “Communal Expressions,” in Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avant-garde Won't Give Up* (London: Ashgate, 2014), 65-104.

that ridiculed their occupiers. The emphasis on social interaction and belonging would have been imperative during the isolation of the war, enacted within the framework of the group structure as a liberating force for creativity.

The tent's permeable yet protective boundary within which divisions between art and life were to be dissolved implicitly questioned the Germans assertion of authority through the manipulation of space—by setting up boundaries and occupying spaces formerly used for and by Danes—and control of movement across those boundaries. The very existence of the space implied resistance that was subjective, fluid, and even imagined. In this way, the kind of resistance Helhesten was partaking in was not an explicit questioning of authoritative power, but, as Pile and Keith describe, “through experiences which are not so quickly labeled power, such as desire and anger, capacity and ability, happiness and fear, dreaming and forgetting.”¹³⁰ In contrast to the overly controlled reality surrounding them, any boundaries—inside and outside, or us and them—were porous and questionable.

It was precisely because of the purposefully ludic and utopian approach of “Thirteen Artists in a Tent” that the exhibition was forgotten from almost the moment the artists lowered their tent. Yet the contributors' strategies to engage the public realm, explore the creative and transgressive potential of play and spontaneity, not to mention the gestural semi-abstraction of the works they displayed, all prefigure Cobra's collective events and exhibitions, as well as the subversive strategies of the SI.

¹³⁰ Pile and Keith, *Geographies of Resistance*, 3.

On the basis of a consistently positive attitude we have been successful at involving major areas in support of human expansion and liberation, which until today have been declared taboo by the radical tradition. It has been our task to bring to life the folkloristic, historical and mystic-psychological values, which [the art establishment] has freely misused at its pleasure until now. The publication of *Helhesten* is currently discontinued, but it is our hope that it will still live on within Danish art life. Thank you for being with us.¹

“The final Helhest,” November 1944

CHAPTER 5

The Legacy of Helhesten

As the project of creative resistance neared its end, the contributors to *Helhesten* assessed their wartime corpus as a success. “The final Helhest,” a group statement which closed the journal’s last issue in November 1944, triumphantly hailed the group’s dual challenge to unchecked cultural power and emphasized the utopian impulse in the artists’ work. Indeed, the artists would uphold *Helhesten* as an ideal moment of avant-gardism throughout their later careers. Some four decades later Egill Jacobsen later recalled it this way:

Our point of departure, when we issued the magazine *Helhesten* during the German occupation, was much more revolutionary than has so far been understood. We became an art movement. It was not what we expected...[we expected] to release all of the creative forces. If everyone was allowed to develop their own abilities, it could release an incredible force into society. We pointed out this force of imagination, which anyone can find in child and folk art. As painters we wished to discover and express what was hidden within us, the unconscious that keeps people alive. Just as it is art that keeps society alive.²

When he was asked in the same interview whether he had believed that “fantasy art” could influence social and political issues, Jacobsen replied, “Yes, we felt that when people understood

¹ “Paa basis af en konsekvent positiv holdning er det lykkedes os at inddrage store omraader til støtte for den menneskelige expansion og frigørelse, der indtil idag har været lyst til i tabu af den radikale tradition. Disse folkloristiske, historiske og mystisk psykologiske værdier, som reaktionen indtil idag uimodsagt har misbrugt efter forgodtbefindende, har det været vor opgave at levendegøre. Udgivelsen af *helhesten* er foreløbig indstillet, men det er vort haab, at den stadig vil leve videre inden for dansk kunstliv. Tak for denne gang.” The editors, “Den sidste *helhest*,” *Helhesten* 2, nos. 5-6 (November 11, 1944): 168.

² Egill Jacobsen in an undated interview with Ole Hyltoft. Per Hovdenakk, *Egill Jacobsen*, vol. 2, trans. Peter Shield (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1985), 89.

our pictures it would change society. Make society warmer, more human, free and tolerant.”³

Jacobsen’s remarkable statements attest to the importance the Danish artists’ belief in the potential of art to serve as a means of energizing the populace, provide therapeutic release at times of subjugation, and challenge the social pressures to conform. In addition, they upheld that art was something that was available to anyone who chose to explore it. Such a democratic and humanist approach to art, moreover, was perfectly suited to immediate postwar recovery.

Why, then, was *Helhesten* virtually forgotten the moment it ended, only to be “rediscovered” in the 1960s, and then as an originator of Cobra? To understand what happened we must return to the war. Denmark was occupied for more than five years, from April 1941 until May 1945, when it was liberated by the British; General Bernard Montgomery was hailed a hero alongside the king when they paraded through the newly freed Copenhagen streets together. The last issue of *Helhesten* came out during the last six months of the occupation, a period in which resistance activities and German retaliation escalated, and yet Danes began to envision life after the war.

Helhesten’s reception during and immediately after the occupation tells us much about why the group was subsumed into histories of Cobra. It also points to larger cultural-political issues in postwar Europe and the cultural dominance of the United States. It must be emphasized, that *Helhesten* was a fully-fledged avant-garde operation by 1945, rather than simply a prelude to Cobra. As we shall see, the very nature of the group’s focus on collectivity, social transformation, and cultural agitation, though of paramount importance for vanguard art groups in the postwar years, would actually work to undermine the significance of *Helhesten*. Moreover

³ Ibid., 91.

Helhesten could not escape its *raison d'être*, which was one of resistance. Once Denmark was no longer under the Nazi occupying power, Helhesten had to dissolve, evolve, or cease to exist.

“Thank You for Being with Us”: Wartime and Immediate Postwar Reception

Helhesten was ignored equally by the Germans and the Danish cultural elite during the occupation years. How surprising then, to learn that it received a healthy amount of attention from the mainstream press while it was in operation. During the war, the Danish art critics viewed Helhesten with bemused ambivalence. Of the approximately twenty-four extant published items featuring the group, most acknowledged it as youth-lead, radical, and new. Yet, without exception, there was confusion as to what its aims and contribution were. Without the benefit of historical distance, contemporary observers viewed the group's semi-figurative abstraction and focus on fantasy as a naïve approach that needed to be further developed if it were to be of long-lasting significance.

The attention the group received from the major Copenhagen newspapers was due partly to the Danish tradition of close press coverage of art exhibitions, as well as to Robert Dahlmann Olsen's indefatigable publicity efforts. Publications featuring Helhesten during the war dealt with the publication of the journal's various numbers (three items), the inauguration of the “Thirteen Artist in a Tent” exhibition (eighteen), the opening of a bar for visitors to socialize with the group (one), and the journal's closure (two).⁴ While the critics received the group's various enterprises with enthusiasm, almost always this was laced with a bewildered and mocking tone. Such reactions revealed the establishment's willingness to begrudgingly tolerate

⁴ The Helhesten artists also featured individually and together in several news items not specific to the group, such as the decoration of the Hjortøgade kindergarten classrooms with the Høst artists, and the various *kunstnersammenslutninger* exhibitions in which they partook.

the group as long as it wasn't taken too seriously. This view remained unchanged until the end of the war, at which time however, the critiques grew harsher.

An article in *Politiken* in November 1941 that marked the occasion of the end of the journal's first volume was typical: "The last issue of art journal *Helhesten*, which is the organ for the most extreme wing of modern art, contains a number of utterly brilliant color lithographs."⁵ The brief text, which also gave an overview of the contents of the issue, did not actually state why the art was modern, or what the style looked like. The illustration accompanying the piece was a photo of an ancient statue from Cypress, which linked the journal to ancient artifacts. Another article, this one in *Ekstra Bladet* in February 1943, discussed the journal's joint second and third number of the second volume. It similarly omitted any aesthetic assessment. Entitled "Viable Ghost," the article described the issue as "lively and excellent" and was illustrated with a photograph of a Sudanese sculpture.⁶ The unnamed author stressed the artists' connections to Surrealism, calling them "Nordic Surrealists and Symbolists," and highlighted the journal's featuring of African art.⁷ The emphasis in these articles on the contents of *Helhesten* was an acknowledgement of the journal's wide-ranging scope and the group's close links to European modernism.

The authors, however, were consistently silent on *what* the Danish artists were actually doing with their works, *why* they would include subjects such as African art, and *how* they were related to Surrealism. One must take into account, not only the lack of historical distance, but also the fact that critics were writing during the occupation when the specter of censorship, or

⁵ "Det sidste nummer af kunstbladet *Helhesten* der er organ for den mest yderliggaaende fløj af modern kunst, indeholder en række aldeles fremragende farvelitografier..." eks, "Nyt nummer af *Helhesten*," *Politiken* ((November 1941).

⁶ "Livligt og fortræffeligt." "Levedygtig gespenst," *Ekstrabladet* (February 20, 1943): 6.

⁷ "Nordiske surrealist og symbolister." *Ibid.*

worse, loomed large. Or perhaps one can attribute the confusion to the art itself, which, while aiming to be political, adamantly refused any didacticism. Elision and parody were necessary components of a resistance art. Perplexity on the part of critics was thus inevitable.

An anonymous November 1941 *Berlingske Tidende* article was, at least on the surface, supportive. However, the tiny length of the text—it was four sentences long—betrays a relative disinterest in the journal, while the jovial tone ribbed the group’s self-consciously avant-garde platform. The author wrote ironically that the journal was “a lively and annoying organ in an otherwise relatively tame time in the art world...the editor, Herr Dahlmann Olsen, announces as proudly as a cock that the second year will be even better. As a regular reader I must exclaim: Is it really possible?!”⁸ Despite the text’s conclusion that the “editors feel the pulse of time,” it was illustrated with modernist sculptor Axel Salto’s cover of the *helhest*, which drew attention to the group’s connection to older established artists who were not necessarily stylistically or ideologically representative of the group.⁹ The press’s sardonic treatment of *Helhesten* extended to segments outside of the art and culture sections. One piece in *Politiken*’s recurring column “Overheard in Line 8,” played off the homophone of the *helhest* as “whole-horse,” quipping “Have you heard that *Helhesten* has ended? Yes, it’s sad. Couldn’t it just have been cut into a half-horse?”¹⁰

Politiken did publish an actual article about the closure of the journal in January 1945, which though positive in places, blatantly attacked the group’s aesthetic. Entitled “*Helhesten*

⁸ “...et livligt og irriterende organ i en ellers—kunstnerisk set—lidt tam tid...redaktøren, Hr. Dahlmann Olsen, kan stolt som en hane meddele, at 2. aargang bliver endnu bedre. Som almindelig læser maa jeg udbryde: Er det virkelig muligt?!” “*Helhesten* fylder 1 aar,” *Berlingske Tidende* (November 1941).

⁹ “...og her føler redaktionen tiden paa pulsen.” Ibid.

¹⁰ “Har du hørt, at *Helhesten* er gaaet ind? Ja, det er trist. Ku' man ikke ha' nøjedes med at skære den ned til en hal' hest.” “Hørt i Linje 8,” *Politiken* (November 1944).

Neighing No More,” the half-page feature recognized the group as representing an avant-garde change in the cultural realm, stating, “The abstract artists have not put down their weapons, they continue on foot in sure conviction that the future belongs to them.”¹¹ The allusion to physical battle was undoubtedly inspired by the last months of the occupation, something that also fed the author’s criticism of the artists’ art theory:

Here comes a flock of talented youths and they tell us that we should not perceive with the eyes but with the mind—as if this were new. They denounce the aesthetic conception of art and demand that we should be like children again, we need to set about on a whole new image assessment! ... The facts have shown that we do not need the “cosmic night” to experience the great drama; it *is happening* all around us. If the abstract artists have not discovered this, it is their fault. Perhaps they did not, and so it is probably one of the reasons why their art has so little to say to a regular viewer.¹²

The article was representative of the Danish critics’ acrimonious assault at the end of the war that focused particularly on the artists’ promotion of fantasy and the childlike—the very elements that would be heralded as the reason for Cobra’s unique contribution to postwar culture. They failed to see how these seemingly inane characteristics had been a means to the end of social agency. And they typically used the word abstract in a generic fashion, rather than distinguishing between non-objective art and the semi-figurative, gestural abstraction that came to the fore with Helhesten.

The author, however, accurately perceived the journal as an archive of a specific time and place, whose purpose had run its course: “We do not shed tears at its demise...the last richly illustrated number of Helhesten...should be purchased and read as a document of its time. It

¹¹ “De abstrakte har ikke nedlagt vaabnene, de forsætter til fods i sikker overbevisning om, at fremtiden tilhører dem.” W. S., “Helhesten vrinsker ikke mer,” *Politiken* (January 5, 1945): 5.

¹² “Her kommer en flok talentfulde unge og fortæller, at vi ikke skal opfatte med øjnene, men med sindet—som om det nu var noget nyt. De bryder staven over den æstetiske kunstopfattelse og forlanger, at vi skal blive som børn igen, vi skal indstille os paa en helt ny billedvurdering! ... Kendsgerningerne synes at have vist, at vi ikke behøver den “kosmiske nat” for at opleve det store drama; det *sker* altsammen omkring os. Har de abstrakte ikke opdaget det, er det deres fejl. Maaske har de ikke, og saa er det vel en af grundene til, at deres kunst har saa lidt at sige den jævne beskuer.” Ibid.

cannot be a coincidence that the animal only whinnied, while the borders were closed.”¹³ The article thus historicized Helhesten as belonging to a moment of the past defined by the war, even as the last issue was still being read and the group’s postwar call to action, “The New Realism,” had yet to be written.

Helhesten operated during a moment of crisis in a nation usually overlooked by art historians of twentieth century European art. Danish art is not considered at the forefront of modernist developments. Moreover, by the very nature of its historical circumstances, Helhesten was effervescent: its fugitive character was a crucial aspect of its avant-garde status, as it is with all avant-gardes. That Helhesten was a response to the occupation, a means to “keep society alive” in Jacobsen’s words, however, does not mean it had little effect on future experimental art groups. On the contrary, Helhesten engaged in issues of cardinal significance to other later radical artists’ collectives such as the Situationist International. And its resistance agenda—holding up creative freedom as a subtle, if essential form of anti-totalitarianism—was an unacknowledged precursor to Cold War cultural politics.

At the end of the war, the denunciation of the Helhesten’s visual idioms and utopian aspirations as both retrograde and unsophisticated reached fever pitch. In March 1945, two months before the liberation, the art historian Henrik Bramsen (1908-2002) wrote a scathing eulogy of *Helhesten* in the highbrow art journal *Aarstiderne* (*The Seasons*, 1941-1952).¹⁴

Bramsen, who later became the librarian of the Royal Academy, epitomized the cultural elite’s condescending dismissal of the group as a bunch of upstarts who had yet to earn their artistic

¹³ “Vi fælder ikke taarer ved dens bortgang... Det sidste afsluttende og rigt illustrerede nummer af *Helhesten*... bør anskaffes og læses som et tid-dokument. Det kan ikke være tilfældigt, at dyret netop vrinskede, medens grænserne var lukket.” Ibid.

¹⁴ Though *Aarstiderne* covered many of the same subjects as Helhesten and even featured articles on some of the Helhesten artists (Henry Heerup also contributed a cover for the February 1943 issue), it was more conservative in outlook and a much more highly polished—and officially funded—art journal.

stripes. He gleefully needled: “[Helhesten has] gathered its last strength to give a great scream, and then placed its three weary legs in the grave. *Aarstiderne* sends its wreath to the bier.”¹⁵ No doubt Bramsen’s acidic tone was partially retaliation for the negative *Helhesten* review of his 1944 text, *Danish Art from Rococo until Now*, which had been assessed as an “unnecessary book,” most notably because the expansive tome included only sixteen pages on art of the last forty years.¹⁶ For Bramsen, cessation of the journal, the contents of which he described as “high school art criticism in caricature,” was evidence of the artists’ inexperience.¹⁷ He contended that their connection to Surrealism was superficial and only exploited so as to gratuitously shock the Danish public. He went on:

This attempt to refresh a mood from the 1920s is probably due to war phenomenon, an attempt of the spiritually confined to go beyond time and place. The future seems an impenetrable wilderness, the road back is paved in contrast. But the war conditions can also be traced in *Helhesten*’s columns in another way, and here it applies to something at home with a similar connection to the unprecedented.¹⁸

Thus while recognizing the group had introduced something new into Danish culture, in the same breath the author dismissed it as passé. The group’s radical reformulation of earlier avant-garde styles was both ingenious and its Achilles’ heel; critics would inevitably view their creative use of pastiche as provincialism or lack of originality.

Bramsen’s review reflected the cultural establishment’s anxiety towards a modernist idiom that featured fantastical and childlike motifs during the closing months of the war.

¹⁵ “...samlet sine sidste kræfter til et stort skrig og derefter lagt sine trætte tre ben i graven. *Aarstiderne* sender sin krans til baaren.” Henrik Bramsen, “Helhesten,” *Aarstiderne* 4, no. 2 (March 1945): 46.

¹⁶ Henrik Bramsen, *Dansk kunst fra Rokoko til vore dage* (Copenhagen: Hirschprung, 1944). Le peintre, “En unøvendig bog,” *Helhesten* 2, no. 4 (December 24, 1943): 60.

¹⁷ “Det er højskolekunstkritik i karikatur.” Ibid.

¹⁸ “Dette forsøg paa at genopfriske en stemning fra 20erne er sikkert et krigsfænomen, et forsøg hos aandeligt indespærrede paa at søge ud over tiden og stedet. Fremtiden synes et uigennemtrængeligt vildnis, vejen tilbage ligger derimod banet. Men ogsaa paa anden maade spores krigsforholdene i Helhestens spalter, og her gælder det noget herhjemme i lignende forbindelse hidtil uset.” Ibid.

Undoubtedly the Danish critics were posturing their responses within an eye toward postwar liberated Europe. As an impending German defeat loomed and information was emerging about the extent of the Nazi genocide, the critics viewed the Helhesten artists' aesthetic as a now inappropriate and unserious response to historical tragedy. The formal affinities of the Helhesten aesthetic with German Expressionism certainly didn't help matters. It was most likely an unwanted reminder of the Nazi persecution of "degenerate" art. At the same time, Helhesten's use of Nordic myth—in a way that was counter to Nazi intentions—nonetheless must have been uncomfortable at a time when Denmark wanted to forget its two-year collaboration with Germany. Better then to relegate the Helhesten to a moment of the past, even as the last days of the war were being played out.

That the public and the cultural establishment were increasingly apprehensive about gestural abstraction serving as the face of the Danish avant-garde at the end of the war was nowhere more apparent than in a widely publicized debate about abstraction that took place from the end of 1944 until the liberation. By 1944, the Helhesten artists were exhibiting prolifically. Consequently, their frequent presence in exhibitions and the corresponding reportage by the daily newspapers signaled not only their status as an established contingent of the art world, it also meant that the cultural establishment could no longer ignore their work. This was the case when the young poet and art critic Ole Sarvig (1921-1981) published an article that supported the Helhesten artists' aesthetic in the established art journal *Samleren* (*The Collector*, 1924-1944) in the fall of 1944. Sarvig's defense of contemporary abstraction found so much interest, that *Samleren* responded with no less than a series. "Enquête on Art Today" appeared in the December 1944 issue of *Samleren* with twelve contributors; the series only lasted one issue, however, because *Samleren's* editors were arrested by the Gestapo.

The survey considered the importance of different styles of abstract art for contemporary Danish society and presented the respondents with four issues to address: were there other options for a less isolated, innovative art than that of the current state of Danish abstraction; why did this abstraction occupy an isolated position from the general public; did abstract art provide the potential for better self-understanding; did the work created during the war characterize the future of art, and would the war bring about a renewed emphasis on narrative and naturalism. The questions themselves implied a deep skepticism towards the social relevance of abstraction at the end of the war. This wariness was undoubtedly due to the sense of exhaustion of the avant-garde and the failure of its various political agendas in the face of brutal regimes.

Although there were responses that sought to argue for the social agency of abstraction, they unwittingly did the opposite by arguing that historical circumstances did not impact aesthetic development. Thus the *kulturradikale* writer and critic Rudolf Broby Johansen argued that abstraction was just one form of innovative art, and that more to the point, aesthetic preoccupations were irrelevant in times of war. The posturing of the historical avant-garde, it seemed, was all too isolated from daily realities. Never mind that this was much of the point behind Helhesten: to operate within the gap and extoll fantasy as psychological weapon against repression.

The Helhesten artists were represented by Ejler Bille and Asger Jorn, who maintained the social relevance of their work. Bille proposed the lack of stylistic hierarchy in ancient cultures as a model for a truly popular contemporary art for a collective society—a point that critics overlooked. Jorn, for his part, argued that abstract art was not isolated from the general public, but *was* the popular art of the people. He wrote, “abstract art enjoys a quite immense popularity,

which is not surpassed by any other art form.”¹⁹ Though Bille and Jorn’s contributions to *Samleren* were not their most sophisticated, their defense of their work as an authentic and relevant popular art was actualized the very same month when they and other artists from Høst decorated the Hortøjgade kindergarten classrooms. The project successfully embodied the idea of a popular semi-figural abstraction that young and old and all levels of class. The abundant news coverage, however, demeaned the artists’ focus on children’s art, missing the intention to blur the boundaries between “high” and “low” art, and public space and subjective imagining. The artists deliberately worked with the children present, often asking their opinions, to visualize creative ideas conducive to cognitive and social development. In this way they connected art to everyday experience.

The debate on abstraction reached its most public stage when Sarvig presented his ideas in “A Lecture on Abstract Art,” at the opening of a solo exhibition for Egill Jacobsen at the Copenhagen Kunstforeningen (The Artists’ Association, est. 1827) in April 1945. Tellingly, the exhibition was the first at Kunstforeningen to feature abstraction in the history of the established art society. This highlighted that the Helhesten artists were being recognized in more traditional corners of the art world, even as they were attacked by other establishment figures such as Bramsen for being too “green.”

Almost immediately Sarvig’s lecture was published as a book and enhanced by collaboration with Bille, Jacobsen, and Jorn. As was the tendency with the Linien and Helhesten artists’ writing, Sarvig and his peers gave contemporary abstraction, in all its variations, an international pedigree by emphasizing predecessors such as Klee, Kandinsky, and Emile Nolde, as well as Miró, Ernst, Arp, and Giacometti. The authors further sought to legitimize abstraction by

¹⁹ “...den abstrakte kunst nyder en ganske uhyre popularitet, som ikke overgaas af nogen anden kunstnerisk ydelse.” Asger Jorn, “Ole Sarvig opruller et skævt billed af kunstens stilling i dag,” *Samleren* 21, no. 8 (December 1944): 166.

positing it as an instinctual and natural reflection of universal creativity rather than an academic art style to be intellectually understood:

‘*Abstract*’ has become one of the most misinterpreted and abused words. ...An abstraction is an act that elevates an object above the sphere of ideas. ...Since Plato Europe has lived on abstractions. Goodness, whiteness and beauty are abstractions...The peculiar thing is simply that abstract images are most often concretions that express a reality, which can not be found in any other place than just in this or that image, thus the image itself is just a reality, a concretion.²⁰

Sarvig’s argument for the relevance of abstraction soon fell on deaf ears; it was eclipsed by the liberation one month later. At that momentous historical juncture, the Helhesten artists set their sights abroad. They wrote “The New Realism” in the summer and fall of 1945 with an American audience in mind. This is significant, since the Danes’ primary international contact with the free world came through the British and the BBC, which regularly broadcast news reports in Danish throughout the war. Subsequently, Denmark was liberated by the British. So why not send their statement to a London museum?

There are several reasons. The Danish artists, none of whom had ever been to the United States by 1945, upheld the Museum of Modern Art in New York to be the most important contemporary art museum in the world, even writing about it in *Helhesten*. Moreover, the artists no doubt heard much about American culture as the U.S. postwar recovery machine spread throughout Europe. Though it remains unclear whether the Helhesten artists knew about the New York School’s development of abstraction in 1945, the artists most likely knew that the U.S. safely harbored many international Surrealists, and creative freedom, during the war. In short, the artists viewed the U.S. as the future for international collaboration. In 1946 Asger Jorn even

²⁰ “‘*Abstrakt*’ er blevet et af de mest mistydede og misbrugte ord. ...En abstraktion er jo en handling, der løfter et objekt over ideernes sfære. Europa har siden Platons dage levet paa abstraktioner. Godhed, hvidhed og skønhed er abstraktioner. ...Det ejendommelige er blot, at de abstrakte billeder som oftest er konkretioner, at de udtrykker en virkelighed, som ikke findes nogen andre steder end netop paa dette eller hint billed, at billedet altsaa netop er en virkelighed, en koncretion...” Ole Sarvig, *Et foredrag om abstrakt kunst* (Copenhagen: Helios, 1945), 11-13.

went so far as to directly write to the MoMA Director of Painting and Sculpture James Johnson Sweeney and ask for his help in getting a visa to the U.S. for him and his wife. He wrote to Sweeney in his rudimentary English, “it is my impression that we here in Denmark have something to tell the artist in the world, something important which I hope somebody will be able to understand. . . .It is my hope once to be able to visit your new world.”²¹ Sweeney would become one of the very few American critics who championed postwar European art, but Denmark was not on his radar, save for Jorn.

The new world, as Jorn describes it, was undoubtedly in the artists’ minds when they wrote “The New Realism.” As the final collective manifesto of Helhesten, it appeared in the catalogue for the November 1945 Høst exhibition—the very same exhibition where Cobra would exhibit together for the first time. Three years before the formation of Cobra, the text made explicit the artists’ aim to continue to use the collective as a vehicle for cultivating postwar international partnerships:

We consider our work method to be in accordance with future international artistic development. Possibly during the war artists in other countries have achieved far more than we have. But we join ourselves to international art in the struggle for solving the new common artistic and human problems, which our time has induced on the basis of the new scientific, psychological, and social results.²²

²¹ Asger Jorn to James Johnson Sweeney (May 2, 1946), Asger Jorn to the Museum of Modern Art (1946-1947), correspondence folder, Museum Jorn Archive, Silkeborg.

²² “Vi anser vor arbejds metode for at være i overensstemmelse med den internationale kunst udvikling fremover. Muligvis er man under krigen naaet langt videre end vi andre lande. Men vi tilslutter os den internationale kunst i kampen for at løse de ny fælles kunstneriske og menneskelige problemer, som vor tid har fremkaldt paa basis af dens nye videnskabelige, psykologiske og sociale resultater.” Else Alfelt, Ejler Bille, Kujahn Blask, Henry Heerup, Egill Jacobsen, Robert Jacobsen, Johannes Jensen, Asger Jorn, Tage Møllerup, Richard Mortensen, Erik Orvad, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Viggo Rohde, and Erik Thømmesen. “Den ny realisme,” *Høst*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: 1945), np.

The artists then sent “The New Realism,” along with almost fifty works on paper, to MoMA as part of an unsuccessful exhibition proposal.²³ The artists included an introductory letter in English addressed to the museum in which they mentioned Helhesten by name and stressed its origins as an art of resistance:

The free experimental art rose to importance as an opposition to the Nazi view of art. Danish artists and connoisseurs regarded artistic freedom as symbolic of the resistance against influences from Nazi art-ideology within Danish territory, and thus provided excellent growing conditions for abstract art. Had the Nazis taken direct action against Danish art, this avant-garde would, as was the case in Norway, have been the first to get it hot and strong. But even if we were not, as the Norwegians were, exposed to the whims of a Quisling government and the ensuing autocratic black-out of civilized life, we have not avoided a strong pressure from the German occupants, and when direct interference on behalf of the Germans was mainly restricted to a series of suppressions, this was only due to the fact that the Allied victories prevented the Germans from carrying out any constructive cultural policy. Though no one during the occupation knew if and when actual persecution might be effectuated...our artists have been able to maintain their free will in independent creative work: All this time this art was inspired and fertilized by the fight for cultural values.²⁴

This extraordinary passage reveals that already in 1946, the artists self-historicized themselves as an avant-garde whose originality lay precisely in flaunting irrepressible creativity as a gesture of political defiance. While so many Western governments were vaunting the freedom-affirming role of abstract art after the war, Helhesten had already used it as a *modus operandi* and sought to communicate their role to MoMA, the bastion of creative freedom.

Of the forty-eight works on paper sent to MoMA, five were by Richard Mortensen, ten by Carl-Henning Pedersen, and twenty-eight by Asger Jorn. Six of the works were by the future Cobra artist Erik Ortvad (1917-2008), who was slightly younger than the Helhesten artists and

²³ For an overview of the correspondence with MoMA in English see Peter Shield, “Spontaneous Abstraction and its Aftermath in Cobra, 1931-51” (Phd diss., The Open University, 1984), 299-300. The original letters can be found in the Jorn correspondence files at the Museum Jorn Archive, Silkeborg.

²⁴ Else Alfelt, Ejler Bille, Kujahn Blask, Henry Heerup, Egill Jacobsen, Robert Jacobsen, Johannes Jensen, Asger Jorn, Tage Møllerup, Richard Mortensen, Erik Ortvad, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Viggo Rohde, Erik Thommesen, “To the Museum of Modern Art, New York” (1946). Asger Jorn to the Museum of Modern Art (1946-1947), correspondence folder, Museum Jorn Archive, Silkeborg.

had begun exhibiting with them at Høst at the end of the war. Although Jorn contributed over half of the images, they consisted entirely of two sets of prints of which he probably had extra editions. All of the works were characteristically child-like, looked unfinished and quickly made, and displayed a penchant for fantastical creatures. An untitled lithograph by Jorn (fig. 153) presents a *horror vacui* composition seething with kinetic movement. The marks, some thick and messy, others thin and agitated, coagulate into floating creatures whose somatic presence is contingent on the persuasiveness of relative shapes. Jagged geometric lines and meandering stains challenge the bodily forms manifested by eyes, teeth, mouths, wings, and claws. Another lithograph abandons the all-over approach to experiment with compositional emptiness. Disembodied eyes and dysmorphic humanoid creatures churn into a swirling hurricane of crescent forms (fig. 154). Jorn's inventive and expressive prints are reflective of the Helhesten artists' attraction to various media and demonstrate that color was not the only means by which they sought to create a sensory and subjective visual experience.

There were, however, images in color included in the MoMA gift. Carl-Henning Pedersen's *The Happy World*, 1943, consists of a figure, bird, and horse floating together in an abstract environment full of lush watercolor hues that still express their fluorescent intensity, even more than seventy years after the picture was painted (fig. 155). The dark and piercing eyes of all of the creatures suggest the unease reflected in Pedersen's larger paintings during the occupation. The claustrophobic framing of the standing, eviscerated humanoid by the quasi-dagger legs of the pink horse, itself hedged in by a geometric lemon sun, parallels the sense of anxiety evoked by the uncontrolled, primordial drift represented by the groundless bodies, all of which gleefully challenge the meaning of the title.

Another work by Pedersen, *The Birds of Fantasy*, 1944, exhibits the artist's dexterity with ink (fig. 156). Luminous, quickly applied washes of black and gray create bird and horse-like creatures that seem to be feeding from an organic sphere in the bottom center of the composition. Their bodies are monumental and abruptly cropped, and their prominent eyes gaze blankly ahead. Erik Ortvad contributed images loosely colored in crayon that recall children's coloring books. One untitled scene from 1944 suggests a cosmic world of rainbow-colored planets or kaleidoscopic orbs, which call attention to the hand of the artist with their energetically expressive slashes of color (fig. 157).

All of the works included in the MoMA gift insist on fantastical and dreamlike evocations, as well as "low" art forms and materials, which heed little concern for rules of composition, seriousness, or finish. The challenging of traditional notions of art was reflective of the creative freedom the artists espoused, and representative of their humanist aims. How ironic, then, that in the immediate postwar moment when the U.S. was using humanism as its clarion call for recovery, MoMA declined the exhibition. Sweeney, who was later a supporter of Cobra as director of the Guggenheim Museum, sent a memo to Alfred Barr that read, "I do not think that much deserves Museum Collection acceptance. Perhaps some however could be taken for the Study Collection for 'regional interest.'"²⁵ In fact, none of the works, except those by Jorn, have ever been exhibited. This rejection is all the more remarkable given the proximity of works by the former Helhesten artists to the synthesis of Expressionism and Surrealism engaging the nascent Abstract Expressionists at this time.

As art historian Raffaele Bedarida has demonstrated, despite promoting the idea that abstraction was apolitical, in the late 1940s MoMA's exhibition agenda was put into service of

²⁵ James Thrall Soby Papers, III.D.2, September 30, 1946, the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

cultural diplomacy for countries that were seen in need of rehabilitation according to Cold War demands. Thus, the museum's 1949 "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" exhibition reconstituted formerly Fascist Italian artists into an apolitical canon that reestablished Italian modernism and allowed for international economic progress after the war.²⁶ That the Danes were not in need of such rehabilitation, meant that they were of little interest to the American museum. Conversely, perhaps the idea of an art movement that subtly countered the Nazis through the production of modernist art defied belief. While the Surrealists languished in exile in New York, Helhesten carried on their style to new levels of political relevance.

Danish Ostriches? Helhesten Beyond Cobra

The response by MoMA was just the first of several episodes that chronicle missed opportunities to assess the avant-garde nature of Helhesten on an international scale. The exception, of course, is Cobra. The Danish contribution to Cobra has been well documented and lies outside the parameters of this study.²⁷ However, even the briefest overview of the Danish artists' international activities and involvement with Cobra presents three issues of contention that demand redressing by future research. The first problem concerns the dominant emphasis on Asger Jorn in the Cobra literature, to the profound detriment of his lesser-known colleagues. The second issue involves the significance of the Danish artists' involvement in Cobra.

It is undeniable that Jorn was the most prolific conduit for partnerships with his European colleagues after the war and he was without a doubt the most systematically inventive artistic

²⁶ Raffaele Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940–1949," 35, no. 2 (2012): 147-69.

²⁷ See Gunnar Jespersen, *De abstrakte: Historien om en kunstnergeneration* (Copenhagen: Kunstbogklubben, 1991), 185-229, and Shield, "The Fruits of War," 113-59, "Establishing International Contact," 299-331, and "The Danes and Cobra," 332-75, in "Spontaneous Abstraction."

provocateur from Helhesten to undertake new modes of cultural intervention in the postwar period. But, contrary to all accounts, Jorn was not the only Danish artist to have an international impact after the war. In fact, like Jorn, most of the Helhesten artists immediately began traveling abroad after the liberation. In 1946 Carl-Henning Pedersen and future Cobra artist Tage Møllerup (1911-1988) traveled to Sweden, while Egill Jacobsen was awarded a grant to work in Paris where he spent time with Jorn and Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005), later member of the SI. From the spring to autumn of 1947 Jacobsen and Ejler Bille lived in the south of France; while there the two artists exhibited in Cannes. At the end of their stay Jacobsen returned to Paris, where he would spend another year and a half.

In the spring of 1947 an exhibition titled “Abstract Art in Denmark” featuring the Helhesten artists was shown in Gothenburg, organized by no less than Lars Rostrup Bøyesen, the assistant curator of the Statens Museum for Kunst.²⁸ The Helhesten artists were included in the Nordic Art Fair in Fredericia in May of 1947; the exhibition garnered 10,000 visitors. Also in 1947, the now official newspaper of the Danish Communist Party (DKP), *Land og Folk*, arranged a hugely popular exhibition of modern art with Egill Jacobsen on the selection committee. The exhibition included all of the Helhesten artists except Jorn, most likely because he was not pursuing activities beyond Danish borders. The popular show demonstrated the still extremely liberal DKP embrace of abstraction just after the war, though this was short-lived. From 1948 the DKP would reject everything but Social Realism, and *Land og Folk*, which had been a constant organ for the artists’ writings, began rejecting their articles.

²⁸ The original plan to send the exhibition to the United States failed, most likely due to lack of resources. Rostrup Bøyesen would later become director of the modern art museum in Aalborg, now called KUNSTEN. During his tenure there he was instrumental in acquiring the Anna and Kresten Krestensen collection, most of which was bought from Elna Fonnesbech-Sandberg and included important works of the Helhesten period such as those that were displayed in the “Thirteen Artists in a Tent” exhibition.

In 1948, Ejler Bille, Egill Jacobsen, and Carl-Henning Pedersen, along with Richard Mortensen, represented Danish contemporary art at the 1948 Venice Biennale, the first one since 1942 and a rallying point for postwar rehabilitation. Erik Thommesen was on the selection committee, though Statens Museum for Kunst director Leo Swane still managed to hang their works in the least visible spaces. Despite Swane's efforts, in his account of the Biennale Lawrence Alloway picked up on the Danish artists' reformulation: "It appropriated elements of other styles, but did not engage in the balancing projects of the [French and Italian] synthesists. ... Theirs was basically an expressionist art which used the rest of modern art as a source of forms."²⁹

While they vigorously sought out exhibiting opportunities and social contacts at home and internationally, the Danes actively took part in Cobra. Robert Dahlmann Olsen edited the first *Cobra* issue, which featured a collective drawing by Jacobsen, Jorn, and Pedersen (fig. 158). The first exhibition of the Cobra artists as a group occurred at the 1948 Høst exhibition in Copenhagen (fig. 159).³⁰ Høst continued to exhibit the Cobra artists throughout the movement's existence. As has been well documented, the Danes were important aspects of Cobra's two major exhibitions, the November 1949 show at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the 1951 exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Liège, in 1951. Further, the major collective art projects the Cobra artists undertook all occurred in Denmark. The Dutch Cobra members even added decorations to the Hjortøgade kindergarten classrooms during one visit to Copenhagen. The first Cobra congress was held in 1948 in Bregnerød, a suburban village north of Copenhagen. While

²⁹ Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 138.

³⁰ The exhibition included Else Alfelt, Karel Appel, Ejler Bille, Eugène Brands (1913-2002), Constant, Corneille (1922-2010), Svavar *Guðnason*, Henry Heerup, Egill Jacobsen, Asger Jorn, Tage Møllerup, Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, Ernst Mancoba (1904-2002), Knud Nielsen (1916-2008), Jan Nieuwenhuys (1922-1986), Erik Ortvad, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Anton Rooskens (1906-1976), Erik Thommesen, and Theo Wolvecamp (1925-1992).

there, the retreat house for the Danish School of Architecture students was collectively painted with the artists and their children and the Cobra library was put together. Eight of the fifteen volumes, in fact, featured the Danish artists. In 1949, the Cobra artists decorated a farm belonging to Jorn's friend, ceramicist Erik Nyholm (1911-1990) in Funder, Denmark, and collective artworks were made. At the end of 1949, the Cobra artists exhibited with the Danish *kunstnersammenslutning* Spiralen. In short, the collaborative and performative aspects most identified with Cobra and the postwar moment, were a repeat of Helhesten-energized tactics that the artists employed "in order to survive." Helhesten bequeathed its radical reformulation to its own detriment in the historical record.

Just as they had earlier done with Helhesten, in these ventures the Danish artists continued to experiment with unusual forms of artistic creation and modes of social and cultural intervention. Perhaps the most provocative example of this besides Jorn was Henry Heerup. As early as 1934 Heerup was almost arrested for parading down Copenhagen's main pedestrian shopping street with a toilet seat cover on his head to advertise that year's Linien exhibition. In the famous 1948 Høst exhibition photo (fig. 159), he can be found sitting cross-legged playing the celluloid flute strikingly similar to the one Jorn had written about in "Intimate Banalities." This playfulness was characteristic Heerup's theatrical positioning of the artist as a living creative force that did not recognize boundaries between art and life. Heerup's tomfoolery and social interaction in the public sphere included experimental film, an advocacy of nudist culture, and the opening of his sculpture garden to all visitors. His performances, on the street and in real time, confounded spectators as to his sanity, and continued unabated until his death. Like most of

the Helhesten artists, his lifetime *oeuvre*, in all its manifestations, is only beginning to be fully understood and looked at critically.³¹

Despite the Danish matrix of Cobra, a general notion exists that, as Cobra went on, the Danes became less interested in international collaboration. This idea stems from a famous text by Christian Dotremont in 1951 sent to the Danish subscribers to Cobra in which he claimed that the Danish avant-garde was not expanding its revelatory practices beyond its own borders. He wrote:

The position of Denmark in the experimental artists' *internationale* is unique. For Cobra Denmark is a permanent, living example, but this applied only to the country itself, and not to its participation in international cultural life. The lack of equilibrium in the relationship between these two things is striking. Everything goes to show that Denmark, within her own frontiers, has exhausted all her ability for solidarity, her desire for exchange, her desire for confrontation with subject matter other than her own. If the French are giraffes, who view things from too great a height where things other than their own are concerned, then the Danes are ostriches, who do not see them at all. But it is undeniable that there are Danes who simultaneously are able to be internationalists, and among Cobra's Danish artists, first and foremost is Asger Jorn, as well as pioneers in the Danish company. They have understood that culture must have international flowering, as well as national roots. None the less Dane's indifference to the international cultural life, their fear of giving to the international without receiving, or to receive without giving, as soon they pass [the southern Danish village of] Padborg, is scandalous.³²

³¹ See Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, "Heerups have, tingene og fantasien," *Billedkunst* 12, no. 2 (2004): 14-15. Bolt Rasmussen's text was originally intended for the exhibition catalogue of the 2003 Heerup retrospective at Arken Museum for Moderne Kunst, Ishøj, "Henry Heerup, Belief, Hope and Love." As the title suggests, the exhibition upheld the uncritical view of Heerup's work as non-serious and connected to "vitalism." Tellingly, the museum chose not to include the essay because it did not fit this profile of the exhibition.

³² "Danmarks stilling i denne de eksperimenterende kunstneres internationale er enestående. Danmark er for Cobra et permanent, levende eksempel, men dette gælder landet i sig selv, og ikke dets deltagelse i det internationale kulturelle liv. I forholdet mellem disse to ting er mangelen på ligevægt slående. Alt foregår, som om Danmark allerede indenfor sine egne grænser havde opbrugt al sin evne til solidaritet, sin trang til udveksling, sit ønske om konfrontering med andre frembringelser end sine egne. Hvis franskmændene er giraffer, der anskuer tingene fra for stor højde, så snart det ikke drejer sig om deres egne, så er danskerne strudse, som overhovedet ikke ser dem. Men det er ubestrideligt, at der er danskere, der er i stand til på samme tid at være internationalister, og blandt dem er Cobras danske Kunstnere, først og fremmest Asger Jorn, såvel som pionererne i det danske selskab. De har forstået, at kulturen må have international saft, såvel som national rod. Ikke des mindre er danskernes ligegyldighed overfor det internationale kulturelle liv, deres angst for at give til udlandet uden at modtage, eller for at modtage uden at give, så snart Padborg er passeret, skandaløs." Christian Dotremont, "I juli kommer i København Cobra's særnummer," postcard supplement to the Danish subscribers to *Cobra* 8-9 (August 6, 1951).

Clearly, Dotremont was recognizing the Danes' precedence (though he did not mention Helhesten by name, clearly relegating it to the past), but his comment about the "Danish ostriches," is the most cited aspect of this passage. Dotremont wrote these words at a time when he was faced with Cobra's imminent demise and frustrated with the amount of practical work he had to undertake to keep it going. It is also clear he was rankled that the Danes had not jettisoned local enterprises for a complete commitment to the international movement. Nevertheless, Dotremont was explicit his conviction that without the Helhesten artists—he may have mentioned only mention Jorn, but he states that there were others—Cobra would not have continued as long as it did.

Finally, what of the legacy of the Helhesten period after Cobra? Helhesten did return for to the spotlight in the mid-1960s, however briefly. There were two exhibitions that commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the collective's founding, one that traveled the United States in 1964-1965 and the other at the Royal Library in Copenhagen in 1966. Both of the exhibitions were funded by the Danish state and curated by Robert Dahlmann Olsen to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the journal's founding.³³ The reactions to these shows were indicative of the difference in the national and international reception of Helhesten, and set up the current history of the group, whereby within Denmark Helhesten is viewed as an avant-garde that established Cobra, while outside of that country Helhesten is barely mentioned at all.

Although "Danish Abstract Art" toured seven American cities and the small catalogue provided the first English-language history of the group, it made little impact on the Danish press or American audiences. Notably, it refrained from using the collective's name in the title of the

³³ Dahlmann Olsen was also approached by Studenterforening in October 1964 to help organize an anniversary exhibition of the Linien shows, which took place at the end of 1964. The show included some of the originally exhibited works as well those by contemporary emerging artists. He also edited the exhibition catalogue.

exhibition, despite the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary. The show was commissioned by the Artists' Committee for Exhibitions Abroad in collaboration with the Danish Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the Danish Foreign Ministry. It toured the U.S. from the fall of 1964 through the end of 1965, traveling to the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts; the Huntington Galleries, West Virginia; the Robertson Memorial Art Center, Binghamton; the Dartmouth College Art Museum, Hanover; the Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; the State University of New York, New Paltz, and the Lamont Art Gallery, Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter.³⁴

Robert Dahlmann Olsen selected the works in collaboration with the artists, wrote the catalogue, mediated the agendas of the all of national and international parties involved, and curated and opened the show in Dallas. The dozen American articles covering the show were brief and misunderstood the art, characterizing it as regional manifestations of an authentic and unsophisticated Nordic version of European abstraction. This misinterpretation is even more remarkable in that it took place during the same year in which Asger Jorn, Carl-Henning Pedersen, and Richard Mortensen were included in a 1964 Guggenheim exhibition, and Jorn was awarded that year's Guggenheim Prize—which he famously rejected by telegraphing Harry Guggenheim to “go to hell with your money bastard.”³⁵

The catalogue for the exhibition, which none of the reviewers seemed to read, was written by Robert Dahlmann Olsen and published in English. *Danish Abstract Art* was the

³⁴ The catalogue states that the exhibition also went to the Florida Museum of Fine Arts, St. Peterseburg, but I have found no evidence it actually traveled there.

³⁵ Jorn was awarded the prize for his painting *Dead Drunk Danes*, 1960 (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk). His refusal of the award was a gesture of defiance against the commercialization of the art world as much as it was the romantic notion of the artist as gifted individual creator. See Karen Kurczynski, “Expo Jorn: A Users Guide,” in *Expo Jorn: Art is a Festival!* eds. Karen Kurczynski and Karen Friis, exh. cat. (Silkeborg: Museum Jorn, 2014), 12-19.

closest the exhibition came to presenting a historically accurate explanation of the art created during the 1930s and 1940s. It also provided the first comprehensive history of the group in any language. Dahlmann Olsen credited Jorn with initiating and sustaining the artists' international activity: "The Danish contribution to Cobra's development rested first and foremost on Asger Jorn's initiative."³⁶ Consequently the section on Cobra recounted Jorn's international activities and affiliations at the expense of any of that of the other artists.

In the text, Dahlmann Olsen highlighted the importance of the *kunstnersammenslutning* tradition for the development of modern Danish art and traced the last thirty years of its development by focusing on Linien, Helhesten, and Cobra. This three-point trajectory would set the precedent for all later accounts of modern Danish art. It was significant that Dahlmann Olsen explicitly stated that he attached "particular importance to the second of these"—that is, Helhesten.³⁷ He wrote, "The Line was the beginning, the Hell-Horse well-balanced collaboration, and Cobra the final dissolution."³⁸ His framework thus positioned Helhesten as *the culmination* of the Danish modernist avant-garde.

The wide-ranging, if idiosyncratic, nature of the venues for "Danish Abstract Art" presents as many questions as possible reasons as to why the tour had little impact on American audiences, art historians, or artists. While the larger institutions such as the Dallas Museum and the Smithsonian offered greater exposure with huge numbers of visitors, the university museums presumably represented viewing communities of students and art historians. Indeed, the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts estimated 20,000 people saw the exhibition, while the Smithsonian

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Robert Dahlmann Olsen, *Danish Abstract Art*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: Danish Artists' Committee for Exhibitions Abroad, 1964), np.

³⁸ Ibid.

approximated that a large portion of the 130,000 visitors to the Natural History Museum visited the show.³⁹ Yet the Smithsonian's misplaced setting for an art exhibition in the Museum of Natural History most likely ensured viewers simply walked through the exhibition to get to other galleries. In addition, there was a lack of advanced publicity or critical interest in the exhibitions, since some of the locations were determined shortly before the show's appearance at those destinations. It seems no works were sold, the American museums acquired no works, and there was no mention of the exhibition after 1965.

There is, however, another other, more fundamental explanation for the exhibition's missed opportunity to export Danish modernism effectively to American audiences, and it was one that Jorn called attention to from the moment the exhibition was proposed, resulting in his withdrawal from the project: the inclusion of works from outside of the Helhesten period. As he had done during the war, Dahlmann Olsen judiciously collected all of the participating artists' opinions about the nature of the exhibition through letter writing and group meetings. His documentation of the organization of the exhibition indicate that initially, all of the former Helhesten artists were in favor of the show, which was originally proposed by the ministry as a way of highlighting the development of Danish modernism from the 1930s to the present as well as the Danes' formative role in Cobra. The participating artists, who included Else Alfelt, Ejler Bille, Svavar Guðnason, Henry Heerup, Egill Jacobsen, Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, and Carl-Henning Pedersen, felt that their contribution to Cobra had been overlooked abroad in favor of that of the Dutch members and they wanted to highlight what they all viewed as a crucial period

³⁹ Merrill C. Rueppel, Director of the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, to Robert Dahlmann Olsen, November 30, 1964, and Mrs. Michael Padnos, Assistant Chief of Traveling Exhibition Service, to Robert Dahlmann Olsen, August 9, 1965. Robert Dahlmann Olsen Archive, Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.

for their work.⁴⁰ They were also in favor of including works from the Cobra period, and since they were still professionally active, they also wanted to include a selection of recent artworks. The view was that such an exhibition would elicit not only historical recognition, but also possible sales. This, the artists argued, would show that their art had lived on, and present the opportunity to possibly include younger Danish artists working in an abstract idiom.

Jorn was vehemently opposed to this approach for several reasons, all of which would have repercussions for the exhibition's lack of critical success. In the first place, Jorn was wary of the state support of the exhibition, which he worried would be used as national propaganda to promote their art as specifically "Danish," and which was contrary to the original mission of Helhesten. Indeed, the idea that Helhesten was now being supported as part of official Danish culture was one of the ironies of history. That the other artists did not see this as a betrayal of their principles suggests that they not only understood that the urgency of the Helhesten moment had passed, but also, that they were partaking in the very openness to different forms of culture they had supported during the war. Yet there is no doubt the official nature of the exhibition dulled the image of the artists' work as avant-garde and radical.

Jorn also argued that the exhibition should have focused solely on the development of experimental Danish art during the 1930s and 1940s, and be limited to the artists and works directly related to Linien and Helhesten. Such an exhibition, he argued, would best show the historical and cultural conditions that had generated the Danish artists' distinctive agenda. He wrote to Dahlmann Olsen, "As for the show in America, I want to have guaranteed that the catalogue presents Linien and Helhesten's historic grouping and provides a clear historic

⁴⁰ Erik Thommesen also declined to participate; he stated that he did not want to subject his sculptures to any possible transit damage.

explanation of this period, and does not mix the Cobra question into it.”⁴¹ Even decades later, Jorn cited the unfortunate remarks in *Aarstiderne* and Dotremont’s ostriches comment as indicators of the misinterpretation of the Helhesten period. He was rightly worried that history would repeat itself in 1964.

Jorn suggested translating into English the important journal texts the two *kunstnersammenslutninger* had produced to better elucidate the theories behind the works. For Jorn, if the exhibition included Cobra work, it would dilute the importance of the prior period, while the inclusion of contemporary art would lessen the historical import of the show, especially if it was to travel to the U.S. He warned Dahlmann Olsen that America had:

...the toughest art theorists in the world and they will fall over this exhibition with a magnifying glass and probe seeing that we are so impudent not to subordinate ourselves as less significant than the entire American continent. The exhibition must therefore reflect an extremely clear logic, not only with regard to the artworks, but also in accordance with the art theoretical issues that today are discussed in these circles.⁴²

Right away Jorn knew that to establish a footing for the development of wartime gestural abstraction from outside of the U.S. to an American audience was a losing game. Dahlmann Olsen agreed with Jorn and in a letter to him he proposed publishing an American number of *Helhesten* that would involve the original contributors, concluding “...do you get as giddy at the thought of it as me?”⁴³

⁴¹ “Hvad angaar udstillingen i Amerika, saa er det jeg vil have garanteret at kataloget præsenterer Linens og Helhestens historiske gruppering og giver en klar historisk redegørelse for denne periode, og ikke blander cobra spørgsmaalet ind i det.” Asger Jorn to Robert Dahlmann Olsen (1964), correspondence folder, Museum Jorn Archive, Silkeborg.

⁴² “...de skrappeste kunstteoretikere i verden, og de vil falde over denne Udstilling med lup og sonder da vi er saa frække ikke at ville underordne os som mindre betydningsfulde end hele det amerikanske kontinent. Udstillingen maa derfor afspejle en uhyre klar logik, der viser ikke blot resultaterne i form af kunstværkerne, men ogsaa i overensstemmelse med de kunstteoretiske problemstillinger, der idag diskuteres i disse kredse.” Asger Jorn to Robert Dahlmann Olsen (1964), correspondence folder, Museum Jorn Archive, Silkeborg.

⁴³ “...du må vel som jeg blive helt kåd ved tanken?” Robert Dahlmann Olsen to Asger Jorn, February 5, 1964, Correspondence folder, Museum Jorn Archive, Silkeborg.

Neither the American issue of *Helhesten* nor the more focused exhibition happened. The selection of eighty-six paintings and sculptures by eleven artists that made its American debut in 1964 was a compromise; about half of the objects were from the Linien-Helhesten period, supplemented by later and contemporary pieces.⁴⁴ The other artist to exhibit with the Helhesten figures was Jørgen Haugen Sørensen, a sculptor who was born the year of Linien's first exhibition in 1934. While his inclusion was in some ways a delayed iteration of the *kunstnersammenslutning* tradition of the inclusion of outsiders, he was the only young contemporary artist to take part, making his participation more peculiar than inclusive. Given that the objects ranged from 1938 to 1964, the exhibition presented a fairly incoherent and meandering picture that obscured the fact that the aesthetic styles on display were borne of experiments that took place as part of the cultural-political debates of the 1930s and 1940s. Some of the works from the 1960s resembled those of the earlier periods, thus communicating the opposite message that their style had evolved since the 1940s.

The unfocused nature of the show and the absence of Jorn, coupled with the appearance of paintings in bright colors that evoked fantastical and child-like associations, consequently presented an image of a diluted, after-the-fact Abstract Expressionism to an American audience. As a result, the American press misinterpreted the artworks. The exhibition was written about in a few local newspaper articles at each venue; these texts tended to be brief and emphasized a

⁴⁴ The participants included Else Alfelt (with nine paintings, four of which were from the Linien-Helhesten period, and five from 1949-1962), Ejler Bille (seven paintings, with four from the period, and three from 1950-1964) Svavar Guðnason (nine paintings, with four from the period and 5 from 1948-1964), Henry Heerup (nine paintings and eight sculptures; seven of the group were from the period and other 10 from 1949-1963), Egill Jacobsen (nine paintings, five from the period, and four from 1958-1964), Robert Jacobsen (five sculptures, all from after the Linien-Helhesten period), Sonja Ferlov Mancoba (five sculptures, all from after the period), Richard Mortensen (ten paintings, all from after the period), and Carl-Henning Pedersen (ten paintings, all from 1947-1963), and Jørgen Haugen Sørensen (five sculptures).

specifically national character of the art—as Jorn had feared. This is the Washington D.C.

Sunday Star:

Contemporary art in Denmark is represented in an excellent, if not particularly exciting, exhibition... The Danes are probably too civilized to produce art at the highest level of contemporary manners, but [the works]... are all eminently rational and balanced... The visitor feels a little closer to the supernatural swamp life of Denmark remembered from certain tales of Hans Christian Andersen.⁴⁵

The Washington Post stated that the artworks “reflect style and imagination of the Cobra group of 1948-51.”⁴⁶ The author described Carl-Henning Pedersen’s paintings as having “a swirling energy which recalls Van Gogh” which she identified as characteristics that were “vital and masculine... [Pedersen’s] magical world of monsters and primitive forces recalls Teutonic myths.”⁴⁷ The likening of the Danish artists as partaking in some belated form of northern Expressionism created, as Sweeney had described it, a “regional” framework for the group. This interpretation, as Jorn had rightly predicted, suggested that the group was less sophisticated and somehow separate from the avant-garde currents elsewhere. The *Post* made this explicit when it concluded, “the Danish painters have none of the over-sophistication or moody *mal de siècle* which infects the international art world. They paint with enjoyable energy and unconcealed delight.”⁴⁸ Although adjectives were undoubtedly part of the Helhesten project of resistance, in this context they were perceived as indigenous qualities of simplicity and authenticity, rooted in their geographic origins—the very national exploitation of art that they had so intensely fought against during the war.

⁴⁵ “Smithsonian,” *Sunday Star* (March 15, 1965).

⁴⁶ Elisabeth Stevens, “Danish Abstracts Underline Love of Symbolism,” *The Washington Post* (March 14, 1965).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

In contrast to “Danish Abstract Art,” the exhibition featuring Helhesten at the Royal Library (the Danish National Library) in Copenhagen was a historical and informational presentation of contextual materials related to the collective and its journal. A smaller and less ambitious showcase, the only art on display at the exhibition at the library was the works on paper that were created specifically for the journal. The show opened on March 31, 1966 and lasted for less than a month. Most likely stimulated by his work on the American exhibition the year before, Dahlmann Olsen approached the library in order to provide substantial contextual material to the Danish public for the first time. Despite its brevity and small scale, exhibition reignited an interest in Helhesten in Denmark and solidified its status, along with Linien, as a native avant-garde. While the Danish public was quite used to semi-abstraction and naïve styles by 1966, a specific awareness of Helhesten was much less widespread. Consequently, the Helhesten artists, who already were viewed as important because of their involvement with Cobra, were now given credit for having formulated the Cobra aesthetic while in Denmark during the war.

Dahlmann Olsen himself created and designed display cases, which presented a plethora of the diverse material documenting the scope and labor that went into the production of *Helhesten* (fig. 160).⁴⁹ While some vitrines showcased the range of subjects that were covered by the journal, others featured the periodical’s namesake and original artwork (fig. 161). There were yet other cases that presented a myriad of bills, letters, marked up texts, and receipts. The combination of the playful images with a substantial amount of textual and factual data underscored that, contrary to the perceived whimsical nature of the group’s pictorial style, there was a vast magnitude of theoretical and practical work behind the Helhesten aesthetic approach.

⁴⁹ The original displays can be found at the Museum Jorn, Silkeborg; they were a gift of Dahlmann Olsen.

The message of a serious and sustained commitment to experimental art during a historical period of conflict was acknowledged by the public reception of the show. Although the exhibition seems to have garnered only two substantial articles, they were part of a renewed interest in the group in Denmark, which witnessed the first book in Danish to feature Helhesten, Gunnar Jespersen's *De abstrakte: Linien, Helhesten, Høststillingen, Cobra* (*The Abstract: Linien, Helhesten, the Høst Exhibition, Cobra*).⁵⁰

Both of the articles reviewing the exhibition were by figures very familiar with Helhesten. Critic, art historian, and one-time *Helhesten* contributor Jan Zibrandtsen (1907-1982) provided an account of different subjects encompassed by the journal in the daily newspaper *Berlingske Tidende*. His article championed Jorn and totally overlooked the contribution of Dahlmann Olsen. The article illustrations were similar to that of the wartime reviews, in which a photo of a non-Western art object was reproduced along with a cover of the journal, visually suggesting the formal stimulus of the group's aesthetic could be found in such objects.⁵¹ Zibrandtsen made pains to establish the importance of Helhesten for Cobra, stating, "It is significant that already the journal, each [issue] with its own individual design, created a new revival in modern painting that later—in 1948—occurred by [the artists'] entry to Cobra to bring about international paths."⁵² The article provided the group's style with a Danish lineage by citing as precedents the work of the modernists Vilhelm Lundstrøm, William Scharff (1886-1959), and Edvard Weie. He combined these artists with international examples such as the

⁵⁰ Gunnar Jespersen, *De abstrakte: Linien, Helhesten, Høststillingen, Cobra* (Copenhagen: Berlingske Forlag, 1967).

⁵¹ Jan Zibrandtsen, "Hvad Helhesten betød," *Berlingske Tidendes Kronik* (March 31, 1966).

⁵² "Af vigtighed er det desuden at fastslå, at de allerede i Helhestens udgivelsesår hver med sin personlige udformning havde skabt den ny fornyelse i det moderne maleri, der senere—i 1948—ved deres indtræden i Cobra skulle sætte internationale spor." Ibid.

Bauhaus, Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Joan Miró. Zibrandtsen concluded the article by commending the Danish artists for heralding in a new era of Danish art, even describing their style as “an original abstract expressionism.”⁵³ Zibrandtsen thus provided belated recognition of Helhesten, but did so by substantiating its originality because it was a model for Cobra.

The second article was written for the literary journal *Vinduet* (*The Window*, est. 1947) by the Situationist International artist and filmmaker Jens Jørgen Thorsen (1932-2000). Thorsen’s text was also a spirited espousal of Helhesten, and he singled out Jorn, who he described as the “kingpin” of the enterprise.⁵⁴ The article, which was titled “The State Did Not Help Them,” set up a romantic narrative for Helhesten as a fledgling group that received no official financial support or recognition by the art establishment. Thorsen positioned the group as political agitators, emphasizing their reaction to the conditions of the war and the disregard of the official art world as an act of political defiance by cultural outsiders, and he described the journal as an “art journal of resistance during the war.”⁵⁵

Thorsen’s article was one of the first accurate assessments of the political import behind Helhesten. He also sought to explain why it was an original avant-garde:

In this case the art journal gathered the whole discussion, which after the war would spread like a fire all over Europe and make Denmark the mainland of international artistic collaboration, the scope and activity of which was by far the most extensive in European art since Surrealism. ... Helhesten led to an explosion of Nordic culture. And first and foremost Nordic independent thinking full of passion, spontaneity, humor, fantasy masks and Viking ornamentation. It was that which in the years following would grow vastly in the call for a popular art.⁵⁶

⁵³ “en original abstrakt ekspressionisme.” Jens Jørgen Thorsen, “Staten hjalp dem ikke,” *Vinduet* (March 30, 1966): 10.

⁵⁴ “Bagmanden.” Ibid.

⁵⁵ “Kunstens modstandsblad under krigen.” Ibid.

⁵⁶ “I tilfældet her samlede kunstbladet hele den diskussion, der i efterkrigstiden skulle brede sig som en brand over Europa og gøre Danmark til hovedlandet i et internationalt kunstnersamarbejde, hvis omfang og aktivitet uden sammenligning var det mest omfattende i europæisk kunst efter surrealismen... Helhesten medførte en eksplosion

It is telling that Thorsen purposefully did not mention Cobra in the article, either, allowing the Helhesten period to speak for itself. It is therefore surprising that in his 1965 book *Modernisme i dansk kunst, specielt efter 1940* (*Modernism in Danish Art, Especially after 1940*), Thorsen subsumed Helhesten into a section on Linien and the Corner-Høst exhibitions, dedicating just a page and a half to the group!⁵⁷

Despite the efforts of these exhibitions and the related publications, perhaps it was inevitable that there was little interest in what the Helhesten moment could impart during a period that saw the civil rights movement, Vietnam protests, and space wars, not to mention Beatles mania. Yet as this study has attempted to demonstrate, the group's experimental platform resonated widely with the concerns of the 1960s. Like the Situationist International, Helhesten provided a "living example," in Dotremont's words, of a politically engaged grassroots collective that, like the SI, "worked within culture against the whole of culture."⁵⁸

The Helhesten artists' interest in improvisation, spontaneity, kitsch, and appropriation, sought to break down the viewer/artist dichotomy in much the same way the SI attempted to collapse the difference between professional and amateur and performer and audience. The Helhesten artists' exploration of spaces outside of the cultural establishment, their seeming disregard of the capitalist work ethic, and their attempts to make art congruent with the everyday were early manifestations of Guy Debord's *dérive* and the utopian themes represented by

af nordisk kultur. Og først og fremmest nordisk selvstændig tænkning fuld af lidenskab, spontanitet, humor, maske fantasi og vikinge-ornamentik. Det var den, der i årene efter skulle vokse sig vældig i kravet om en folkelig kunst." Ibid.

⁵⁷ Jens Jørgen Thorsen, *Modernisme i dansk kunst, specielt efter 1940* (Copenhagen: Thaning & Appel, 1965).

⁵⁸ Situationist J. V. Martin, as quoted in Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen and Jakob Jakobsen, "Introduction," in *Expect Anything Fear Nothing: The Situationist Movement in Scandinavia and Elsewhere* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2011), 9.

Constant's New Babylon. Moreover, the Danish artists' use of humor and nonsense as agitational tactics to provoke bourgeois society were early formulations of the SI's more subversive interventions such as Jørgen Nash and his colleagues sawing off the head of the little mermaid in Copenhagen in 1964. The Helhesten artists' investing in the art journal as a socio-political apparatus and vehicle of the free circulation of information, with its at times unclear authorship, and the ephemeral nature of many of the Helhesten social events as proto-happenings, foreshadow George Maciunas's (1931-1978) Fluxus, and its emphasis on nomadism, communes, and the blurring of media and participatory boundaries.

Indeed, Helhesten was an avant-garde ahead of its time. The collective's insistence on the social imperative of art and art making provides a model for the social turn in art in recent decades that grew out of Fluxus and the SI, which art historian Claire Bishop has demonstrated "appropriate social forms as a way to bring art closer to everyday life."⁵⁹ In Scandinavia in particular, as curator Lars Bang Larsen has documented, activist art emphasized what he defines as "social aesthetics" to "explode" art versus reality.⁶⁰ In this way art historian (and future director of Museum Jorn) Troels Andersen curated "Festival 200" at Charlottenborg in 1969 to mark the 200-year anniversary of the Danish salon. With a very small budget, Andersen provided artists throughout Europe with a second-class train ticket to Copenhagen and invited them to curate their own space in the show without any restrictions. What resulted was a theme park-like interactive space with installations such as artist Palle Nielsen's (1920-2000) unattended shooting range of dishes and a roulette wheel, where visitors could shoot and play at their whimsy. "Festival 200" as a whole was a collective event that revolved around social

⁵⁹ Claire Bishop, "Introduction: Viewers as Producers," in *Participation: Documents in Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 10.

⁶⁰ Lars Bang Larsen, "Social Aesthetics [1999]," in *ibid.*, 172.

participation, which provided a model for groups such as the Danish artists' collective Superflex (est. 1993). Superflex's art projects, or "tools" as they describe them, depend on other people's participation and involvement.

While there are certainly many significant differences between the aims of Helhesten and those of more contemporary artist collectives, the Danish artists' use of socialization during the war—from inviting the public to their parties to celebrate the journal to the editorial meetings which were also celebrations, or the offering of hayrides and tours of Dyrehaven to visitors, to drinking beer together as they created a ludic exhibition space in which viewers and artists socialized and experienced the space without any differences between them—were all collaborative experiences dependent on social participation and inextricably bound to their aims to merge art and life. As an avant-garde that occurred during the twentieth century's most profound moment of historical and political crisis, the ephemerality of Helhesten was a necessary condition of its originality. That it existed during the war, however, served to relegate Helhesten to the sidelines of art history, because as Tony Judt so masterfully demonstrated, forgetting was a natural component of Europe's recovery.⁶¹ In the case of Helhesten, however, the time has come to remember.

⁶¹ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2005).

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