

COPENHAGEN SWORDPLAY –
AVANT-GARDE MANOEUVRES AND THE AESTHETICS OF WAR
IN THE ART MAGAZINE *KLINGEN* (1917-1920)

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The Copenhagen art magazine *Klingen* (The Blade) was founded by the painter and graphic artist Axel Salto, and published in three volumes between October 1917 and November 1920. At the end of World War I, *Klingen* served as both an import channel for the diffusion of European avant-garde art into the Nordic countries and as a discursive platform for an emergent, Copenhagen-based group of young artists and poets (from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands) engaged in a the struggle for a new art different from that of the previous generations.

During World War I, Copenhagen, the capital of neutral Denmark, gained a reputation as a Nordic art centre. This was a direct consequence of the war and due in part to an injection of capital accrued from Denmark's exports to the belligerents as well as to the emergence of a parvenu class keen to display its wealth – by collecting art, among other things. Another influential factor was the abrupt diminution of the reputation of Paris and Berlin as traditional artistic centres, a shift that resulted in both artists and the art-buying public alike staying at home and cultivating new markets.

It was amidst this social milieu that the *Klingen* artists operated, both as a result of and a reaction against the sudden flood of money into the Danish art world – an economic situation that on the one hand supported their avant-gardist actions, but on the other hand, affronted their aesthetic ideals. However, the artists themselves appeared to have no moral qualms about exploiting the war for their

own ends: they published an enthusiastic war issue in May 1918; at a point when the war had raged for nearly four years and claimed the lives of millions of men.

The artists participating in *Klingen* have traditionally been categorised as modernists in Danish art history (cf. Abildgaard 1994). But while the aesthetic and editorial policy of *Klingen* leaned toward the avant-garde, its approach was also thoroughly mixed with an oddly classicist approach to modern art.

The publication was conceived by Axel Salto (1889-1961) who was assisted by the lawyer and art critic Poul Uttenreitter (1886-1956) as co-editor. After a study tour to Paris in 1916, Salto imagined founding a new Danish art magazine and, thanks to an inheritance, had the economic means to realise this. Direct inspirations behind the editorial format came from Georg Pauli's Stockholm avant-garde venue, *flamman* (1917-1921) and Amédée Ozenfant's Parisian cubist magazine, *L'Élan* (1915-16), and perhaps also, although to a lesser extent, the Parisian magazine *Sic* (1916-1919), edited by the French futurist Pierre Albert-Birot – whose onomatopoetic aeroplane poem, “Poème à crier et à danser” (Poem to cry and to dance, 1917), appeared in translation in *Klingen*'s March 1918 issue (I: 6; 110).¹

Despite the dominant French influence, Herwarth Walden's Berlin gallery and art journal *Der Sturm* (1910-1932) also played a certain role in the creation of the new magazine. In October 1917 and again in October 1918 the Berlin art gallery visited Copenhagen with travelling exhibitions of international avant-garde art. Both were reviewed in *Klingen*, and attempts were made to establish a form of co-operation between *Der Sturm* and *Klingen*. These plans, however, were never realised, and *Klingen*'s attitude towards Walden's expressionist enterprise became increasingly negative, not least after Germany lost the war and German culture ran low on prestige (cf. Jelsbak 2012).

Editorial Staff and Rank-and-File Participants

For *Klingen*'s second volume, the editorial staff was extended by the poet and critic Otto Gelsted (1888-1968), the poet Emil Bønnelycke (1893-1953), the critic Poul Henningsen (1894-1967), and the painter and critic Sophus Danneskjold-Samsøe (1874-1961). Beside the contributions of the editors themselves, participants in the three volumes

included painters of Salto's own generation such as Jais Nielsen (1885-1961) and Olaf Rude (1886-1957), together with older, more established modernists such as Harald Giersing (1881-1927) and Sigurd Swane (1879-1973). Most important, however, *Klingen* became the mouthpiece for the new brigade of rebellious artists who made their debuts at the Danish Autumn Salons of 1917 and 1918, Svend Johansen (1890-1970), Vilhelm Lundstrøm (1893-1950), and Karl Larsen (1897-1977), along with young expressionist poets such as Tom Kristensen (1893-1974) and Frederik Nygaard (1897-1958).

At the time of the magazine's launch only Salto was a resident of the Danish capital. Both Uttenreitter and Otto Gelsted, who assisted him on the first issues as a kind of shadow editor, were located in the fishing village of Kerteminde, situated on the Funen side of the Great Belt. Despite this provincial basis, the magazine quickly profited from a comprehensive network of Nordic contacts and contributors: from Sweden, the painters Isaac Grünewald (1889-1946), Otte Sköld (1894-1958) and Kurt Jungstedt (1894-1963); from Norway, the painters Yngve Anderson (1892-1981), Per Krohg (1889-1965) and Alf Rolfsen (1895-1979), along with the poets Alf Larsen (1885-1967), Olav Aukrust (1883-1929), Kristofer Uppdal (1878-1961) and Henrik Rytter (1877-1950); from Iceland, the painters Gudmundur Thorsteinsson (1891-1924) and Jón Stefánsson (1881-1962); and from the Faroe Islands the poet William Heinesen (1900-1991).

The exiled Norwegian poet Alf Larsen, who at the time was living in Copenhagen, gained a position as a kind of 'resident poet' throughout *Klingen*'s first volume. Far from any avant-garde experimentalism, Larsen wrote a highly traditional kind of lyrical poetry based on impressions of his native island, Tjøme, at the southernmost end of the Oslo Fiord (Stegane 2008). Apart from a certain tendency towards formal abstraction in his lyrical scenarios, Larsen's poetry did not contain many features of lyrical modernism. Taken as a whole, his poems in *Klingen* show no trace of the brutal modernity of war-time Europe. Nevertheless, his poetic regionalism had a certain impact on the poetic style and literary repertoire of *Klingen*. Larsen also facilitated the publication of texts by the Norwegian poets Aukrust, Uppdal and Rytter, all writing in the 'New Norwegian' (Nynorsk) language.

Artistic Agenda and Topics of the Magazine

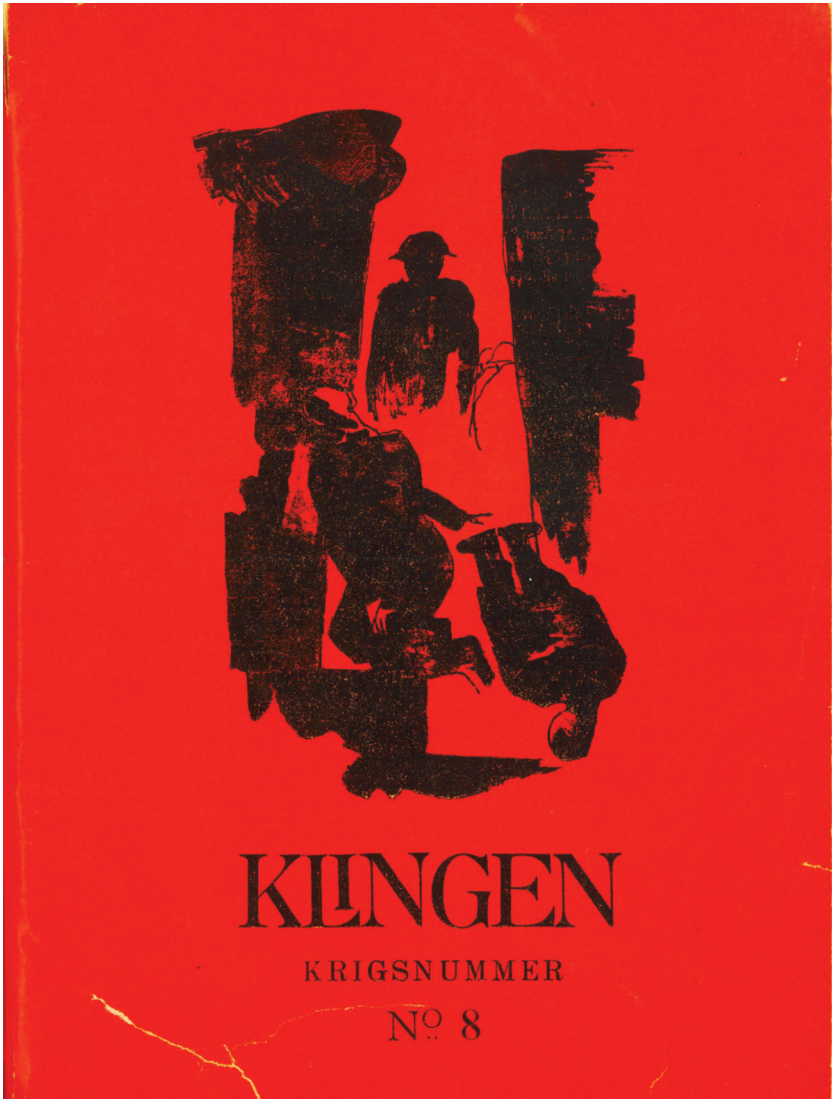
In the second issue of *Klingen* (November 1917), Axel Salto made a significant statement about the artistic and political agenda of the new magazine in relation to the contemporary rupture in European art:

Like a powerful phalanx the 'New Art' advances: Frenchmen, Russians, Germans, Scandinavians, Poles, Spaniards, artists of all nations are on the march. Art stands at the entrance to a new, rich land of plenty [...]. The 'New Art' cultivates the absolute decorative use of colour, the purity of form, the severity of drawing – the strength of the eye and the skill of the hand. Expressionism, Simultanism, Cubism, Totalism are the inscriptions on the flags that are flying in honour of the great old art of Antiquity and the Renaissance. – It is becoming more and more obvious that artistic ability is on the increase among young art in Denmark. [...] The fortuitous, non-artistic naturalism of the eighties is now being brushed aside by our art. (I: 2; 35)

Salto's position thus implied a conception of the avant-garde as a kind of renaissance or *retour à l'ordre*: a rediscovery and restoration of the art preceding naturalism. The artistic rupture announced in *Klingen* did not involve a radical avant-garde project of "sublimation of art into the praxis of life", to use Peter Bürger's famous formula of the critical intention of the historical avant-garde (1974: 44). On the contrary, as Torben Jelsbak has recently pointed out, "*Klingen's* avant-gardism served essentially as a means to define and to conquer a position within the local art field, which ultimately stressed the strategic (and commercial) side of the artists' actions. (cf. Jelsbak 2012)

In line with the editorial models of *flamman* and *L'Élan*, *Klingen* included both original graphic works (lithographs, woodcuts, engravings) and photographic reproductions of works by foreign avant-garde artists such as Picasso, Juan Gris, Braque and Chagall. On the textual front, the magazine included poems, proclamations and polemical essays by its editors as well as theoretical essays on art by international pioneers such as Kandinsky, van Gogh, Cézanne, and Matisse.

Particularly important were Harald Giersing's and Poul Henningsen's polemic attacks on The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and other leading institutions within the domestic art field. In



Cover of the war issue of *Klingen*, May 1918, by Mogens Lorentzen.

an often violent rhetoric of rupture, *Klingen* championed aesthetic experimentalism and revitalisation and defended the primacy of youth against decrepit traditions and the critiques of an “ignorant”

public. An exemplary expression of the conceited attitude of the group was delivered by the painter O.V. Borch (1891-1969) in a short proclamation on behalf of "The Youngest", appearing in the first volume: "The situation of the youngest artists in this country – despite all claims from the press of being a spoiled youth – is rather isolated and lonely" (I: 7; 118).

Besides the cult of youth, *Klingen* also included typical avant-garde interests and topics such as Polynesian and African masks and sculptures as well as children's art. They constituted a crucial source of inspiration for the new aesthetics and *Klingen's* rejection of "the skilful but superficial art of the Academy" (I: 6; 100). In its deviation from well known iconic codes and pictorial rules of composition, primitive art and children's art were regarded as more authentic or "unspoiled" expressions that could serve to free the young artists from the shackles of academic art and bourgeois society at large.

When it came to the literary contents, the magazine did not quite endorse the radical experiments of the international avant-garde. Marinetti's 'Words in Freedom' and the expressive typography of *L'Élan* and *flamman* failed to resonate with Copenhagen's young poets and writers. The only examples of such literary experimentation in *Klingen* were Bønnelycke's wordless, concrete poem "Berlin" (I, 9-10; 183) and his handwritten sky-line poem "New York" (II, 9; 369) (see cover illustration), with its redolence of Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*.

Another important, though perhaps less intentional, feature of *Klingen's* editorial policy was its almost universal exclusion of women. Only the German painter Gabriele Münter, at that time living in Copenhagen, was represented as an artist in her own right with a lithograph in the first volume. The other female artists to appear in the magazine, the editor's wife Kamma Salto (1890-1979) and Besse Giersing (1896-1944), daughter of the painter Fritz Syberg and wife of Harald Giersing, were included mainly due to their familiar associations with the leading men of the circle. Salto's statement accompanying a presentation of Besse Giersing's work in the third volume was emblematic of the masculine dominance in the *Klingen* circle: "Although influenced by her husband, her works constitute an independent, delicately accentuated feminine accompaniment to Harald Giersing's production, to which they subordinate themselves in a natural way" (III: 3-4; 462).

The War Issue

There is a well-known affinity between the aesthetics and politics of the avant-gardes and the topics of war and revolution: the titles of international avant-garde magazines and periodicals like *BLAST*, *Die Revolution* or *Torpedo* illustrate this vividly. However, the war's effects on art in the neutral Nordic countries were of course different from those at work in the homelands of the belligerents; in the former, no generation was "lost", no phalanx of young artists butchered in the trenches or left to question its pre-war artistic ideas in light of the reality of the conflict. Consequently, the young Danish artists were able to publish a special war issue as late as May 1918 that, from today's perspective at least, constitutes a rather offensive bout of belated pro-war enthusiasm.

The front cover of the war issue was illustrated by a lithograph by the painter Mogens Lorentzen (1892-1953), portraying, or so it seems, the inside of a trench, with the silhouettes of soldiers wearing British steel helmets, and a couple of fallen soldiers at the bottom of the picture. We are on the Entente side of no man's land, or engaged in a raid on a German trench with the British. Sympathy for the Entente was evident throughout the issue – there were, for instance, numerous Tricolours on display. Perhaps as an attempt to balance this partisan attitude, the orange-black back cover presented the Norwegian painter Yngve Anderson's lithograph of an amorphous figure holding – or maybe discarding? – an Iron Cross.

The playful tone was set by Salto's enthusiastic memoir of the Bastille Day parade of 1916, when the many different Entente soldiers marched by "as in a picture book" (I: 8; 139). Lorentzen's untitled lithograph on the following page seems to illustrate Salto's words: a huge Tricolour at the centre, and troops with helmets and bayonets marching by in the direction of the Arc de Triomphe. This kind of enthusiasm was also present in the only contribution by an actual participant in the war, the fallen Frenchman Jacques de Choudens, whose poem "Mon sabre" (My sword) was charged with eroticised images and individualised heroism.

The journalist Christen Friberg's (1888-1962) enthusiastic and patriotic report on "War-life at Montparnasse" (I: 8; 147-150) provides another revealing example of *Klingen's* peculiar approach to the events of the war. From his seat at Café du Dôme he acknowledges various people, including a couple of Swedish volunteers "who could

not die”, but preferably war-marked artists such as Blaise Cendrars (who cut off his wounded hand with a penknife), Guillaume Apollinaire in his lieutenant’s uniform, and André Derain arriving directly from the front, tired and muddy. As Fribert remarked, some of the Montparnasse artists are, paradoxically, “too martial to endure the stationary trench life”; all in all, Fribert painted a picture of a high-spirited French capital, where even Scandinavians were “doing their bit”.

Only one other contributor to the war issue, besides the fallen Frenchman, had seen war at first hand: the Norwegian painter and Apache dancer Per Krohg. In the winter of 1915-16 he had volunteered for a Norwegian ski ambulance in the Vosges (cf. Krohg 1966; Nergaard 2000); later, in Copenhagen in 1916, he exhibited paintings of his war-time experiences (cf. Abildgaard 1994: 103-105; Cork 1994: 125-127). His two contributions to the war issue, the one-act play “Nervousness or A Quiet Night at the Front”, and the drawing “The Mitraillease” (I: 8; 141-42 and 151), are both examples of what might be called a quasi-futurist rendering of the war. In the case of the machine-gun drawing, the focus on dehumanised, mechanical warfare points to the bleak reality of modern war. Krohg’s three machine-gunners are anonymous and faceless, as is the fallen figure at the bottom of the picture.

The one-act play is set inside a shattered church, the ultimate symbol of the collapse of the old order; the voices are performed by weapons – which in some respects may be said to have done most of the talking in the real war – in one of the rare examples of expressive typography in *Klingen*:

Guns of all calibres, rifles, hand-grenades, machineguns:

Oiiiiiii plang! Baoum! Takketakketakkeouiiiiii pling, pling!

Baoum! Baoum! Baoum!

(Krohg 1918)

This onomatopoetic dialogue of *guns of all calibres* seems to be inspired by the Italian futurist leader Marinetti’s description of the Battle of Adrianople in the First Balkan War in *Zang tumb tuuum* (1914). The few remaining lines of Krohg’s play are performed by Jesus and Mary in a fairly blasphemous style: God has been taken hostage by the Germans, and is eventually blown to pieces by an air

torpedo – God, however, was just a painted plaster figure. This, along with the stage direction, “[p]erformed on the theatre of war in the Vosges, 1916” (Krohg 1918), seems to point towards a critical view of the war. The term *theatre of war* is – and was – highly unusual in both Norwegian and Danish, so Krohg probably intended the term ironically. Thus, depersonalised mechanical war and God’s downfall, two of the defining topics of modern art and war art, were present in *Klingen*’s war issue, albeit in a marginal and ambiguous capacity – Krohg’s use of these topics can be interpreted as yet another playful expression of war imagery.

Generally, *Klingen*’s war issue and the artists’ approach to the topic provide evidence of their distance from the actual frontlines of the war, as was the case for most of the contemporary artistic avant-gardes in Europe. The martial rhetoric and aesthetic patriotism remained an important part of Salto’s strategy for propagating modern art in the Nordic countries after the war. In a collective statement by the artists of the *Klingen*-group from December 1919 criticising the contemporary Stockholm Exhibition of Nordic art for its lack of aesthetic radicalism, Salto reinforced his argument for modern art by invoking the Danes’ violent past: “We are of Viking stock! Our flag is fiery and our songs are strong. Our forefathers subdued Northern Europe, we are of the hard substance of the conquerors” (III: 2; 447).

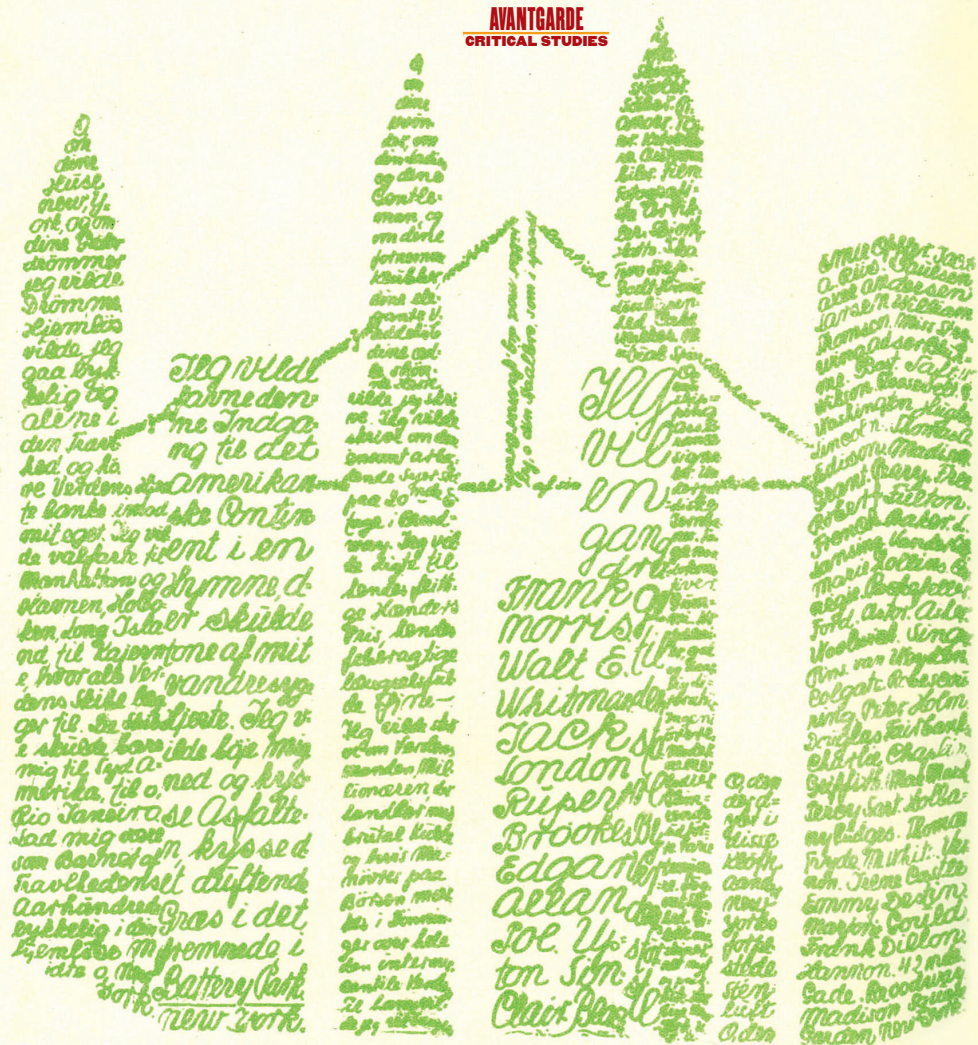
Klingen was an important showcase for the opinions of the Nordic war-time avant-garde. It was also the central conduit through which international avant-garde art and aesthetics (especially cubism and fauvism) entered the Nordic art scene. Finally, from a local Danish perspective, the magazine played a crucial social role as a meeting point and the formative ground for *The Four* (Salto, Lundstrøm, Johansen, and Larsen) which was to become the dominant modernist artist group in Denmark throughout the following decade.

NOTES

¹ *Klingen* is available in an online digital facsimile edition published by The Royal Library in Copenhagen. Quotations indicate number of volume and issue in the original edition and, after semicolon, page number of the digitalised version available at <http://www2.kb.dk/ktss/>.

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A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE

in the Nordic Countries 1900-1925

**Edited by HUBERT VAN DEN BERG, IRMELI HAUTAMÄKI,
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PER STOUNBJERG, TANIA ØRUM, DORTHE AAGESEN**

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