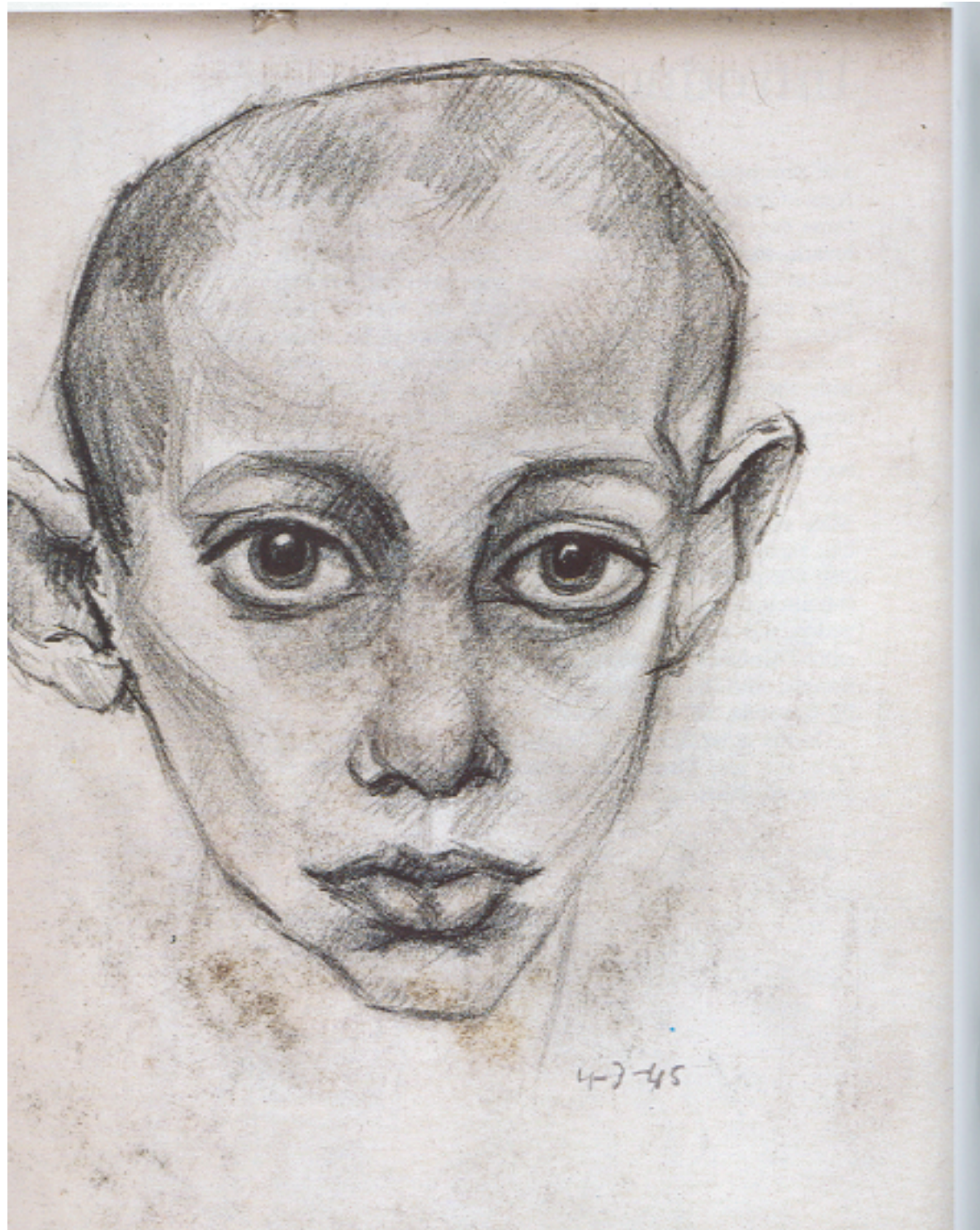


# Introduction

The first person to mention Karel Appel to me (actually Appel-Constant-Corneille, who were so inseparable in those days that they were always mentioned in the same breath, like a single name) was Jean-Michel Atlan. It was the autumn of 1948, and we were planning our first long visit to Denmark. Atlan told me that Jacques Doucet had brought three young Dutchmen to his studio in the Rue de la Grande-Chaumiére who were “painting with the same feeling as I am and are publishing a magazine.” He handed me a copy of *Reflex*.

The word *Reflex*, with its big red letters, seemed to leap off the cover. The subtitle, also in red, was *Orgaan van de experimentele groep in Holland*. Then came a black drawing, the central shape of which was serrated, like many of Atlan’s paintings, signed “Corneille 48.” The title page displayed in large letters the word *Manifest* (Manifesto). Since *Reflex* was written in Dutch, we didn’t understand a word of the texts, written by Dutchmen named Constant Nieuwenhuys, Jan Elburg, and Eugène Brands; with the exception of two short poems in French by Corneille, all were untranslated.

On the other hand, the full-page lithographs by Appel, Constant, and Corneille expressed a fabulous world of imaginary birds, quarter moons, and childlike characters,





which immediately entranced the twenty-four-year-old critic I was at the time, who recognized in the work of these Dutch artists barely older than himself the same new pictorial art he had become familiar with at exhibitions of Dubuffet and *Art Brut* at the Galerie Drouin on the Place Vendôme, as well as through his continued correspondence with Gaston Chaissac and in endless talks with Atlan.

In the spring of 1948, invited to Munich for an international youth congress that had been organized to bring the young German generation out of its isolation, I met a young Dane, Victor Brockdorff, who invited me to organize an exhibition of two French painters for the *Corner Salon*. I at once thought of Atlan. And since Brockdorff wanted the second to be a "figurative" painter, I suggested Edouard Pignon.

This is how, in December 1948, Jean-Michel Atlan and his wife, Denise, happened to be accompanying me to Copenhagen, in a train that moved endlessly through then-ruined Germany, stopping at every station, where the haggard and hungry populace stared at us in stupefaction as we passed, as if we had fallen from some other planet. In Copenhagen many of the *Corner* painters were traditionalist artists who gave us a friendly welcome. The avant-garde salon was the *Höst*, and it was there, during the yearly show held from November 19 to December 2, that the three Dutchmen of *Reflex*—Appel, Constant, Corneille—had just exhibited their work for

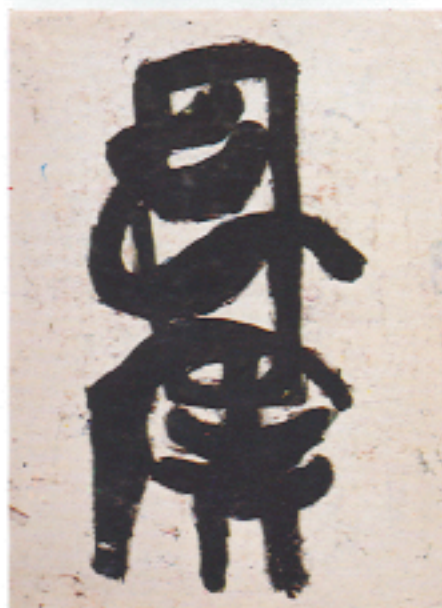


1. *Portrait of a Child*, 1945  
Pencil on paper, 30 x 24 cm (11 7/8 x 9 1/2 in.)
2. *Flower*, 1955  
Watercolor on paper, 32 x 23 cm (12 1/2 x 9 1/8 in.)
3. *Farm*, 1956  
Pencil on paper, 23 x 32 cm (9 1/8 x 12 5/8 in.)





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what gives these works their validity. We are overjoyed, because in Denmark we found men who have for years been engaged in a tireless struggle against all types of formalism, and, above all, we are happy to be able to state that the works themselves surpassed our expectations.

It was during this stay in Copenhagen with Atlan in December 1948 and January 1949 that Asger Jorn first told me about COBRA, the group created to bring together the Danes of *Høst*, the Dutch of *Reflex*, and the former Belgian Revolutionary Surrealists, the most active of whom was Christian Dotremont. The magazine, whose title had been created from the first letters of the three capital cities—Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam—would solidify the ties within the movement. The first issue of the magazine had been planned during the *Høst* exhibition, and its realization had been entrusted to Jorn, who at once invited me to collaborate on it. Caught unaware, but particularly eager to make Atlan a part of this un hoped-for collective group, I wrote a note about the Atlan-Pignon show at the *Corner Salon*.

The first issue of *Cobra* appeared in March 1949. In May the three Dutchmen returned to Paris, where Jacques Doucet had gotten them into the Colette Allendy gallery. Was it on this occasion that I met Appel and Constant and Corneille? Was it during their earlier visit? I have a clear picture of the three of them standing in



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