

Southpaw: Gerasimos Floratos & Karel Appel

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On Influence and Meaning | Franz W. Kaiser

The story of this exhibition started when we, Harriet Appel and I, first met Gerasimos Floratos at the opening of his show *Hymn* at the Château de Boisgeloup, France, in October 2022. Both Floratos and Appel had recently been added to the roster of Almine Rech. We didn't know him yet and we were intrigued by some sort of aesthetic affinity with Karel Appel that we meant to recognize in a little sculpture that featured on the invitation card.

And when we met, Gerasimos confirmed that Appel was a major inspiration for him. A year later, he came up with the proposal of a dialogue to be staged at the Tribeca space of the Almine Rech – a proposal that we happily agreed to.

There is a gap of three generations between Karel Appel and Gerasimos Floratos, but a closer look into their respective biographies and preoccupations reveals some analogies:

A transatlantic identity: Born in Amsterdam in 1921, Appel left The Netherlands for good in 1950 to settle in Paris, and from 1957 onwards he shared his time between Europe and the US. Born in New York in 1986 from Greek immigrants, Floratos is a Manhattan kid with a Greek name, and since 2017 he shares his time between Manhattan and the Greek island Kefalonia, where his family originates.

An anti-academic attitude: Floratos is self-taught and he has curated an exhibition featuring Outsider Artists. Whereas Appel did spend two years at the Amsterdam Art Academy, the development of his pictorial language drew in large part from children's drawings and from Outsider Art.

Both their artistic idioms are ostensibly non-modernist. They gather inspiration from popular culture, without however transferring it one to one, as postmodern artists tend to do.

For the better part of the 20th century, the narrative of Modernism, i.e. of progress and avant-garde toward a better ontological understanding of art, provided the reference frame for interpretation. Its culmination was marked by the consensus that painting as an artistic medium was outdated. But then painting came back, and the narrative became outdated. Given the absence of a common framework, like progress, what can you make of an artwork that is not just an illustration of a verbal concept? Anything goes, maybe?

Some time ago, an artist interested in epistemological questions shocked me by stating that “the terrible thing about art is that it is completely arbitrary”. Wasn't he confusing arbitrariness with subjectivity, and aren't admittedly subjective decisions involved in the creation of artworks also grounded in some necessity, a necessity comprehensible for others? If not, why should one exhibit them at all?

Artworks are shown in order to share attention. The most basic occasion for attention sharing is the confrontation with a problem: something has to be done, and there is no purely habitual or simply reactive way of doing it. Mostly, such problems are of a practical or material nature, which applies less to artworks, because they are essentially useless.

Moreover, within the social practice about art there is a difference between the sense of problem in the actor and in the observer: “The actor thinks of ‘problem’ when he is addressing a difficult task and consciously knows he must work out a way to do it. The observer thinks of ‘problem’ when he is watching someone’s purposeful behavior and wishes to understand.”^[1]

Inferring purposeful behavior that led to an artwork imbues it with inherent meaning, but given its essential uselessness, the concept of ‘problem solving’ can be misleading. The British art historian Michael Baxandall, while discussing Pablo Picasso’s *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (1910, The Art Institute of Chicago), has proposed the artist’s “brief” as an alternative. This is not meant to be a concern with reconstructing the artist’s actual thoughts, rather it should be understood as an inference from the comparison of a picture at hand with previous paintings – by the same or by other artists. There is thus a strong historical-cum-critical dimension to the painter’s brief. ^[2]

Now, this sounds very much like the notorious art-historical obsession with ‘influence’. According to Baxandall, this “is a curse of art criticism, primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who is the patient”. Saying that Cézanne influenced Picasso would take the actively purposeful element out of Picasso’s behavior to Cézanne, which had quite some impact: In a sense, Picasso rewrote art history by making Cézanne a much larger historical fact than he had been when he had died in 1906.^[3]

So far as for a theoretical framework that might be useful for gathering some meaning from the present dialogue. Gerasimos Floratos is a young artist, but he is obviously very much involved in researching what other artists have done before him. So, let’s try to imagine his brief. If seen through the prism of present-day priorities, Jean-Michel Basquiat comes to mind as well as two female artists: Lee Lozano and Maria Lassnig. To me, what comes to mind first are Robert Crumb and Philip Guston – and then Karel Appel.

When Karel Appel was young, he lived through a spectacular international career. He was, in 1948, one of the co-founders of CoBrA, a European avant-garde group that lasted only for three years, but which had an indelible art historical impact later on. In 1954, Appel had his first show in New York, at the Martha Jackson Gallery, and starting with his first visit to New York, in 1957, on the occasion of his third show at Martha Jackson, he shared his time between Paris and New York. As a consequence, his artistic development was very much informed by what happened in art during the transition of the status of the international capital of modern art from Paris to New York. He became involved with Nouveau Realism, and then with Pop Art, always trying to find a connection with his proper pictorial language; and when painting came back, he reinvented himself, taking stock of his very idiosyncratic reading of Van Gogh.

To sum up: In both Floratos’ and Appel’s case we can imagine briefs with strong historical-cum-critical dimensions.

While he was creating paintings for the exhibition, Gerasimos Floratos started with the selection of works by Appel from the catalogue raisonné. After the selection had been brought down to available works, we held a session at the foundation’s warehouse, where Floratos could see the works in real. The final selection is rather astonishing – only an artist could have come up with something like this.

— Franz W. Kaiser, Karel Appel Foundation

[1] Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention – On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* [1985] (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1992) p.69.

[2] Ibid., pp. 44-47.

[3] Ibid., pp. 58, 59, 61.