The Making of a Reputation: the Case of Cobra

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Like many avant-garde artists also Dutch Cobra members initially met with fierce resistance. But the clamour soon died down and a process of acceptance emerged. The question that this article focuses on is: how can this turn-about be explained? To answer this question recent studies on the making of a reputation have been consulted. These studies view criticism as a social phenomenon and they depart from the assumption that consensus about the quality of a work of art is reached on the basis of non-intrinsic factors. Each of these factors will be dealt with in this article. The conclusion is that even if the kind of knowledge that we have at the moment does not allow for any satisfactory or comprehensive answer to this question, it is still possible to give an idea of the direction in which the answer could be found.

Outside the Netherlands little is known about the Dutch contribution to the avant-garde. Exceptions are to be found in the areas of architecture and painting. Leaving Van Gogh aside for a moment – many see him as a precursor of various innovations in the twentieth century – these exceptions specifically concern *De Stijl* and Cobra. The group around *De Stijl* is the most famous, particularly because of Mondrian, who after his death became one of the icons of the avant-garde. Also those who are unable to read Dutch can access a wide variety of literature about him and other contributors to this magazine. This is much less true for Cobra, especially if we limit ourselves to the Dutch members of the group. Within the framework of this book this might be a good reason to focus our attention on these artists.

We are then talking about seven painters: Karel Appel, Eugène Brands, Constant, Corneille, Jan Nieuwenhuys, Anton Rooskens and Theo Wolvecamp. Together they founded the Experimentele Groep (“Experimental Group”) on 16 July 1948. Shortly after that three writers joined their ranks: Jan G. Elburg, Gerrit Kouwenenaar and Lucebert. The group published a magazine - *Reflex* - that only saw two issues. As a result the group did not go entirely unnoticed but it still led a rather obscure existence until its members joined Cobra.¹

Cobra was founded in Paris on 8 September 1948. Members were artists from Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands. Cobra too published a magazine, also called *Cobra*. The group burst upon the
public in 1949 in the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam with an exhibition called “Exposition Internationale d’Art Expérimental”. The exhibition had hardly been opened when quarrels arose and the Dutch writers left the organization. However, they stayed in touch with the painters and kept on collaborating with them.

In 1951 a second group exhibition was organized and shortly after that Cobra disbanded itself. So the group lasted only a very short time and this may be the reason why it took so long for the name of Cobra to be firmly established in the Netherlands. Critics rather preferred the terms “experimentelen” (“experimenters”) or “experimentalisten” (“experimentalists”). They did not use those terms to refer exclusively to the writers and painters that we just mentioned, but also for artists who were supposed to be related to them.²

At the end of the forties and in the early fifties the majority of critics rejected the work of the “experimentelen”. However, soon after that they were accepted and a short time later again they were seen as the most important representatives of their generation. How can this turnabout be explained? The traditional answer to such a question is that every new style or movement takes some time getting used to, especially so when it concerns art that aims at being innovative. But – so the argument runs – after a certain period of time the qualities of the new art will become apparent. This is hardly a satisfactory answer. It does not need a great deal of knowledge of the history of art to be able to see that works of art have no intrinsic or fixed value. Qualities are not recognized or discovered: they are ascribed to works of art. Therefore it is not correct to present the change of appreciation for the “experimentelen” as an inevitable thing. The critics might just as well have stuck to their former rejection.

About the “experimental” writers a study has been written which tries to explain why the critics changed their mind about them, but hardly anything is known about the way they reacted to the painters. Still the turnabout there was equally dramatic. Moreover, it is often claimed that their breakthrough led to a great divide in the Dutch art world with the “conservative” or “figurative” side increasingly losing territory to the “progressive” or “abstract” side.³

So the question how it came about that the Cobra painters were so quickly accepted and respected after having been initially rejected is also important in a broader context. Since the eighties a number of books and articles have appeared on the making of a reputation