ART METROPOLIS FOR A DAY
– COPENHAGEN DURING WORLD WAR I

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Between 1914 and 1918 cultural life in the Danish capital went through a short-lived, but intense ‘boom’, while war raged in other parts of Europe. “The standing of artistic culture in Denmark is now extraordinarily high, it is swarming with painters, every day has its own art auction and exhibitions are held in all available spaces”, declared one Copenhagen artist in a report printed in the newspaper Politiken in October 1916. The city became a meeting place for artists from all of the Nordic countries. They came to exhibit and to take advantage of the possibilities of selling their art at exceptionally high prices; they also came to meet each other, to take part in a stimulating cultural scene, and see recent international art – the war rendered such work less accessible. For a moment, Copenhagen held the status of a “Paris of the North”, that is as an attractive stand-in for other European centres, until travel again became possible.

The story of Copenhagen during World War I is a remarkable example of how political and economic conditions could turn a particular geographical locality into a vital cultural centre attracting avant-garde artists from across the Nordic region. These artists gathered in groups that were often competitive and sometimes antagonistic toward one another. Oppositions aside, these groups nevertheless felt united by a sense of generational solidarity, their common goal being to distance themselves from the values of previous generations and develop modern artistic idioms. They saw themselves as pioneers in pursuit of an artistic approach that differed from the “mechanical (academic) transposition of reality to the pic-
ture plane”, as Harald Giersing, one of the leaders of the young Danes put it in 1909 (Giersing 1909: 321).

Instead, he called for subjective interpretations of the impressions of reality led by “the plastic life of the picture” in terms of colour, line and space. Giersing’s statement can be taken as indicative of the rhetoric used by young, experimental artists in Copenhagen in the 1910s. They explicitly emphasised their generational status as “the young ones” committed to abandoning naturalistic conceptions of form and space and to promoting such notions as the “power of colour”.

If we define the avant-garde as a network of groups and individuals who felt united by a common project (despite spanning several ideological positions and aesthetic idioms (cf. Berg 2005: 31-34)), the story of Copenhagen during the years in question demonstrates the importance of external conditions in the formation of this network. Following the outbreak of the war, a lucrative art market and intense media coverage seem to have provoked in a number of young artists a heightened awareness of the roles they could take for themselves as an avant-garde. These favourable conditions also seem to have attracted artists from other Nordic countries who similarly considered themselves involved in the avant-garde project. As a result the significance and complexity of the Copenhagen avant-garde environment suddenly increased. That external conditions were crucial to this development is illustrated by the fact that this environment diminished once the economic heyday reached its peak and other European centres became easily accessible again. Thus, after the end of World War I in November 1918, Nordic artists soon disappeared from the Danish art scene and once again turned their attention further south.

The fact that this development took place during wartime, amid severe political tensions and a growth in nationalist sentiment adds another dimension to the story of Copenhagen as an avant-garde metropolis. One final dimension to be discussed in this text concerns the status of the avant-garde within Danish wartime cultural discourse – which ranged from sympathetic to prejudicial – and the influence these discourses had on the reception of avant-garde art at the time.