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## Reconsidering figurative, graphic art of the 1950s Danish art scene. The *Man* exhibitions (1956–1959)

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The article contributes to a revision of today's understanding of the 1950s Danish art scene. By presenting three exhibitions and analysing the reception of them, I point out that figurative art enjoyed a much more central role than later accounts have recognised. All three exhibitions were entitled *Mennesket* (Man), and featured figurative, graphic art, concerned with depictions of the human figure and with the post-war psychological condition of the individual human being. Among the artists were Palle Nielsen, Svend Wiig Hansen, Dan Sterup-Hansen and Henry Heerup. The exhibitions took place in the Copenhagen gallery *Clausens Kunsthandel* during the years 1956–1959 and attracted much attention and critical acclaim. In short, the artists' intentions were to portray the human condition in a time which they considered unhappy, and their depictions of "the strange, seeking and divided <...> creature we call man" made many critics praise the artists for the relevance of their portrayals of the human situation. A more optimistic view was also represented, but it was the works by the so-called pessimists that resonated deeply with the art critics of the day. The pessimists' interpretations were not only seen as expressions of the "correct" understanding of the time and its problems; they also lived up to expectations about engagement and truthfulness in art expressed by central figures in the field of art and culture, expectations which were attached to figurative, graphic art in particular. The article concludes that although the Danish 'depictors of man' have more or less been written out of Danish art history, they held a central position on the 1950s Danish art scene.

KEY WORDS: Danish art, 1950s art, Post Second World War, Cold War, graphic art, figurative art, man, human situation, existentialism and art, the moment of realism

When consulting surveys of Danish art history or visiting a Danish art museum today, the 1950s appear to have been completely dominated by abstract art, and one might very well get the impression that figurative art did not play a significant role at this particular time<sup>1</sup>. Here, my aim is firstly to contribute to a revision of the today's understanding of the 1950s Danish art scene by examining the role played by a particular group of figurative artists concerned with depictions of the human figure and with the post-war psychological condition of the individual human being.

1 Another related problem is the lack of surveys about Danish art from the period. As has been pointed out by Henning Jørgensen, author of *Ny Dansk Kunsthistorie* vol. 7 (New Danish Art History), *Tradition og surrealisme*, 1995, Danish art from the late 1920s until the early 1960s is not adequately covered. Even though 18 years have passed since Jørgensen made his observation, the situation remains more or less the same. Henning Jørgensen covers what he calls "The graphic renewal" in his part of the *Ny Dansk Kunsthistorie* vol. 7, pages 115–131, which is dedicated to a survey of "Tradition". In comparison to this sparse treatment an entire volume is dedicated to the Cobra movement: *Ny Dansk Kunsthistorie* vol. 8, *Cobra*. In Mikael Wivel's recent book on Danish art in the 20th century, *Dansk Kunst i det 20. århundrede*, 2008, the artists Palle Nielsen and Svend Wiig Hansen are highlighted primarily as important individual artists of the 20th century, instead of as exponents of an important post-war figurative trend.

Secondly I would like to show that figurative, graphic art played a much more central role at the time than later accounts reveal.

In this article, I will present three hitherto relatively unexplored exhibitions that do not fit comfortably into the standard definition of the art of the 1950s. Furthermore I will analyse the reception of the exhibitions and discuss them in relation to the prevailing ideas on art. Taking place in Copenhagen, in the second half of the 1950s, these exhibitions featured figurative, graphic art concerned with the human condition following the disasters of the Second World War and the experience of the conflicts of the early Cold War. This period was for many marked not only by the traumas of war, but also by a fear of a third world war which could potentially mean the eradication of humanity.

All three exhibitions were entitled *Mennesket* (Man). The initiative and idea for the exhibitions came from the artist Svend Wiig Hansen (1922–1997). The other participating artists were Palle Nielsen (1920–2000), Dan Sterup-Hansen (1918–1995), Henry Heerup (1907–1993), Erling Frederiksen (1910–1994), and Reidar Magnus (1896–1968). The third exhibition included a seventh artist, Albert Mertz (1920–1990). The works exhibited were all works on paper, primarily graphic art executed in various techniques. Some drawings were also included.

As argued by Deborah Cherry and Juliet Steyn in their 1982 article “The Moment of Realism: 1952–1956” something similar to the reception of Danish figurative art of the 1950s applied to the reception of British realist painting from the same decade. As formulated by the authors: “The 1950s was to witness the rise and fall of realism.”<sup>2</sup> While “realism dominated the debates on the nature and the future of art and the role of the artist” and “involved critics and artists in passionate and didactic exchanges. These debates have been written out of our history. The moment of Realism had been lost”. Thus, realism lost the style war to abstraction, and as always the winner takes it all. Here, I do not intend to engage in an in-depth discussion of realism, neither in relation to Danish or British art, although the term was also discussed in the Danish debates and is therefore not irrelevant<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, in this context the British example is included primarily to illustrate that a comparable, although not identical, phenomenon took place elsewhere at that moment in time, and that in both cases art historians have subsequently chosen to focus on abstraction.

It is important to stress that the group of artists who arranged the *Mennesket* exhibitions were not the only Danish artists who practised figurative art in Denmark during the time of the 1950s. A number of other graphic artists such as, for example, Jane Muus (1919–2007) and Per Ulrich (1915–1994) practised a similar mode of expression as well as content matter. Neither was this particular combination restricted

<sup>2</sup> Cherry 1982. 35: 44–49.

<sup>3</sup> I will, however, discuss the use of the term in my forthcoming PhD dissertation on Danish Graphic Art of the 1950s.

to graphic art, since most of the artists in the *Mennesket* group practised the same mode of expression in their paintings and, in the case of Svend Wiig Hansen, in their sculptures as well. On the other hand, the combination of the figurative approach and a content concentrated on the human figure was first and foremost expressed in the field of graphic art.

In Danish I have named the group of artists addressed here “Menneskeskildrerne”, which in English translates as “depictors of man”. It is important to stress that these “depictors of man” not only focus on the factual depiction of the human figure, but equally much on the existential circumstances of the 1950s. By doing so they contribute to the discussions taking place in the wider cultural field, preoccupied with defining “The human being of the time” and, in more general terms, with humanism and existentialism. To exemplify, a new series of books called *Mennesket i tiden* (The human being of the time) was introduced in 1950 by the publishing house *Hans Reitzels Forlag*. Twelve books were published in the series from 1950 to 1954, featuring significant writers, theologians and scientists making important contributions to the 1950s debate on ideas. Amongst them we find H. C. Branner’s *Humanismens krise* (The Crisis of Humanism), 1950, published alongside Martin A. Hansen’s *Eneren og massen* (The Individual and the Crowd), 1950, and *Mellem håb og frygt* (Between Hope and Fear), 1952, with contributions from the Norwegian writer Sigurd Hoel, the Swedish writer Eyvind Johnson and the Danish writer Paul La Cour. Four years before that, in 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre’s widely popular *L’Existentialisme est une humanisme* was published in Danish and in the same year three of his theatre plays – *Huis clos*, *Les Mouches*, and *Morts san Sépultures* – were published in Danish and performed in Copenhagen<sup>4</sup>. In 1953 the labour party minister of education (and from 1961 the first minister of culture in Denmark) Julius Bomholt edited the anthology *Mennesket i centrum* (The Human Being at the Centre), with contributions on “an active cultural policy”. These are only a few examples serving to illustrate the relevance of the exhibition theme.

In order to accurately describe the 1950s understanding of the work of these figurative artists, I will perform a discourse analysis of the art critics’ reception of three exhibitions. What did they approve of in terms of subject matter, and what did they reject? How did they identify the artistic aims? And how did the art critic’s reception represent aspects of the general debates on art of the period? The critic’s reception offers important insight into the historic period through their articulations, judgements of taste, focus points, choices and omissions. Newspaper reviews offer important evidence of the understanding of the art of the 1950s; evidence which is not influenced by later interpretations and receptions.

<sup>4</sup> *Huis Clos*, translated to *Lukkede døre*, was performed at Frederiksberg Teater in October 1946, *Morts san sépultures*, translated to *Døde uden grave*, was performed at Allé Scenen in November 1946, *Les Mouches*, translated to *Fluorne*, was performed at the Royal Theater in December 1946. <http://www.litteraturpriser.dk/1850u/u4412.htm#Dramatik> (on 4 September 2013).

## The *Man* exhibitions

The exhibitions took place in the gallery *Clausens Kunsthandel* (Clausen's Art Dealership). Founded in 1953 by joiner Viggo Clausen (1916–1992), the gallery is situated in the centre of Copenhagen. In the 1950s the premises were very small. The exhibition space was limited to two rooms, 37 m<sup>2</sup> in total.

The first of the *Man* exhibitions was exhibited 24 September – 22 October 1956, ending just two days before the Soviet Union invaded Hungary. The second was exhibited 4–26 January 1958; just two months after the Soviet Union successfully launched the first artificial earth satellite *Sputnik I*, thereby proving their technical superiority to the Americans. The third and last of the *Man* exhibitions was exhibited 3–25 January 1959. At that point the Danish economy had been gradually recovering from 1958 onwards<sup>5</sup>, meaning that the 1959 exhibition was on the other side of the 'turning point'. That fact might partly explain why this exhibition also happened to be the last in the series. This assumption is supported by one of the critic's perception that by 1959 "the darkness grows lighter"<sup>6</sup>.

Even though these exhibitions took place in a small commercial Copenhagen gallery established only three years previously, not in one of the well-established art institutions, press interest was extensive. As no catalogue of any kind was published and no lists of the exhibited works appear to have been produced, this very interest is what makes reconstructing and exploring possible. Although space restrictions prevent me from presenting a reconstruction of the exhibitions, such a reconstruction has been carried out as a part of my PhD project and forms an important background for analysing the exhibitions<sup>7</sup>.

## Picturing an unhappy time

Analyses of material pertaining to the *Man* exhibitions show that the governing idea behind all three was more or less the same. Writing on the third exhibition, two significant critics, Pierre Lübecker and Svend Eriksen, confirm this impression<sup>8</sup>. In the daily newspaper *Politiken* Lübecker states in 1959 that "There are no changes, neither to the title nor to the theme. The graphic exhibition is still called 'Man', and the exhibitors are still concerned with the human figure."<sup>9</sup> In *Dagens Nyheder* Svend Eriksen writes: "Same time last year the small graphic exhibition called 'Man' could inflame an art critic to write an extensive feature article. In fact, the same could have happened this year, if one were not afraid to write more or less

5 The exhibition dates are from the exhibition lists in the archives of *Clausens Kunsthandel*.

6 Lübecker 1959.

7 The reconstruction of the exhibitions will be presented in my forthcoming PhD dissertation.

8 Lübecker 1959; Eriksen 1959.

9 Lübecker 1959.

the same thing again.”<sup>10</sup> Still, both critics were enthusiastic about the exhibition. Eriksen added that “Also this time one is excited about at least some of these artists’ solemn efforts to say something significant about their understanding of the human being in our time.”<sup>11</sup>

In January 1958 two of the participating artists, Svend Wiig Hansen and Palle Nielsen, were interviewed by the Danish newspaper *Information* about the second exhibition under the headline “The impossible human position of today”<sup>12</sup>. The intention, Svend Wiig Hansen explains, is to portray the human condition at a time which the artists describe as “unhappy”. He continues: “I believe it is an unhappy time for man; the imagination, dreams, and faith has been taken away from us. On the outside everything seems fine: we are clean, we are happy, we have a radio gramophone and all that... but how do we look on the inside? Think about how close we are to the edge, we are in danger – all it takes is some “crackpot” to push the button, and we are no longer here.”<sup>13</sup> He goes on to explain that it is this particular “condition of the soul” that they wish to illustrate. In the same vein Palle Nielsen describes how the Man artists participating in the exhibition employ the human figure in order to illustrate the human condition in its current situation. From his point of view, the situation is “impossible”, and the only way for Man to survive is to recognise the impossibility of the situation. In Palle Nielsen’s opinion the most horrible thing is the way in which people are systematically closing their eyes to and distorting the actual conditions under which they live. In his experience, people’s actions do not correspond with their articulated intentions. While their utterances might be filled with good intentions, such as “Today we are going to save culture, freedom, the wife, the children etc.”, their actions show something else. If their utterances were to correspond with their actions, they really ought to be saying: “Today we will kill, burn, stab and kick as many people as possible”. In Nielsen’s words killing is “the impossibility, the false hope”<sup>14</sup>.

To sum up, according to Svend Wiig Hansen and Palle Nielsen the focus of the exhibitions was on the human condition at a time which the artists perceived as “unhappy”, i. e. on the inner experience of life during the aftermath of the Second World War and the early period of the Cold War. Not only had man, as a consequence of the Second World War disasters, suffered a loss of faith and imaginative scope, he was also experiencing a feeling of living in constant danger caused by the atomic bomb, a glaring contrast to the orderly everyday life defined by increasing wealth and modern amenities. As articulated by Palle Nielsen, the artworks also offered a critique

10 Eriksen 1959. Eriksen is referring to his full-page feature article *Det menneskelige i kunsten* 1958.

11 Eriksen 1959.

12 Johansson 1958.

13 Ibidem.

14 Ibidem.

of human behaviour, especially the lack of honesty and of the use of violence.

Most pieces by Palle Nielsen and Svend Wiig Hansen exhibited at the three *Man* exhibitions exemplify the ideas presented in the interview. For instance, Palle Nielsen's strong aversion to violence and war is a consistent theme in his linocut series *Orpheus and Eurydice*, on which he was working during the exhibition years and from which he exhibited pieces in all three *Man* exhibitions (Fig. 1). In Nielsen's version of the ancient myth we see the unhappy Orpheus on his path through a war-torn city in his search for his lost love, Eurydice. The disasters of war and Orpheus' reactions to them are described with uncompromising bleakness. The situation is in all respects inhumane.

Svend Wiig Hansen exhibited variations of portraits of figures in various states of dissolution or distortion. He also exhibited apocalyptic scenes in which groups of figures seem to exist in a world on the verge of its final doom.

In Wiig Hansen's etchings we are confronted with what the critic Pierre Lübecker described as "Man's loneliness, despair, its degradation, its anxiety and desperation in a hard time"<sup>15</sup>. In the etching *The Searchers*, exhibited at the second exhibition, we meet a group of figures on a harsh seashore where they stand petrified in the face of disaster, unable to relate to one another (Fig. 2).

In Dan Sterup-Hansen's work war, disasters or threats are never depicted directly. Rather, he focuses on the experience of loneliness and alienation as a common experience in the aftermath of the Second World War, feelings that were emphasised by the Cold War crisis. He explores these feelings in depictions of men seated or lying on benches alone in public places, or in studies of swimmers' underwater movements (Fig. 3). Likewise he is concerned with the theme of 'the individual against the crowd', a theme inspired by existentialism and addressed in many works, including



Fig. 1. Palle Nielsen, *Temporary Bridge. Fellow Beings*, 1956, from *Orpheus and Eurydice I*, linocut, 140 × 200 mm, inv. no. KKS1960-773, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

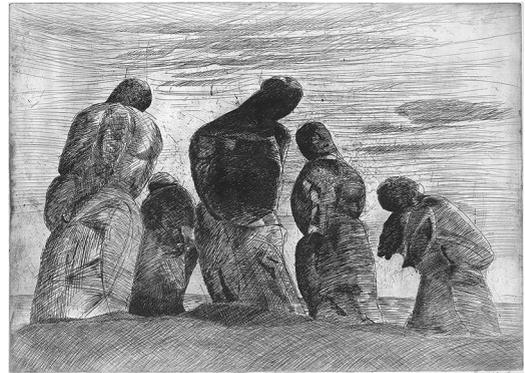


Fig. 2. Svend Wiig Hansen, *The Searchers*, 1958, etching, 483 × 675 mm, inv. no. KKS1958-33, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

<sup>15</sup> Lübecker 1958.



Fig. 3. Dan Sterup-Hansen, *Man on a Bench*, 1957, etching, 196 × 310 mm, inv. no. 1263x03261, Arbejdermuseet, Copenhagen



Fig. 4. Henry Heerup, *Horseshoe Family II*, 1991 (1949), linocut, 549 × 454 mm, Heerup Museum

Martin A. Hansen's aforementioned *Eneren og massen*<sup>16</sup>.

On the other hand, fear did not pervade every artwork in the three exhibitions. The works by Henry Heerup, Erling Frederiksen and Reidar Magnus, their stylistic and thematic differences untold, are characterized by a much lighter and more optimistic tone. Although Heerup also includes the darker sides of life as his subject matter, he generally depicts subjects from everyday life characterized by a light and optimistic tone. The linocut *Horseshoe Family II*, exhibited at the first of the *Man* exhibitions, is a typical example of his style (Fig. 4). A family consisting of mother, father and a baby is represented in a happy moment sitting closely together on a huge pillow, the mother breastfeeding the baby, and all of them surrounded by a heart and a horseshoe, symbols of love and happiness. Life seems to be unproblematic and carefree in this representation. Likewise, Erling Frederiksen typically picks his subjects from his immediate surroundings, and to an even greater extent than Heerup, Frederiksen concentrates on the unproblematic aspects of everyday life. At the *Man* exhibitions he showed a series of woodcuts telling the story about

<sup>16</sup> In line with their overarching ideas Palle Nielsen and Dan Sterup-Hansen were both involved in peace movements. Palle Nielsen was a member of the Danish department of the "World Movement for World Federal Government" founded in 1947. The Danish department was named *Een verden* (One World), similar to the book entitled *One World or None* published in 1946, in which some of the world's leading nuclear scientists responsible for the development of the A-bomb explain "the full meaning of the atomic bomb". The movement believed that the constitution of a world government was the only way to solve the problems caused by the threat of nuclear weapons, and consequently the only way to ensure the survival of mankind. These problems could not be solved by national governments. In a similar vein, Dan Sterup-Hansen designed a poster intended to encourage the Danish to sign the Stockholm Appeal (1950), an appeal that called for an absolute ban on nuclear weapons.

the working day of a peat digger, portraits done in an impressionistic manner, and drawings of a mother breastfeeding her baby (Fig. 5). Reidar Magnus stands out from the rest of the group with his imaginative tales populated with figures from Norse and Classical mythology (Fig. 6). While none of the other artists can be regarded as naturalists or realists, they nevertheless have a much closer connection with reality than Magnus, whose depictions mixes elements from the world of fantasy, dreams and ancient mythologies.

So, although Svend Wiig Hansen and Palle Nielsen focus on their own pessimistic view of the human condition in the interview, it is important to stress that another point of view was also represented in the exhibitions. And, as I will show in the following analyses, the contrast between these two fundamentally different ways of describing the human condition is a recurrent discourse in the reviews. However, despite their differences all six artists share an interest and engagement in the condition of the human being at the time. And even though their stylistic expressions are highly individual, they do share a figurative base and all have the human figure at the centre of their art.

Below I will analyse some of the dominant discourses in the reception of the exhibitions.

## Reception

Virtually all critics were positive or even exultant about the exhibitions. The first two shows in particular were praised for showing world-class, Danish graphic art, for making the Clausen gallery the centre of the Copenhagen art scene, and not least

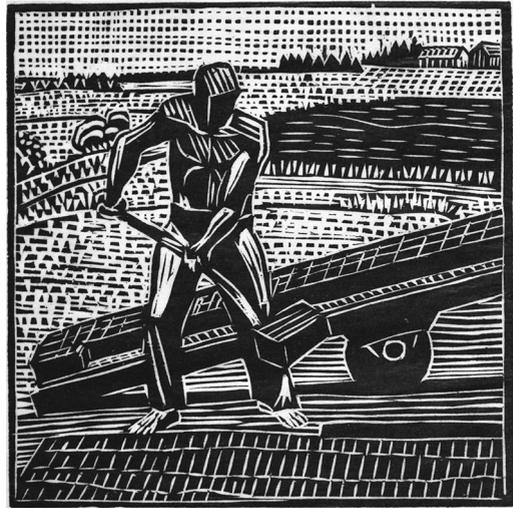


Fig. 5. Erling Frederiksen, *The Turfs are Placed for Drying*, 1945, from *A Working Day at the Turf Marsh*, wood cut, 148 × 150 mm, inv. no. 1058x00004-31, Arbejdermuseet, Copenhagen

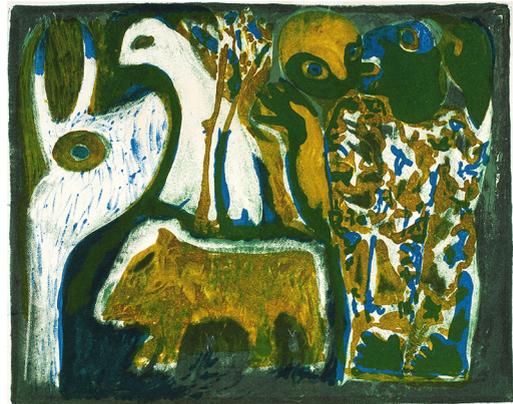


Fig. 6. Reidar Magnus, *Exotic composition with human figure and animals*, 1956, colour lithograph, 289 × 457 mm, inv. no. KKS1958-28, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

for the relevance of their portrayals of the human situation<sup>17</sup>. Critics unanimously saw the exhibitions of 1956 and 1958 as key events on the Danish art scene, and several of them strongly urged everyone to pay a visit. For instance, the critic Helge Ernst praised the 1956 exhibition for its successful composition. He wrote: “None of them could be left out, together they form an image of the strange, seeking and divided, but at the same time indomitable creature we call man. One *must* visit this exhibition!”<sup>18</sup> In 1958 another critic, Pierre Lübecker, commented on the fact that he didn’t find the exhibition title equally relevant for all participating artists, after which he stated: “However, this doesn’t change the fact that this exhibition as a whole is the best which has been seen for a long time in one of the smaller Copenhagen galleries. This [exhibition] one simply has an obligation to visit.”<sup>19</sup> Helge Ernst was also enthusiastic in 1958, where he stressed the importance of the exhibition by concluding that the exhibition was characterized by “an artistic realization which will be crucial for the future”<sup>20</sup>. And likewise many other critics stated in 1956 as well as in 1958 that these exhibitions were simply “must-sees”<sup>21</sup>. Why was this? Which characteristics convinced the critics that these particular exhibitions were of such great importance? And what exactly made them important?

As has already been mentioned a recurrent argument on the significance of the exhibitions concerned the artist’s treatment of the human situation. A few critics, like Helge Ernst, praised the successful combination of all six artists, but a majority of critics clearly preferred the artists that can be described as the pessimists, i. e. Palle Nielsen, Svend Wiig Hansen and Dan Sterup-Hansen. Several critics highlighted the pessimistic version of the human situation as more significant than the optimistic one. Or, to phrase it differently, it seems that the majority of the critics shared a certain idea about which version of the human situation was the true one. This idea resulted in the critics dividing the artists into two groups, which I shall call pessimists and optimists.

In the following I will provide some examples of how the critics articulated their ideas about the “right” and “wrong” versions of the human situation, that is: how they argued why they preferred the pessimistic version over the optimistic.

### The true image of the time?

In 1956 Maria Marcus gave her account of the features that did not convince her about the quality of the work of one of the leading optimists, Henry Heerup. Marcus

17 Marcus 1956; Ernst 1956; Gelsted 1956.

18 Ernst 1956.

19 Lübecker 1958.

20 Ernst 1958.

21 Lübecker 1958; Ernst 1956; Gelsted 1956.

argues: “With stubborn energy this artist sticks to an optimism which today is bound to appear as an inadequate simplification, a blue-eyed naivety, a refusal to see clearly”. She rejects Heerup’s expression as clichéd, supporting her position with a description that almost certainly refers to the linocut *The Horseshoe Family II*, 1949, exhibited at the first of the *Man* exhibitions: “Heerup shows us man girt with innocence, men flexing their muscles, women with bulging breasts and children depicted as small solid dolls”. Finally Marcus adds, rather intriguingly, that she finds Heerup’s works “touching”, but at the same time “at bit disquieting”, because “all this fertility cult has a Germanic tang”<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, Maria Marcus dismissed Heerup’s depictions on the ground that they are not in accordance with her understanding of the situation of the human being at the time. In her words they are “inadequate simplifications”, they are “naïve” and furthermore they express Heerup’s unwillingness to look at the present situation and see it the way it truly is. I find it particularly interesting how she interprets the optimism of Heerup as something he clings to “with a stubborn energy”. This indicates that according to this critic, it simply does not make sense to have an unambiguously positive experience of the present anno 1956.

Instead, Marcus highlights Palle Nielsen, whom she considers the gloomiest of the six artists. His vision is obviously much more in accordance with Marcus’ own perception of the time. She explains: “it is hardly a coincidence that anxiety and degradation have found the best expressions. It is the eye of a needle which must be passed through if the youth of today wants to reach a positive understanding of the human being.”<sup>23</sup> This idea, repeated by several other critics, that the pessimistic phase is a necessary transitional phase, may very likely have been influenced by the thinking of Jean-Paul Sartre, known to the general public through his theatre plays and the publication of *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* already mentioned. While many criticized Sartre’s existentialism for being too pessimistic, he consistently stressed that the exact opposite was the case. In his view, it was possible for man to overcome anxiety and despair by engaging in life and creating a meaningful life for oneself. Hereby, existentialism could help conquer discouragement and make life a possibility<sup>24</sup>.

Amongst the critics Maria Marcus was the one who most explicitly articulated the opinion that the optimist’s depictions of the human condition seemed naïve, was not in line with the present situation, or simply not as interesting as the pessimist’s depictions. Other critics made similar remarks. For example, the critic Ejner Johansson considered Erling Frederiksen “the least problematic” artist, adding that “his drawings are predominantly skilful and pretty, however they lack the menacing aspect that

<sup>22</sup> Marcus 1956.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> Sartre 2002.

makes Palle Nielsen's pictures so fascinating<sup>25</sup>. Thus, in Johansson's point of view, the works of Frederiksen are fine as far as technique and aesthetics are concerned, but they have serious shortcomings in terms of content or, to be more specific, in their approach to the human condition. Basically the difficulty with Frederiksen is that he ignores the problems, the traumas and the crisis. In the discourse of these critics a focus on technique and especially on aesthetics is generally associated with modernism that "reduced the human figure to being merely a model in line with fruits and a pitcher and other *nature morte* objects"<sup>26</sup>. Johansson's standpoint is supported by the critic Pierre Lübecker, who concludes his 1958 review by mentioning that the works by Frederiksen, Magnus and Heerup, which were exhibited together in the smallest room of the gallery, do not really fit the exhibition title<sup>27</sup>. The rejection of the works by these three artists makes it clear that Lübecker has a specific understanding of the title, which means that images concerned with everyday subject matter, such as Frederiksen's depictions of mother and child, are regarded as irrelevant. When approaching the subject of the human being of the time the critics expects artists to deal with themes such as the Second World War trauma and fear of the nuclear bomb, not with the uncomplicated and trouble-free affection between a mother and her infant child.

Instead of outwardly rejecting the optimists the rest of the critics simply highlighted the pessimists without going into detail about the deficiencies of the optimists. They did so by writing mainly or, as in the case of Svend Eriksen's extensive feature article, exclusively about the pessimists, or by focusing exclusively on the pessimist's interpretation when presenting or arriving at conclusions about the exhibitions' message<sup>28</sup>. Pierre Lübecker's 1958 review illustrates this point very well<sup>29</sup>. Initially he argues that Palle Nielsen, Svend Wiig Hansen and Dan Sterup-Hansen have a kinship arising out of their view on existence; one "which gives the exhibition its distinctive character". He elaborates: "It cannot be denied that they are pessimists. Man's loneliness, despair, its degradation, its anxiety and desperation in a hard time is their message. It finds its strongest expression in the works by Wiig Hansen, whose characters we meet on a harsh seashore where they stand petrified in the face of disaster."

Yet, even though several critics did not explicitly reject Heerup, Frederiksen and Magnus, the space reserved for and the attention given to the pessimists in the reviews far outweighs the attention given to the optimists. This indicates that even if such critics did not explicitly state their preference, they too found the pessimists

25 Johansson 1958.

26 Ernst 1958.

27 Lübecker 1958.

28 Eriksen 1958.

29 Lübecker 1958.

the most interesting and relevant. The same is indicated by the art works chosen to illustrate the reviews<sup>30</sup>.

Only one critic, Helge Ernst, seemed to value the pessimists and the optimists equally highly, although he actually refers to their joint project as “an interpretation of the problems”, which inevitably sounds as if his focus is on the darker side of the situation. However, Ernst concludes that none of the artists could be dispensed with: “together they form the picture of the strange, seeking and divided, but also indomitable creature we call man”<sup>31</sup>.

### Time, truth and the problems

In the following I will focus on some of the key words and phrases characteristic of the reception of the exhibition. These words and phrases are crucial if we want to understand the widespread agreement amongst critics on, firstly, what they perceived as an expression of the present time and situation, and secondly how they understood the exhibition title. Furthermore, these words and phrases often functioned as criteria of assessment in the critic’s argumentation. Finally, they are an important part of the discourses involved in the reception, which enters into a dialogue with the overall 1950s discussions on art.

The most frequent key phrase concerns “the time” or “the present time”, often linked to other key phrases describing the times as being “hard”, defined by “problems” or “disasters”. The critics were rarely specific about which events were the cause of the problems. The critic who most explicitly addressed one of the problems was Jens Jørgen Thorsen, who in 1959 referred to the situation as “here in the din of hydrogen bombs”<sup>32</sup>. Instead, they seemed to agree on understanding the pessimist’s gloomy portrayals and images as reflections of the conflicted political situation and of “the oppositions of the time”. The wording of critic Otto Gelsted is a typical example of how the critics approached the time and its problems. In 1956 he noted that Palle Nielsen depicts “tremendously moving, dramatic scenes that reflect the tensions and oppositions of the present time”<sup>33</sup>. The same year the critic Helge Ernst concluded that the first *Man* exhibition presents “the human condition”, elaborating his point by stating that the exhibition confronts us with “Man, the known and the unknown, perceived by six artists, who give their individual interpretation of the problems”<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> My material consists of 20 articles, 13 of which are illustrated. Amongst these 10 show 1 or 2 works by a “pessimist” and only 3 are illustrated by a work of an “optimist”. Works by Palle Nielsen are used most frequently (6 times), works by Svend Wiig are used 5 times, works by both Dan Sterup-Hansen and Henry Heerup 2 times, works by Erling Frederiksen only once and no works by Reidar Magnus are used as illustrations.

<sup>31</sup> Ernst 1956.

<sup>32</sup> Thorsen 1959.

<sup>33</sup> Gelsted 1956.

<sup>34</sup> Ernst 1956.

Pierre Lübecker joins the choir with his description of the exhibition in 1956: “In the two small rooms you get inspiring glimpses of how the artists understand the conditions life imposes on the human being of our time, and it cannot be denied that it is the pessimist who speaks with the greatest authority and conviction.”<sup>35</sup> As has already been mentioned, Maria Marcus shares this position in her review from 1956.

Thus, the shared understanding of the historic moment as one defined by ‘disasters’ and ‘problems’ explains the critics’ agreement that the pessimist’s depictions of “man’s loneliness, despair, its degradation, its anxiety and desperation” draw the true picture of the times, as opposed to the picture evoked by the optimists<sup>36</sup>. Or, to phrase it differently, the critics agree on a particular narrative as the true one; the narrative of crisis.

Apart from agreeing on their understanding of the times in which they live the critics furthermore agree that there is no alternative to telling the truth about the dismal and dark times, even though this strategy does not result in pretty or pleasurable images. In 1958 the critic Svend Eriksen explains: “If these artists give us the impression that they are a bunch of gloomy fellows it’s simply because they see no other solution than to keep on going straight to the point, speaking out clearly and without compromises.”<sup>37</sup> And he elaborates that “The deeper meaning is that they want to draw a picture of man’s not very enviable situation as it is today”. This strategy of going straight to the point, drawing a picture of the situation even though it cannot be considered pretty in any way is very much in line with ideas, popular at the time, that value art’s engagement with reality higher than beauty. Such

ideas were expressed by e. g. the Danish literary historian Harald Rue (1895–1957) in his important book *Dansk kunst omkring to verdenskrige* (Danish Art at the Time of Two World Wars) published in 1948. Rue exemplifies his view with drawings by the Danish draughtsman and printmaker Per Ulrich (1915–1994), images that depict some of the artist’s fellow internees drawn during his incarceration in a German concentration camp (Fig. 7). Rue cites Ulrich talking about these drawings: “Some people have regarded my works as speculation in ugliness, since they

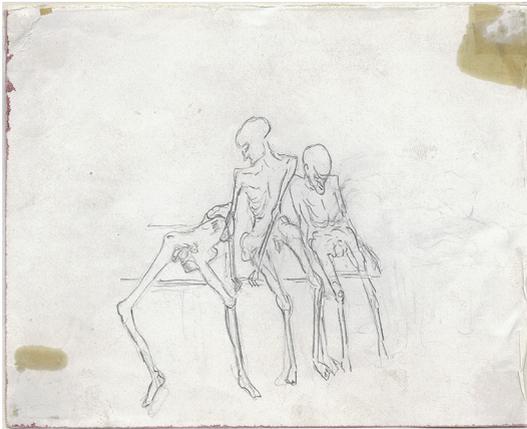


Fig. 7. Per Ulrich, *Three Muselmänner on Their Way to the Bath*, 1944–45, drawing, 10.5 × 13.0 cm, inv. no. 161/2006, Frihedsmuseet (The Museum of Danish Resistance)

<sup>35</sup> Lübecker 1956.

<sup>36</sup> Lübecker 1958.

<sup>37</sup> Eriksen 1958.

assume that art should only deal with what is beautiful. I did not intend to make something beautiful. I have intended to create something true. To me, art is not only a quest for beauty, but also a struggle for truth and humanity.”<sup>38</sup>

### Figuration, social commitment, and graphic art

The critics' preference for the pessimists is not merely an indication of their shared understanding of living in an age of misery. It also indicates that the critics mutually agreed that the subject matter of this particular kind of art – figurative, graphic art – ought to address the problems of contemporary life.

The critics' discourse on such engagement and social commitment is interwoven with another discourse pointing out that the human being is once again at the centre of art and has thereby replaced the formal experiments of modernism. A discourse which draws upon a shared knowledge of the discussions initiated by Ortega y Gasset's essay “The Dehumanization of Art”, written in 1925, but not published in Danish until 1945. In the following quote the artist and editor Ernst Clausen combines these two discourses. The quote is taken from the preface of the literary periodical *Hvedekorn* that dedicated their second issue of 1958 to the *Man* exhibition of the same year:

“The initiator of the exhibition is Wiig-Hansen, who believed that the time was now ripe to join forces with some colleagues, widely different in their views on art, but with a mutual interest in the human figure as something more than merely an excuse for strictly formal experimentation. In short: an artistic engagement in the present time.”

Likewise, Helge Ernst wrote about the first exhibition that the artists let the human being take the centre state instead of merely treating the human figure as a suitable model “similar to a decorative pitcher or three apples on a dish”. Ernst's phrasing is without a doubt a reference to the Danish modernist painter Vilhelm Lundstrøm (1893–1950), who was often accused of treating his models as if they were pieces of fruit or one of the pitchers that were among his favourite motifs. Ernst considers the *Man* artists to be practitioners of a “new realism” who, unlike Lundstrøm, “are trying to recapture things by effecting a break away from aesthetics and lyricism”<sup>39</sup>. With the reference to “things” he continues the juxtaposition with modernism. One key figure in the discussions on “the things” was Aksel Jørgensen (1883–1957), professor and long-standing Head of the School of Graphic Art at the Royal Academy, whose ideas on looking at every single thing as it *really* is, as opposed to being seen from a perspective infused by emotions or moods, was very influential in the discussions on figurative art in the late forties and fifties. It is important to note that Jørgensen uses the term “things” as a common denominator

<sup>38</sup> Rue 1948: 112.

<sup>39</sup> Ernst 1958.

meaning both the human model and the pitcher. However, his point is that they are to be treated individually as opposed to similarly, because his interest concerns an engagement in the reality of things<sup>40</sup>. In the works of the *Man* artists the reality of man is interpreted into an “engagement in the recognition of the human situation today”<sup>41</sup>. This understanding is shared by the critic Leo Estvad, whose 1958 double review “Abstraction and Man” addressed the second *Man* exhibition as well as an exhibition of contemporary non-figurative art<sup>42</sup>. Referring to the exhibition on non-figurative art he writes about the *Man* exhibition: “here we find no aesthetic reservations, everything is out in the open and each of the artists presents us with what he finds to be the truth about existence”. As has already been indicated, the discourses shaping the reception of the three *Man* exhibitions are infused by the general 1950s discussions on art, on the role of the artist, and on the role of art in society. The ambition to make an art infused by a real engagement with the world is perfectly in accordance with the ideals of Aksel Jørgensen, whose influence on this generation of Danish graphic artists and on Danish post-war figurative art is widely recognised. It has even led to this group of graphic artists being nicknamed not only “The Existentialists”, but simply “Akselisterne” (“The Akselites”). Jørgensen’s idea that the artist had an obligation to be engaged in life and in the living conditions of human beings had a particularly strong impact on “The Akselites”, shaping their work. In 1956 Jørgensen described his belief as: “an immense sympathy for the human being in its full humiliation, in its comprehensive ruin, in accordance with the social conditions at that time”<sup>43</sup>.

In 1957 Eric Fischer (1920–2011), the renowned keeper (from 1948) and later head of the Royal Collection of Graphic Art in Copenhagen, applauds Jørgensen for his influence on post-war Danish graphic arts, giving him credit for the fact that it had developed into something more than “technique and formalism”, that is: an art that shows “an urge to once again use art as a means of communicating something more than merely an individual expression, an urge to create art that may best be categorised as political, that is: focused on a compassionate humanity and prepared to adopt new mythologies, instead of being limited to being decorative and private”<sup>44</sup>. Fischer highlights Dan Sterrup-Hansen and Palle Nielsen as examples of this reorientation in the graphic arts. He stresses the artist’s special relationship with reality, and in his conclusion on Palle Nielsen’s work he describes Nielsen’s art as a “passionate message about the present time and humanity”<sup>45</sup>. Fischer regards this

40 Rue 1948: 77–78.

41 Ernst 1958.

42 Estvad 1958.

43 Jørgensen; Clemmesen 1966: 19.

44 Fischer 1957: 21.

45 Ibidem: 23.

striving for “representation” amongst the youngest graphic artists as an important statement about “the aims of art” in the latter half of the 1950s. He concludes his report on Danish graphic art from 1940 to 1956 by commenting that he has not yet noticed a similar trend in the art of painting, and he views this as a proof of the independent power of graphic art.

As was pointed out by Harald Rue, the idea that graphic art has a special obligation to engage reality is closely linked to the politically engaged art produced during the Second World War. In Denmark artists such as Erling Frederiksen and Dan Sterup-Hansen produced illegal woodcuts depicting the crimes of the occupying German forces and the acts of heroes of the Danish resistance movement (Fig. 8). In Rue’s words art like this, which can be reproduced, is the most significant form of art during wartime and other crises. He explains: “Even as the artist expresses what moves him and what he sees around him, he actively intervenes through his art, because the prints can be disseminated everywhere they are needed.”<sup>46</sup>

Harald Rue defines this kind of art engaged in reality as a “new realism”, one that had not been seen since Aksel Jørgensen’s early works, i. e. not since before the First World War. He states that “this kind of art is new, because all attempts at showing the characteristics of the time, a picture of humankind at this particular time and place, have been abandoned by the art scene since the years around the First World War. This big ambition was given up in favour of a smaller one, the aesthetic dream of an art that was freed from depressing or discomfoting subject matter. An art meant to shield us from reality, not reveal its true nature to us. Rather than the external reality, humanity’s true existence, the artistic was pronounced the true reality of painting.”<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

By examining the conceptual ideas and analysing the reception of the three *Man* exhibitions during the years 1956–1959 I have shown that the exhibitions concerned themselves with topics that were considered highly relevant in the 1950s, both politically and artistically. I have demonstrated that the artists’ engagement in the



Fig. 8. Erling Frederiksen, *Fallen in the Street*, 1944–45, wood cut, 158 × 215 mm, inv. no. KKS16708, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

<sup>46</sup> Rue; Gildet 1945.

<sup>47</sup> Rue 1948: 122.

human condition of the post-war and early Cold War years, expressed figuratively by the so-called pessimists, resonated deeply with the art critics of the day. The pessimists' interpretations were not only seen as expressions of the "correct" understanding of the time and its problems, they also lived up to expectations about engagement and truthfulness in art expressed by central figures in the field of art and culture, among these as Aksel Jørgensen, Harald Rue and Erik Fischer. Expectations which were attached to figurative, graphic art in particular. Thus, the *Man* exhibitions were seen as central events, and the figurative art by the graphic artists in question held a central position on the 1950s Danish art scene. Exactly like the realistic art discussed by Cherry and Stein in their article "The Moment of Realism: 1952–1956"; art that was central to the British art scene in the mid-1950s.

Since then, the British realists and the Danish "depictors of man" have more or less been written out of art history as exponents of a key trend of the 1950s. Even though Danish art history has attributed central positions to individual artists such as Palle Nielsen and Svend Wiig Hansen, there is still a remarkable lack of recognition of the importance of the figurative trend of the 1950s. As a result, the general understanding of the 1950s Danish art scene is that it was dominated by abstract art and that figurative art played a minor role. With this study I hope to have pointed out that figurative art did in fact enjoy a significant status at the time.

This is hardly surprising in an age infused by a general loss of faith in humanity after the Second World War; in a world shrouded in the looming shadow of the Cold War and the threat of the hydrogen and nuclear bombs, prompting a general interest in humanity existential condition. Existentialism and its focus on the tangible human condition is widely recognised as a cultural phenomenon within 1950s literature and philosophy, so the real surprise is not that it also had a place within the arts; rather, the startling issue is that this position has been so widely neglected when writing the history of Danish art.

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## Permąstant figūrinę grafiką 6-ojo dešimtmečio Danijos dailės scenoje. Trys parodos „Žmogus“ (1956–1959)

### Santrauka

Straipsnyje permąstomas iki šiol vyraujantis požiūris į 6 deš. Danijos dailę. Pristatydama tris parodas ir analizuodama jų recepcijos procesus, straipsnio autorė atskleidžia, kad figūrinė dailė anuometinėje Danijos dailės scenoje užėmė svarbesnę vietą, nei buvo pripažinta vėliau. Trijose parodose bendru pavadinimu „Žmogus“ buvo eksponuoti grafikos kūriniai, kuriuose dailininkai, pasitelkę figūrą kaip pagrindinę išraiškos priemonę, siekė atskleisti psichologines individualias žmogaus būties sąlygas pokario metais. Parodose buvo eksponuoti dailininkų P. Nielsen, S. W. Hanseno, D. Sterup-Hanseno ir H. Heerupo kūriniai. Parodos surengtos Kopenhagoje, *Clausens Kunsthandel* galerijoje, 1956–1959 m. ir sulaukė didelio susidomėjimo bei kritikų įvertinimo. Dailininkai siekė perteikti nelaimingą amžininkų būklę, o jų sukurti „svetimos, pasimetusios ir nepritampančios <...> būtybės, vadinamos žmogumi“ atvaizdai sulaukė kritikų įvertinimo būtent už tai, kad sugebėjo tiksliai perteikti aktualią žmogiškąją situaciją. Parodose būta ir optimistinių požiūrio apraiškų, tačiau tik vadinamųjų pesimistų kūriniai giliai rezonavo su tų dienų dailės kritika. Dailininkų pesimistų interpretacijos buvo priimamos ne tik kaip „tiksliausias“ to laiko ir jo aktualijų atspindys, jų kūryba atitiko tai, ko buvo tikimasi iš figūrinės grafikos ir meno apskritai – galimybės susitapatinti ir tikroviškumo. Tai gebėjo išreikšti reikšmingiausias to meto meno ir kultūros asmenybės. Straipsnyje prieinama išvados, kad nors danų „žmogaus vaizduotojai“ daugiau ar mažiau buvo įrašyti į Danijos dailės istoriją, jie užėmė reikšmingą poziciją 6 deš. Danijos dailės scenoje.

**RAKTAŽODŽIAI:** Danijos dailė, 6 deš. dailė, po Antrojo pasaulinio karo, Šaltasis karas, grafika, figūrinė dailė, žmogus, žmogaus būklė, egzistencializmas ir menas, realizmo momentas