

KAREL APPEL: *LIFE-SIZE AND LARGER*
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POLAROID SERIES

Anyone born before 1980 will remember the ubiquitous Polaroid cameras. Before the dawn of digital image media, this was the only technology accessible to everyone making it possible to have the photograph in hand almost immediately after pressing the button. In the 1970s, Polaroids were all the rage: 8 cm squared images within slightly larger passe-partouts. Artists worked with them as well: David Hockney, for example, assembled collages of them, and Andy Warhol always carried a Polaroid camera with him – for quick shots that could be used as models for portrait paintings. At the end of the 1970s, Polaroid introduced a camera one could take instant 20 × 24 inches pictures with (51 × 61 cm approx.). This gigantic instant picture format was primarily intended for taking conventional portraits and to replicate works of art from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The camera, which is about the size of a refrigerator, was never mass-produced. Moreover, its use required some professional skills. In 1986, John Reuter and Dutchman Eelco Wolf, Polaroid's communications director, set up a studio in New York, a Mecca for artists back then, which had turned out to be the most regular customers: Apart from the high image quality and sharpness of detail, enthralling a photo-realistic painter like Chuck Close or a detail-obsessed photographer like Robert Mapplethorpe for example, a Polaroid picture is always unique and irreplaceable – just like a painting. Even Andy Warhol used them, followed by Julian Schnabel and William Wegman, among others.¹

It appears quite a surprise that Karel Appel, who is not exactly known as a photographer or as having worked with photography, also started working with 'Polaroid 20x24' (the name of this product) in the late 1980s. This can perhaps be explained partly by Eelco Wolf's Dutch origins, leading him to the Dutchman Appel, who as a painter pur sang was not an obvious choice in the first place. But above all, his Polaroid paintings reveal an attitude that was characteristic of him and that runs through his entire oeuvre. Pierre Restany, the French art critic, and founder of Nouveau Réalisme put it as follows: 'Appel says loudly and clearly that he hates repetition, and in his art and in life, he constantly calls into question everything routine.'² And to avoid lapsing into a routine, he repeatedly sought friction with the new, the still unknown. These could either be drawings of children or the mentally ill, found objects or, indeed, photographic images.

The gigantic Polaroids have incredible image quality and sharpness of detail because they are not enlargements of small negatives, but one-on-one recordings. And for close up images Karel Appel could use a 360 mm lens, which normally is an 8x10 lens, but when placed in a 20 × 24 camera gives a magnified image, the direct, accurate enlargement of detail. Like Chuck Close, Appel made use of this specific possibility by constructing portraits from detailed shots of the faces of the people he portrayed: the 51 × 61 cm fragments of the faces were subsequently assembled into a whole. Karel Appel did this by tying the fragments together with ropes, but without trying to make a continuous whole out of them, a recognisable portrait – as Chuck Close did. They are assemblages of separate fragments that – in their entirety – can measure up to two and a half by two and a half metres. The ropes holding the whole of his portraits together – to Appel – represented 'repairs to our civilisation'.³ He ended up painting over everything because

he was primarily a painter. Six portraits – of Sam Hunter, his wife Harriet, Eelco Wolf, Donald Kuspit, Stephane Janssen and his dealer Marisa Del Re – were first shown in New York in 1988 under the title 'Titan Series'. The title was possibly inspired by the monumental formats of the assembled portraits.

It seems as if Karel Appel discovered the possibilities for his own use of these razor-sharp enlargements of fragments through another classical theme: the female nude. A year earlier, in 1987, in the same gallery Marisa Del Re, he showed a series of nudes assembled from enlarged body fragments, *Standing Nude no. 1* being the first. This theme was anything but new to him – ever since the CoBrA period, the nude had recurred in his work, and since 1985 he had just begun to make oversized nude drawings after live models.⁴

As with his portraits, Appel didn't intend to reconstruct the whole body as a continuous unit with the assembled Polaroid nudes: the oversized body parts hang together as loose fragments, *Standing Nude no. 1* is even constructed from four Polaroid shots with the model adopting a different pose each time. The photos are stuck to wooden panels, cut out along the contours of the body parts, and then tied together with ropes. Here, however, the ropes have a more independent, expressive autonomy than in the portraits, where the functional aspect of tying them together predominates. In this way, a free-standing image came into being, of which the front and back were painted – on the front rather as an accentuation of the photographic images, on the back as a continuous painting.

For some two years, Karel Appel experimented with this large instant format, with the fragmentation of the human being – either as a portrait or a nude – being the thematic common thread. *Titan Series no. 7* is the second to last work from this group. With this thread, he dealt with one of the perhaps most fundamental themes of Western art history – consciously or unconsciously, we will never know, but that isn't relevant. For centuries, and till not so long ago, the ideal of beauty of the classical period formed the basis of academic training, but mostly just fragments of antique sculptures have survived. Until the 19th century, it was customary to complete them – until the realisation that their beauty could be brought out even more strongly by this fragmentation. The avant-garde technique of collage – first with the Cubists, then with Dada, Schwitters, the Surrealists – assembled fragments of reality, i.e. found objects, precisely to oppose the antique ideal of beauty. A similar strategy was employed by Neo-Dada and Nouveau Réalisme in the late 1950s and early 1960s – and Karel Appel drew inspiration from them.⁵ With his 1987–89 Polaroid works, he applied this assemblage technique to extremely realistic photographs of human body fragments. After the end of his experiment with an unusual medium, he again devoted himself with all his might to the theme of the nude, this time using the medium of painting alone.⁶

1 Polaroid went bankrupt in 2008, but the large formats are still used and have recently experienced a revival with the establishment of a studio in Berlin in 2019; see: Mary Panzer, 'Big Artists, Big Camera: Not a Typical Polaroid', in: *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 August 2008 www.wsj.com/articles/SB121797626872014909; Chiara Agradi, 'Giant Polaroid, innovation or preservation?', in: CFA, www.conceptualfinearts.com/cfa/2020/09/21/brief-history-giant-polaroid/ (both retrieved 21 April 2021). I am grateful to Eelco Wolf and John Reuter for their corrections and precisions that they contributed to my initial draft.

2 Cf. Pierre Restany, 'Street Art', in: Karel Appel, *Street Art, Ceramics, Sculptures, Wood Reliefs, Tapestries, Murals, Villa el Salvador* (Abbeville Press: New York, 1985), p. 7.

3 Karel Appel in his foreword for the exhibition catalogue of the Marisa Del Re Gallery *Karel Appel – Portraits from the Titan Series*, New York 1988.

4 Franz W. Kaiser, 'Appels Akte' in: Klaus-Albrecht Schröder (ed.), *Karel Appel – 'Monumentale Aktzeichnungen'* (Albertina: Vienna, 2007).

5 Franz W. Kaiser, 'Appel after CoBrA: Collages 1957–1968' in: *Karel Appel – Collages 1957–1968* (Galerie Jahn & Jahn: München, 2021).

6 R.H. Fuchs (ed.), 'Karel Appel – Ik wou dat ik een vogel was' – *Berichten uit het atelier*, 2e bd.: *Karel Appel 1988–1990*, exhibition catalogue Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague 1990.



TITAN SERIES NO. 7, 1988



POLAROID PORTRAIT SERIES, 19889