

Karel Appel *Variations on a Theme*

5 March – 16 April 2026
First Floor, 41 Dover Street
London W1S 4NS

Opening: Thursday, 5 March, 6 – 8pm



Karel Appel, *Personnage*, 1952, photo: Jack Hems

Galerie Max Hetzler, London, is pleased to present *Variations on a Theme*, an exhibition of work by **Karel Appel**. This is the seventh solo presentation of Appel's work with the gallery.



Karel Appel, *Human Being and Animals*, 1949
351.6 x 358.3 cm.; 138 3/8 x 141 in.
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

'One of the most iconic paintings of the avant-garde group CoBrA's first institutional exhibition, held in autumn 1949 at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, was Karel Appel's monumental *Human Being and Animals*. It was realised on the spot, for the occasion. Its title epitomises a theme often associated with CoBrA, of which Appel was a co-founder, and this association has been recited to a somewhat stereotyped extent. However, using the 'human animal' theme as a search term reveals that it runs right through Appel's entire oeuvre like a silver lining. It keeps on coming up in very different iterations, if less frequently in the middle part of Appel's career.

The present exhibition at Galerie Max Hetzler, London, uses the theme as a filter. Combining works of diverse styles from different periods – a focused retrospective so to speak – the gallery space is dialectically structured, suggesting an allocation of historical examples in the front as opposed to later ones in the back.

The works shown in the front gallery are from the aftermath of World War II. Appel had returned from hiding in the countryside and, together with his friend Corneille, whom he had met at the Art Academy in Amsterdam, he discovered the international avant-garde. They learned, for instance, about Paul Klee's use of children's drawings as a primary and pure source of inspiration. Very early works, which bring Klee to mind, each in its own particular way, are combined in the first room of the front gallery.

The paintings displayed in the middle room of the front gallery appear to be somewhat related to Pablo Picasso or, as with *Woman with Bird*, 1946, the earliest painting in the show, to Édouard Pignon, a close friend of Picasso. Appel and Corneille had come across the French publication *Cinq peintres d'aujourd'hui* (Five Painters of Today), published by Éditions du Chêne in Paris in 1943, which featured five painters of the Nouvelle École de Paris. One of the five painters was Édouard Pignon, and the two young artists decided to pay him a visit in 1947, marking their first trip to Paris.

The other painting in this room, *Personnage*, 1952, is from six years later – CoBrA had, by this time, been dissolved. The painting looks like a condensation of the ideas that a young painter, living in Paris in the early 1950s, was likely to have of Picasso – some mixture of the Cubism and Surrealism discernible in Picasso’s portraits of Dora Maar or in his *Guernica*, 1937.

The only work in this show that was actually made during the brief existence of CoBrA (1948–1951) is *Man and Animals*, 1950. It is presented in the third room of the front gallery, alongside *Boy with Bird*, 1953, and *Woman and Bird*, 1954, which were painted during the crucial period of Appel’s international breakthrough.

The back gallery presents monumental works from the 1980s and 1990s – a period when painting, after having been considered an outdated medium, came back with a vengeance. For more than two decades, Appel had been living between Europe and the US. In New York, he spent a lot of time strolling the streets, observing. And what he observed went directly into his paintings, like *Cattle Slaughter*, 1981, which depicts a butcher with a knife and a slaughtered pig on his shoulder. *Figure with Butterfly*, 1982, has a completely different atmosphere. Like *Animals of the Night* in the front gallery, which was made 44 years earlier, it is based on a cloth collage technique, but here it is much larger and overpainted in acrylic instead of oil. The subtitle ‘Tuscan Series’ under *Firebird*, 1990, indicates that this one was painted in Tuscany, where Appel had a home and studio.

All these late paintings have been shown widely, with the exception of *Woman with Animal no.3*, 1996 – a painting to be discovered.’

Franz Kaiser, 2026

Karel Appel (1921–2006) lived and worked internationally, primarily in Amsterdam, Paris, Molesmes and New York, and later residing in Monaco and Zurich. Major solo exhibitions of Appel’s work have been held at Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris (2017); Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Hague (today Kunstmuseum Den Haag) (2016 and 2005); Emil Schumacher Museum Hagen; The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; Staatliche Graphische Sammlungen, Munich (all 2016); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2015); Museum Jorn, Silkeborg (2013); Albertina, Vienna (2007); National Museum, Belgrade; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (both 2004); Kunstforum Wein, Vienna (2002); Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2001); and Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent (2000), among others. Appel’s work is in the collections of Albertina, Vienna; Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Kunstmuseum Den Haag, The Hague; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; LACMA, Los Angeles; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris; Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; MoMA, New York; Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; and Tate, London, among many others.

Further Exhibitions and Events

BERLIN

André Butzer
13 February – 18 April 2026
Potsdamer Straße 77–87
10785 Berlin

Jake Longstreth
Where We’re Going We Need Roads
13 March – 25 April 2026
Bleibtreustraße 45
10623 Berlin

William N. Copley
X-Rated (1972–1974)
13 March – 22 April 2026
Goethestraße 2/3
10623 Berlin

PARIS

Friedrich Kunath
On A Clear Day I Can See You Forever
7 March – 16 May 2026
46 & 57, rue du Temple
75004 Paris

MARFA

Rinus Van de Velde
The Dinner
24 May – 6 December 2026
1976 Antelope Hills Road
Marfa, Texas

Press Contact

Galerie Max Hetzler

Leanne Dennis
leanne@maxhetzler.com
+44 20 7629 7733

www.facebook.com/galeriemaxhetzler
www.instagram.com/galeriemaxhetzler
WeChat ID: max_hetzler

Sign up to our Newsletter

