



BIOGRAPHY CARL-HENNING PEDERSEN 1913-2007

Lotte Korshøj

1913 Carl-Henning Pedersen is born on 23/9 in Copenhagen to a poor worker's family. His father is a navy and his mother dies when Carl-Henning is ten years old.

1933-34 In his younger years Carl-Henning Pedersen participates in the work of the Young Communists. He dreams of becoming a composer or an architect. During a stay at The International High School in Helsingør he meets the young painter Else Alfelt, who tells him about modern painting. Pedersen makes the choice to become an artist, and Else Alfelt becomes his life companion and loyal critic. The young couple marry in 1934 and the same year they have a daughter, Vibeke Alfelt.

1936 For the first few years the artist couple move from one rented studio to the next, but in 1936 they find a regular home and workplace in an apartment on Ny Carlsbergvej in Copenhagen. The same year both make their début at *The Artists' Autumn Exhibition* in Copenhagen. Of the ten abstract paintings Pedersen sends in, four are accepted. Later he writes about this début: "My four pictures hung well. True, they had hung one upside down, but I didn't say anything. Imagine if they didn't like it when it hung properly."

1937 Pedersen makes his début in the Danish avant-garde as a guest exhibitor at Linien's exhibition in The Free Exhibition Building (Den Frie) in Copenhagen, where mentors for the Danish abstract artists such as Kandinsky, Klee, Miró, Mondrian, Jean Arp, Yves Tanguy and Max Ernst are also represented. The same year Pedersen exhibits in Copenhagen Students' Union (Studentforeningen) with among others Henry Heerup and launches his first solo exhibition at Borup High School in Copenhagen.

1939-40 In 1939 Pedersen sets off on a journey on foot across Germany to Paris to see his mentor Picasso's works for himself. On the way home he sees the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* in Frankfurt, showing works by Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee and others as examples of works that have been rejected by Nazi cultural policy as degenerate. He arrives back home in Denmark just before World War II breaks out. Back home the daughter Kari-Nina Pedersen is born in 1940.

1941-44 At the beginning of 1941 Pedersen participates in the establishment of the cross-cultural periodical *Helhesten*. He is part of the group surrounding the periodical with among others Else Alfelt, Ejler Bille, Henry Heerup, Egill Jacobsen and Asger Jorn. In the periodical people from disciplines as different as medicine, psychology, music and poetry engage in debate. Nine issues appear



Carl-Henning Pedersen's front cover for *Helhesten* 1944

Drawing of a 'Helhest' (a demon horse), 1941 (117)



1945 In the year of Denmark's Liberation, as Chairman of the Adjudication Committee of Høstudstillingen, Pedersen writes a tribute to the art that had been stigmatized as 'degenerate' in Nazi Germany. The catalogue includes his call for the cultivation of a free art that appeals to mankind's free thought. The same year his poetry collection *Drømmedigte* is published by Helhestens Forlag.



1948 In 1948 Jorn is the driving force behind a manifesto for a future collaboration with artist colleagues in Europe. Pedersen signs the declaration along with Asger Jorn, Else Alfelt, Egill Jacobsen, Ejler Bille, Dahlman Olsen and Erik Thommesen. Later the same year the wish for an international collaboration is realized in the artistic collectivity COBRA. The movement as such has a short life, up to 1951, but is inscribed for posterity in international art history. In 1948 Pedersen's international potential is underscored by the fact that he is represented at the Venice Biennale.



1949-50 The group around Høstudstillingen is dissolved in 1949, and in 1950, as the last member, Pedersen fills all the exhibition rooms at The Free Exhibition Building with his own works in the exhibition *Fairy-tale Paintings*, which goes on to Aarhus. In parallel with the dissolution of the Høst group, more and more energy is devoted to the newly established COBRA collaboration. In 1949 COBRA makes its debut with the exhibition *International Experimental Art* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The exhibition is organized by The Experimental Group in Holland, and is mounted in unconventional fashion by the architect Aldo van Eyck. The works hang either close to the floor or all the way up at a height of three metres, and on the cover of the catalogue a tongue is directly being stuck out at the viewer. At the same time the catalogue constitutes the fourth issue of the COBRA periodical and its content aggressively confronts the bourgeoisie and its norms. The exhibition arouses much discussion, as does the congress of the COBRA group in Bregnerød in 1949. The congress results in a collective decoration of the architectural students' weekend cabin, in which both children and adults participate.



Carl-Henning Pedersen during the decoration of the kindergarten in 1944

Nationaltidende, 1950

The monograph on Carl-Henning Pedersen, 1950

Invitation card for the second and last COBRA exhibition, 1951

1951 Travels with Else Alfelt to Greece and Italy and on his return exhibits *Greek and Italian Watercolours - from a journey in the South* at Tokanten, Copenhagen. They both also participate in the second COBRA exhibition, *II Exposition Internationale d'Art Expérimental*, held at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Liège. The exhibition is larger than the first one in 1949, but at the same time is the last in COBRA's history. The tenth issue of the COBRA periodical serves as a catalogue for the exhibition. Outside the COBRA context Pedersen exhibits with Asger Jorn and Sven Dalsgaard at the Randers Museum.

1952-55 The international collaboration in COBRA has ceased, but the movement has helped to mark Pedersen's position internationally. In the years ahead he often travels and exhibits outside the borders of Denmark. In 1952 for example he participates in the touring exhibition *Contemporary Drawings from 12 Countries 1945-52* in Toledo, USA, and in *Contemporary Painting and Sculpture* at the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, where he is represented under the same heading again in 1955.

In 1954 Pedersen and his family move to a larger apartment at Esplanaden in Copenhagen. Quite specifically, this is reflected in Pedersen's works inasmuch as from the mid-50s he also expresses himself in larger formats. He exhibits his most recent works in a solo exhibition at Den Frie in Copenhagen and participates in the international exhibition *Expressionism 1900-55* at the Walker Art Center, USA.

1956-58 Participates in *The Guggenheim International Exhibition* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 1956. In 1958 he is awarded The Guggenheim National Award for Denmark.

1959-60 Participates in the exhibition *Danish Contemporary Art 2* in Lund in 1959 and in 1960 mounts the solo exhibition *Pictures from a Decade* at Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen. Travels to Ceylon, India, Kashmir and Nepal. Pedersen and Else Alfelt buy a house and studio in Bovbjerg on the west coast of Jutland, where they later spend the summer months with work and family.

1961-63 In 1961 he exhibits with David Smith and Pierre Alechinsky at the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, while in 1962 he represents Denmark at the Venice Biennale alongside Henry Heerup and is awarded the UNESCO Prize. This is followed the next year by a Silver Medal at the Biennial in São Paulo and the Thorvaldsen Medal. In 1963 he stays at the Danish Academy in Rome and travels to Tunis. Pedersen's 50th birthday is celebrated with a solo exhibition at the Galerie de France in Paris and with a retrospective exhibition at The Free Exhibition Building, where he fills all the rooms with works from 1936-1963.

1964 Participates in the touring exhibition *Danish Abstract Art*, shown among other places at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Liège. He is awarded the Knight's Cross of the Order of the Dannebrog, and Erik Andreassen's monograph on him appears in the series *Vor Tids Kunst*.

1965 The 3 x 13 m mosaic *The Cosmic Sea*, commissioned by the Danish Arts Foundation, is unveiled on 3rd April 1965 at the H.C. Ørsted Institute in Copenhagen.

1966 As early as around 1960 Pedersen stops selling works to private individuals. He willingly sells to museums, but would prefer to see his works collected under one roof and accessible to the public. This vision leads to a reader's letter in *Berlingske Tidende* in 1966, in which Pedersen offers to donate a very large part of his life's work to the State: 1000 oil paintings and several thousand drawings, water-colours and sculptures. The gigantic donation arouses much debate in the press, where among other places Sophienholm, Løgumkloster and the manor of Herningsholm in Jutland are suggested as possible settings for the artist's works.



Berlingske Tidende, 3.8.1958

Berlingske Aftenavis, 4.12.1965



Information, 13.12.1968

Pedersen exhibits 55 pictures from his neo-impressionist period in more than 20 places all over Denmark. As a commission from the Danish Arts Foundation Pedersen paints a 100 m² drop curtain for the theatre Det Ny Teater in Copenhagen. Exhibition with Else Alfelt at the Swedish art association Landskrona Konstförening. The periodical *Helhesten* is celebrated with an exhibition at the Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen, and COBRA with an exhibition at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Virtus Schade's monograph on Pedersen is published.

1966-68 Executes the 1000 m² ceramic decoration, *The Play of the Imagination around the Wheel of Life* at the Angli courtyard in Herning.

1967 Exhibits with Henry Heerup and Palle Nielsen at Moderna Museet in Stockholm under the heading *Earth, Heaven and Hell*. The same year Pedersen's work *The Fairytale of Copenhagen* is unveiled at the SAS Building in Copenhagen. He also exhibits at The Free Exhibition Building, and a number of his works form the opening exhibition at the new Aarhus Art Museum.

1968 Participates in the exhibition *Expressionism after 1950*, which opens at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne and is later shown in Romania, Australia, Belgium and Finland. In addition he participates with more than 150 pictures in the exhibition *The Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture* at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, where he also has a solo exhibition. Stays at the Danish Academy in Rome and is awarded the Marzotto Prize at an exhibition in Valdagno. Exhibits with among others Bacon, Dubuffet, Jorn, Alechinsky and De Kooning in *Neue Formen expressionistischer Malerei nach 1950* at Kunstmuseum Luzern. Back home in Denmark, 1968 brings the publication of the poetry collection *Solens Latter* and the unveiling of *The Play of the Imagination around the Wheel of Life*. The latter leads to new talk about a museum for Pedersen.

1969 Awarded the Henrik-Steffens-Preis by Stiftung F.V.S zu Hamburg in recognition of his important Danish contribution to modern European painting. In this connection he exhibits at the Kiel Kunsthalle. He also exhibits under the title

Carl-Henning Pedersen working on the drop curtain for Det Ny Teater, *The Blue Birds*, 1966 (photographer unknown)



Contemporary Paintings in the Museum of Natural History Building in Washington and participates in the exhibition *Painting and Sculpture* at Sophienholm.

1970-72 Represents Denmark at the world exhibition *Expo 70* in Osaka, Japan, in 1970, while 120 pictures from the period 1965-1970 can be seen at Sophienholm. The next year he publishes the poetry collection *Romersk Elegi* written in Rome in 1968. Stage design for Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* at the Royal Danish Theatre in 1971 and for Jean Anouilh's comedy *Ne reveillez pas Madame* at the Aalborg Theatre in 1972.

1971-72 Pedersen and Else Alfelt are proposed as members of the artists' association Den Frie, but are rejected because of internal disagreements. This entails that their artist colleagues Mogens Andersen, Egill Jacobsen and Robert Jacobsen resign from Den Frie, and with Pedersen and Else Alfelt they form the association The Free Artists. They exhibit in 1972 at Charlottenborg in Copenhagen. In the text for the exhibition Lars Rostrup Bøyesen congratulates The Free Artists, saying "that you have not grown too old to leave the chimney nook and fight on the barricades."

1973 Solo exhibitions at Galerie de France, Paris and the Lefebvre Gallery, New York. Also participates in the exhibition *L'art danois* at the Grand Palais in Paris. To mark his 60th birthday he fills the whole of The Free Exhibition Building with paintings, water-colours and bronzes done in the period 1964-1973. After three years of work the mosaic *Universum Fabularum* is inaugurated at the Kennedy School in Gladsaxe.

1974 After a long illness Else Alfelt dies. After her death the long-planned exhibition *Free Artists* is held at Galerie Birch in Copenhagen. The exhibition is in honour of Else Alfelt and includes members from The Free Artists. In the catalogue of the exhibition one can read Pedersen's farewell poem to his late wife.

1974-75 Extensive travelling activity results in stays in New York, Bali, Japan and Jerusalem. The last of these in particular is of crucial importance, since it is where he meets the second great love of his life, the architect and photographer Sidsel Ramson. Together they settle down in Barbizon in 1975.

1976 At long last a museum for Pedersen becomes a reality in Herning. This is due not least to the innovative art collector and shirt manufacturer Aage Damgaard, who commissioned Pedersen to do the decoration *The Play of the Imagination around the Wheel of Life*. Pedersen decides, besides his own works, to donate his late wife's collected works to Herning City Council. The Carl-Henning Pedersen & Else Alfelt Museum is inaugurated in the summer of 1976, clad with 1000 tiles painted by Pedersen. Exhibits with among others Alechinsky, Dotremont, Reinhoud and Sonia Delaunay at the Galerie de France and on his own at the Galerie Krikhaar in Amsterdam.

1977 Travels to Mexico and New York. Marries Sidsel Ramson and acquires Karel Appel's former house and studio in Molesmes in Burgundy, where many of the pictures from Pedersen's late oeuvre are made. Oil paintings and mosaics by Pedersen make up the opening exhibition at the new Haderslev Kunstmuseum.



Berlingske Tidende, 30.11.1971

Aarhus Stiftstidende, 5.10.1973

Berlingske Tidende, 12.4.1973

- 1978** Exhibits watercolours in Zürich and in Amsterdam, while back home he exhibits with The Free Artists.
- 1979** The book *En blomst er et øje* is published by Forlaget Borgen. Exhibits under the title *2 x Pedersen* at the Lefebvre Gallery, New York.
- 1980** Is awarded the Prins Eugen Medal. Does the stage design for the Royal Danish Theatre's performance of the Mozart opera *Idomeneo*. Becomes a member of the art association Grønningen.
- 1981-85** In 1981, exhibits at FIAC in Paris. Up to 1985 he exhibits several times with the artists' association Grønningen.
- 1982** Journey to Peru and the first of many journeys to Zermatt, Switzerland. Participates in the exhibition *COBRA* at the Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris and at the Kunstverein, Hamburg.
- 1982-88** For several years there has been talk of decorating Ribe Cathedral, and at the beginning of the 1980s the attention of the parish council is drawn to Pedersen. The choice is made with support from the Danish Arts Foundation, but from the start prompts much debate. Combining modern expressionist painting with "the noblest church interior of the Romanesque period," as it was called in a contribution to the debate, was in itself considered problematical. Pointing to an artist like Pedersen, who was not a member of the Danish national church, does nothing to allay the indignation. The debate begins in June 1982, when the first comment is printed in *Politiken*, and the protests continue, pro and contra, over the summer. In 1983 Pedersen begins the work with frescoes, mosaics and stained glass for Ribe Cathedral. The decoration is inaugurated in 1988.
- 1983** Inauguration of the stained glass work *The Light of Liberty* at The Museum of Danish Resistance 1940-1945 in Copenhagen. His 70th birthday is celebrated with a retrospective exhibition at the Louisiana Museum, at the Henie-Onstad Art Centre, Norway, at Galerie Ariel, Paris and at Kunstforeningen, Copenhagen.

Polemics on the decoration of Ribe Cathedral, *Politiken*, 22.6.1983

Politiken, 15.7.1970

- 1987-88** Solo exhibition in 1987 at Galerie Ariel, Paris. Participates in 1988 in the exhibition *COBRA: 40 Years Later* at Stichting De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam. Exhibits the same year at FIAC in Paris.



- 1990** Decorates the foyer of Herning Central Hospital with six large oil paintings. Exhibits at FIAC in Paris.
- 1992-98** Participates in several exhibitions marking COBRA's 50th anniversary, including at ARKEN, Brandts Klædefabrik and the São Paulo Biennial. In 1993 the museum in Herning is expanded with the Prism Hall, decorated by Pedersen, which stands as a tribute to Else Alfelt.
- 1999** Travels to Guadeloupe. Solo exhibition *French Years* at Galerie Asbæk, Copenhagen. Exhibition of watercolours and drawings, *Entre ciel et terre*, at The Danish House in Paris. Exhibits at FIAC in Paris and at Art Cologne, Cologne.
- 2000** Travels to Egypt for the 8th International Biennial in Cairo. Solo exhibition, *Pedersen. Carnet de voyages. Egypte et Guadeloupe* at Galerie Ariel, Paris.
- 2001-02** Pedersen is named an honorary citizen of Herning in 2001 and the next year exhibits at the Heerup Museum, Rødovre.
- 2003-04** Solo exhibition *In the Blue. From the Blue* opens at Galerie Asbæk, Copenhagen 2003, while Pedersen's 12-metre-tall *Obelisk* is inaugurated in Herning. The *Obelisk* joins his other decorations in Herning and becomes together with The Queen Margrethe Hall in Fredericia the last monumental work by the artist. The large retrospective exhibition *A Life's Work* opens at Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen on Pedersen's 90th birthday. Subsequently it is shown at the Carl-Henning Pedersen & Else Alfelt Museum in Herning.
- 2005-07** Exhibitions at the COBRA Museum in Amstelveen, Kunstforeningen Gammel Strand, Guy Pieters Gallery, Galerie Moderne, Art Cologne. Participates in the touring exhibition *The Blue Flower of Lava*, which is shown in several places in Iceland and in Denmark.
- 2007** Carl-Henning Pedersen dies on 20 February at the age of 93.



Carl-Henning Pedersen and Sidsel Ramson, Molesmes, 1986
Photo: Anja Bogush