Since the early twentieth century, abstract art has been variously championed as an ideal mechanism for the expression of artistic originality and autonomy, as a means of rejecting conscious control as evidenced by Surrealist automatism, and for the implementation of rigorous scientific thinking and systematic aesthetic strategies. In Europe after World War II, geometric abstraction was widely exhibited; however, many artists found the rigid order too limiting to reflect their particular psychological experiences and turned to a looser, more gestural form of abstract painting. The painting that resulted included Art Informel, Tachisme, and Cobra in Europe, and Abstract Expressionism in the United States. Although these diverse gestural tendencies subscribed to significantly divergent notions of artistic subjectivity and authorship, what they shared was an emphasis on spontaneity, a concern for the expressive potential of paint, and a sense of immediacy in execution. Focusing on the work *The Menaced House* (1962) by the Dutch artist Lucebert, this short essay will investigate the radical shift in notions of artistic originality and subjectivity advocated by the international avant-garde movement Cobra to which he belonged.

The artists and poets associated with Cobra aimed to create a collective practice, one that displaced the idea of the artist’s intentionality as central to the production of meaning. Members demanded liberation from artistic formalism and any preconceived principles of

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1. Cobra was an international group of artists and poets founded in 1948 and active until 1951. The name was a conflation of the initial letters of the capital cities of the countries of origin of the first members of the group: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. Cobra’s internationalism was both a reaction against the destructive nationalism and racism of the Hitler years and a counter to the perceived narrowness and corruption of contemporary bourgeois culture. See Graham Birtwistle, “Behind the Primitivism of Cobra,” in *COBRA: Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2003), 22.

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style, championing instead children’s drawings and the spontaneity found in primitive aesthetics. Unfettered by traditional notions of artistic originality and autonomy, art would be within anyone’s reach. Although painted over a decade after the official dissolution of the group, *The Menaced House* demonstrates Lucebert’s continued identification with the Cobra spirit and a determination to make art that was materialist, festive, and vital.

Cobra’s utopian outlook was fostered, in part, by the writings of French philosophers Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) and Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962). In the first volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947), Lefebvre set out to critically assess the large-scale transformations of perception and habit in French society after World War II.² The revolution he spoke of was to be brought about by the de-alienation of human beings and the creation of *l’homme total*, a self-constituting subject who achieves full command of all areas of his life. Lefebvre’s vision of a “whole” or “total man” as a necessary imperative was positioned in contrast to the alienated, “economic” man of capitalism. By invoking the notion of the “total man,” Lefebvre points to a need for a utopian focus in order to galvanize the people for collective social transformation, Recovery of a lost human plenitude—what Lefebvre claims was once the norm in ancient rural life—lies at the heart of his project. This type of sanguinity would become the moral climate of Cobra, whose work championed the realization of essential moments through spontaneity and festivity.

Bachelard’s theories on artistic expression and the sources of fantasy, while notably removed from the radical social critique promoted by Lefebvre, were also of great significance to Cobra. Influenced by psychoanalysis and phenomenology, Bachelard emphasized the distinction between images of perception and those of the active imagination. He set out to “question everything” in an effort to “escape from the rigidity of mental habits formed by contact with familiar experiences.”³ His work seemed to offer the possibility of a third path between the veristic depiction of dreams as practiced by some Surrealist painters and the total abstraction practiced by others.⁴

Like Bachelard, Lucebert saw imagination as an essential means of expanding the images supplied by perception alone. In both his poems and paintings he articulated a strong commitment to childhood imagery and the power of poetic reverie.⁵ While individual agency was always in evidence, it was notably subdued by the artist’s receptiveness to chance occurrences and the unforeseen. At first glance, the thick paint and gestural

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brushstrokes used to create *The Menaced House* give the composition an abstract character. The extreme impasto makes it difficult to distinguish between foreground and background and between individual compositional elements. Upon closer examination, a small house appears to lean precariously in the middle of a nondescript location, as giant birds, sea creatures, and other beasts draw closer and closer. In the upper right-hand corner of the canvas a misshapen head complete with elongated nose and large, garish teeth merges with the top of the heavily drawn dwelling. The dark background, in combination with the painting’s title, implies an ominous quality. However, the vibrantly colored creatures and their elastic depiction reveal a decidedly playful and carnivalesque character.

Instead of an instance of “pure psychic automatism,” as proposed by French Surrealist André Breton, *The Menaced House* reveals a more “impure” encounter with reality, harnessing the irrational forces of the unconscious and the world of dreams to engage with life more fully. “Anything that crosses my mind I paint,” Lucebert explained in 1963.

> I value one notion as highly as the next…and I make no attempt to arrive at syntheses. For me contradictions simply go on contradicting, and instead of trying to resist them while they clash with each other, I stay out of their way and enjoy the freedom that only they can give me—my paintings and poems, these pleasure-filled playgrounds where seesaws do not crowd out swings and where Saharas and oceans meet in sandboxes.⁷

Although never as socially engaged as some of his Cobra contemporaries, Lucebert openly rejected traditional aesthetic principles and displayed an unwavering commitment to a spontaneous method of production—working directly on the canvas without making preparatory studies. The combination of grotesque subject matter, raw materiality, and intense physical gesture emphasizes the artist’s commitment to unfettered creation over formalism and to immediacy of experience over aesthetic mediation. The scene depicted is not reducible to any one reading; rather, it may be variously understood as a melancholic depiction of a rural house—a place of retreat and security—threatened by outside forces, as an otherworldly landscape in which the imagination is free to run rampant, and as a ludic depiction of a world turned upside down. The viewer is thus encouraged to enter into a direct dialogue with the work and to become an active participant in the interpretation of the image. Lucebert’s gestural expressionism is in keeping with the pervasive, if romantic, desire on the part of artists, philosophers, and activists alike in the postwar period for unmediated, visceral experiences in the face of increased urbanization, consumerism, and the rise of mass media.

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⁷ Lucebert, “Now Listen Children, This Is Important.”

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