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Blindness as Empathy: The Politics of Touch in Works by Dan Sterup-Hansen

Abstract

This article has as its topic the Danish artist Dan Sterup-Hansen (1918–1995) and his paintings and prints on the subject of blind people with canes as well as works related to these. Sterup-Hansen was active as an artist from a young to an old age, but made a significant artistic contribution in the decades following World War II. During this period, he explored a number of themes related to cold war anxiety and the cultural trauma of the World War II. These themes centre on the human body and a phenomenological perception of the world. They are humanitarian in spirit and are related to Sterup-Hansen's left-wing political views of solidarity, humanism, and advocacy for change and reconstruction after the World War II.

Keywords: Danish modernism, Danish Art, Graphic art, Cold war art, Humanism, the body in art, politics of touch, left-wing art, Dan Sterup-Hansen

*You see them and see yourself in all of them
Your love burns like open wounds.*

From a poem by Erik Knudsen to Dan Sterup-Hansen.¹

I am no more compassionate than other people.

Dan Sterup-Hansen.²

1 "Du ser dem og ser dig selv i alle / Din kærlighed brænder som åbne sår" E. Knudsen, *Hvedekorn*, 1954, 7, November. My translation. Unless otherwise stated all translation of quotes from Danish texts are by the author.

2 "Jeg er ikke mere medfølelsende end andre mennesker". D. Sterup-Hansen, *Kunst*, 1954, 7, p. 149.

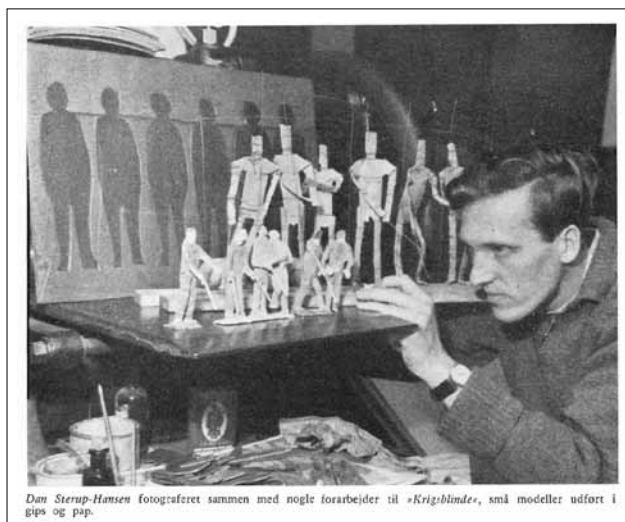
On the Armistice Day, 11 November 1949, Sterup-Hansen encountered a group of blind war veterans and immersed himself in the subject, working on it for years onwards (Fig. 1). *The War Blind*, as the series is called, does not contain images of heroism or grandeur, but images of anonymous people in the streets feeling their way through the world with their canes. Deprived of their sight, they seem to feel their way through the world experiencing and inhabiting it somehow more fully in body and flesh than the sighted. The gentle probing taps of blind men's canes are bodily ways of engaging with the world as subjects – vulnerable and armed at the same time. With their blindness and their probing canes, they have the possibility to both hurt and be hurt on their path through the street. They can choose to be careful and perhaps even caring towards their surroundings – and to choose a gentle path through both city street and life. Sterup-Hansen touches on the theme repeatedly, for instance: “A group of war blind in procession opened my eyes for the possibility that I could visually express an inner undefined attitude to being human in a chaotic post war time – an after-the-atom-bomb-time. This subject, – this ‘blind’ condition, – this sensation of being able to see with the body led in various situations when I met blind people to a feeling of them being ‘the denominator’ for humankind...”³ and “His attitude gave body to my images, now they were not just emotions and symbols, but also flesh and blood”.⁴ While portrayed with empathy, the figures are not subjected to pity by the artist, but created with optimism and perhaps hope. In his works of *The War Blind* Sterup-Hansen ties together blindness and touch with political and humanistic concerns. It is this gentle intersection I wish to explore in my article.

The body Sterup-Hansen thematises in his artworks is a body that in different ways is injured or lacking in its ability to inhabit the world: injured by war, disabled, temporarily deprived of cognition or senses, such as being underwater or asleep.

3 “En gruppe krigsblinde i procession åbnede mine øjne for den mulighed, at jeg synsmæssigt kunne udtrykke en indre udefineret holdning til det at være menneske i en kaotisk efterkrigstid – en efter-atombomben tid. Dette motiv – denne ”blinde”-tilstand – dette at føle, at man kunne se gennem kroppen førte til, at i tilfældige situationer når jeg mødte blinde, følte jeg, at de var ”nævneren” for mennesket...”. D. Sterup-Hansen, *Dan Sterup-Hansen – grafik og tekstfragmenter. En se-bog*. Copenhagen, 1976, p. 26. Sterup-Hansens “Se-bog” (“to see book”), is a collection of short texts related to works or groups of works in his oeuvre. As far as I have been able to find, Sterup-Hansen wrote the texts in 1976 recounting decades of “conversation” with his art works: “It is my job to write the texts for the pictures in this book [...] The pictures are without texts, but when I created them they spoke to me and we still talk when we meet. This is a look backwards, they represent a breath or perhaps a long deep drawing in of air, that fills up so much of my life, that it would not have existed without it”. (“Det er min opgave at tekstledsage denne bogs billeder [...] Billederne er tekstløse, men talende har de været, medens jeg lavede dem, og stadig taler vi sammen, når vi mødes. Det er et tilbageblik, de repræsenterer et åndedrag eller måske mere en lang dyb indånding, der fylder så meget i mit liv, at dette ikke havde været foruden”). Ibid., p. 5.

4 “Hans holdning gav krop til mine billeder, nu var de ikke kun følelser og symboler, men kød og blod”, Ibid., p. 29.

Fig. 1. Unknown photographer, Dan Sterup-Hansen photographed with some of his studies for *The War Blind*, small models in plaster and cardboard. Reproduced in *Kunst*, 7, 1954, p. 151 © Unknown photographer/VISDA © Dan Sterup-Hansen



Blindness plays a dominant role in this regard. My argument is that Sterup-Hansen explores how the absence of sight gives space to the sense of touch and works to express this – paradoxically, also to himself – in visual form. The sensuous being in the world is also one of awkwardness and displacement. To be bodily and emotionally in the world means also to *be* on an existential and ethical level. I want to argue that Sterup-Hansen uses the senses of sight and touch to communicate political, humanistic, and existential issues in his art and that the topic of senses and the blind body is presented in a way that seeks to evoke empathy and affection in the viewer.

About Dan Sterup-Hansen

The Danish artist Dan Sterup-Hansen (1918–1995) worked in a constructivistic and figurative style and predominantly chose the human figure as his subject. He is primarily known for his graphic art, but he also contributed a number of large scale public decorations in mosaic and ceramic, as well as works in other media including traditional easel painting. He attended the Royal Danish Academy of Arts in the years 1936–1939 at the school of painting, and in 1943–1944 he was a student at Graphic Art Department at the Royal Academy of Arts, both under the tutelage of professor Aksel Jørgensen. He was influenced by the professor's commitment to socially engaged art and by his formalist-constructive teachings.⁵

⁵ I. Dybbro, *Levende Form. Dan Sterup-Hansen, Rasmus Nellesmann, Palle Nielsen, Bent Sørensen*, Copenhagen, 1994, p. 30. Dybbro also notes the friendship with artist Georg Jacobsen as an important formal inspiration.

In the latter part of the 1950s Sterup-Hansen exhibited in the important “Man” exhibitions at Clausen’s Kunsthandel. Three exhibitions (1956, 1958, 1959) centred on the figure of man and on the subject of the human condition. He distanced himself from both the contemporary Danish gestural abstraction – calling the art of infamous Cobra artist Asger Jorn “aga-gaga” – as well as from any excessive formalism of socialist realism.⁶ His own version of a constructivist realism was shaped by his social engagement: “[...] but I live today and the problems I face are the same that all living people face. The facts about the war, the facts about post war times. Who can shake these from their mind and who would want to shake them off?”⁷ He engaged himself in current debates about art and advocated for a clear and understandable pictorial language as well as for making art accessible as graphic art and public commissions at workplaces, schools, etc. He became professor at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1962, first at The School of Mosaics and Murals and in 1974 at The School of Graphic Arts and served there until 1988, including a stint as Director of the Academy in 1984–1985. After the World War II Sterup-Hansen joined the Danish communist party (until 1956, when he left the party following the Soviet intervention in Hungary). He was also active in political study groups and active in the Danish peace movement.⁸

Sterup-Hansen in the Danish Scholarship

The research literature on Dan Sterup-Hansen is very limited. The most recent contributions are Karen Westphal Eriksen’s doctoral dissertation dealing with mid-century debates on abstraction and figuration in Danish art, and the PhD dissertations of Liza Kaaring and Ulrike Brinckmann.⁹ Eriksen focuses on rethinking the aesthetic ideals of mid-century Danish artists across stylistic categories, and discusses Sterup-Hansen’s contributions to the contemporary art debates as well as examples of his visual arts. Kaaring and Brinckmann have both written on the important and now rehabilitated “Man-exhibitions” in Copenhagen in the mid 1950s, in which Sterup-Hansen took part. Kaaring charts the reception and history of the exhibitions, whereas Brinckmann is concerned with the different graphic techniques

6 K. W. Eriksen, *Grus i maskineriet: Abstrakt og figurativ kunst i Danmark efter Anden Verdenskrig*. PhD dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2015, p. 104.

7 ”[...] men jeg lever i dag, og de problemer jeg står overfor er de samme som alle andre levende mennesker står overfor. Kendsgerningerne om krigen, kendsgerningerne om efterkrigstiden. Hvem kan ryste dem af sig og hvem ønsker at ryste dem af sig”. D. Sterup-Hansen, “Moderne kunst og socialistisk realisme”, *Dialog*, 1951, no. 5, p. 312.

8 I. Dybbro, *Mennesket i centrum. En undersøgelse af den realistiske strømning i dansk kunst 1950–1960*, konferensspeciale, University of Copenhagen, 1994, p. 45.

9 U. Brinckmann, „Mennesket – Der Mensch”: *Das Menschenbild in der dänischen Graphik nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Marburg, 2014; K. W. Eriksen, op. cit.; L. B. Kaaring, *Mennesket i tiden. Menneskeskildrerne i dansk grafik i 1950ernes anden halvdel*, PhD dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2015.

employed by the Danish artists and a thorough survey of their oeuvres. In 1994 the art historian Inge Dybbro wrote about Sterup-Hansen in a publication based on her masters thesis on realism in Danish art in the 1950s.¹⁰ Dybbro interviewed Sterup-Hansen in 1992, and placed Sterup-Hansen in a cultural and art historical framework of likeminded artists and in connection to a left-wing aesthetic, which had previously only received brief mentions. Former curator at The Royal Collection of Graphic Arts at the National Gallery of Art Jan Garff, and former head of this same collection Erik Fischer have written on Sterup-Hansen as a graphic artist, both in short texts. Fischer, writing in 1957, had a clear eye for the contemporary art scene in the 1950s, and the artists, including Sterup-Hansen, who was creating an art that Fischer termed political by way of its humanitarianism – a view I share, and which is shared by Kaaring, and Dybbro. In surveys on Danish art, Sterup-Hansen is only briefly mentioned as part of the unofficial “Aksel Jørgensen-School” of socially engaged and figurative graphic artists.¹¹ Beyond these contributions, Dan Sterup-Hansen has only short mentions and presentations in literature on Danish graphic art and short exhibition presentations.

Fischer represents the earliest voices in placing Sterup-Hansen in a cultural political narrative. In contrast to this, Jørgensen and Voss are concerned with formal attributes – Voss in a brief, but appraising manner, and Jørgensen with rather derogatory criticism. The majority of the literature sees Sterup-Hansen as a formalistic and realist artist centred on the figure of man, with an emphasis on left wing politics. Except Dybbro and Eriksen, scholars identify isolation and inherent loneliness as central themes in the works of Sterup-Hansen, an understanding this article is in opposition to.

Historiographically, the contemporary positive reception has declined both in quantity and quality, but has re-blossomed in later years with a richer and more nuanced look on Sterup-Hansen. It is worth noting in terms of quantity that besides short texts such as Garff’s in the literature there are no monographic studies devoted purely to the study of Sterup-Hansen, a fact that has methodological advantages, but is a disadvantage in terms of attention paid to the study of Sterup-Hansen’s art. The brevity of this review indicates that there is still much to be said and done in terms of understanding Sterup-Hansen’s art.

Theory and Method

I am inspired by scholars who have in various ways thought about touch, perception, technology, and the body. It is a wide field within philosophy, media theory and art theory, and I in no way do it justice in this text. What I do is I allow myself

10 I. Dybbro, *Levende ...*; I. Dybbro, *Mennesket...*

11 K. Voss, “Fra tredive til i dag” in: *Dansk Kunsthistorie 5. Vort eget århundrede*, eds. V. Poulsen, E. Lassen, J. Danielsen, Copenhagen, 1975, pp. 275, 279; H. Jørgensen, V. Villadsen, *Ny Dansk Kunsthistorie 7*, Copenhagen, 1995, p. 116.

the freedom to let my experience of Sterup-Hansen's art and my readings inform one another in order to form analysis and discussion.

The way the American philosopher of science Don Ihde writes about technology, the body and the lifeworld has informed my reading of the works of Dan Sterup-Hansen and it is between the art works and my reading that the analysis and my argument have arisen for understanding Sterup-Hansen as a visual artist, working in synesthetic and non-visual ways.¹² How this comes about in Sterup-Hansen's works is akin to the thoughts media theorist Laura U. Marks has formulated around the haptics of video art.¹³ Her concept of "haptic visuality" centres around a reworking of Alois Riegl's concept of the haptic. Haptic visuality works on a sliding scale from optical visuality. This idea of a continuum of the haptic and the optic is interesting in terms of Sterup-Hansen, who worked with a strict formalism comparable to the master of optics, Clement Greenberg's thinking, but in my view, in order to reach a haptic goal of existential visual phenomenology, rather than one of opticality.

My reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty is more literary than philosophical. It is his famous example of a man walking with a cane, presented in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, that I think Sterup-Hansen through.¹⁴ Sterup-Hansen's series of images of war veterans walking with canes parallels Merleau-Ponty's example in a literal sense. I propose that the correspondence is more than literal, and that there is a sensing of the body in Sterup-Hansen's works that Merleau-Ponty writings can illuminate. In the writing on Sterup-Hansen there is no theorisation of this kind. Kaaring has mentioned phenomenology in connection to the period and the group of artists to which Sterup-Hansen belongs, but her point of reference is the English art historian James Hyman and his characterisation of English modernist realism.¹⁵ She points out that Palle Nielsen, with whom Sterup-Hansen exhibited in the "Man" exhibitions in the 1950s read and was influenced by Merleau-Ponty, but that this did not happen until 1970, when Merleau-Ponty was translated into Danish.¹⁶ However, I am not the first to think suggestively along this line. Although I don't know of any direct theoretical inspiration of Sterup-Hansen by Merleau-Ponty. The contemporaneity of Merleau-Ponty's writings with Sterup-Hansen's art makes them part of and a response to a shared cultural fabric. One is working with concepts and the Western philosophical tradition of phenomenology, the other is working with visual art: point and line to plane to paraphrase Kandinsky. Visuality speaks in many tongues and in its own language. Philosophical theory is not a "corrective" or a check list to understanding works of art. Rather it is a double

12 D. Ihde, *Bodies of Technology*, Minneapolis-London, 2002.

13 L. U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Minneapolis, 2002.

14 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York, 2012, trans. D. A. Landes, originally published as *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, 1945.

15 L. B. Kaaring, op. cit., p. 95; J. Hyman, *The Battle for Realism. Figurative Art in Britain During the Cold War 1945–1960*, New Haven, 2001.

16 Ibid.

movement, a mutual exchange that can help cast light on one another enrich our understanding of both.

The War Blind

It was on a trip to France that Sterup-Hansen encountered a group of blind war veterans in an Armistice Day parade, tapping their way with their canes, and found them to be a “denominator” of humankind, as described above. Over the following years this encounter fostered a series of works on the subject of *The War Blind*, including drawings, lithographs, etchings, and mosaic. The main work is a painting from 1952 (Fig. 2), which he exhibited at *Den Frie* (The Free Exhibition), one of the leading annual exhibitions in Copenhagen. The painting earned him the Eckersberg Medal, a medal awarded by the Royal Academy of Arts to artists, who have made an effort of high artistic quality.



Fig. 2. Dan Sterup-Hansen, *The War Blind* (*Krigsblinde*), 1952, oil on canvas, 134,5 x 200 cm. Esbjerg Kunstmuseum © Dan Sterup-Hansen

In the painting Sterup-Hansen has chosen to depict the parade. Although the motif has the form of rows and rows of people shown overlapping in the background, the focus is on the six figures in the foreground. Their dark shapes (all but one) and frontal poses arrest the motion of a parade and the frieze-like composition

creates an impression of calm monumentality. In this way Sterup-Hansen communicates that this image has significance beyond its occasion.

As already mentioned, Sterup-Hansen noted that the blind seemed able to “see with their bodies”. The physicality of this fact is expressed in the variation of poses of the five blind men. The first is leaning on two canes, walking, the second is holding his cane and being aided by a woman in yellow, the third is reaching out with his cane, feeling the space before him. He also has a guide dog, pulling him forward with its leash. The fourth also feels his way with a cane and he has linked his arm with a fifth man, who has slightly differently coloured clothes, and is perhaps not blind as he has no cane. The ambivalence of his status as seeing/unseeing makes a connection between the way the blind and the seeing inhabit the world. This falls into line with Sterup-Hansen’s view on the blind as denominators for us all, included, not isolated or opposed. The heads of the blind are turned at different angles. One is in a three-quarter profile, as if he is craning his neck to register the sounds around him, using other senses than his eyes to orient him. However, this means that he is also “looking” slightly down to the side. The man on the far left is “looking” down, as if concentration on the ground he feels through his feet and the canes in his hands. Besides drawing attention to the senses, which the blind – and all human beings – use to connect themselves with the world, this has a further implication in that they look like they communicate. Their faces address each other and the viewer, and this subtly indicates that the theme of the painting is human perception, assigned a phenomenological meaning of an interaction with the world and the people in it.

In his famous example of walking with a cane, Merleau-Ponty addresses the body and the knowing that comes through the habitus of wielding different objects. He describes how they expand our presence in the world when we let them become part of our own body.¹⁷ In this way the body and the world, with its materiality, are connected. The technology of the cane is not alien to the body, it can be part of our perception as it is known through the body, not through our thoughts. Sterup-Hansen’s prominent rendering of the canes in *The War Blind* in this line of thought highlights a bodily experience of the world. While Merleau-Ponty is somewhat a-historical in his project, Sterup-Hansen is concerned with the here and now of a western post world war crisis. The comparison is a way to understand Sterup-Hansen’s painting as expressing a way of being human where humans and their surroundings are interconnected.¹⁸ We are not separate from the world – and the historical world we inhabit. This is not symbolic, but fundamentally ingrained into the image and how he renders the human figure in his art.

17 M. Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., p. 215.

18 By the “here-and-now” I understand the subjects chosen by Sterup-Hansen from contemporary political contexts: *The War Blind* and a series of etchings from a women’s peace congress in Copenhagen in 1952, anchoring those of more generic, if not timeless, nature, such as *Wall of Humans*, 1954 (Fig. 10).

It is the blind men that seem central to Sterup-Hansen's investigations. When we look at the preparatory figures and studies in the photo above (Fig. 1), it is the poses of the men that are foregrounded. The positions of the canes and limbs in the figurines and the frontality translated into an almost abstract pattern in the relief in the back. In the painting as well as in the majority of the graphic prints on the same subject (Fig. 3) a woman is also present in the formation. In the painting, she is dressed in yellow breaking up the dark frieze of men. Kaaring sees her as a helper-caretaker aiding one man along, but as the figures vary in the different versions of the subject, I think it is more complex than that.¹⁹ She is a formalistic gateway to the background of the painting. Sterup-Hansen associated yellow with hope and affirmations of life and the colour is recurrent in his oeuvre.²⁰ Through the use of the yellow in her dress and in the background, the rank of the blind becomes connected to the ranks of human figures behind it. The yellow colour shows that this is an image of optimism, it also joins the blind with all of humankind in a literal and metaphorical parade.

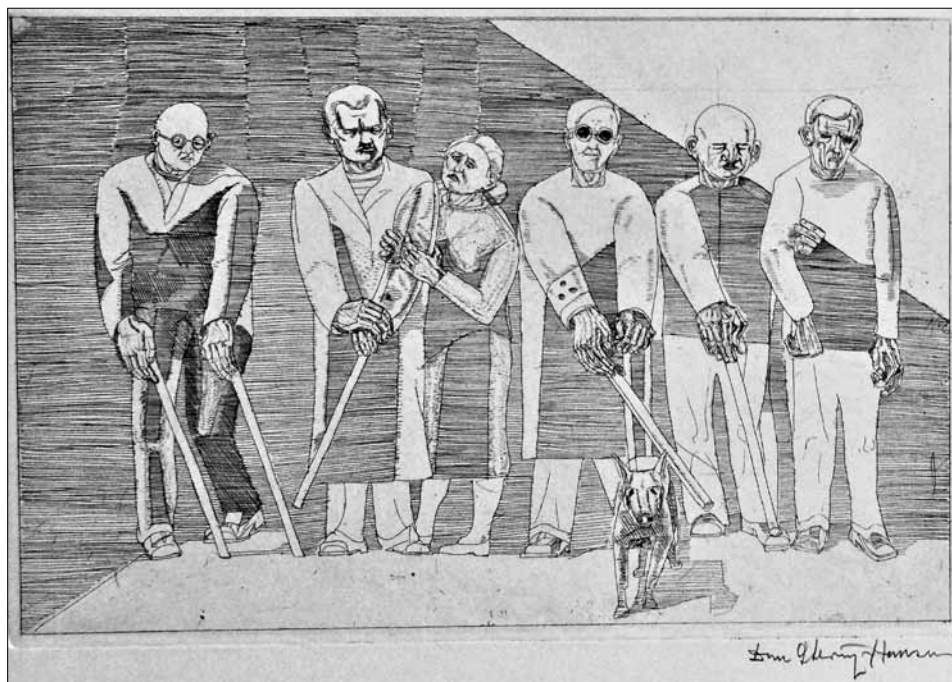


Fig. 3. Dan Sterup-Hansen, *The War Blind (Krigsblinde)*, 1952, etching. Private collection.

Photo by Lis Clausen © Dan Sterup-Hansen

¹⁹ L. B. Kaaring, op. cit., 184.

²⁰ I. Dybbro, *Levende...*, p. 31.

Fellow Human

Under the heading “Medmenneske” (Fellow Human) Sterup-Hansen writes about an experience he had at a political meeting in Idrætshuset in Copenhagen. His brief text is a development of the cane as an extension of the body in *The War Blind* series. In the text, however the extension of the body is not a tool but another body: “At a meeting in Idrætshuset I experienced how a man in a wheelchair had to be lifted into a chair. In the middle of this everyday situation the meeting began with *The Internationale*, and everyone stood up. Another man who was carrying him did not know what to do and therefore remained standing with the slight human in his arms – and he remained standing in my consciousness, had become a visible expression of something I search for, and which I believe we are all searching for”.²¹

The contrast between sitting and standing is central to the experience. The person lifting the wheelchair user is caught in a situation, where during the singing of the left-wing anthem *The Internationale*, he ought to remain standing for the duration of the song. As should the wheelchair user, who for obvious reasons cannot stand himself. This is a complex situation. The movement that starts off as utilitarian and helping becomes a movement signifying respect and participation in a political community. The man remains standing with his fellow man in his arms, thus showing respect and participation by standing up, although this was not the original intention behind his movement. He cannot complete his movement for now, but remains standing, and also – by keeping the wheelchair user in his arms not just helps him to move from one chair to another, but by embracing him in his arms, helps him to “stand” for the duration of the song. Sterup-Hansen titled his text “Fellow Man” and thereby made a connection to the humanitarianism implicated in both the situation and the political commitment of the song (and meeting) of wanting to make the world a better place for the weak. There is a multitude of corresponding and opposing meanings woven into this: the situation is akin to Marks haptic eroticism by which she means a physical exchange of trust and care in a wide sense. It is also an example of the body as a discursive field of signs: The implication of standing as a sign of respect, comparable to the sign language bicyclist use in traffic to indicate stops and turns. Meanings arise in intricate ways.

The image of one man carrying another is controversial in terms of masculinity. One is strong and one is frail in this situation. Ihde has remarked upon how the body analysed and discussed by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* is both a masculine body and a sports body.²² It is relevant to note that while Sterup-

21 “Ved et møde i Idrætshuset oplevede jeg, at en mand fra en rullestol skulle løftes over på en stol. Midt i denne hverdagsagtige situation åbnedes mødet med Internationale, og alle rejste sig. Manden, der løftede, var midt i den bevægelse at bære fra rullestol til stol. Han vidste ikke, hvad han skulle gøre og blev derfor stående med det spinkle menneske i sine arme – og han blev stående i min bevidsthed, var blevet et synligt udtryk for noget jeg søger efter, og som jeg tror vi alle søger efter”. Sterup-Hansen, *Dan Sterup-Hansen...*, p. 46.

22 D. Ihde, op. cit., p. 18.

Hansen draws women – for instance his etchings from another political meeting, a Women’s Congress in Idrætshuset in 1952 and the seeing woman included in most of the war blind images – as well as men, his oeuvre is not characterised by erotic themes or sensual embraces. While the predominance of male figures can be regarded from a feminist standpoint as chauvinistic in the sense that Man in terms of humankind is indeed predominantly a *man* in the works of Sterup-Hansen, it also has specific signification. The frail and disabled man having to be carried is unheroic and even unmasculine. There is a queer quality to the gentle care one man offers to another man, which is not characteristic of a traditional gender-hierarchy of a man carrying a woman or a child. It is like to like. Man to man. Human to human and in extension a humankind we are all equally part of. (And one that needs help). To take the action of queering further, the experience Sterup-Hansen recounts incorporates a feminine motif: that of mother and child and, to take it even further, that of the Christian Pietà.

The woman carrying her child in her arms is in the case of Sterup-Hansen replaced by two grown men, but the responsibility and the care for a weaker human being is related to this motif. Likewise, with the Pietà-motif, where the Virgin Mary has her dead adult son on her lap, as if he was still the child (which of course he will also always be to a parent) she birthed and took care of. In Sterup-Hansen’s narration it is not a dead body, but it is still a body that has suffered some kind of injury or limitation. A wounded body, in the widest sense of the word, that can do less than most bodies and must rely on help from others. We are given no details of the person or the cause of his disability, but seen together with *The War Blind* series based on the Armistice Day procession, where the disabilities were caused by physical damage on the battlefield they seem to form part of the same bodily theme: the injured body and in extension the wounded and vulnerable human being. The human, that must rely on the helpfulness and care of others as well as must take care of others himself, becomes an image of humanitarian ideals encompassing all of humanity. I think that herein lies the key to understanding what Sterup-Hansen meant when he wrote that seeing the war blind march on the Armistice Day, he experienced “a feeling of them being ‘the denominator’ for humankind”.²³ The body of the injured man manifests our inherent vulnerability and mutual dependency as human beings and human bodies.

Vulnerable Bodies

Vulnerability is an important theme in both *The War Blind* series and in the encounter discussed above. The war blind and the disabled man in wheelchair are all injured and impaired men. As such they are bodies that do not just signify, but embody, the fact that human bodies are physically vulnerable to damage and violence. This embodiment was important to Sterup-Hansen, who in reference to

23 D. Sterup-Hansen, *Dan Sterup-Hansen...* op. cit., p. 26.

another wheelchair user, a partially paralysed friend, wrote that “[his friend’s] attitude gave body to my images, now they were not just emotions and symbols, but also flesh and blood”.²⁴ He writes this in his passage on *The War Blind*, thus connecting together disability and war injury. As noted above, *The War Blind* are not just victims of harm, but themselves capable of inflicting harm. They navigate their space with the help of a cane, prodding, probing, tapping their surroundings in order to mark out a safe path in front of them. By exchanging sight with touch, they potentially touch other people, trip them over, strike them – soft or hard, while making their way through the world. They hold an agency of their own, despite their disability. In their case the touch is once removed as it is mediated by the cane. It can be accidental or desensitized, or clumsier than a direct touch. Yet it connects back to the cane wielder’s hand.

Touch is often associated with the touch of a hand, but the sense of touch belongs to most of the body. Sterup-Hansen returned to the subject of touch: To touch and be touched; to navigate the world without sight; and to move in connection to other people, negotiating the vulnerable body and the human potential for hurt. In 1957 Sterup-Hansen travelled on a passenger ship from Brindishi to Piraeus. Onboard the tightly packed ship people seemed almost stacked on top of each other. The experience became the subject of several etchings. The motif centred on rows of lying people and one intruding person, stepping into the landscape of sleepers.

In *T.S.S. Angelica*, 1957 (Fig. 4) we see a man walking away from us towards a staircase, with his feet half buried between human bodies. We can see the sole of his shoe between two bodies as he stretches his foot to take another step forward. One leg is slightly bent; another seems overly stretched. The left arm is awkwardly bent, the right one is rigidly straight with fingers knotted together. His neck is bent as if he is both trying to see and feel his way, relying on all senses to aid him. The awkward pose suggests the physical effort of navigating in a sea of bodies in near darkness.²⁵ The comparatively detailed line etching suggest closeness to a lived experience. In a TV interview in 1966, Sterup-Hansen recounted the experience of feeling his way with his feet among people sleeping on the floor hidden from sight by darkness; how he was afraid to bump into them and cause them harm.²⁶ *T.S.S. Angelica*’s central figure has his back turned to us, so our identification is not with him as a person, but with his actions. As viewers of the etching, our bodies are facing the background of the image, as is the body of the walking man. We are in a position not to confront him, but to repeat his movements, walking behind him into the sea of soft bodies cloaked in darkness. Sterup-Hansen visualises the physical sensation on a multisensory level and creates a connection to the viewer’s body on a phenomenological level. We see what he is showing us, but we are also presented with an invitation to experience it through the work of art.

24 Ibid., p. 29.

25 L. U. Marks, op. cit., p. xii gives the navigation of close-range spaces as an example of the “haptic perception”.

26 *Grafiske blade*, 1966, Production: Dokumenta Film, Director Per Ulrich, TV-program.

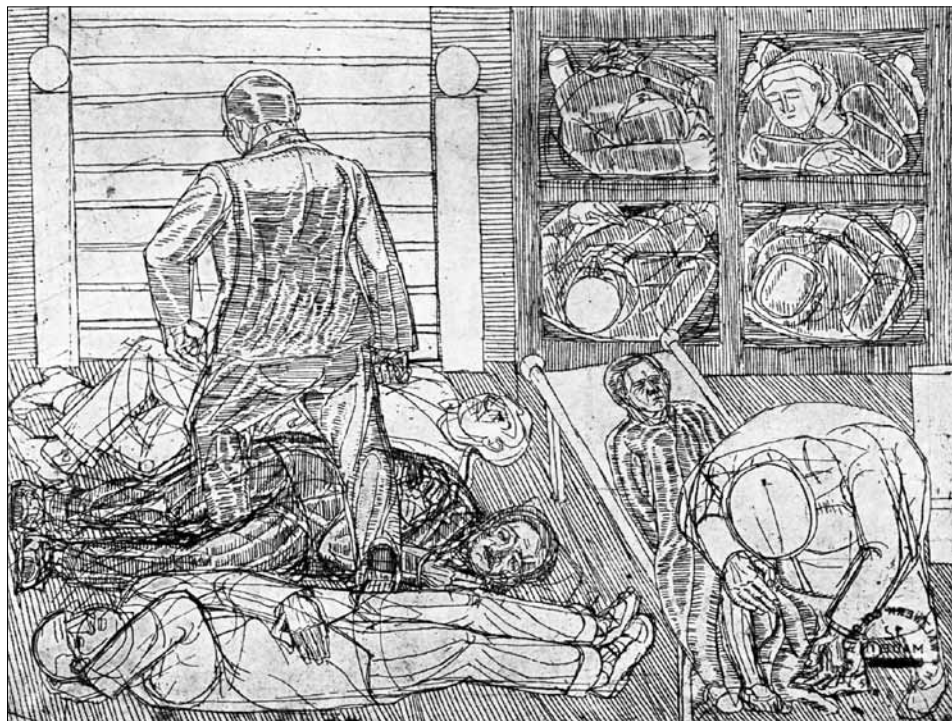


Fig. 4. Dan Sterup-Hansen, *T.S.S. Angelica*, 1957, etching. Private collection © Dan Sterup-Hansen

In another version of the subject the lines are simpler and the picture dominated by the stark contrast of black and white areas (Fig. 5). The composition consists of a simple division of the image into four squares: in the top left corner we see people sleeping on shelves or tight bunk beds. They are compressed into their small spaces in varied poses and seen from the top of their heads. The foreshortening makes their narrow spaces look more like storage than beds for humans. In the bottom on the left side a figure is crouching by a cot with a person lying on it and in the bottom on the right side we see people lying horizontally asleep on the floor. In the upper right part, an anonymous intruder steps into the picture. We see the lower part of the body and the legs as he descends a staircase and approaches the sleeping people on the floor. Or is it a person leaving the space of the sleepers? The picture does not give an answer to this, but seen together with Sterup-Hansens recounting of his experience, and the prominence given to the theme of walking through the bodies and stumbling in the dark in the other version of *T.S.S. Angelica* a coming together of a walking, awake person and a group of sleepers seems more likely. This does not exclude other meanings to be embedded in the image.

The linear outline of a person is generalised and schematized due to the flatness of the picture space. The flatness is underlined by the use of blocks of colour and changing viewpoints. The cot is seen from above with no foreshortening, while

the people sleeping in bunks are so foreshortened that they are more flat than deep. Naturalistic space is reduced. The abstraction and the division into squares enhance the impression of generalisation and schematization. The picture detaches itself from an individual experience and approaches commonality. Furthermore, the flattened space and changing viewpoints resist an experience of a homogenous naturalistic pictorial space – despite this the picture remains figurative. In this respect Sterup-Hansen's picture stresses here that other modes of experience are at stake than purely visual ones. The previously discussed version of the subject (Fig. 4) was directly narrative and the threat posed to the sleeping bodies was primarily circumstantial. In the schematized version there is an element of intentionality or even a threat connotated by the dark intruder on the stairs.

The sleepers grouped in the light and the dark field allude as *pars pro toto* to masses of people. Sterup-Hansen called them *menneskeophobninger* (stacked humans).²⁷ These sleeping groups connote the stacks of people – alive and dead – seen in the documentary photos taken in the Nazi KZ-camps following the liberation (Fig. 6). Sterup-Hansen did not verbally connect this series to the world wars, as he did with *The War Blind*, but he did regard the subject matter of *T.S.S. Angelica* as metaphorical, at least in retrospect: “The etchings *T.S.S. Angelica* with the trampling people have become symbolic to me, when I see them today and think of the Greece that saw the light of day a few years later. This sensation of trampling on others was expanded on my way to Aegina [...]”.²⁸

In the other two areas of the picture, also light and dark, two actions take place. In the upper right area the potentially threatening figure is descending a staircase in the dark, getting close to the sleepers on the floor. His face is outside the image so he literally cannot see where the bodies are lying in the dark – his feet, not his eyes, will be the first point of contact with them. In the lower left corner, the simple bed with the draped figure and the crouching figure besides it connotes the already mentioned Christian burial scenes and the Pietà motif. The sitting figure becomes the one that watches, or perhaps the one that grieves, hereby creating a contrast to the intruding threat.²⁹ A potential caretaker, or intervener – or just a witness to the actions of men.

The body feeling its way in the inhabited world and taking care of other bodies implies a potential for violence as well as a responsibility for taking care of the

27 D. Sterup-Hansen, *Dan Sterup-Hansen...*, p. 36.

28 “Raderingerne *T.S.S. Angelica* med de trampende mennesker er for mig blevet symbolske, når jeg ser dem i dag og tænker på det Grækenland, der få år senere så dagens lys. Denne fornemmelse af trampen på andre fik jeg uddybet på vej til Aegina [...]”. Sterup-Hansen continues to narrate how two chained men under guard were travelling on the boat with him, but without actually telling in what way this was also a “trampling on others”. In Danish to trample someone has a double meaning of both physical trampling and suppression. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

29 Although Sterup-Hansen's communist affiliation indicates atheist beliefs, cultural Christianity is compatible with his humanistic views and as an academy trained artist, he was well versed in the history of Western art.

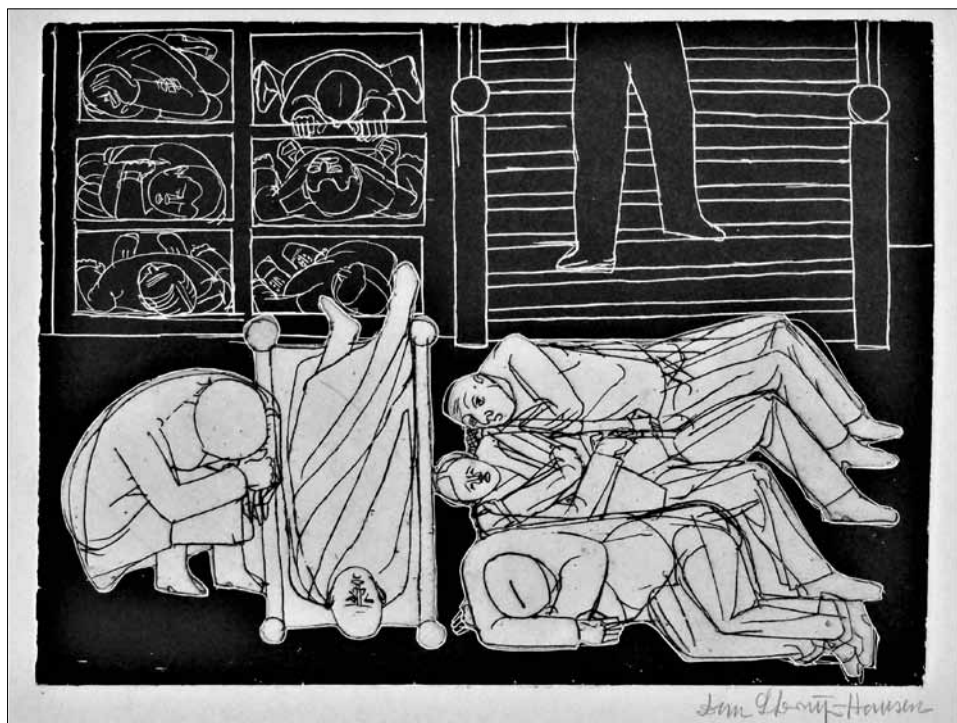


Fig. 5. Dan Sterup-Hansen, *T.S.S. Angelica*, 1957, etching. Private collection. Photo by Lis Clausen
© Dan Sterup-Hansen

other(s). It is what Danish philosopher K. E. Løgstrup in his existential and phenomenological ethics terms “an ethical demand” in regards to interdependence: “Our life is so constituted that it cannot be lived except as one person lays him or herself open to another person and puts her or himself in to that person’s hands either by showing or claiming trust”.³⁰ In the *T.S.S. Angelica* etchings, the vulnerability goes hand in hand with responsibility more closely than in *The War Blind*. The two series are closely related in terms of the primacy given to the mediated touch. The canes creating simultaneous distance and closeness between the hands and the world they touch are replaced in the *T.S.S. Angelica* etchings by feet. Despite the simple line drawings of the etching, the intruder’s feet carry shoes. They are thus like *The War Blind* once removed in their touch. Feet are already a part of the body not often connected to gentleness, caretaking or caresses, but more often to autonomous movement. By wearing shoes, the possibility for kicking or trampling is stressed in the images. In the etchings, the possibility of kicking seems to be one of unintentionality (Fig. 4), whereas the intentionality of kicking is implied in Fig. 5.

³⁰ K. E. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, Notre Dame, 1997, p. 18. While Sterup-Hansen likely did not share Løgstrup’s Christian faith, both were concerned with humanism and its constitution.



Fig. 6. Lee Miller, Civilians and American soldiers with dead prisoners, Buchenwald, Germany, 1945. Photography, 30 x 40 cm. Lee Miller Archives © Lee Miller Archives, England 2020. All rights reserved

With regards to sight, the sleepers are not blind, but momentarily deprived of their sight in their surrender to sleep. Like *The War Blind* and the wheelchair user in Idrætsparken they are humans in situations where their vulnerability is stressed and where touch is the primary sense evoked. The composition of the *T.S.S Angelica* etchings especially (Fig. 5) is one that to some degree challenges sight as a transparent sensation. In his constructivistic combination of abstraction and figuration, Sterup-Hansen's picture evokes perception as a phenomenological multi-sensuous and cognitive – thought-provoking – sense. We are meant to not just look, but to see, feel and think. Bodily identification evokes sensation: the physical feelings of pain, of caress, of nearness and distance. Through the work of art, we can experience sensations of feeling exposed or safe.

Marks identifies haptic visuality in regards to images: "Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure as much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image". She continues by stating that it is appropriate to speak of "a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image".³¹ It is precisely for that reason the identification in Sterup-Hansen's image does *not* take place in the form of portrayed persons or facial characteristics. While the figure is important in Sterup-Hansen's art, the relationship he builds between the viewer and the motif is a person to person one in a general humanitarian sense – as the body and the senses we have in common. Very little of this belongs to the visual in any primary sense, yet Sterup-Hansen finds a way to communicate it by visual means.

³¹ L. U. Marks, op. cit., p. 3.

Taking action: The *Dialog* magazine

In 1952 Sterup-Hansen was invited to join the editorial board of the little magazine *Dialog* (1950–1961) as the picture editor.³² It was a left-wing magazine devoted to art, literature, and politics. The magazine was advocating peaceful co-existence, political and social engagement, European humanist traditions, reciprocity between the cultural life in modern times and the human beings, as well as seeking to present an alternative to American cold war propaganda.³³ While often critical in its voices it was also optimistic, in that it aimed towards building a better, more enlightened future, rather than lamenting the past. Under the headlines such as “Rationalism and Humanism” the magazine advocated rationalism, enlightenment through education, humanism, and a reconstructive and forward-looking attitude to the cultural and socio-economic challenges ahead.³⁴ With Dan Sterup-Hansen’s arrival in 1952, the magazine started communicating its values and viewpoints through visual art as well as through text. The visuality of the magazine is important to understanding the humanistic ideal behind these politics: the concern for humans and humankind.³⁵

The illustrations in the magazine included both original art and reproductions from a global art scene, but one need only look as far as the covers to gain an understanding of the aesthetic profile of the magazine. After Sterup-Hansen joined the editorial board the covers became original works of graphic art; either woodblock or lino print. Some were dialectical in their use of front and back cover, presenting problem and solution, or reality and ideal (Fig. 7), some cover art figuratively presented the textual content of the magazine in a human embrace such as Olsens “peace-dance” cover from 1953 (Fig. 8), where a line of four women and one infant dance across the front and back cover. When one approaches the magazine as a materiality, Olsen’s and similar covers – front and back – literally cover the articles in the magazine and as such provide a “container” for the textual content. While the content presented many voices, and spanned political and cultural content, the cover framed these voices, and made visible the overall humanistic objective of the magazine: peace and coexistence.³⁶

Sterup-Hansen not only edited the layout and visual art of the magazine, but also contributed a cover. The first cover of 1952 was a woodblock print, that drew on *The War Blind* subject (Fig. 9). On the cover we see a silhouette of a group of people standing closely together and forming a short human wall. At the same time as

32 I. Dybbro, *Levende...*, p. 30.

33 C. E. Bay (ed.), *Dialog. En antologi*, København, 1979, pp. 8–9.

34 S. M. Kristensen, “Rationalisme og humanisme”, *Dialog*, 1, 1950, pp. 3–44.

35 The history of the magazine and its editors are intertwined with Danish political history, from close ties to the communist party, through its editors’ political orientations, eventually leading into the formation of the more moderate Socialistic People’s Party in 1959.

36 This reading is based on J. J. McGann, *The Textual Condition*, Princeton, 1991. For a longer discussion of materiality in *Dialog* see K. W. Eriksen, op. cit., pp. 272–281.

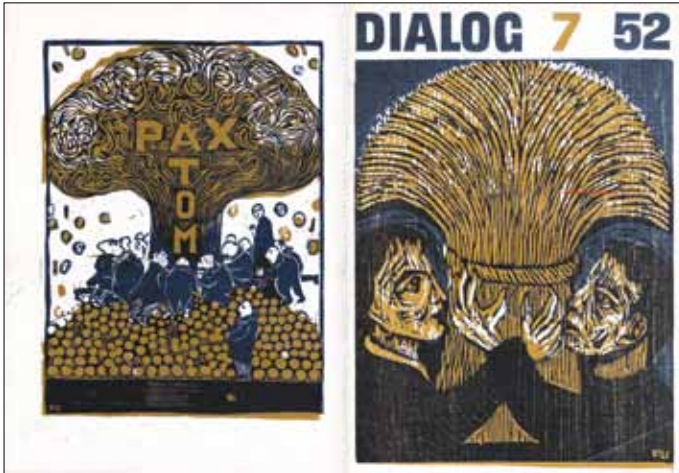


Fig. 7. *Dialog*, 7, 1952.
Cover: Per Ulrich
(1915–1994) © Per
Ulrich



Fig. 8. *Dialog*, 3, 1953.
Cover: Ib K. Olsen
(1919–2017) © Ib
K. Olsen

Sterup-Hansen was working on the subject of *The War Blind* he also worked on the subject of humans forming a wall or front saying it was “[...] a wish for a situation, where humans, children, women, and men put a stop to the cynical game, which back then had the nuclear bomb as its latest and most distinct symbol”.³⁷ (Fig. 10). His cover is a composite of both: The silhouette of the war blind without canes or dogs, standing or walking in a linked wall formation. They are simplified silhouettes of men (no children, no obvious female figures) with no details but a minimum of

³⁷ “[...] en ønskesituation hvor mennesker, børn, kvinder og mænd standser det kyniske spil, der dengang havde atombomben som sit nyeste og tydeligste symbol”. D. Sterup-Hansen, *Dan Sterup-Hansen...*, p. 31.

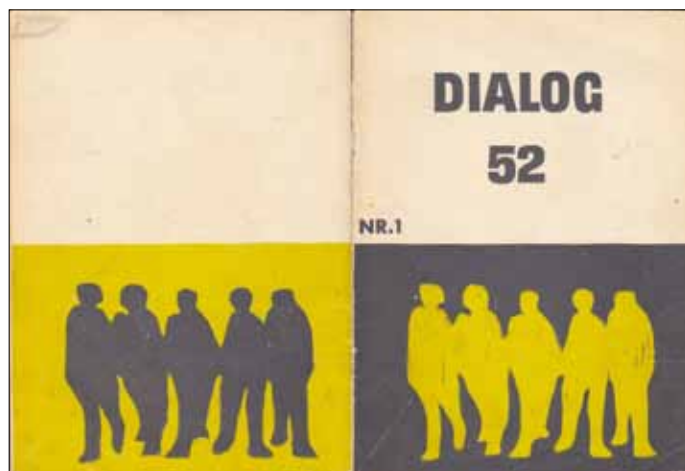


Fig. 9. *Dialog*, 1, 1952.
Cover: Dan Sterup-
-Hansen (1918–1995)
© Dan Sterup-Hansen

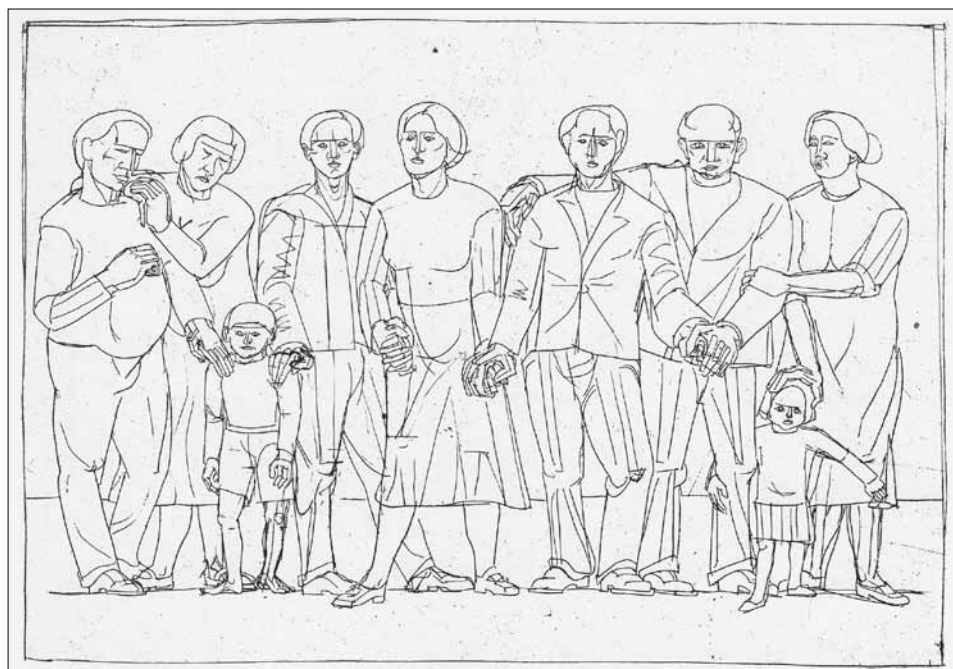


Fig. 10. Dan Sterup-Hansen, *Wall of Humans (Menneskemur)*, 1954, etching. Private collection
© Dan Sterup-Hansen

signification, and an obliteration of the elements of narrativity seen in his other works. They invite identification through their generality.

The simplification of form is mirrored in the use of colour. In this cover, Sterup-Hansen is repeating the same motif in reverse colouring on the front and back

covers, hereby visually marking a change either caused by or aimed at the group of people standing in unison in the centre of the image. The character of this change is optimistic. As mentioned above, Sterup-Hansen associated the colour yellow with optimism thus the use of the colour on this cover implies the possibility of positive change in accordance with the magazine's ideological stand.

Sterup-Hansen's composition, while visually simple, encompasses the complex intersection between the singular individual and the abstract and heterogeneous collectivism of a society. The motif is figural and relates to a general notion of humankind and an implied solidarity, but seen in terms of the doctrine of the figure-ground relationship within abstract art it contains additional meaning. The reversal in colour between figure and ground calls attention to the image-ground relationship and connects the figure to the ground. On an ideological level man and his surrounding environment is presented as connected and dependent. Inside the magazine the abstract notion of society as a larger network of people relating to one another is called forth.³⁸ Thus, the schematic figures of human beings rendered in textured woodblock printing evoke our corporal, physical existence and pair it with the non-visual, abstract qualities of world politics, left wing ideology, and ideals for reconstruction also given textual form inside the magazine.

The viewer as body

The body and its senses are a core theme in Sterup-Hansen's art and it is by addressing the body of the viewer that he communicates political and humanitarian ideals. Sterup-Hansen expressed a wish for fellow humans to take action in the shaping of our common world, to take responsibility in many senses of the word. In terms of the *Dialog* magazine there are instances where abstracted thought and phenomenological perception merge together in the material act of reading set forth by artworks and layout. In the act of reading the reader is – ideally – reminded of his or her own body, and thus situated in their own reality while reading. In this way the call to action set out in *Dialog* meets the reader not in an immersion in a text, but in a reality, where they have the possibility of acting, of doing something: something ethical, political, phenomenological.

The caretakers in Sterup-Hansen's art indicate people who act: the women aiding the blind, the man lifting the disabled man, but Sterup-Hansen makes explicit in his texts, that the protagonists are the blind. I have already discussed how their use

³⁸ A magazine can be regarded as a "public", involving a multitude of voices debating – including the reader. In the editorial of this issue of *Dialog* the editors address the reader in this capacity. The magazine wants to "call to assembly" (*kalde til samling*) and it "invites [...]" the readers to join us in the fight against the disintegration of the humanist tradition and the impoverishment of society that takes place with reckless violence" ("*[...] læserne til sammen med os at tage del i kampen mod den nedbrydning af den humanistiske tradition og den forarmelse af samfundet, som finder sted med hensynsløs voldsomhed*"). "Foreword", *Dialog*, 1, 1952, p. 1.

of canes both makes them vulnerable and gives them a potential to hurt others – if only by accident. The blind must be trusting, yet are not helpless. They are agents onto themselves. The trust involved in accepting help is something that opens up us all to each other, and something that we must also understand as an act, perhaps even a political act: the act of trust between people, the courage to be interdependent, as ways to fight for peace.

The act of trust is given bodily form in Sterup-Hansen's texts and art, and I have touched on how the viewer echoes the body of the walking man in *T.S.S. Angelica*. I want to expand this observation to include the formal qualities of Sterup-Hansen's art. Several times in this article I have mentioned or alluded to the notion of awkwardness. The awkwardness of being caught between movements, the awkwardness of navigating in the dark in piles of people, feet catching on clothing and limbs. It is a subtheme in many of Sterup-Hansen's works of art. The notion of awkwardness is found in many of the artist's works such as in the awkwardly perched man sleeping on a bench (Fig. 11). Awkwardness could easily be dismissed as poor quality of draughtsmanship, but that would be a mistake. Awkwardness connotes physicality and points to the body, its presence and bulk. It blocks visual delight in a pretty shape or face and instead "bumps" into the eye of the beholder. It could even cause a feeling of uncomfortableness in the viewer, a small embarrassment due to the awkwardness perceived. As such it serves as a reminder of the



Fig. 11. Dan Sterup-Hansen, *Sleeping man on a bench* (*Sovende mand på bænk*), 1957, etching. Private collection. Photo by Lis Clausen © Dan Sterup-Hansen

viewer's own being as body. That the one who looks is also sometimes awkward, is bodily inhabiting the world, a fact the optical enjoyment of art has been accused of erasing. Awkwardness engages us as beholders as well as makes us aware of our being in the world outside the image we behold. It pushes us back, forming a bridge between the meanings and messages offered by the work of art and the lifeworld we inhabit, where we – according to Sterup-Hansen's ideological aesthetics – can and must act. The formal qualities force the viewer to remain in his body, as viewer. Rather than get lost in an image, the image meets him or her in their own space, similar to what I argue takes place in *Dialog*. The connection between viewer and art work is – just as the subjects of Sterup-Hansen's art – based on a phenomenological experience of being in the world: blinded, awkward, stumbling, sleeping, disabled, vulnerable, interdependent, as well as seeing, standing, walking, feeling, thinking, doing.

Conclusion: A politics of touch

In this article, I have argued that Sterup-Hansen explores different modes of blindness – *The War Blind*, the sleeping as well as other sensorial deprivations in order to focus attention on the body and a phenomenological perception and to evoke empathy and phenomenological recognition in the viewer. His art undertakes recurrent themes of disability, often paired with an awkwardness that extends into formal qualities in order to reach out to the viewer in his or her space of reception. I have drawn inspiration from Merleau-Ponty, Ihde, and Marks in order to understand how Sterup-Hansen's motifs perform, so to speak, rather than how they look. While Merleau-Ponty is concerned with the relationship of subject to object and how we as subjects extend into our surroundings and they into us, Marks offers us her almost manifest-like invitation to think and expand on a notion of haptic erotics – or perhaps also a haptic phenomenology – in order to take on bodily and emotional responsibility in the meeting of subjects, not as motifs, but as subjects.

Sterup-Hansen was a devout communist, actively engaged in a left-wing struggle for a peaceful and humane future. In my analysis, this ideological and humanistic position is embedded into his works of art, but in a way that addresses the body, more so than the mind. In this respect they can be said to provide their own argumentation: you sense this in your body, so it must be true. Through texts and images political situations are presented with emphasis on the senses involved: seeing, non-seeing, touching – as in carrying, stumbling or walking. And on the emotions connected to these sensation, not least a recurrent theme of vulnerability, which seems to be the core theme: by being vulnerable, we depend on each other, and this in itself is political. A politics of touch finds a clear expression in the etching *Wall of Humans*. To be bodily and emotionally in the world is also to *be* on an existential and ethical level. It is the texture of our existence and it gives form to our acts as human beings.

Human touch is a recurrent theme in *The War Blind* series and in the cover of *Dialog*. The war blind feel their way with canes as sensory extension of their bodies, but in their closeness to one another they also extend each other, so to speak, in solidarity and cohesion. This is also implicit in the mutual singing of *The Internationale* in the text by Sterup-Hansen. It is consistent with the ideological standpoint Sterup-Hansen has expressed, but it is also an expression of human interdependence and responsibility. The blind have a responsibility in using their canes, the walking have a responsibility for their own bodies – in this case their feet – in connection to other bodies.

In this regard Sterup-Hansen's images differ from Merleau-Ponty's example with the cane, in that it implies another human being beyond the subject. Merleau-Ponty's famously writes about a woman wearing a feathered hat: "Without any explicit calculation, a woman maintains a safe distance between the feather in her hat and objects that might damage it".³⁹ What is carried in Sterup-Hansen's aesthetics is a person. Just as when we carry a child on our shoulders we must be careful to take hanging branches, wind and door openings into account. A lot more is at stake in this extension of our being, than in the case of a feather. Thus, vulnerability goes hand in hand with responsibility in Sterup-Hansen's art. He evokes a phenomenological – dependant – relationship between the individual and his lifeworld and between one person and the next.

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