





**MERTZ<sup>+</sup>**

Curated by Peter Holst Henckel

KIRKE SONNERUP GALLERY 2005

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## Foreword

Mertz+ should be seen as a modest attempt at introducing some new aspects of Albert Mertz's artistic oeuvre. Specifically, it is the first time that some of the exhibited works are presented in public. Other of the exhibited works have previously been exhibited, but are here presented from a new angle. In the exhibition as well as in the catalogue three perspectives or vanishing lines are laid down that each try to encircle important aspects of Mertz and his art. In the exhibition this circumscription is demonstrated in the way the works are hung and the way the space is distributed. This publication tries, in the shape of a catalogue, to supplement and support the perspective that the exhibition outlines through images, text and layout.

Upon his death on December 30th 1990, Mertz left behind an extensive production of gouaches, montages, collages and paintings, besides an important body of sketches, writings and notes. It has been a very special experience to discover this by all measures extraordinary oeuvre. In particular, the correspondence between Mertz' production of works and his theoretical reflections have been enlightening. Combined, they have given an amazing insight into one of the great persons in Danish art. As minute and bashful as he was in stature, as important and inevitable he was, and is, in modern Danish art and – I maintain – international art.

Albert Mertz was a very productive artist. He started early – was admitted to the fine arts academy when only 16 years old – and

until the very end of his life he stubbornly continued to investigate and challenge art. His artistic practice extended itself to all genres, media and forms. His attitude was that art was not restricted to any definite appearance, to any specific object, but rather that it was identical to the effect that it had on the spectator. Art must therefore always relate to the contemporary and dare to challenge it. It is well known that at an early stage he started to work with film. Later video and TV followed. He always managed to add something more – qualitatively as well as quantitatively. In that sense he was a generous artist. An artist+.

First and foremost I would like to thank Sam Jedig for the incitement to initiate this project. Just as many thanks go to Lone Mertz for an unreserved and inspiring collaboration. I have spent quite some time with her at Glænøgård, and each time left with renewed energy and support. Also thank you to Stefanie Hering who has contributed to this catalogue with an international perspective on Mertz's work. Finally, thanks go to all the others who in one way or another have helped realize this project: Flemming Brusgaard, Susanne Mertz, Kristian Jakobsen, Cecilie Høgsbro og Anne-Mette Willumsen.

PETER HOLST HENCKEL  
Copenhagen April 2005

# Discovering Mertz

Over a period of more than 50 years, Albert Mertz has devoted himself with consistency and persistence to the development of a nearly vast oeuvre that encompassed painting, film, collage, installation, writing. Through his work and life Albert Mertz has been the ultimate insider and outsider in the whole brought range of cultural fields which has been the central focus of his art during his whole lifetime. Due to the fact that he never felt himself bound to a particular medium, but used painting as his natural tool while including everything he could get from other areas, he never the less concentrated on the pictorial as the artistic activity without objects. His famous concept of colouring in red and blue was more about spirit than about colour. The use of colour was his most immediate and direct form of approach to the world. One might say to a world liberated from any illusions.

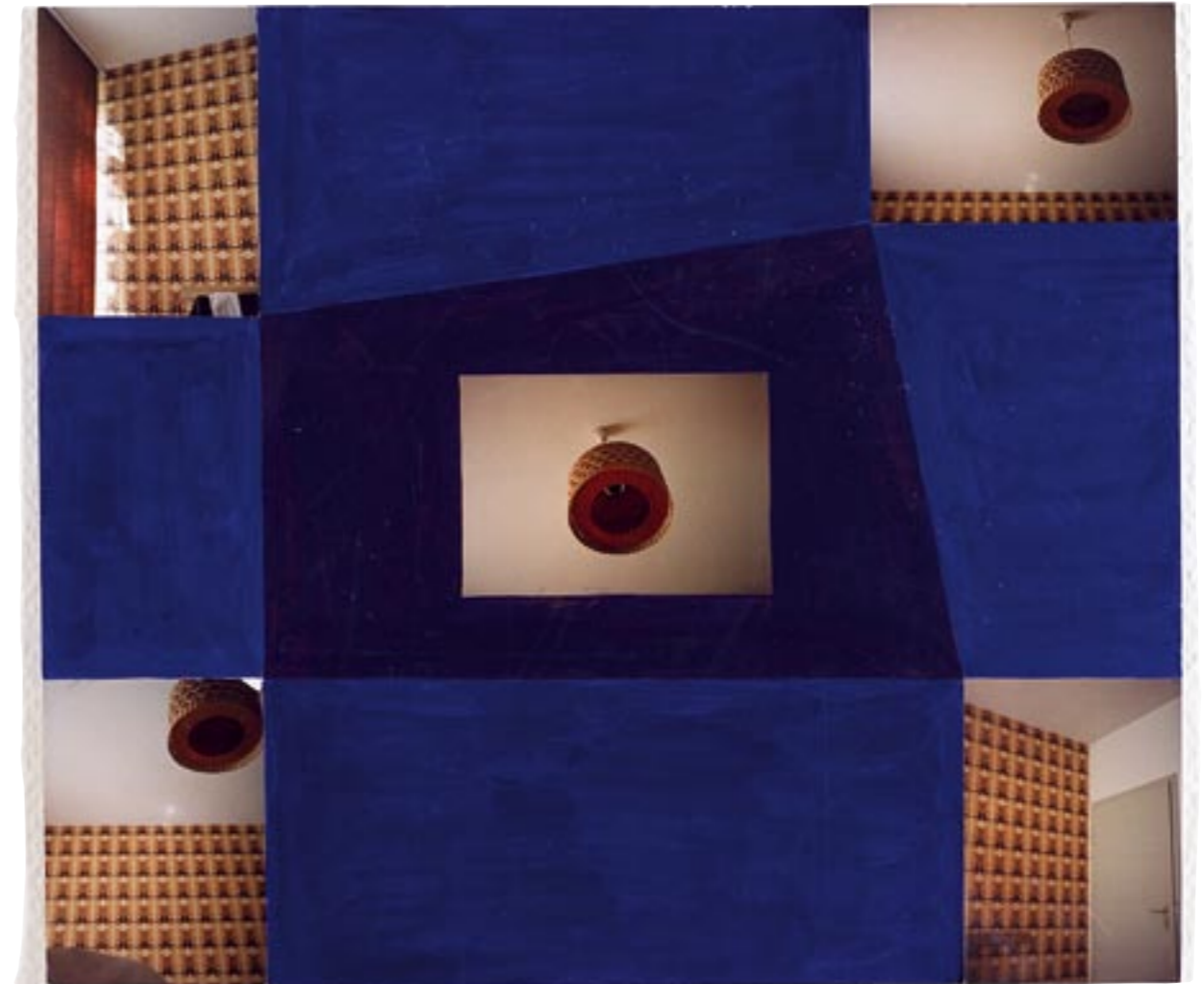
Without any regard for fashionable trends Albert Mertz never stopped moving on, daring to venture into unfamiliar terrain. In a personally inherent anarchistic manner he crossed all contemporary borders of his lifetimes arthistory, surching at first for balance between the distant tradition of realistic description in Danish art on one side and on the other side experimental forms and media, later on between the visual languages of Conceptualism and Minimalism on one hand and Dada featuring Fluxus on the other. His work equated all these different forms of artistic expression, never loosing it's purely personal form and unique magic. His expression varied between the strictest rules of composition and a

completely free and spontaneous visual term. This was due to the always one and same basis: the transformation of the elements of reality into pictorial symbols by choosing to employ which ever medium transfers best the experience of the moment.

The tremendous range of his work, which's prerequisite has been it's almost proletarian directness, is a treasure which has not been yet discovered in all it's facettes. And this fact is precisely the objective of this show.

Albert Mertz's fame has never left the borders of Denmark during his lifetime. The immense influence this most contemporary of all contemporary artists has had on other stars of his own generation as well as on younger ones - a lot of them nowadays focused by the attention of the international artscene - is not mirrored into any international attention for himself. The Sao Paulo Biennial 1991 came too late, as we all know. - But due to the name Albert has under the most international and wellknown artists, it's not too late to claim the gift of the treasure - his work indeed is already representing to us - for the rest of the world. This exhibit at Stalke is a first step to discover Albert Mertz and some of the uncounted brilliant facettes of his gorgeous work newly.

STEFANIE HERING  
Berlin April 2005





” *The experience lies not within the work itself, but within what the work provokes in the spectator.* ”  
 (AM 09.67)

” *I no longer have any faith in the art object not to mention the artwork, but only in the permanent process, a stream of ideas, thoughts, actions, something never ending, something without a place, because it, due to its eternal movement, cannot attach itself, cannot stay in one place, but is in constant mutation.* ”  
 (AM 27.12.73)



## In the middle of the present

During a study trip to Paris in 1938, Albert Mertz saw an exhibition of modern American art that was to be of great importance to him. In his opinion, it was the films that were shown there that were of the greatest interest. He saw them as the most relevant and modern contribution to the exhibition. He subsequently got involved in films and became Denmark's first experimental film artist. During the 40s and the fifties he was deeply involved in the world of films, now as a screenplay writer or as director, now as promoter, writer or theorist. Though visual art started to play a greater role in his creative universe, film and later television continued to be important to him. In an interview in 1990 he was asked what he would work with if he could start his career as a young artist at that time. His answer was short and precise: TV. Mertz' curiosity and interest in new media, new expressions, new art is legendary. For long periods of his life he worked as an inspiring promoter for the newest international art in magazines, newspapers and even TV. His own production was equally determined by an unending curiosity and experimentation, to such a degree that he was considered by the art world as artistically restless. However, this was closely linked to his entire attitude towards art and its importance for the spectator and society in general.

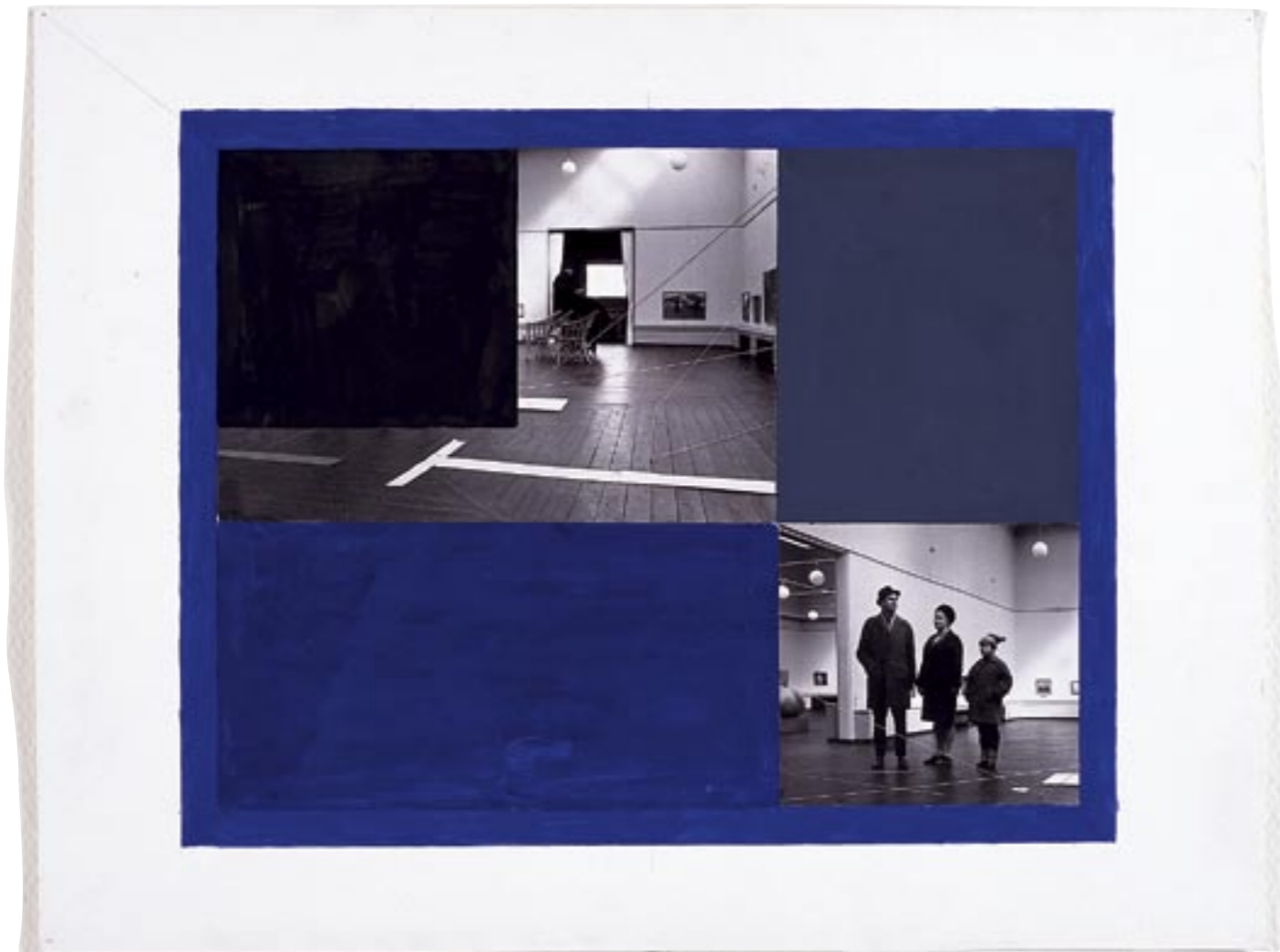
For Mertz, the determining factor was that art placed itself at the centre of contemporaneity. It had to speak the language of the time to make itself understood and thereby assert itself. Only by going into clinch with the predominant media and imagery of the time could art assume its required place in the development of society. This was expressed in many ways. In the 40s he worked not only with film but also with assemblages where fragments of newspapers and other readymade printed material were used literally to create new pictures. Later on, he developed a quite unique kind of collage where cutouts from weekly magazines or postcards were incorporated in a kind of concrete painting programme. It sounds impossible – to bring “pure” painting together with “impure” mass media reproducibility. But it wasn't impossible, quite to the contrary; in these collages he managed to make the “pure” and “impure” meet. A variation over this kind of collage are the works where he painted over images from advertising and wrapping paper: collages where the pre-printed image is contaminated, so to speak, with one or more painterly elements, balancing on the edge of deconstructing or reconstructing the pictures' predetermined purport - very typical of Mertz. For it is exactly in the juxtaposition and the tension between the “pure” and the “impure” that Mertz is quintessentially Mertz. This double bind possesses a nonchalant accuracy that one as a spectator cannot help but be affected by. Formally speaking, the collages are simple and clear,

but at a closer look they display a certain resistance. They toy with the relation between picture space, concrete image surface and reality. In this often peculiar game of looking, they point at some important painterly and image-related questions: is painting just one among so many other objects in the world, or is it rather a reflection or representation of it? What is most real: painting itself (as an object) or what the painting represents? In other words, the works appear as simple visual ways to raise some highly complex representational issues. Thereby, they unfold a basic element in Mertz' artistic practice which deals with the relation between art and reality; an element that he returns to repeatedly in his works and which he equally repeatedly reflects on in his writings.

For Mertz, it didn't make any sense to make art equal reality. To him, art was not reality but simply a way of being in the world, a way of seeing and understanding it that might make it bigger, more nuanced and thereby more interesting, but which at the same time was fundamentally something other. The work is thus an optic, a frontier between the world and us, and thereby it also opens up the possibility of meeting it anew. Here and now, over and over again.

PETER HOLST HENCKEL





” *In Danish art you are  
allowed to use your  
hands but never your head.* ”  
(AM 87)





# The Universe of Little Things

In the 1970s and the 1980s Mertz made a great number of photomontages where he started out with little 10 x 15 cm. colour photographs that he had taken of different day-to-day objects in and around his studio in Paris and his house on Glænø. One of the montages consists of some partly unfocused shots of for example the edge of his desk, a bit of baguette photographed from different angles and a piece of rolled-up cloth. The photomontage is called "The Universe of Little Things". There are many similar works from that period, all revolving around nature and the intimate aspects of life, especially on Glænø. At a first glance, they differ a great deal from the rest of Mertz' oeuvre concerning subject and palette. Here, there is room for sunsets, light glittering on treetops and - who would believe it - the paintwork on these pieces are kept within a range of delicate earthy colours, violet washes, Prussian blue and nuances of pink. Had the man become a romantic in his old age?

There is no doubt that, artistically speaking, Mertz was a restless character. He was aware of that. Somewhere he wrote straightforwardly that one of the reasons that he kept on working on Red+Blue was to prove to himself as well as to colleagues and to the whole world that he wasn't the eternally changing turncoat that he had the reputation of being, and that "he could stick to doing one thing". It is probably true that, on the one hand, he had

a tendency towards dry, pure, almost scientific work as Red+Blue required, but on the other hand couldn't do without the "impure" Dadaist work with collages, montages and painting.

Thus, when he delved into the universe of little things in the 80s to investigate the intimate, the textural, the delicate and sensual, it was therefore hardly artistically a big change for Mertz, but rather yet another facet that was added, tested, investigated and worked on.

After having settled down in France in 1963, he returned to Denmark in 1977. In the secure surroundings of his family and Glænø, he allowed himself to delve into the intimate, the nuances and the landscape. In part because he became curious again, in part because he wanted to investigate some other aspects of the work process than the ones that he had provided himself with until then.

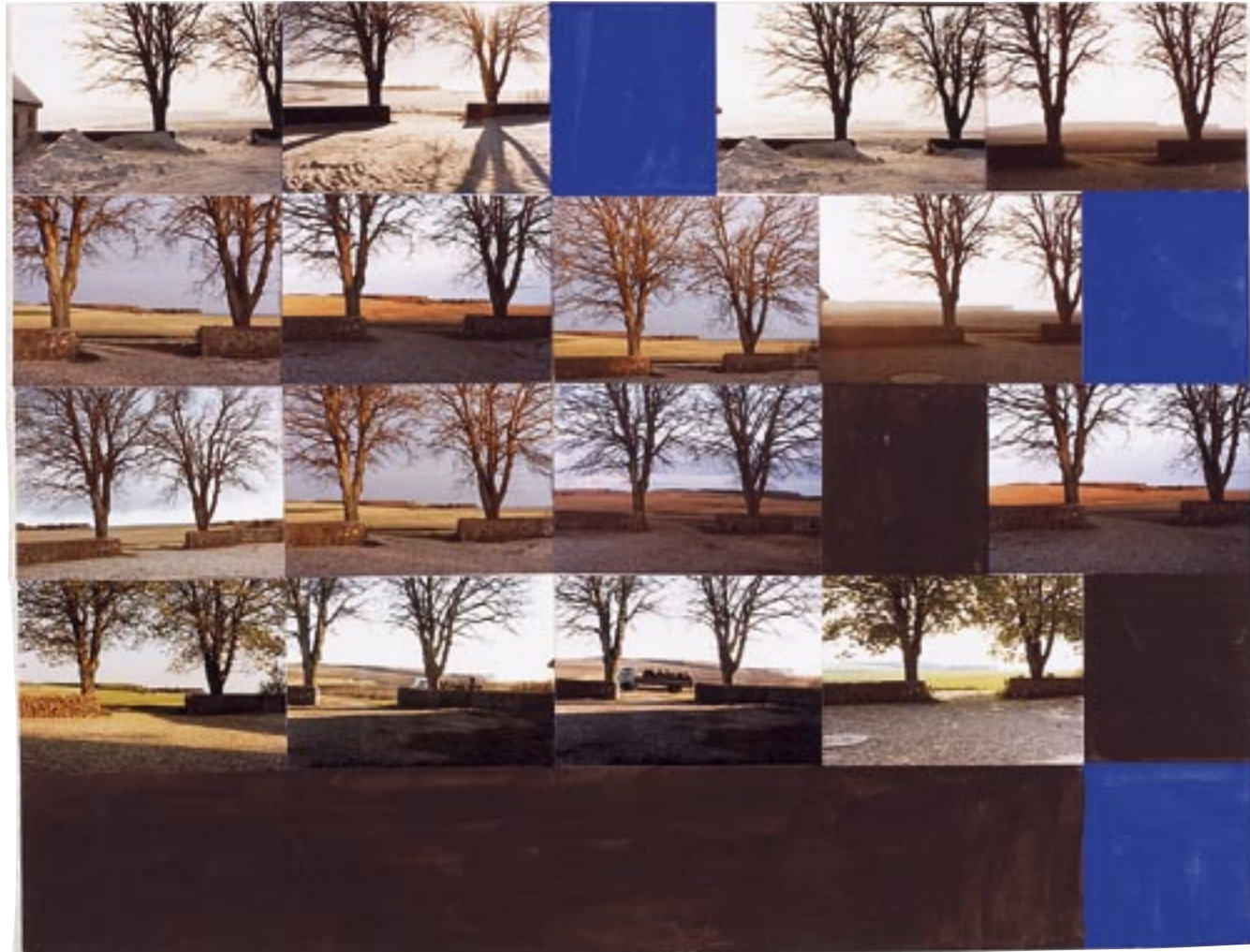
Throughout his life, Mertz was deeply preoccupied with eastern religions, aesthetics and thinking. He was convinced that we in the West could learn infinitely from the Eastern focus on the process. Compared to a Western concept of art that is only interested in the aesthetic object as an artistically formed end product, the aesthetics of the East focussed on the process. To Mertz, work



was a kind of meditation that he practiced on a daily basis under very scheduled and almost programmed conditions. Thus, Mertz had constructed his daily routine in relation to work in a way that left room for both the "pure" and "impure" ways of practicing art. Before noon he worked systematically with reading, variations and new ideas for works. After lunch he put on his pyjamas and went to bed. In the afternoon he started work on the looser and less concrete projects. In connection with each process a formidable amount of notes were produced, in the shape of writings and sketches in Studio Books, Trash Books, Idea Books etc. In this way, the structure of the day functioned as a way of connecting

the many different – and contradictory – artistic interests and modes of practice that Mertz was preoccupied with. He described it himself quite precisely as a "steady stream of ideas, thoughts, actions... in constant mutation". When in the 1980s threw himself into working with the intimate in the universe of little things, it isn't because he was going back to the painterly virtues of the past, but rather it was yet another example of his way of constantly adding something more: new ways, new images, new surprises.

PETER HOLST HENCKEL



” If you ask the question: “What is art?”  
you either get a number of contra-  
dictory answers or no answer at all. ”  
(AM 24.1.74)

## R+B

In the autumn of 1968 Mertz “invented” the Red+Blue Proposition. A rectangle divided in the middle so that two squares were formed: a red one to the left and a blue one to the right. Over the following years he concretely and theoretically investigated and developed this seemingly simple structure in an infinite series of manifestations, variations and reflections. Up until his death he stubbornly continued to turn and twist the problems of R+B. But it is obvious that he had an ambivalent relation to it. As carried away with and as enthusiastically as he could describe the possibilities of this idea, as useless and limiting it could appear to him at other times. On November 22nd 1973 he noted, for example: “This morning I have destroyed most of my “R+B” production, but I couldn’t eradicate it completely – maybe later, but not now.” Fortunately, it didn’t come to that!

R+B is, by all means in a Danish context, a unique and major artistic programme. Today, it stands rightly as one of the few examples of Danish art from the 60s and 70s that has an international level. So international that it almost seems utterly un-Danish. Mertz developed it intentionally to clash with an introspective and rigid Danish art scene while in his - for that very purpose created - working exile in Paris. In the beginning of the 60s he “fled” to France because he found Danish art too provincial. In southern France and later Paris there was more breathing space, and here Mertz had the opportunity to see and read about the most advanced international art. And it was in no way an uninteresting period.

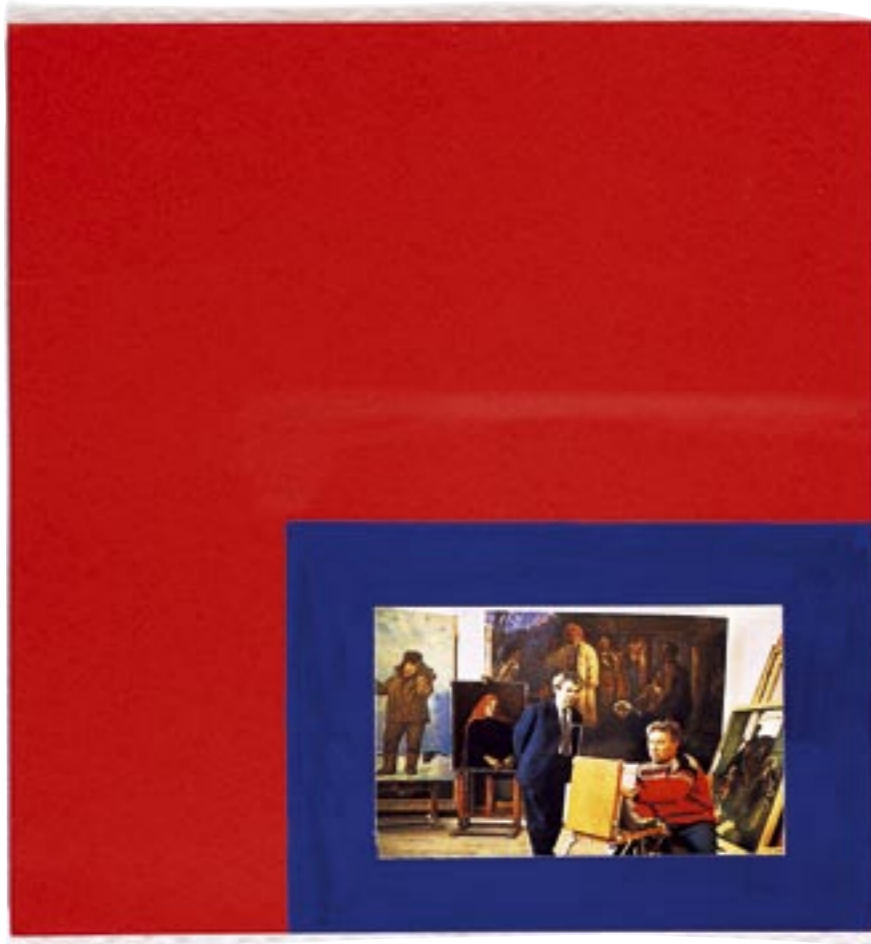


If one followed the international development of and debate on art, as Mertz did, also through intensive reading of art magazines, you could see something important happening precisely in the decade from 1965 to 1975, where Mertz developed R+B. Already in the beginning of the 1960s there were signs of a break with post-war modernism as it was practiced by the New York School and their Abstract Expressionism and theoretically canonized by Clement Greenberg. With Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Realisme and from the middle of the 60s Conceptual Art, several of the dogmas of Modernism were put under pressure. Fluxus challenged the media-specificity of Modernism with a wide range of new mixed media, while Conceptual Art questioned the materiality of art, its character of being an object, a commodity.

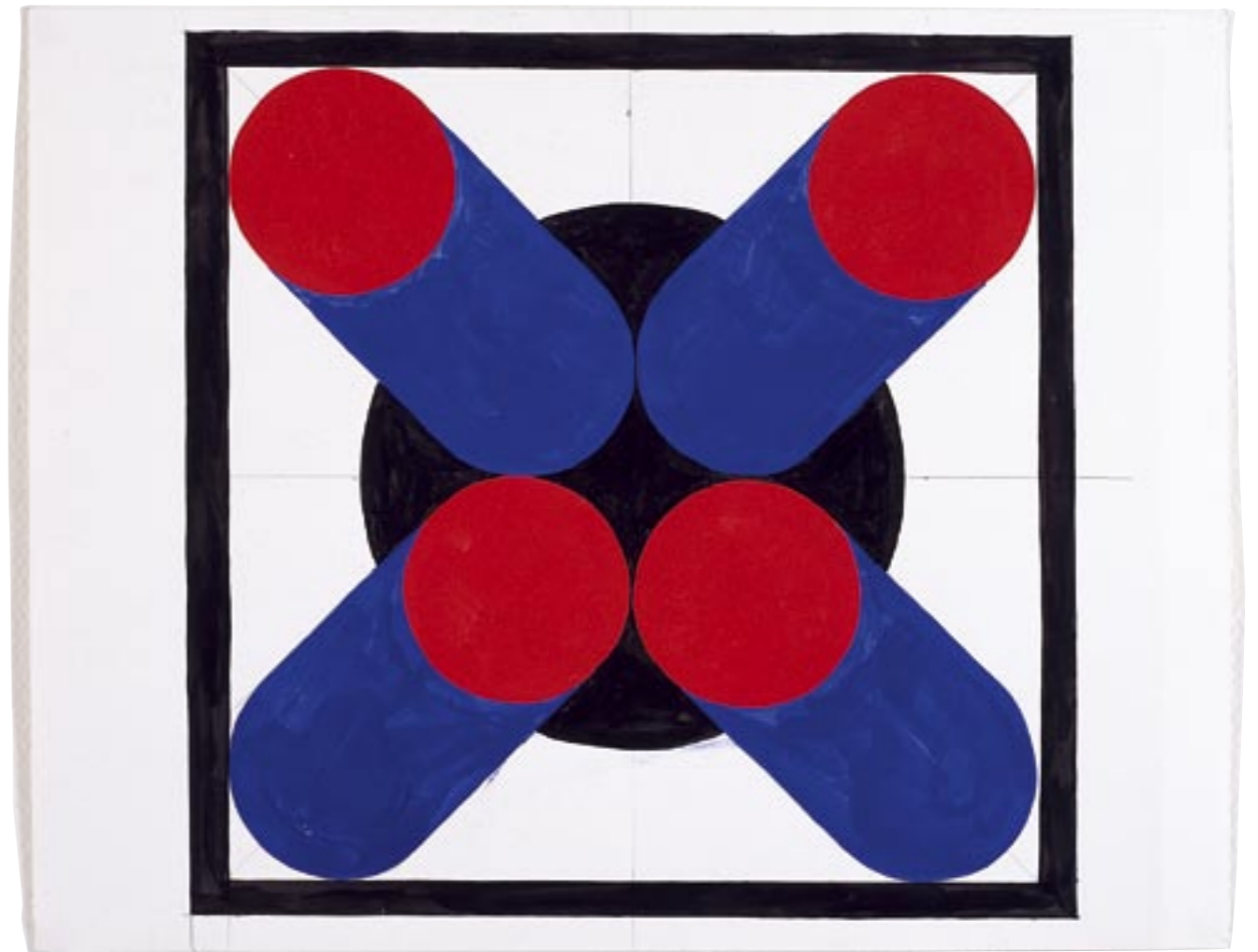
During that very same period, Mertz worked with his own solution to a way out of the crisis in Modernist painting. Even though he was deeply preoccupied with the process of dematerialisation of art as it was developed thanks to artists such as Lawrence Weiner, Daniel Buren and Joseph Kosuth, his own response could go either way rather than going one way or the other. His answer was the R+B Proposition – equally concept and painting. Although the reading of Kosuth’s *Art after Philosophy* in 1969 seemed to exclude the possibility of painting as the bearer of new artistic meanings and recognitions, Mertz continued to insist on a conceptual painting in the shape of R+B. Thus, R+B incarnates the schism between Modernist painting and Conceptual Art. Herein probably lies one

of the reasons that the proposition continued to be an ambivalent project to him. On the one hand, R+B was about erasing the Modernist slate, proposing a new set of rules that liberated it from some of the previous trademarks of painting such as expressivity, narration, colour-space et al. But at the same time the work with R+B couldn’t detach itself from being an investigation of painting as painting, its means and possibilities as a media. However, by negating colour, space and composition, these investigations also became directed outwards, towards the surrounding space, the context and the spectator. This is a movement that is related to Mertz’ intention to remove from the work its priority as object and replace it with “what the work provokes in the spectator”. This could sound like the dematerialisation of the art object in favour of the pure idea that Conceptual Art proposed, but for Mertz it was essential that idea and materiality were each other’s prerequisites and not each other’s oppositions.

PETER HOLST HENCKEL



” *I want pictures that manifest themselves almost brutally in any room, pictures that are perceived immediately, pictures that are sensed, pictures that are without content, i.e. without literature.* ”  
(AM 24.1.74)



# Biography

- Albert Mertz (1920-90)

*From his earliest youth he was at the forefront of experimental and internationally orientated art. Made his debut at the age of 13. Worked as a painter and film director before settling in France from 1963-1976. Was one of the founders of Linien II and later on part of the artist group Den Frie, where he drew attention with a number of early spatial works. From 1980-90 Professor at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, where he initiated fruitful exchanges with a number of international artists who visited the Danish Academy. In 1970 he received the lifelong grant from the Danish State. Widely represented at the National Gallery of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Holstebro Museum of Art, Nordjyllands Museum of Art and Vestsjællands Museum of Art. Albert Mertz has left behind extensive written material that has been published, a few films and an extraordinary body of work. In addition, there is an unpublished body of notes, commenced in France. These meticulously dated notebooks and diaries, numbering approximately 200, contain texts, sketches and collages, which he considered as his artistic testament.*

LONE MERTZ

## Selected Exhibitions in Denmark

- 1998 Albert Mertz and Lawrence Weiner. Installations. **Stalke, Copenhagen.**
- 1988 Dialog. Installations in collaboration with Lawrence Weiner. **Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Aalborg.**
- 1987 Giv Agt Mertz! Den Kgl. Kobberstiksamling. **The National Gallery of Fine Arts, Copenhagen.** (Catalogue)
- 1983 Kunst i Byen. The centre of Copenhagen.
- 1983 Red As Well As Green As Well As Yellow As Well As Blue. Installations in collaboration with Lawrence Weiner. **Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum, Aalborg.** (Catalogue)
- 1976 Dødsspringet. International Exhibition. **Charlottenborg, Copenhagen.** (Catalogue)
- 1966 Pejlinger, **Louisiana, Humlebæk.** (Catalogues)
- 1962 Fluxus Festival, **Nikolaj Kirke and Allé Scenen,** Copenhagen.
- 1961 Bevægelse i Kunsten, **Louisiana, Humlebæk.** (Catalogue)
- 1960 Gå ind i maleriet. Group exhibition, **Galerie Köpcke, Copenhagen.**

## Selected Exhibitions Abroad

- 1986 Copenhagen – New York Round Trip. Solo. **Greenwald Gallery, New York.**
- 1984 Process Und Konstruktion. **Internationale Kunst der Gegenwart, München.** (Catalogue)
- 1984/83 A Pierre et Marie. Un Exposition en Travaux. **Rue d`Ulm, Paris.**
- 1973/72/67 Realitee Nouvelles, **Grand Palais, Salon de Comparison, Paris.**
- 1964 Groupe Danois. **Galerie Kasper, Lausanne.**

## Selected Posthumous Exhibitions

- 2003 Albert Mertz by/with Nils Erik Gjerdevik, **Stalke Galleri, Copenhagen.**
- 2001 Albert Mertz by Jes Brinch, Søren Andreasen and Lone Mertz. (Catalogue).
- 2001 Albert Mertz and Gunnar Ørn, **Gallery Kambur, Island.**
- 1999 Four simultaneous Exhibitions: **Total Mertz, Nikolaj, Copenhagen. Doku Mertz, Kunstmuseet Køge Skitsesamling. Mertz Rum, Esbjerg Kunstmuseum** and Til Mertz, four installations by Daniel Buren, Joseph Kosuth, Les Levine and Lawrence Weiner. **Vestsjællands Kunstmuseum, Sorø,** (Catalogue)
- 1998 Come Closer. 90's Art from Scandinavia and its Predecessors. **Liechtensteinische Staatliche Kunstsammlung, Vaduz and Nikolaj, Copenhagen.** (Catalogue)
- 1997 Red + Blue. Curated by John Nixon. Denmark meets Australia, **Sidney and Asbæk, Copenhagen.** (Catalogue)
- 1991 Sao Paulo Biennale. Representing Denmark. By Vibeke Petersen and Lone Mertz. Brazil. (Catalogue)

# Images

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Innercover	<b>Photography</b> © Birgit
p 05	<b>Untitled</b> , acrylic on magazine, 29.01.87
p 06	<b>Untitled</b> , acrylic on magazine, 20.12.1986 - detail
p 09	<b>Untitled</b> , acrylic and photographs on cardboard, 07.1981 / 01.1982
p 10	<b>Elevator</b> , acrylic on magazine, 09.04.1970
p 11	<b>Arkitektur</b> , acrylic and postcards, 29.04.1970
p 13	<b>Untitled</b> , acrylic on magazine
p 14	<b>Fra udstillingsrummet</b> , acrylic and photographs on cardboard, 04.1979
p 15	<b>Untitled</b> , acrylic on magazine, 20.12.1986
p 17	<b>Untitled</b> , acrylic and photographs on cardboard, 09.1987
p 18	<b>Untitled</b> , acrylic and photographs on cardboard, 05.1989
p 20	<b>Untitled</b> , acrylic on cardboard, 19.01.1987
p 22	<b>Untitled</b> , acrylic and photographs on cardboard, 06.08.1984
p 23	<b>Ind og ud i rummet</b> , acrylic on cardboard, 09.1986
Innercover	<b>Photography</b> © Susanne Mertz

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