

Nils Erik Gjerdevik  
møder Albert Mertz



Udstilling på Stalke Galleri  
31. januar - 7. marts 2003

# MERTZ AND GJERDEVIK - ON THE ROAD AGAIN

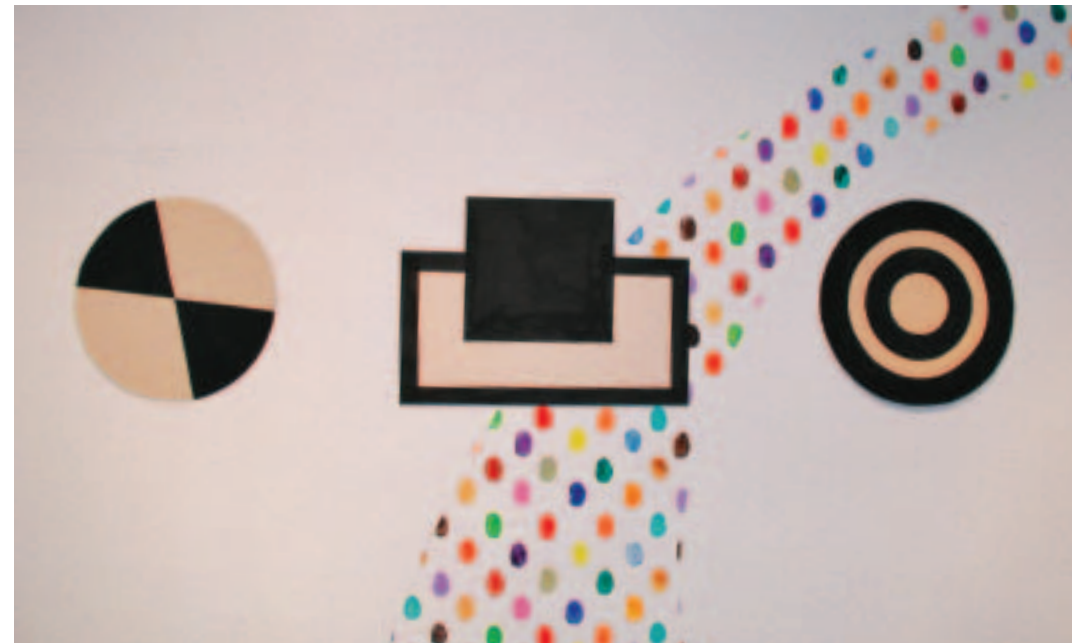
## Scenario 1

Imagine Danish post-war art as a two-lane highway. One lane is formalistic and packed with cars driving towards the specific qualities of the medium whether it is the flat surface of the canvas or the spatiality of the sculptural object. In the other lane the directions of the cars are more expressionistic as they head for the psychological nature of the modern individual. In this generalization and art historical piece of fiction further try to imagine a little car, maybe blue and red, driving in-between the two lanes. Sometimes even in the ruff on the outside of the lanes. Crossing back and forth. The driver is Albert Mertz and in the car with him is Norwegian born Nils Erik Gjerdevik. Gjerdevik's multi-colored is parked a little fur-

ther up the road. He likes to take these rides with Mertz. Together the two of them/they look at and talk about the cars of Danish art they pass on their way. Sometimes Gjerdevik thinks of it like being in a movie or flying in a satellite high above the events, but still being able to focus on even the most negligible details by using the high-mentality equipment that comes as standard in Mertz's car. The Mertz-mobile. And although Mertz often breaks the traffic laws with his reckless slalom driving, Gjerdevik sits confidently in his co-driver seat thinking that this is a fun way to avoid the heavy traffic in the two main lanes.



Crossing back and forth





## somewhat of an outlaw

Within the Danish art world there is a tendency to elevate conventional rules and established schools to a virtue. Albert Mertz never accepted this mentality. Although he participated in various activities of his time, worked at the literary periodicals *Helhesten* and *Hvedekorn*, co-funded the artists association *Linien 2*, exhibited as a member of another, the long-established *Den Frie Udstilling*, was professor at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen for many years and certainly acknowledged the influence of the country's art history on his work he always deliberately placed himself in the position of the outsider who never followed expectations. When abstract painting and the avant-

garde spirit of Fluxus were in vogue among his contemporaries he turned to an American inspired cool conceptualism characterized by his anti-coloristic use of red and blue. He substituted the formalistic idealism of the canvas and the expressionistic pathos of the psyche with the powerful openness and subtle politics of the reflective mind. This allowed Mertz to maneuver freely and kept him at a healthy distance of the mainstream maelstrom as well as from any kind of aesthetic dogmatism or conformity. Throughout his career he worked in a variety of media and styles, not with the intention to produce different kinds of works, but to initiate a nuanced and extensive discussion of art as a

privileged way of thinking and being. Mertz' view was that of the engaged outsider enriching the discussion by humorous gestures, generous experiments, luminous insights, innovative ideas and cool investigations. In total a comprehensive approach whereby he expanded the field of Danish art.

Nils Erik Gjerdevik also thinks of himself as somewhat of an outlaw within the context of Danish art. Contrary to many of his contemporaries he did not attend the Royal Academy in Copenhagen. In the mid 80s he traveled to the then communist Prague, spent a year there, then in the late 80s moved to Düsseldorf and later on to Berlin, which had just experien-



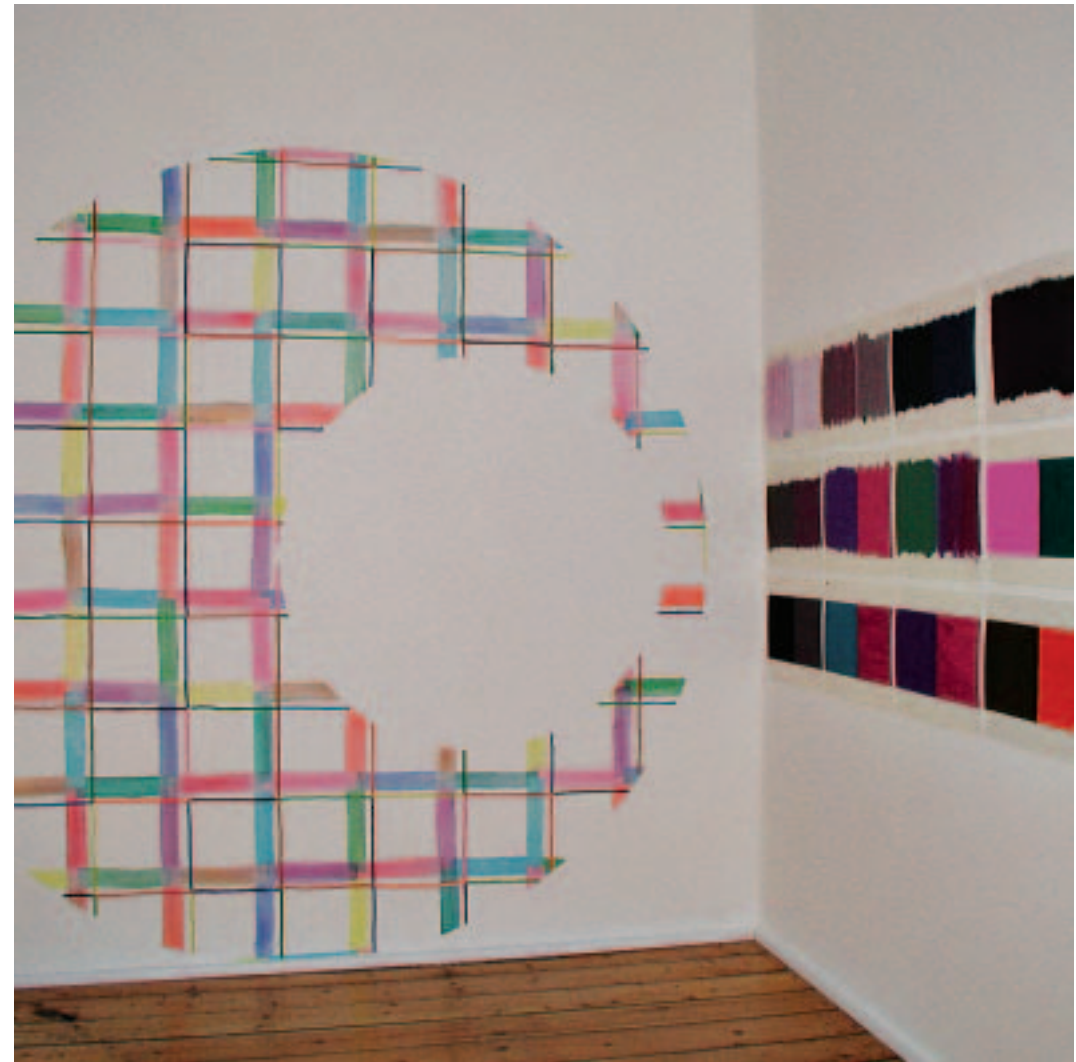
ced the fall of the wall. This biographical and professional course of events made it only natural for Gjerdevik to identify with and be fascinated by Mertz' position despite the obvious differences between their art. To emphasize this relationship the largest part of the works, dating from the 1970s and 1980s, which Gjerdevik has selected for this installation at Stalke Gallery are not "typical" of Mertz, meaning that not all of them are red and blue. Only a few of the works have been shown in public before, but years back Gjerdevik saw some of the small almost clumsily made canvas

works and the graphic and double-colored paper works, which trickily comments on Mertz' preoccupation with red and blue and the coloristic interest of modern painting. He found them so peculiar, that when Lone Mertz, Mertz' wife and the administrator of his estate, showed him a whole bunch of them Gjerdevik immediately knew that these works were going to form the core of his installation. Thus the installation with its fragmented form is conceived as being congenial with Mertz' own strategy of focusing on the periphery and emphasizing the detail to make essential remarks.

▶ focusing on the periphery



▶ the atmosphere in the living room is lively



## Scenario 2

For real. On the walls of Gjerdevik's living room hangs what seems like hundreds of art works. Photos next to paintings next to drawings next to more paintings are forming a mesmerizing tapestry. Only in small spots are the walls themselves visible. It is a view that would probably knock a modernist museum curator unconscious if not make him run away screaming about lack of discipline and disrespect of the works. Gjerdevik does not run away, nor does he scream. He smiles, because he lives there. Contrary to the politics of most museums and galleries Gjerdevik regards hanging as a kind of composition in its own right. But not in a formalistic sense, he adds. The composition of a hanging is to be

▶ a mesmerizing tapestry

made without unnecessary complications and without trying to make a specific point out of it. In his living room he has hung them, causally and with respect for the works' integrity, of course, but also with a great deal of personal intuition and experimentation. If a new work enters the collection he might rearrange. Gjerdevik also quotes Mertz for saying that art works die if no one looks at them and that they grow when hanging in spaces and places where people live their everyday lives. Does that make him a kind of a rescuer in the field of art? Surely the atmosphere in the living room is lively.

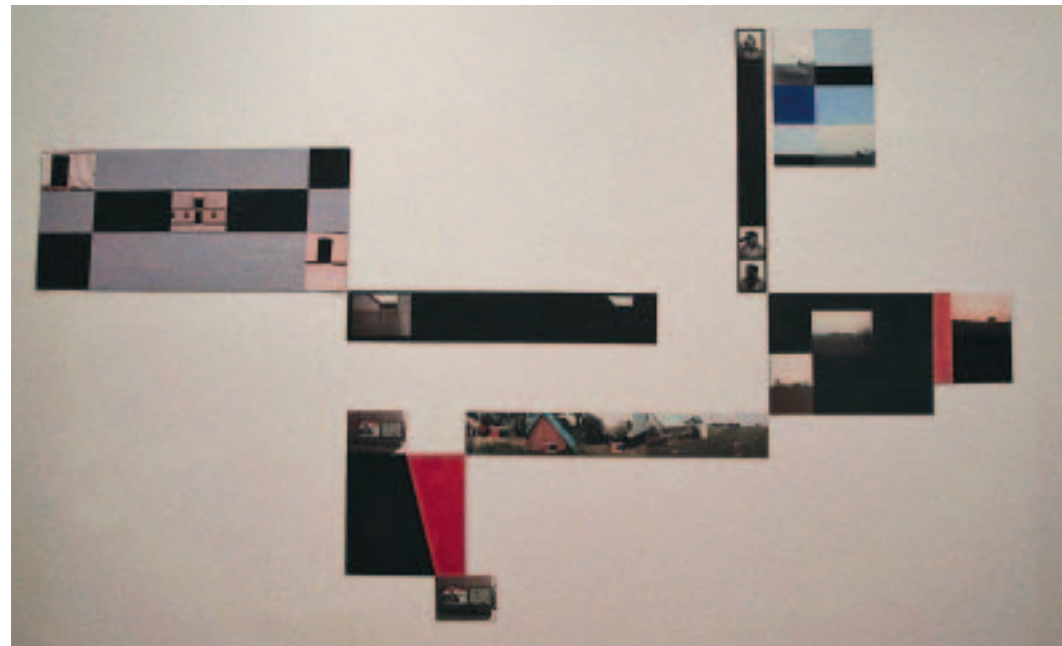


An important point of departure for Gjerdevik's installation of Mertz' works is the idea of the autonomous yet mobile work that can be exhibited in different ways and placed in different contexts without losing its integrity. Thus his three circular wall paintings do not take on the character of independent works nor do they intend to stage an enclosed totality. Rather they are formal considerations of how to expose a work such as Mertz'. With their multi-colored patterns they create a turbulent background that disrupts the peaceful neutrality of the white wall. Gjerdevik balances their visual effect and instead of grasping all the attention they activate a focus on Mertz' works as visual refuges. Mertz'

works become places for the eye to relax and allow the mind to concentrate in a meditative Zen Buddhist sense, which is a spiritual way of thinking that Mertz himself practiced in the later part of his life. Furthermore Gjerdevik's juxtaposition of Mertz' subtle conceptual statements with his own hand made geometric abstractions dismantles the modernist ideology of the wall and accentuates the material quality of the works. As such the installation does not pretend to make a particular original point. In a sympathetic spirit it simply reframes and presents the concrete yet philosophical and imaginative reality of Mertz' art.



reframes and presents the concrete yet philosophical and imaginative reality of Mertz' art





“You are beginning to get nowhere”

## Scenario 3

Back in the car. Mertz and Gjerdevik have pulled out a map from the glove compartment. This map is not what one would call a regular map. On the front cover it says “1:1” yet the map itself is completely blank. It gives no directions and shows no roads. It is just this blank piece of paper. Folded what seems to be an infinite number of times. Nevertheless the excitement inside the car rises and with the map covering the entire front window Mertz and Gjerdevik set off again. “You are beginning to get nowhere,” a former user of the map has inscribed in one of the corners on the back.



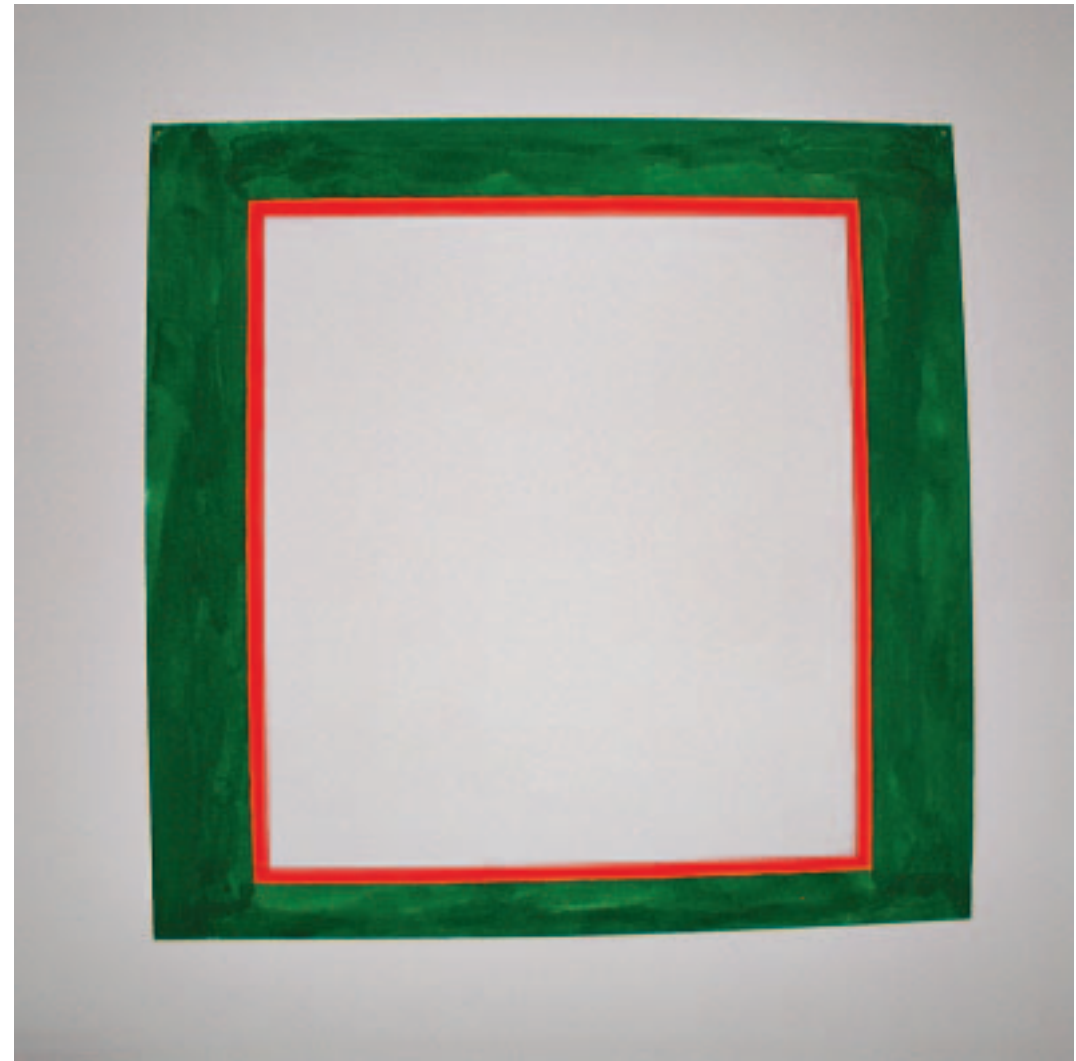


a borderline tension and a concentration of energy

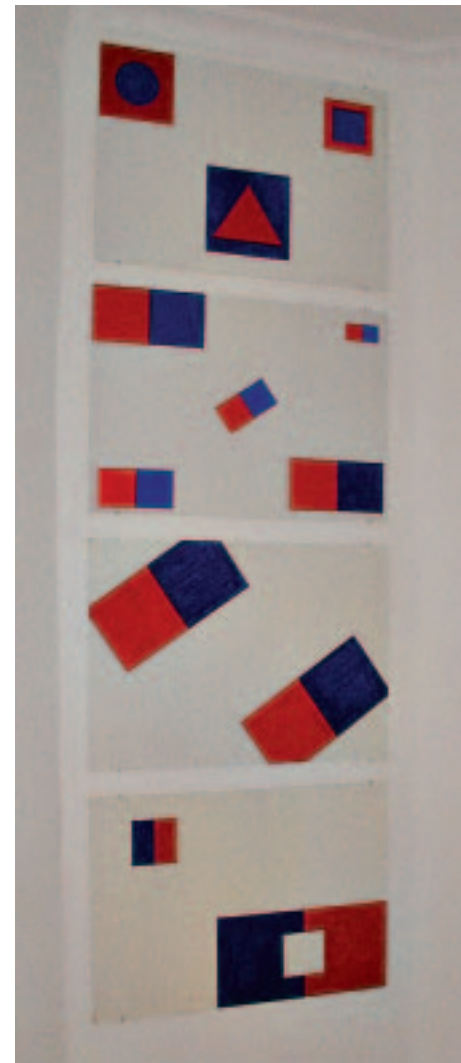
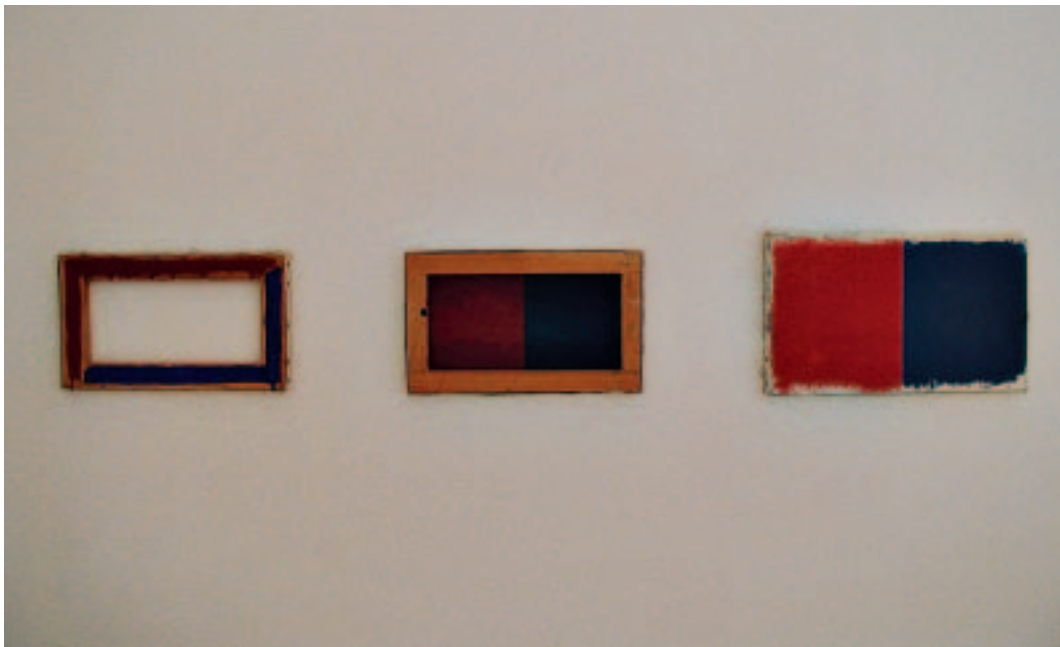
Gjerdevik's installation connects the mobility of Mertz' works as objects with a strong sense of visual movement. The common figure of his three wall paintings is a repetition of a figure inspired by one of Mertz' black and white paper works in which a circle is spinning within another bigger circle. This figure creates a centripetal movement, which seems to spread the series of Mertz' works onto the walls. The series themselves on the other hand create a rhythmic almost syntactical movement. This movement is especially

obvious in the series of seven red/blue canvases in which Mertz advances with a dumb, combinatorial logic. As a dynamic unity these two visual movements anticipates a virtual space that exceeds the measurable sizes of the canvases and physical surroundings of the gallery space. This space is marked by Gjerdevik's use of various grid like structures to fill out his figures as well as in his hanging of Mertz' color sketches. By "encircling" the grid and leaving the center of the inner circle unpainted his figures furthermore playfully

frame a kind of void just like Mertz' emblematic paper work Red/Green Frame from 1987. For both Gjerdevik and Mertz the framing of this void creates a borderline tension and a concentration of energy. At the same time it characterizes a fundamental condition of art: Art cannot depict the void, but only frame it. Yet by this framing art can create an at the same time conceptual and visual access to the void, the fascinating inscrutability of being.



▶ signs of honesty



## Scenario 4

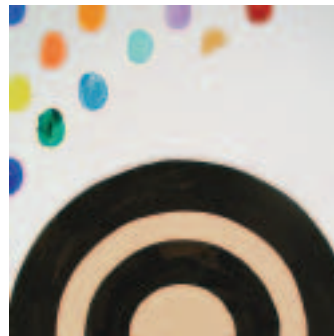
▶ this act certainly involves failure

"Try again. Fail again. Fail better." These precise and humorous words, first spoken by Samuel Beckett, could be the title of a stage play written by Mertz or Gjerdevik. Or a stage play in which Mertz and Gjerdevik play the leading characters. The two of them would be on stage making works of art or working artistically in an act of continuous experimentation with a variety of colors and shapes and figures. The act certainly involves running the risk of failure and embarrassing themselves in front of the audience. But Mertz and Gjerdevik do not mind the risk. Not at all. Actually it makes them laugh at times. Furthermore they know that they have to face the risk and deal with it to keep on working. As

such they have no interest in creating the definitive work to end their endeavors and evoke the applause of the audience. Because if their works do not contain failures or call them deliberate inaccuracies, open ends, signs of honesty, they simply do not work anymore. The potential for spiritual reflection and aesthetic questioning disappears, for the two artists as well as for the viewers. Mertz and Gjerdevik do not want that to happen. No way. They fight for their right to fail. Again and again. On stage. In their works.

**Jacob Lillemose, 2003**





## Nils Erik Gjerdevik møder Albert Mertz

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