

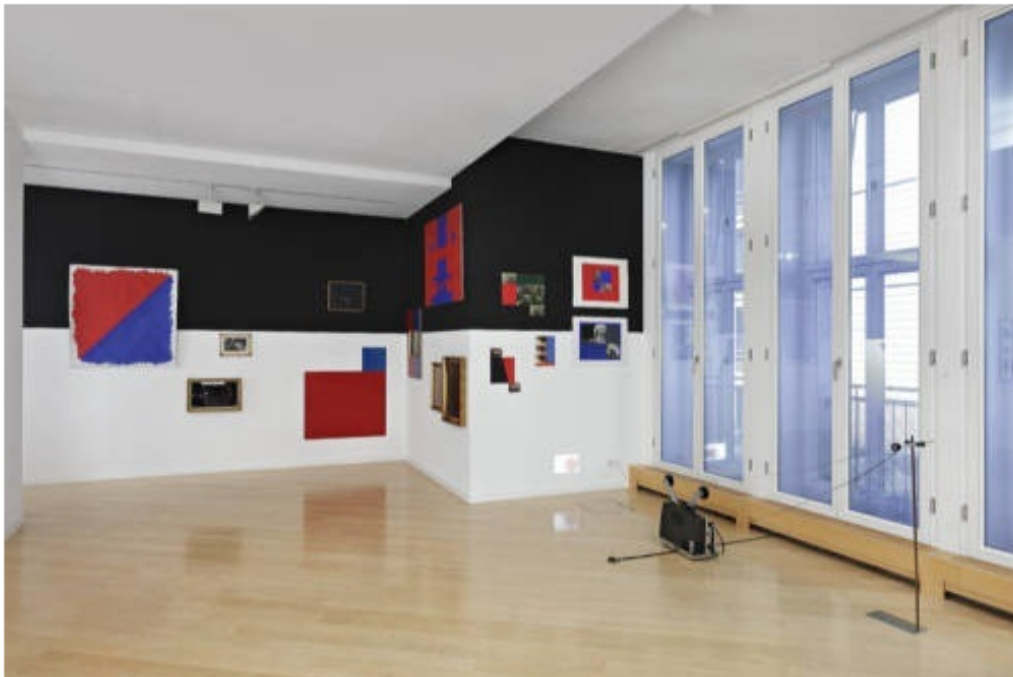
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Konzept Kunst
by Erik Wenzel

The collection of the Daimler Corporation focuses on “abstract and geometrical pictorial concepts, from which it derives its distinctive character,” which is an excellent starting point for conceptual approaches to art making. It seems like Sol LeWitt is becoming lionized as the unchallenged father of the conceptual art, his practice bridges the pictorial and the sculptural and provides a through-road from Minimalism to hardcore “conceptual art” as it were. And while luminaries of the tradition such as LeWitt, Robert Barry and Joseph Kosuth are present in *Conceptual Tendencies 1960s to today*, as the title suggests, this exhibition looks at conceptual approaches to contemporary art making rather than strictly conceptual art.

A “conceptual” approach toward art making has been around about as long as conceptual art has. European contemporaries of the American conceptualists are also well represented in the show. In particular Daniel Buren and Olivier Mosset, who along with Michel Parmentier and Neile Toroni punched painting to the ropes and nearly knocked it out cold in 1960s Paris. Like a wounded creature kept alive in captivity, the members of “BMPT” have carried out this endgame on their own for the last several decades. Here Buren’s trademark vertical stripes are represented in the playful *A Dance With A Square* (1989) where framed panes of glass arranged in a quirky circle piece together sections of a patterned square. I much prefer Olivier Mosset’s untitled painting of 1974, one of his circle paintings, which consist basically of a white square canvas with a small black circle painted in the center. I know it’s stupid, but it is brilliant in its hardheaded and unflagging repetition. In the exhibition I initially misread the wall label as saying, “Olivier Mosset exhibited his first Circle pictures in 1966, of which there were 200 identical works by 1974. There is no need for any further anecdotes in regards to the Circle pictures.” That’s all it should have said.

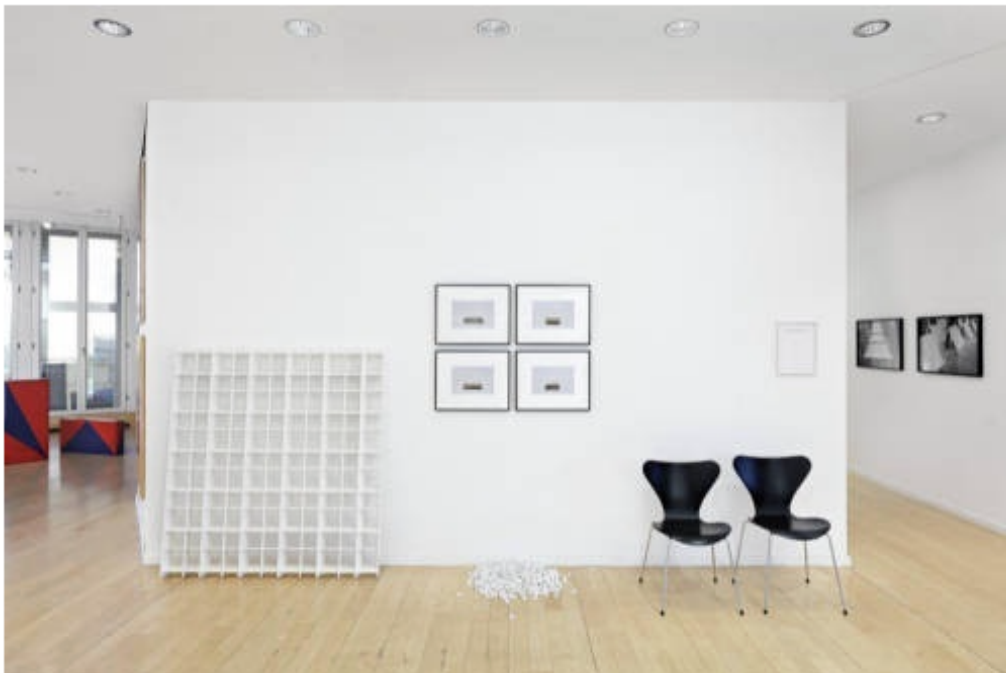


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This exhibition introduced me to a contemporary of LeWitt's, the Danish artist Albert Mertz (1920 – 1990), who worked for a period in Paris but primarily in Copenhagen. The works in the Daimler collection span Mertz's career, from his early work engaging Dada and Surrealism (with quite compelling results) through to abstract formalism that resembles Russian Constructivism. Unlike most concept-driven art, Mertz's exudes passion, frustration and commitment. Buren and Mosset are cool. Sol LeWitt is cool and certainly the younger generations are way too cool, but Mertz is hot. Even after arriving at his dialectic color palette of red and blue, his exercises have a certain vibrant energy not seen even in Ellsworth Kelly paintings. These deliberately rough works, meant to emphasize their "non-intact" nature and point the viewer toward the thoughts behind them nevertheless make for some of the most compelling art objects in the show. In particular the group of small untitled studies from the 80s where Mertz combined serial photographs of Marlboro billboards, flower arrangements and circus tents taken with a point-and-shoot camera and collaged them onto geometric cardboard cut-out supports painted red and blue or red and black.

It appears that conceptual art as a guiding tendency is running out of un-opened doors. Just look at Jonathon Monk born at the time conceptual art was coming the fore, whose work basically amounts to a Sol LeWitt fan art. An artist of a younger generation and who shows the most promise of where conceptual art's legacy still has room is Lasse Schmidt Hansen. He marries a stringent attention to language and specifications with personal shortcomings and everyday life resulting in work that is as conceptual and dry as any Joseph Kosuth, but also quite funny. For example Schmidt Hansen presents four photographs of a pile of unpaid bills, unopened letters and other paper documents collected from his desk and neatly stacked on a white backdrop. The piece's title is the following dead pan description, *Piled up stuff photographed from the front, back, right and left, but not necessarily in that order* (2007).



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Often Schmidt Hansen's work dances in that space between specified norms and corporeal reality. This often is in relation to and minute deviations from DIN (German Industry Norms) and ISO (International Organization for Standardization) measurements. Perhaps a bit nerdy, but no less funny is the piece *Whatever, whatever* (2006) since everyone in the art world either seems to know for sure or is perpetually asking. Printed on a sheet of paper and signed "sincerely, [blank]" is the answer: "Further to your inquiry of today, I regret that we have been unable to identify any ISO standard referencing a recommended eye level measurement for an exhibition."

Offering the best icon for the show and its place in the collection are two attractive but unremarkable chairs placed side by side, one slightly smaller than the other. Schmidt Hansen's *3107/3107* (2008). In fact, they are both certified copies, licensed like generic drugs, of Arne Jacobson's Series 7 chair. While they are both pretty much the same chair, they are both a little different. And since they are both official copies, they are more or less OK. They also slip effortlessly into vernacular. These chairs might as well have come from a conference room somewhere on the premises. They seem just like the sort of reasonably priced smart design with a broad appeal a corporation like Daimler would provide for its employees and clients.

~[Erik Wenzel](#) a writer living in Berlin.