

TIF SIGFRIDS

ARTFORUM

Albert Mertz

AUTHOR: LARS BANG LARSEN

In contradiction to its title, "*Duer ikke . . . Næstel!*" (No Good . . . Next!), this exhibition of works from the estate of Albert Mertz (1920–1990) stands out as the local show of the year. It was all there, or seemed to be: Respecting Mertz's regard for process over the individual object, the curators—art historian Karin Hindsbo (the director of the nonprofit Den Frie Udstillingsbygning) and artist Jørgen Michaelsen—defied curatorial polish with a Dadaist hanging of collages, paintings, and objects that spread anarchically through the gallery and included notebooks as well as films and sound works. Even if not presented as a retrospective, the show had the authority of a museum exhibition, revealing the essence of Mertz's practice.

Mertz's point of departure was pictorial, and he arrived at a provocatively simple form of expression: concrete painting with an edgy trashiness, embodied in poor materials such as unprimed canvas, cardboard, and Masonite. Inspired by Conceptual art, he synthesized pictorial relations by boiling them down to two colors, red and blue, a trademark throughout most of his career. He saw this "red/blue proposition," which he formulated in 1968, as a recognizable constant imbued with the regularity of flags and street signs, but also incidental, a pure difference. As his handwritten notes, exhibited in glass cases, explain: "This blue can be light or dark, but it stays blue. It does not signify or express anything, it is only blue. It stands next to a red square but is still blue. It is not more valuable than the red, the yellow, the white. They are different, that's all. What it becomes together with the red is what you make it. . . . They will always be unbalanced and will never be in harmony. Both are colors, but different ones, and even if the difference is the same it is a difference."

This dualism has as much to do with the relation of object and image, art and life practice, as it does with color. Mertz invested his desire for pictorial reduction with a kind of tough playfulness toward art's preconditions, an approach that was in the same modernist family as the investigations of Ad Reinhardt and later artists such as Lawrence Weiner, with whom he maintained a close working relationship. Whereas abstraction had its philosophies of purity, he often played the fool by using comy, Fluxus-like moves to grind up the categories into an unholy mess. In contrast to more territorial approaches to Conceptualism, he blew stylistic coherence out of the water and embraced the everyday by making a point of encompassing pop-cultural and folksy imagery.

Mertz was the first Danish artist to work with film—he did so as early as the '40s. This aspect was represented in the exhibition by the experimental film *So ein Ding muss ich auch haben* (I Want Such a Thing Too), 1961, featuring a (very) free-jazz sound track by Asger Jorn and Jean Dubuffet. A welcome postscript to the exhibition will be a book with the great experimentalist's notes and writings, edited by Michaelsen and the art critic Cecilie Høgsbro, which is scheduled to appear later this year.

—Lars Bang Larsen