

Clear Form

*Cutting Edges:
Nordic Concrete Art from the Erling Neby Collection*
opens at Scandinavia House this fall.

By Karin Hellandsjø

THIS FALL, SCANDINAVIA HOUSE will present an exhibition of paintings, drawings and sculpture never before seen in the United States. Joined under the term “Concrete Art,” the works from all five Nordic countries span more than 70 years. All are from the internationally known collection of Norway’s Erling Neby.

But what is concrete art? The term “concrete art” was first used in 1929, launched by the Dutch artists Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian. It was devised to avoid the ambiguity inherent in the word “abstract,” and was intended to emphasize the fact that forms and colors were already “concrete realities” in themselves, not needing to refer to anything outside a specific work of art. Over the years, internationally recognized artists such as Victor Vasarely, Frank Stella and Josef Albers became prominent exponents.

Concrete art is characterized by combinations of simple geometric elements to create autonomous visual realities. When it was conceived, it formed a new concept of image, a new image world. Over the years, various other names have been used for this form of expression, including constructivism, neo-plasticism, and non-figurative and geometric abstract art. Bauhaus, De Stijl and hard-edge painting are other key terms. Of course, these expressions are not all synonymous. The works in *Cutting Edges* may also belong to various schools among these, but are all considered to be examples of concrete art.

The concrete art of the late 1920s went “underground” when confronted with the nationalist and reactionary onslaught of the 1930s. It was revived after World War II, stronger than ever before, by a new generation of artists building on the principles of its origin. Both before and after the war and

continuing up until today, concrete art has had a stronghold throughout Scandinavia. Extensive international travel by artists from the Nordic regions during the post-war period enabled them to establish contacts with key contemporary figures first in Berlin and then Paris. Eventually the Nordic artists also helped to shape the flow of events. In return, international exhibitions of concrete art also traveled to the Nordic capitals, such as in *Klar Form* (Clear Form) in 1952 and *Konkret Realisme* (Concrete Realism) in 1956.

A dedication to concrete art united the Nordic artists in many ways, and throughout the years there have been many joint efforts to focus on this shared aesthetic through various group exhibitions, such as *Nordic Concrete*



Paul Osipow, b. 1939 Kymi, Finland (currently in Helsinki).
Katherine, 1988-89. Acrylic on canvas, 210 x 170 cm.

Art 1907-1960, organized by the Nordic Arts Centre in Helsinki in 1988, which traveled to all the Nordic countries. Since the 1990s, various selections from the Erling Neby Collection have been exhibited in the Nordic countries and beyond.

A unique collection focusing on concrete art, mostly by Nordic artists, but also including works by important European, American and international artists working in the same genre, the Erling Neby Collection is small, concentrated and characterized by a deep personal engagement on the part of the collector. His resources are limited, but during the almost 50 years since he started, he has created a collection of outstanding quality and character. All the acquisitions are made by Neby. Apart from its strength in Nordic art, the collection includes key figures in concrete European art such as Auguste

Herbin, Jean Dewasne, Alberto Magnelli and Victor Vasarely, alongside American concrete artists like John McLaughlin, Ludwig Sander, Leon Polk Smith and Burgoyne Diller.

Cutting Edges will include works by artists from all the Nordic countries, with Olle Bærtling, Lars Erik Falk and Lars Englund from Sweden; Richard Mortensen and Robert Jacobsen from Denmark; Kristjan Gudmundsson from Iceland, Paul Brand, Gunnar S. Gundersen, Herman Hebler, Arne Malmedal, Kristin Nordhøy, Aase Texmon Rygh, Bjørn Ransve from Norway; and Juhana Blomstedt, Birger Carlstedt, Lars Gunnar Nordstrøm, Sam Vanni, Paul Osipow and Matti Kujasalo from Finland. It is a unique selection that allows us to focus on the distinctive qualities of Nordic concrete art for an American audience unfamiliar with these artists.



Auguste Herbin, 1882-1960, Quiévy, France.
Blanc, 1947. Oil on canvas, 92 x 65 cm.



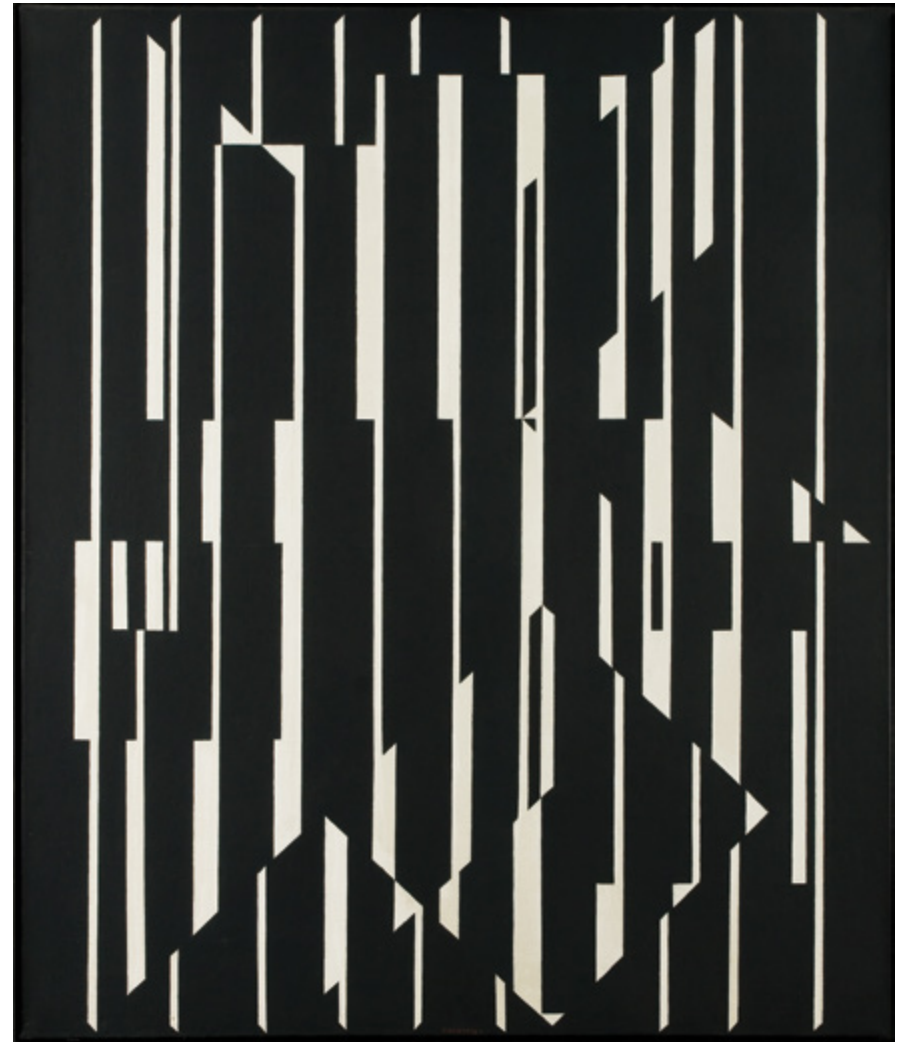
Richard Mortensen, 1910-1993, Copenhagen, Denmark.
Cuer de Carré, 1977. Oil on canvas, 240 x 196 cm.

Erling Neby

In conversation with curator Karin Hellandsjø

Karin Hellandsjø: In an interview in 2000 with Ina Prinz, director of the Arithmeum in Bonn, Germany, you said that you had started collecting concrete art by accident, starting in the early 1970s on a business trip to Paris when you came across the Galerie Denise René. Enchanted by what you saw there, you ended up buying several prints. So you could say your passion for collecting art started right then and there. You said you became completely entranced by this art form and wanted to discover everything possible about it. You read all the books you could get hold of and became very involved, which you still are. Since then you have built up a substantial and extraordinary collection of concrete art in paintings, sculpture and graphics, by both Nordic and international artists, a collection that has been exhibited in many places in Europe since the early 1990s. Many of the European artists represented in your collection were vital to the various abstract art movements in Paris in the 1940s and 1950s. Victor Vasarely is one of these key figures, and as with many of the other artists in your collection, you met him and made his acquaintance.

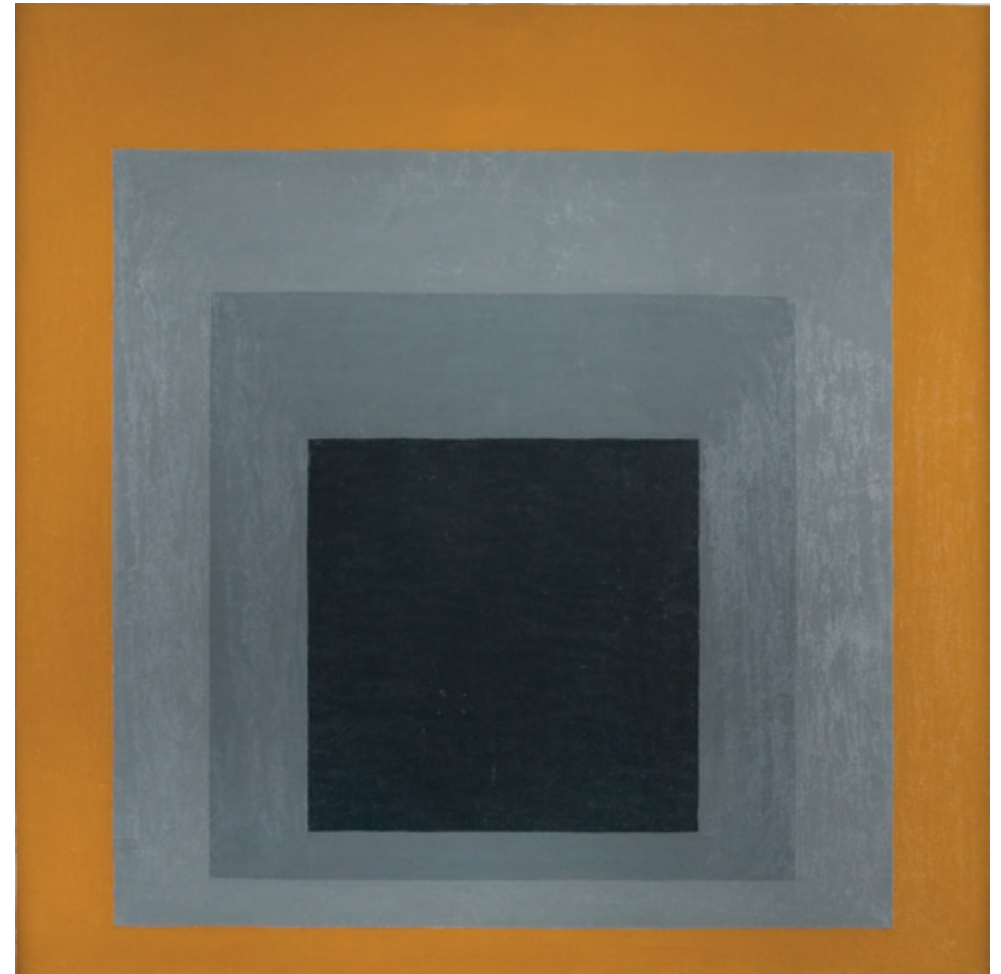
Erling Neby: *Yes, to me Vasarely, not Bridget Riley, was the father of op art, and he is also the forerunner of digital art. The outstanding production of his early period has always fascinated me. In the retrospective exhibition at Centre Pompidou in Paris earlier this year, five of the 55 paintings on show were from my collection, which made me rather proud. When Vasarely saw the catalogue from one of the exhibitions of my collection in the early 1990s, he wrote to me and asked me to come and visit him, which I did a couple of times.*



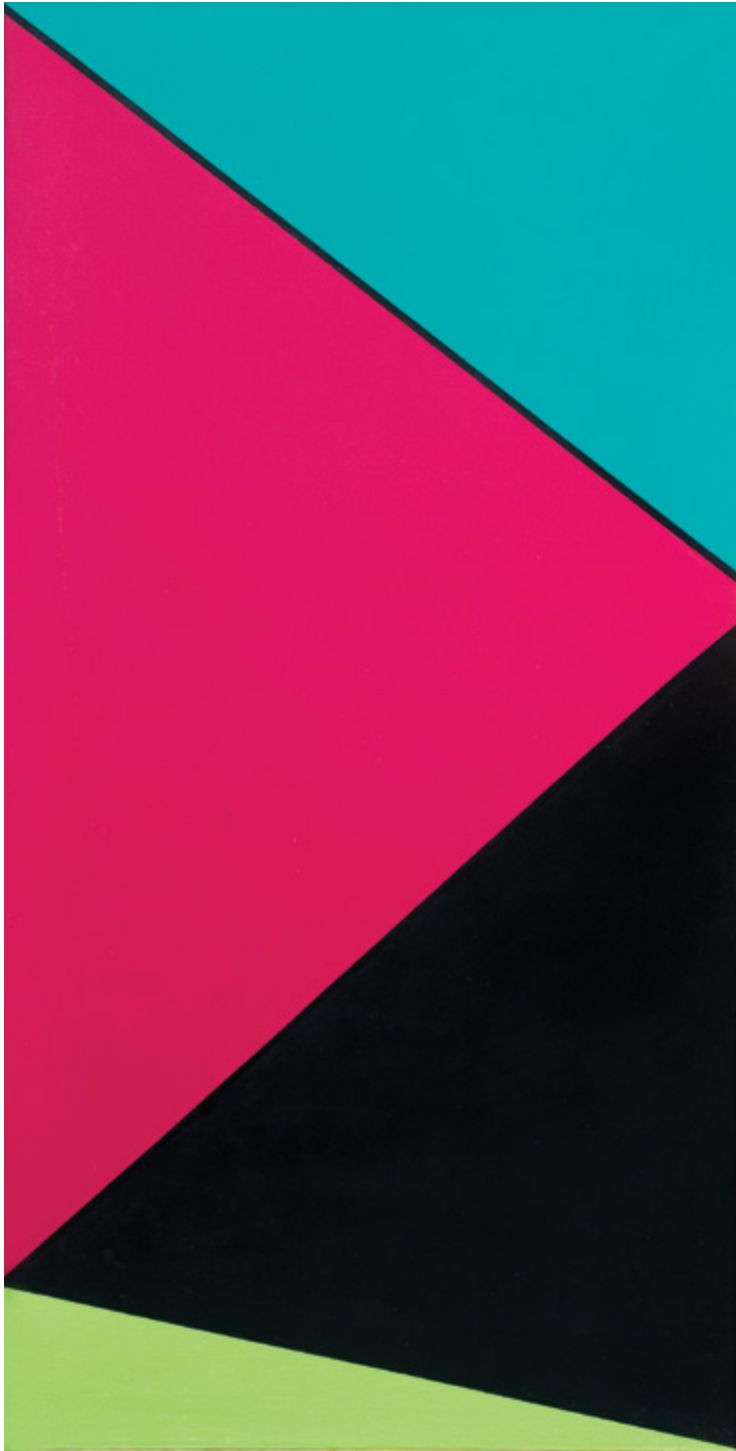
Victor Vasarely, 1906-1997, Pécs, Hungary.
Altair Nug, 1955-60. Oil on canvas, 120 x 110 cm.

KH: After the initial concentration on the geometric elements of a picture, color became important in the further development of concrete art in the 1940s. An important year in this connection is 1950, when Josef Albers started to work on his “Homage to the Square,” on the reciprocal influences of colors. You own several works in this series, pictures that constitute a central feature in your collection.

EN: *Yes, I am the lucky owner of four of his “Homages to the Square”, one bought in Paris, the others in the U.S. Great works, especially if you have two or more of them together. The technique is oil on Masonite and he did not use a brush, but a knife putting on the oil. These various techniques have always fascinated me.*



Josef Albers, 1888-1976, Bottrop, Germany.
Homage to the Square "Grisaille on Ground", 1961.
Oil on Masonite, 101.5 x 101.5 cm.



Olle Bærtling, 1911-1981, Halmstad, Sweden.
Reba, 1965. Oil on canvas, 180 x 92 cm.

KH: In the exhibition *Cutting Edges* we have focused on the Nordic part of your collection. Olle Bærtling is one of the key figures, represented by both paintings and sculpture.

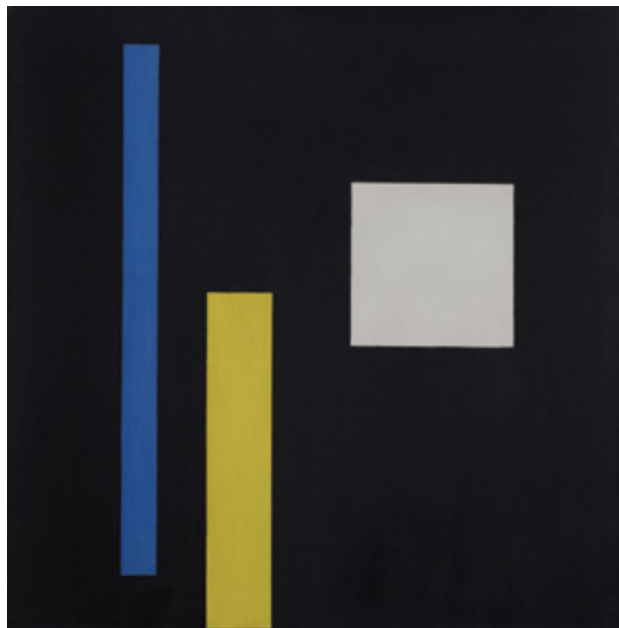
EN: *I bought my first painting by Bærtling in Oslo, whereupon I contacted him and we met many times, discussing art. He had a clear mind when it came to articulating his views on art and the movement called Concrete art. For him art had always been abstract motion, he said. "Everything is motion, everything moves. There is no fixed point in the universe. But, whereas such motion is physical, abstract motion is in tune with human thought."*



Herman Hebler, 1911-2007, Fredriktad, Norway.
Rotasjon, ca.1970. Acrylic on canvas, 105 x 105 cm.

KH: According to you, the lines are the dynamic force of these pictures.

EN: *Definitely. I have never seen any of them have completely straight lines. They are all slightly curved. The canvases always measure 130 cm x 81 cm, or 180 cm x 92 cm, 195 cm x 97 cm, and he never used a ruler for these black lines—he painted everything freehand. I have spent considerable work time in Finland throughout the years and come to know the art scene rather well. Paul Osipow is a fascinating artist, very knowledgeable, who has also become a good friend. I guess it is the works from the early 1980s that interest me the most. Lars Gunnar Nordström is another brilliant Finnish artist. Like Jean Dewasne he wanted the brushstrokes to be hidden, creating a surface almost like enamel. His compositions are harmonious and intriguing. Also his sculptures, of which I have one in my garden at home.*



Burgoyne Diller, 1906-1965, New York.
First Theme No.45, 1962. Oil on canvas, 106.7 x 106.7 cm.



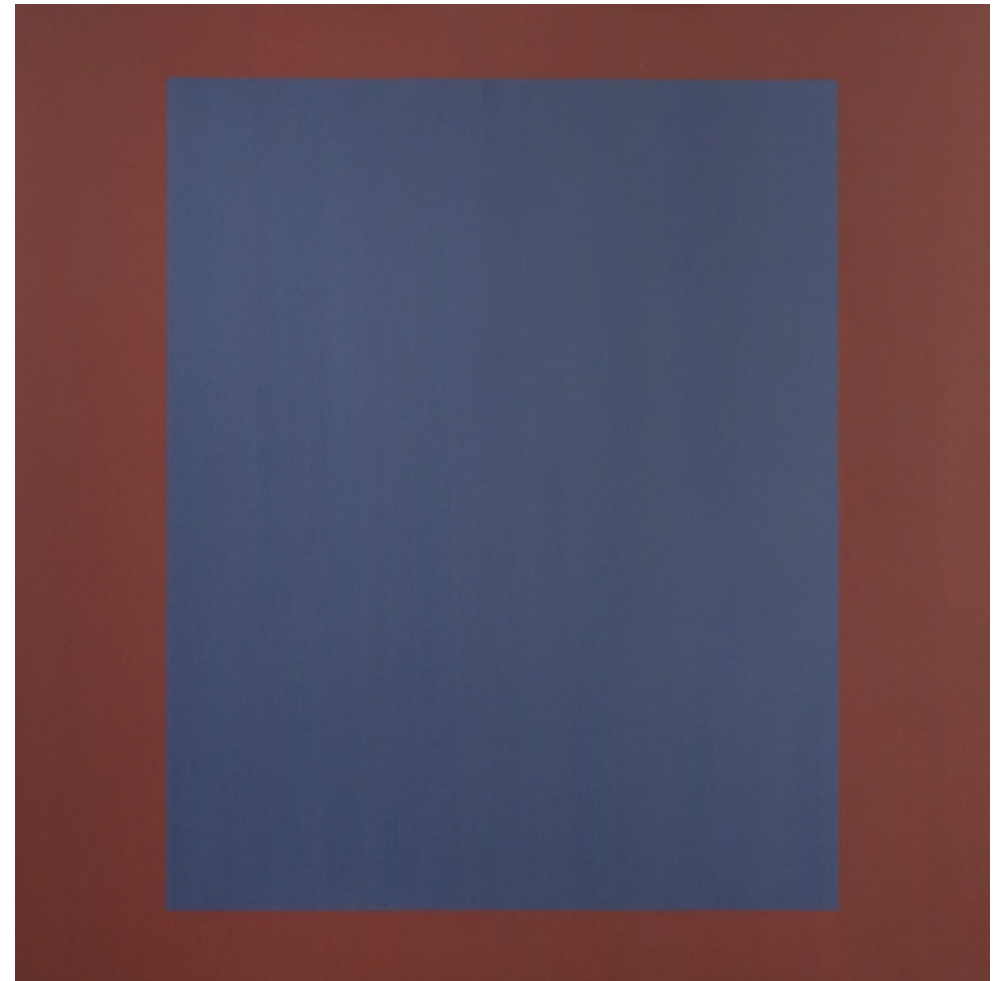
Lars G. Nordström, 1924-2014, Helsinki, Finland.
Composition, 1954. Oil on board, 120 x 60 cm.

KH: The Danish artist Richard Mortensen is represented in the show with a major work from the late 1970s. Of the Norwegian artists in your collection we have included some of the past generation, some still active. Arne Malmedal is often characterized as an artist's artist. Is it his use of color that fascinates you?

EN: *It fascinates me how the colors in his paintings change during the course of the day. When I come downstairs in the morning, they are different every day. His paintings are very personal in a way, radiating energy. Bjørn Ransve is an artist switching between the figurative, often working in the monumental format. He is also a very good graphic artist, with works that I value a lot.*



Bjørn Ransve, b. 1944, Oslo, Norway (currently in Asker, Norway).
4 Black Forms, 1991. Oil on canvas, 210 x 230 cm.



Arne Malmedal, 1937-2018, Bolsø, Norway.
Untitled, 2009. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 155 x 155 cm.



Aase Texmon Rygh, 1925-2019, Troms, Norway (currently in Oslo, Norway).
Volta, 1975. Bronze, h. 40.7 cm.

KH: Talking about graphics, you yourself have helped many of these artists by publishing graphic portfolios of their work. Examples are Arne Malmedal, Bjørn Ransve, Paul Osipow and others. Through this you have played an active and supportive role in the art scene, not only through your acquisitions. Important also is your support and acquisitions of female artists such as Aase Texmon Rygh. And you tell me that your latest acquisitions have been works by Carmen Herrera and Kristin Nordhøy, two women from two generations. Your collection is still growing, still focusing on abstract and concrete art. What do these works tell us today?

EN: *Changes in taste and fashion trends keep coming up from time to time, but I believe there will always be a Mondrian and always be the Bauhaus.*

Karin Hellandsjø is a former director of the Henie Onstad Art Centre outside Oslo and is now working as an independent scholar. Previous exhibitions she has curated for Scandinavia House include *Norge: Contemporary Landscapes from the Collection of Her Majesty Queen Sonja of Norway* in 2005 and *Light Lines: The Art of Inger Jobanne Grytting, Jan Groth and Thomas Pibl* in 2018. *Cutting Edges* will travel back to Norway, to KODE Art Museum and Composer Homes, Bergen, Norway, to be on view during the spring and summer of 2020.