



Danish Extra Light, 1990

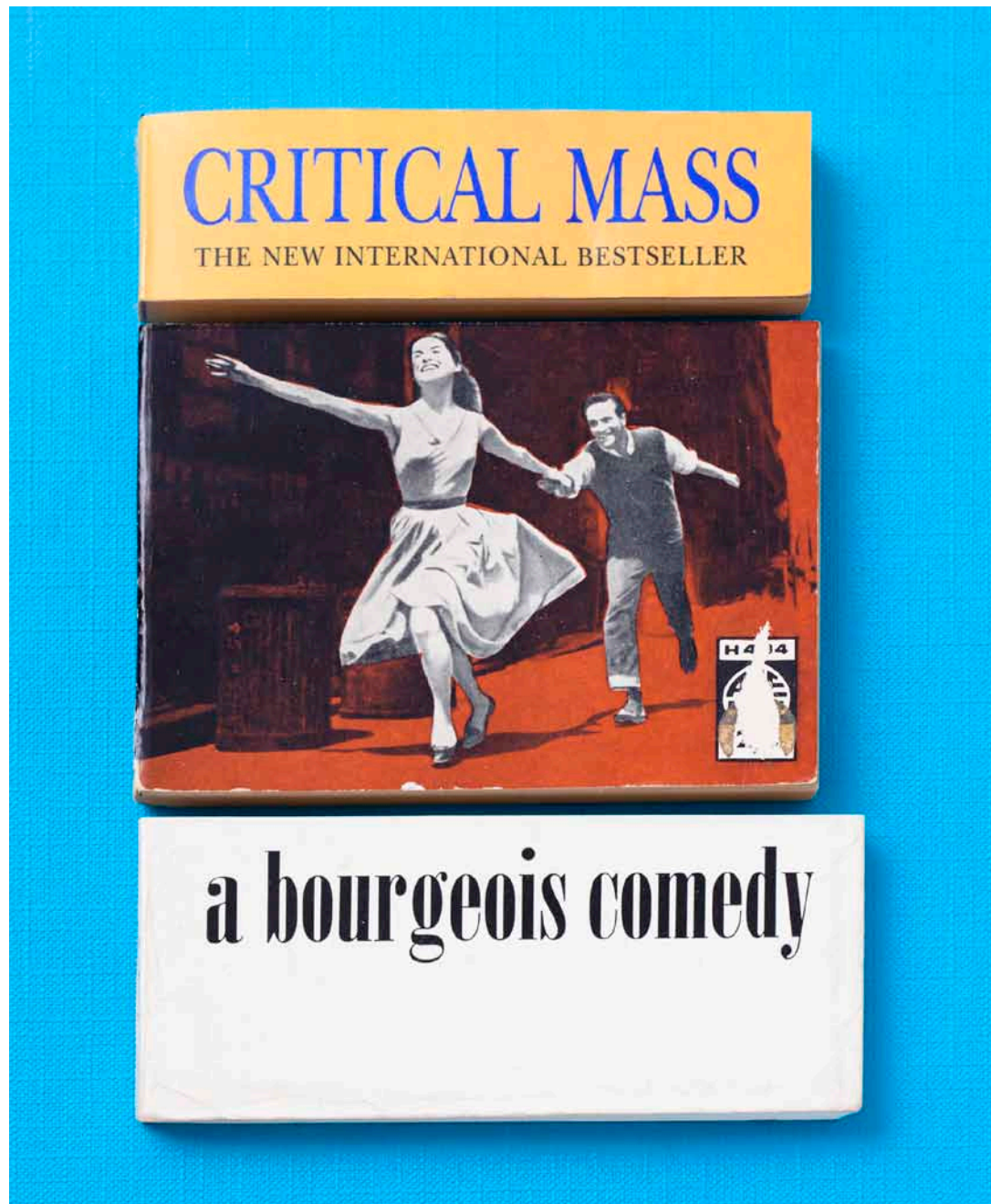
Kathrine Bolt Rasmussen

A Lovely Land is Ours...

— On Ideology Critical Motifs in
the Art of Peter Holst Henckel



To Amando Rodriguez, 2002, 165 x 120 cm, lambda photography



The Moon Cut Up, 2009, 100 x 80 cm, lambda fotografi / lambda photography

A lovely Land is Ours... — On Ideology Critical Motifs in the Art of Peter Holst Henckel

By Kathine Bolt Rasmussen

In 1990, as part of a larger installation at the exhibition *Luxury Culture* at Sophienholm, Peter Holst Henckel presents a work that simply is a photograph of a monochrome, white-on-white flag outlined against a clear, blue, summer sky. The note struck in this work is in many ways characteristic of Henckel's special way of staging a discreet, understated ideology criticism, and of his predilection for using ready-made, loaded titles that leave his works open to an ambiguous play of meanings.

At a first glance, the flag confronting the viewer is strangely anonymous and without identity. Drained of all colour, it seems to have lost its national moorings. The properties that normally make it possible to identify a flag and link it to a nation state, i.e. colours and patterns, have been completely removed or are difficult to see. As indicated by the title *Danish Extra Light*, however, this cleansed, colourless, white-on-white flag is a distorted version of the most value-laden, mythologized, Danish national symbol, namely *Dannebrog*, as the Danish flag is named. Like the flag itself, the title plays on a certain recognizability, bringing to

mind the quickly-read, one-line slogans of advertising that constantly confront us in a post-Fordist information economy.

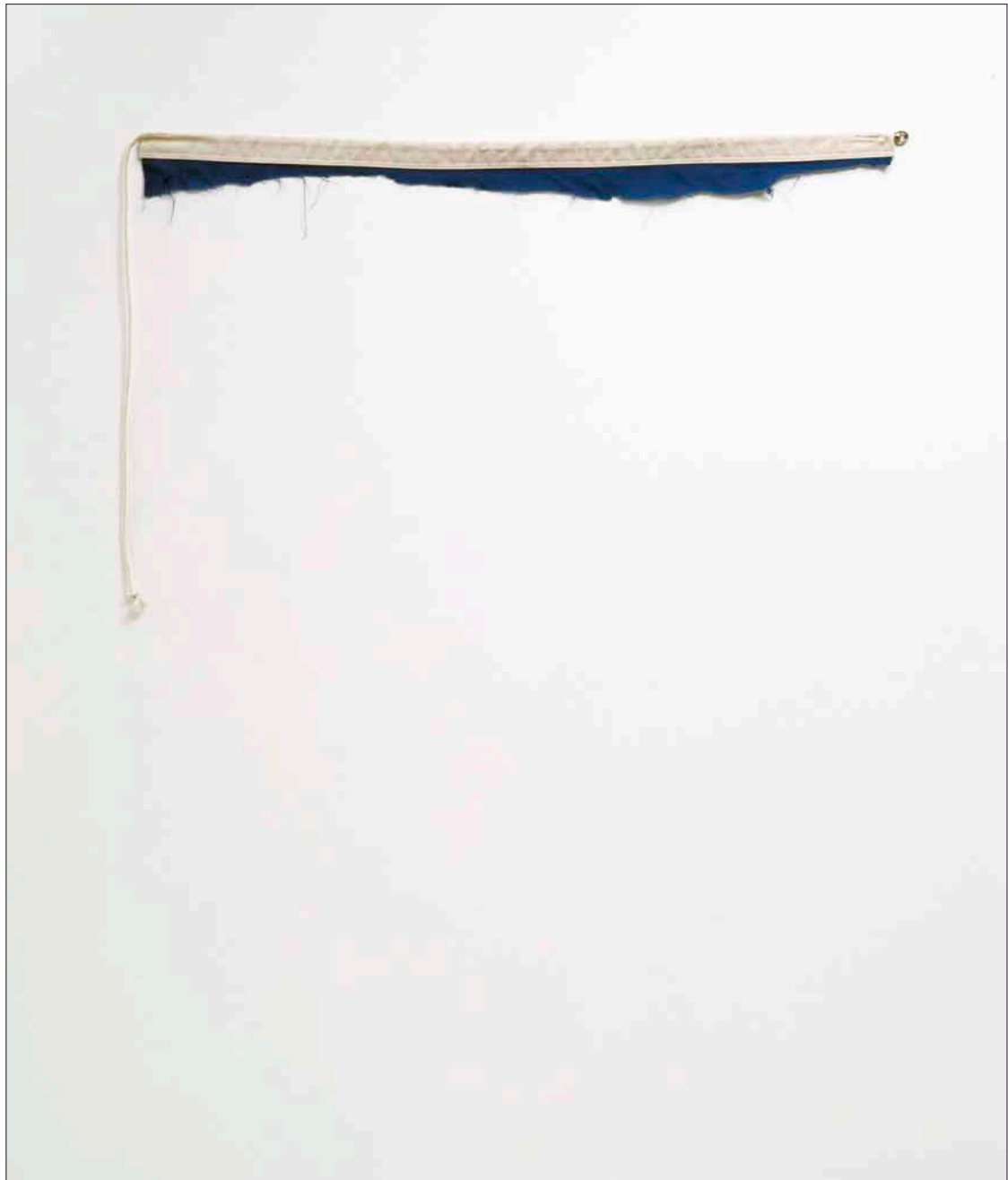
Despite the fact that both flag and title draw on a populist quality of being easily deciphered, the combination of title and image invites a number of complex interpretations challenging and ironizing the cultivation of nationalist-romantic symbols and the idea that a special Danishness and a special Danish value codex exist. By subjecting the most recognizable symbol of Denmark to critical artistic treatment, Henckel demonstrates that national feelings are an ideological construction, kept alive by visual symbols and cliché images.

As exemplified by the title of an exhibition, *OBS! Oplysning til borgerne om samfundet* (NB! Information for Citizens on Society), presented at Galleri Specta in 2006, Henckel often makes use of phrases or titles circulating in the public space—TV, films and advertisements—and thus already linked to certain ideas. By using the familiar title above, Henckel deliberately plays on the associations and special rhetoric of a series of public-service tv-spots that have rolled across Danish TV-screens since the mid 1970s. Serving as the mouthpiece of the Danish state, they have been a permanent feature of Danish television for more than 30 years and carry a distinctive aura of objectivity and sense of security. Appropriating the sober, matter-of-fact title of these TV-spots, Henckel unceremoniously, and with a twinkle in the eye, comments on the orthodox tone in which the state, via TV, severely,

but caringly and with an educational aim, informs its citizens of laws and regulations, the environment and security measures. Using the title of this familiar TV-classic, dating from the state-monopoly days of Danish TV, Henckel demonstrates how the mass media shape our picture of the world and how, despite their objective character, they inevitably reflect the dominant ideological and economic interests in society.

In *Giv agt! Højredrejning* (Warning! Right Turn) of 2006, included in the *OBS!* exhibition, Henckel employs the same simple method as in *Danish Extra Light*, working with an ordinary, everyday symbol. By means of a triangular warning sign normally encountered in traffic and the words *Warning! Right Turn*, Henckel drily and acutely comments on the current political situation in Denmark, in particular the turn towards the right witnessed during the past decade. The meaning of the warning sign, normally drawing attention to dangers in traffic by simple graphical means, is here shifted to serve as a warning against the ideology that increasingly dominates the political scene in Denmark and the consequent danger of national self-sufficiency and xenophobia.

The work *Little Big Tree* of 1996 is yet another example of how Henckel succeeds by very simple means in pointing to a complex socio-political problem. *Little Big Tree*, created in collaboration with Peter Neuchs for the exhibition *Escape Attempts* at Christiania, is a critical and poetic comment by the two artists on the tendency of political-utopian ideologies to become



Somalia, 1991, 55 x 110 cm, flag



Right Wing Birds, 2006, installationview, fotograf / photographer Anders Sune Berg

self-contradictory when faced with the reality of practical politics. The work consists of a small, approximately one-meter-high Sitka spruce, planted in one of the common, outdoor areas at Christiania—supplemented by texts and images in an indoor exhibition in the building known as The Factory. The title of *Little Big Tree* is an oxymoron—combining two normally contradictory terms—and paraphrases the title of Arthur Penn’s tragi-comical western *Little Big Man* of

1970. Thus the title points in an understated and artful way to the self-contradiction that Henckel and Neuchs want to illustrate. The meaning of *Little Big Tree* is subtly and humourously expressed in the growth pattern of the tree. The special characteristics of a Sitka spruce—besides its extremely prickly needles—is that over time it produces new branches in a left-turning spiral movement. This growth process is typically limited to the early part of the tree’s life, after which it

changes direction and turns to the right. By planting precisely this kind of tree in Christiania in 1996 (the 25th anniversary of this “Free City”), the artists address the paradoxical perception of itself that Christiania is constantly struggling with. Throughout its existence, Christiania has had difficulties maintaining its openness and willingness to change, and over the years seems to have become increasingly stuck in an introverted perception of itself. This political-utopian experiment of the 1970s, originally rooted in leftist ideas of freedom and anti-authoritarian values, runs the risk, as Henckel and Neuchs point out, of becoming more and more self-sufficient, introverted and prejudiced—in short, a right turn.

In *Little Big Tree*, as in his artistic practice generally, Henckel stays clear of moralizing about or sanctioning simplistic slogans, instead leaving it up to the viewer to complete the work and read between the lines. By simple, but subtle means



Giv agt! (Warning! Right Turn), 2006, 50×40 cm, archival ink on paper

he thus shows that it is possible to combine plasticity with political issues without having the work topple over into bombastic political propaganda. You might say, with the American art critic Joshua Decker, that Henckel makes use of “strategic interventions in the body of the institution”² resulting in “a unique form of critical complicity/complicit criticality”.³ In a deliberately contradictory way, Henckel maintains a practice that is critical (of institutions), but without repeating the historic avant-garde’s impossible negation of the institution of art. As a consequence of the art institution’s assimilation of the avant-garde’s violent destruction of the artist and the work of art, artists like Henckel have lost faith in the all-or-nothing agenda of the avant-garde and use the institution as a site for social and political criticism. It is thus characteristic of Henckel’s method of working that he uses the rhetorical devices of the avant-garde, but with the awareness that his message is most effectively articulated within

the institutional framework. With works that neither stiffen in forced social criticism nor get stuck in purely plastic problems, Henckel's practice lies somewhere between the formal experiments of modernism and the political project of conceptual art.



Little Big Tree, 1996, sitka spruce, Christiania

- 1 The title of this essay refers to the Danish song "Der er et yndigt land", the national anthem.
- 2 Joshua Decker: "De-coding the Museum", *Flash Art* XXIII, no. 155, Nov./Dec. 1990, p. 140.
- 3 *Ibid.* p. 141.

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