

EDITED BY

Annelien De Troij  
Adriaan Gonnissen

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

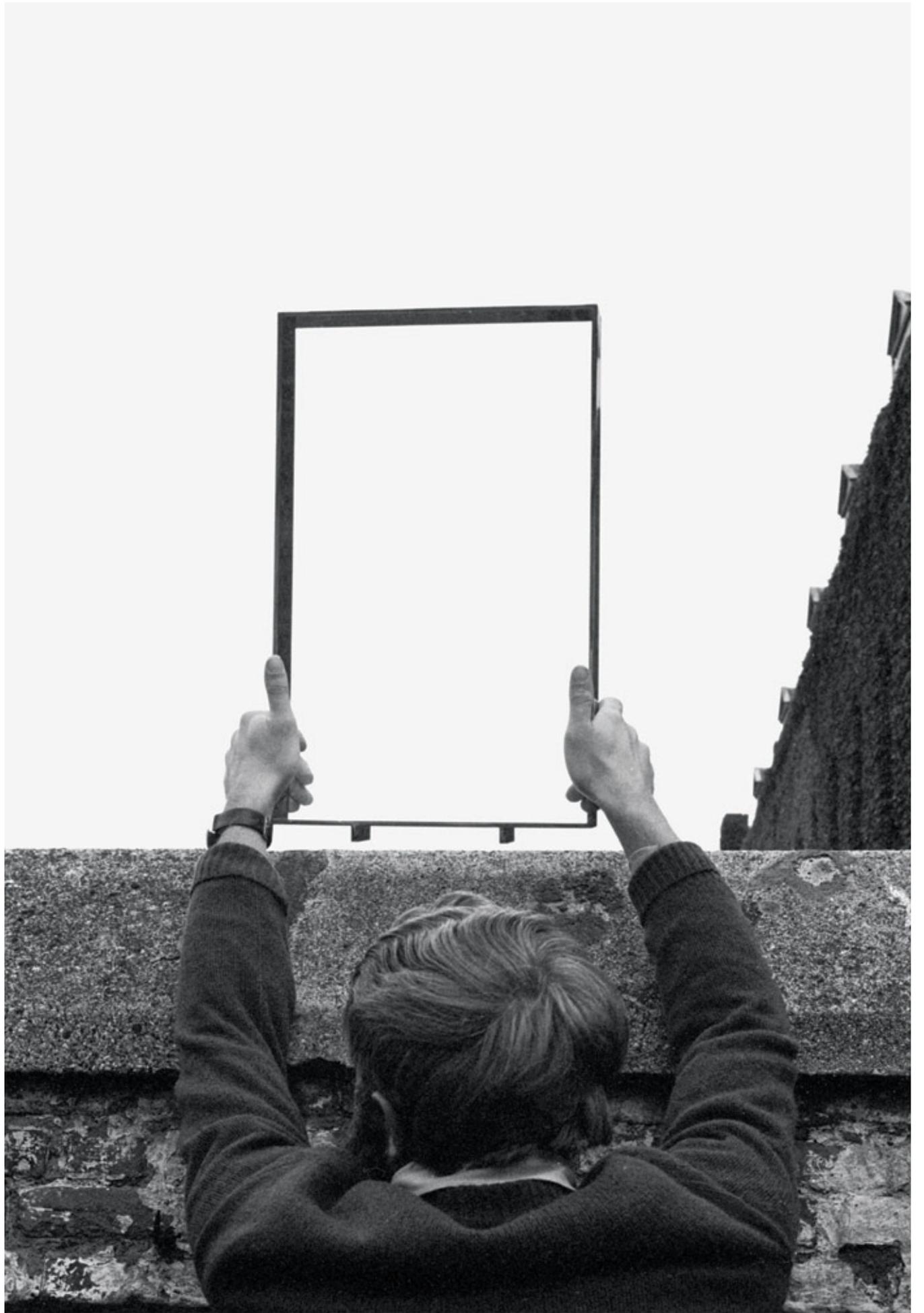
Annelien De Troij  
Adriaan Gonnissen  
Dieter Schwarz  
Thekla Zell  
Roel Arkesteijn

JEF VERHEYEN  
WINDOW  
ON INFINITY

HANNIBAL

Royal Museum  
of Fine Arts  
Antwerp

Museum of  
Contemporary  
Art Antwerp



“Becoming mad for colour,  
falling,  
flying off into space.”

Jef Verheyen  
presents his sculpture  
*Le Vide* (The Void)  
up against the sky,  
ca. 1965, photo  
Gerald Dauphin

Jef Verheyen, quote from the *Essentialism* manifesto, 1958



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# FOREWORD

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Artistic Director

Carmen Willems  
KMSKA Managing  
Director

Luk Lemmens  
KMSKA Chairman

Herman De Bode  
M HKA Chairman

To Jef Verheyen painting, like looking, means going on a mental journey through space. *Jef Verheyen. Window on Infinity* guides you through Verheyen's fascination with Eastern philosophy, Western modernism and Flemish art tradition. The exhibition and the book both are an invitation for you to engage with his ephemeral art of painting and take the time to let his obsession with light and colour work its magic on your eyes. Verheyen's work, most particularly, is an invitation to stare. To muse with a view on the infinite.

By joining forces, the teams from the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp and the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp have created an exceptional exhibition. Back in 2019 already, a research and digitisation project of the Jef Verheyen Archive had started within the cradle of M HKA and the Flemish Centre for Art Archives (CKV). Curator Annelien De Troij (M HKA) is the driving force behind this process. In a dynamic collaboration with fellow curator Adriaan Gonnissen (KMSKA), a thorough journey through the life and work of Jef Verheyen has led to this book and exhibition at the KMSKA.

We thank the curators and all of the staff involved at both museums and the Jef Verheyen Archive for their creativity, expertise and desire to pay tribute to *Le Peintre Flamant*, as Verheyen called himself, in appropriate fashion.

From the late 1950s onwards Verheyen emerged as a key figure in the artistic innovation taking place in Antwerp, Flanders, Belgium

and Europe. Not only did he undeniably play a leading role in Antwerp's breakthrough as a hotspot of the international neo-avantgarde, but he also paved the road to conceptual art. Moreover, in 1979 his vision led to the historic KMSKA exhibition *ZERO Internationaal Antwerpen*. In the aftermath, the museum acquired an internationally acclaimed art ensemble with work by Verheyen as well as his colleagues and friends such as Günther Uecker, Lucio Fontana, Otto Piene, Walter Leblanc and Hermann Goepfert. To this day, this collection forms a top-notch epilogue to the museum's modern art collection.

Now in 2024, Verheyen continues to point the way to international collaborations. Loan partner Museum Morsbroich in Leverkusen, where the *Monochrome Malerei* exhibition that was so important to Verheyen took place in 1960, is developing a sequel to this project, entitled *gegen den Himmel. contre le ciel. – Jef Verheyen / Johanna von Monkiewitsch*. Just as in Antwerp, Verheyen will enter into a dialogue with contemporary art.

In short, Verheyen unites artists, art lovers, collectors and museums. He is a builder of bridges between modern and contemporary art. An artist who combines local roots with international reach. That is why we invite everyone to immerse themselves in the void, to dwell on his ultra-thin layers of paint and to lose themselves in his "windows on infinity". In this way he gives us the opportunity to keep dreaming of the unknown.

# INTRODUCTION

“Painting is like  
shouting into the void,  
into the cosmos,  
the indeterminate,  
the truth perhaps.”

Annelien De Troij  
M HKA curator

Adriaan Gonnissen  
KMSKA curator

The end of the painting as a representation of reality is inextricably linked to the advent and influence of modern painting. With the trail-blazing influence of photography, the escape route of symbolism, and the liberation of light, colour and form, modern visual arts now no longer centred the image but the imagination. At the conclusion of that process, Jef Verheyen's "essentialism" and "non-plastic painting" mark the beginning of a new art.

Verheyen viewed the painting mainly as a contemplative space: a window on the infinite that invites us to alternately dream away, stare into space, or more conceptually: draw our gaze. For Verheyen, painting is no longer about showing but about being. It's about visual thinking that allows us to search for higher knowledge, consciously and unconsciously, to travel unexplored areas within and outside ourselves. The characteristic spatial effects of his subtle colour hues and colour relationships are therefore first of all intended as a portal to the unknown. Personal expression and brushwork were discarded as irrelevant nuisances, as obstacles in the search for essence.

#### ***ZERO Internationaal Antwerpen***

In 2024, *Jef Verheyen. Window on Infinity* picks up where the painter from Itegem and Jean Buyck, one of the museum's former curators of modern art, left things 45 years ago at the KMSKA. In 1979, at the invitation of the museum, Verheyen and Buyck put together an exhibition in which they highlighted Antwerp as a crucial cog in the international network of the ZERO movement (see p. 345). In the aftermath of this historic presentation, the KMSKA proceeded to acquire a high-quality ensemble of international ZERO art, by Verheyen, Lucio Fontana and Walter Leblanc, as well as Otto Piene, Günther Uecker, Hermann Goepfert, and others. To this day, this ensemble in the collection presentation has formed a kind of epilogue to orthodox modernism.

#### **End and beginning**

On the one hand, this exhibition catalogue presents Verheyen's oeuvre as a kind of zero mark of modern painting. That is why, in addition to his work, we are also celebrating the work of his *compagnons de route*, who were influential during his search for that tipping point. This inner circle includes artists such as Gianni Dova, Jozef Peeters, Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni, Yves Klein, Günther Uecker, Hermann Goepfert, Otto Piene, Ad Reinhardt, Francesco Lo Savio, Walter Leblanc, Christian Megert, Guy Mees and Englebert Van Anderlecht.

The at times intense contacts with his fellow travellers in time and space did not prevent Verheyen from engagement with the historical development process while on the path to a zero mark. Because, as Verheyen commented, there is no avant garde without tradition. That is why this publication also examines how he consciously sought a dialogue with art history in his oeuvre. He drew inspiration from the work of Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Claude Monet, Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko, Willi Baumeister, Kazimir Malevich, Paul Cézanne, Wassily Kandinsky, and, closer to home: James Ensor or the Flemish Expressionists, among them Constant Permeke.

On the other hand, Verheyen's key moment around 1958–1960 is a starting point too. Although he persisted in using an age-old medium, the experience of his painting borders on the conceptual. Or, as Fontana wrote in his correspondence with Jef Verheyen: "The most important thing is the idea". With this attitude, Verheyen entered into numerous collaborative projects and also took on the mantle of curator on several occasions. The latter role shows once again his openness towards artists who experimented with new media and, being maybe even more radical than he was, became pioneers of that new conceptual art.



FIG. 1  
Jean Fouquet, *Madonna omringd door serafijnen and cherubijnen* (Madonna Surrounded by Seraphim and Cherubim), ca. 1450, oil on panel, 92 × 83.5 cm, Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, inv. I32

FIG. 3  
Jef Verheyen, *Lux est Lex* (Light is Law), 1974, matt lacquer on canvas, diptych, 173.5 × 173.5 cm each, Jef Verheyen Archive

FIG. 2  
Jef Verheyen, *L'éternelle Renaissance. Aux amis Italiens* (The eternal Renaissance. To Italian friends), colour study for *Lux est Lex* (Light is Law), 1974, pencil and ink on paper, 32 × 22 cm, Jef Verheyen Archive

### Genesis

In this exhibition and publication, we are delving deeper into the genesis of Verheyen's art practice for the first time. During his early years as a ceramist – strongly inspired by the centuries-old tradition of monochromatic Chinese ceramics and painting – he discovered an essential part of his art that involves “the inner form being the outer form”. For Verheyen, artistic creation is the investigation of inner impulses, from the universal and primordial forces of nature to the unconscious essence of human existence. This fascination with universality and tradition is interwoven with his discovery of the potential of monochromatic painting. Both are unmistakably linked to Eastern artistic traditions such as the monochrome mode and philosophical movements such as Taoism, Zen and Chan Buddhism.

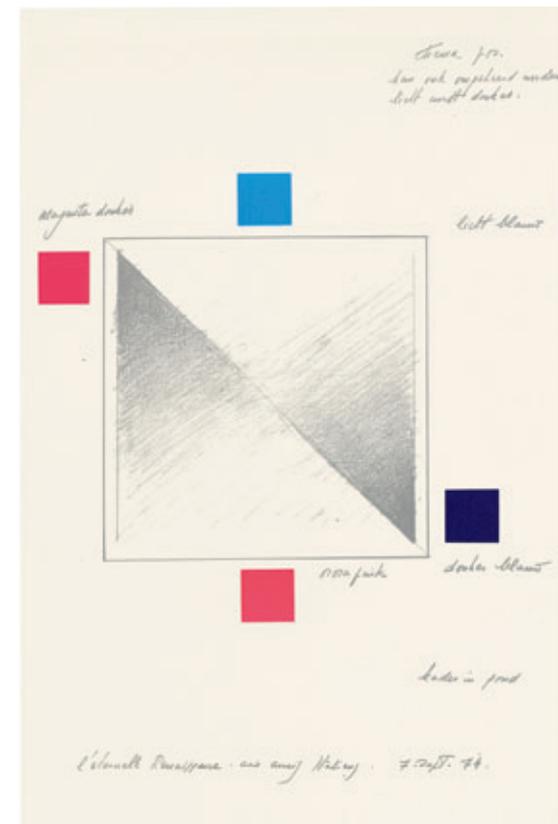
### Flemish originality

The influences from the East did not eclipse Verheyen's awareness of his own identity. The importance of his own personality can be seen in the epithet that Verheyen chose for himself. *Le Peintre Flamant* (“the Flemish/

flaming painter”) can be read as a wink to the fleeting nature of a burning fire (*flamant*), but also to his beloved identity as a Flemish painter (*Flamand*). Verheyen wanted first and foremost to build a bridge between the universal and the individual, the international and the local. In this way he connected his radically purified painting technique with the tradition of oil painting going back to Jan van Eyck, but also with the *tabula rasa* of an avant garde that resonated across borders.

### New besides old

To lean into the idea of Verheyen as a builder of bridges between old and new, this exhibition reaches beyond the walls of its space. Because this pioneer of new art did not shut his eyes to the old masters. For this reason – and in accordance with the painter's own wishful dreams – the famous *Madonna Surrounded by Seraphim and Cherubim* (ca. 1450) by Jean Fouquet will enter into dialogue with a painted diptych by Verheyen (Fig. 1-3). These paintings, entitled *Lux est Lex*, show warm red planes that, through a painted light refraction, form a high-contrast connection with the similarly shaped cold blue





planes. This essentialist echo of the blue-red interaction between the seraphim and cherubim points to the fact that Fouquet's *Madonna* was originally part of a diptych. In this way, Verheyen pays tribute to a 15th-century masterpiece that, due to its progressive character, could just as easily have been painted in Verheyen's time, or our time still. In the same gallery, Verheyen's work enters into dialogue with various other highlights of Flemish painting: Van Eyck's *The Madonna at the Fountain* (1439), Rubens' *The Holy Family with the Parrot* (1614–1633) and Luc Tuymans' *Der diagnostic Blick IV* (1992).

#### Jef Verheyen today

With his conceptual fascination for the sensorial suggestion of spatiality based on light and colour, Verheyen is quintessentially a modernist who forges a bridge to today's art. That is why, in the context of the collaboration with the M HKA, our goal is to amplify Verheyen's visual thinking by allowing his oeuvre to enter into dialogue with contemporary artists such as Carla Arocha & Stéphane Schraenen, Ann Veronica Janssens, Kimsooja and Pieter Vermeersch. We would like to thank them particularly for their installations which – like Verheyen's works – dialogue with the surrounding space or break through it, causing our perception to momentarily falter.

#### Special thanks

This exhibition would not have been possible without the unceasing support of the Jef Verheyen Archive. It is thanks to the effort and dedication of Léonore Verheyen, until her death in 2015, that this archive has been preserved for the future. The care with which the estate is managed today testifies to an unconditional love for the painter, his archive, and his works of art. Annelien De Troij's in-depth research, which started in 2019 in affiliation with the Flemish Centre for Art Archives (M HKA), has made the realisation of this exhibition possible.

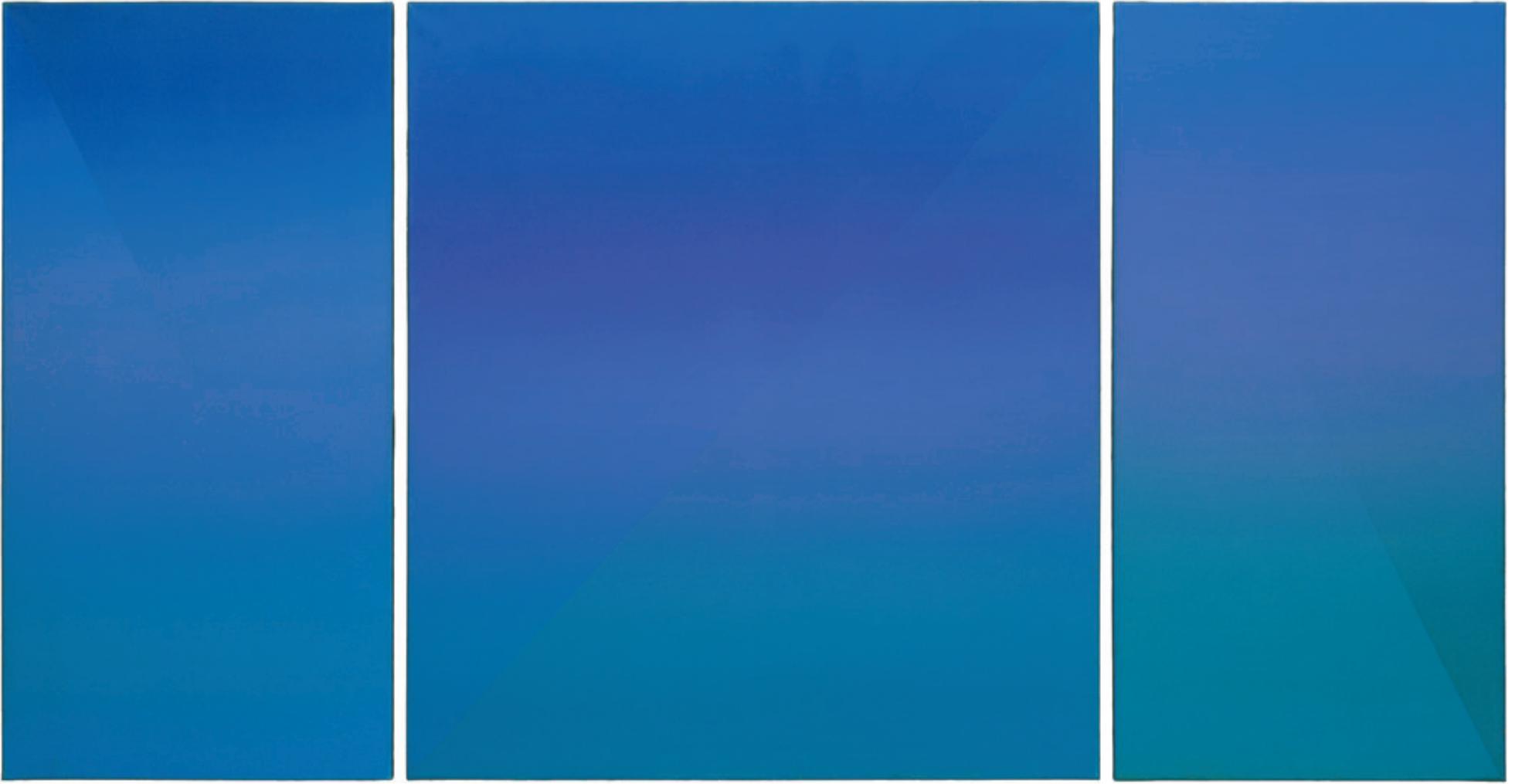
We would like to also thank our co-authors from Belgium and abroad. Dieter Schwarz insightfully sketches Verheyen's painterly path that led him to pursue a monochrome, achrome and panchrome investigation. In "When

Attitudes Become Monochrome", Thekla Zell questions the definition of monochrome art. Finally, Roel Arkesteijn connects the art historical line of the exhibition to today's art scene on the basis of interviews with the participating contemporary artists.

Naturally, the generosity of the exhibition's many lenders also deserves a sincere word of thanks. Works of art have more influence on the quality of exhibitions than curators or museum teams. That is why we are pleased to be able to show, in addition to a selection of work by contemporaries and predecessors, a wide selection of Verheyen's most important paintings from: Archives Yves Klein in Paris (FR), Axel Vervoordt Gallery and Axel & May Vervoordt Foundation in Wijnegem (BE), Centre Pompidou MNAM/CCI in Paris (FR), Bernhard & Pascale Liechti collection (CH), Boris Vervoordt collection in Wijnegem (BE), Caspar H. Schübbe collection (CH), Jason Poirier dit Caulier collection in Antwerp (BE), Lenz Schönberg collection in Tyrol (AT), Thilbert Verheyen collection (FR), Design Museum in Den Bosch (NL), Fondazione Lucio Fontana in Milan (IT), Galerie Callewaert Vanlangendonck in Antwerp (BE), Galerie De Zwarte Panter in Antwerp (BE), Galerie Dierking in Zürich (CH), Galerie Ronny Van de Velde in Antwerp (BE), Jef Verheyen Archive in Mechelen (BE), Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop in Bottrop (DE), Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) in Antwerp (BE), Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (KMSKB) in Brussels (BE), Kunstmuseum Bern / Stiftung Anne-Marie & Victor Loeb (CH), Kunstpalast Düsseldorf (DE), Leopold Hoesch Museum / Hubertus Schoeller Stiftung in Düren (DE), Musée national des arts asiatiques / Musée Guimet in Paris (FR), Museo del Novecento / Boschi Di Stefano collection in Milan (IT), Museum Morsbroich in Leverkusen (DE), Museum of Contemporary Art (M HKA) in Antwerp (BE), Paul De Vree Archive in Antwerp (BE), Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (S.M.A.K.) in Ghent (BE), Uecker Archiv in Düsseldorf (DE), VRT Archive in Brussels (BE), Fondation Walter & Nicole Leblanc in Brussels (BE).

Finally, we would like to thank the many lenders who prefer to remain anonymous but who are stalwart supporters of Verheyen's work.

FIG. 4  
Jef Verheyen, *Espace en 3 temps (Venetië)* (Space in 3 times (Venice)), 1976–1977, matt lacquer on canvas, triptych, 180 × 90 cm (left and right) and 180 × 160 cm (centre), Lenz Schönberg collection, Tyrol, inv. VER-49



# The Artist Who Makes Paint Dream. The Liberation of the Idea in the Oeuvre of Jef Verheyen (1950–1960)

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“Breaking through space and time has always fascinated me. A painting is a space that emerges. I stand before it and I hope an idea will come. I have to see it first before I can start working, what I paint is a lucid projection of an idea or image.”

In September 1957 Jef Verheyen, then 25 years old, went to Milan for the first time (Fig. 5). In this affluent and avant garde city – the wellspring of Italian futurism and its manifestos – he hoped to connect with the thinking of the youngest Italian painters. The timing for his visit couldn't have been better: Verheyen is the Flemish star witness to a crucial momentum in the development of modern art.

This is when Piero Manzoni signed and issued the manifesto *Contro lo stile*, a first step in the direction of what he from 1958–1959 onward called achrome painting.<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that Verheyen also used the term achrome in November 1958, when he was writing the first draft of his *Essentialisme* (Essentialism) manifesto in Milan, “A colour wheel, when you turn it, becomes achrome at the point you could call static. Harmony is static. Static is achrome. Achrome merges with space. Space is freedom. Freedom comes from essence.”<sup>3</sup>

Also in 1958, the Italian-Argentine artist Lucio Fontana was – just like Manzoni – beginning to explore the boundaries of painting and started playing with new artistic concepts.<sup>4</sup> Fontana experimented with his *Tagli*, the monochrome and slashed canvases that he brought together under the name *Concetto spaziale*. In a letter to his young friend from Antwerp, Fontana underlines, “The most important thing is the idea.”<sup>5</sup> Verheyen, too, will continue to balance on that boundary between painting and conceptual art.<sup>6</sup>

#### The painting is about to leave the canvas

The German writer Fritz Usinger also observed this about the work of Verheyen and Fontana in 1965, during his opening speech at the *Lucio Fontana – Hermann Goepfert – Jef Verheyen* exhibition.<sup>7</sup> He told the gathering about the importance of the tension between old and new among these artists, “Before our very eyes, the momentous event is playing out today, that the painting is about to leave the canvas of the ancient form and the flat plane structured solely in colours.”<sup>8</sup>

To highlight the importance of that momentum, this essay portrays Verheyen as a thinking artist.<sup>9</sup> He shared, in the words of Johan Pas, the “militant, recalcitrant attitude” of the neo-avantgarde that included among others Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni and Yves Klein.<sup>10</sup> According to Pas, Verheyen used painting to develop an alternative, post-pictorial practice, and his work offers the opportunity to look beyond the usually cited purely formal charac-

teristics.<sup>11</sup> After all, writing and painting went hand in hand for Verheyen. He is “not only a man of images, but also of ideas.”<sup>12</sup>

This essay studies the possibilities of the many archive records, notes, manifestos and correspondences that testify to the artistic quest of an artist in the making, focusing on the period between the 1950s and early 1960s. This reconstruction ultimately leads to a deeper understanding of what art historian Pierre Apraxine described as the core of Verheyen's quest for liberation, “Stripping all plastic value from concepts of space and colour, Verheyen's paintings constitute a new approach to pictorial fact. The painter rejects the term ‘monochrome’ in favour of ‘achrome’. Colour is treated as a conducting agent for space. Fleeting and yet definitely there, it defines space as a place where the concepts of movement and immobility, fullness and emptiness, presence and absence are reconciled.”<sup>13</sup>

#### Thinking, painting and writing

Verheyen engages in a lifelong conversation about the sense and nonsense of art, as amply illustrated by his correspondence with collectors, curators, gallery owners, fellow painters and writers. A typical example is Swiss gallerist Hans Liechti, owner of Galerie Bernard, and his recollection of “meeting for hours and hours, discussing the problems we had with contemporary painting”.<sup>14</sup> Since they met in Milan in 1957, Fontana and Verheyen also continuously exchanged their ideas about *les problèmes d'art*.<sup>15</sup> The adventure of this artistic investigation was laced with a rebellion against everyday banality, as he writes in a later letter to Willy Van den Bussche, “Painting, as I see it, is a personal adventure, which one experiences alone, a rejection of the triviality of the masses, and therefore an individual act of resistance against the bourgeois aesthetics.”<sup>16</sup>

That is precisely the type of resistance that Verheyen encountered in Milan for the first time. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the experimental ambiance of this city for his further development as an artist.<sup>17</sup> In Italy he definitively emerged as an “ideoplast” thinking painter, and that distinguished him from his Antwerp contemporaries. The Antwerp painter and jazz musician Cel Overberghe also emphasises this difference in his testimonial about Verheyen, “For Jef, art was much more than making beautiful paintings. He'd start grilling me the moment he walked into my studio, immediately asking for an explanation of what those works meant.”<sup>18</sup>

## From Expo 58 to Group 58

In the previous year, Verheyen himself co-founded the Antwerp innovation impetus from which G58 emerged. After his first solo exhibition in Milan in February 1958, he was allowed to contribute to Expo 58, the Brussels innovation momentum. Together with the painter Wim Van Gils, he was assigned the press pavilion, where they created a temporary installation with fluorescent structures and photographic material.<sup>98</sup> The work of Verheyen's Italian friend Roberto Crippa was exhibited in the Belgian pavilion.

In the meantime, Verheyen and several artist friends from Antwerp were of the opinion that the city on the Scheldt should forge links with the innovation movement in Brussels. Consequently, Verheyen became one of the founders of G58, a group of young artists who joined forces to draw attention to a contemporary artistic programme in Antwerp. While waiting for a permanent building, Mayor Lode Craeybeckx granted them the use of the castle in the Middelheim Park. The first G58 exhibitions were held there between May and October 1958, with alternating groups of four or five artists. Verheyen participated in the fifth group exhibition together with Vic Estercam, Paul Bervoets and Walter Vanermen. He exhibited his first monochrome and achrome experiments. Callewaert described them in a review, "And my preference always goes out to these spontaneous, sometimes very poetic sketches, where the inspiration is not killed by endless finessing, and which sometimes contain a floating feeling and a diffused light. Alongside wide-ranging variations on the same theme – a semicircle, a gentle arc, floating or draped in space – Verheyen exhibits a curious monochrome painting entirely in white, which derives its entire impact from the relief of the paint and from the effect of light."<sup>99</sup> (see p. 104) The critic Brice Aubusson in turn highlighted "some very thoughtful works, with sometimes scholarly colouristic research" and was particularly excited about "this large dark canvas in which a reluctant clarity slumbers".<sup>100</sup>

Verheyen's involvement with G58 was short-lived, however. After the group moved to the attic of the Hessenhuis, Verheyen distanced himself from the "officialisation" of the group. He no longer felt affinity with its artistic ideals and values.<sup>101</sup> When the first exhibition in this 16th-century warehouse opened on 29 November 1958, he was still in Milan, where his second solo exhibition at Galleria Pater had opened on 6 November. Although he was not an official member and his name is not in the accompanying publication, one of his works was

nonetheless exhibited at that exhibition: *L'air est plein de ta chaleur* (The Air is Full of your Warmth). This bichrome red work with a dark floating demi-circle was included thanks to the tireless diligence of Dani Franque and Ivo Michiels, who selected and installed this work at the Hessenhuis (Fig. 27, 29).<sup>102</sup> *The Air is Full of your Warmth* was acquired by Fontana and is still part of the collection of the Fondazione Lucio Fontana today.<sup>103</sup>

After the young vanguard of Antwerp descended upon the Hessenhuis, the desire to establish international connections grew rapidly. Verheyen's plan for an exhibition on European monochrome painting was put on the back burner in favour of the organisation of a large-scale exhibition at the G58 Hessenhuis.<sup>104</sup> Together with Pol Bury and Jean Tinguely, Marc Callewaert and Paul Van Hoeydonck brought artists together to participate in *Vision in Motion / Motion in Vision*.<sup>105</sup> The correspondence between Klein, Tinguely and Verheyen shows that their original enthusiasm for Verheyen's exhibition idea swivelled to reluctance. Klein and Tinguely ultimately chose to commit only to *Vision in Motion*.<sup>106</sup>

In the context of this essay, it is interesting to note the alternative exhibition title that was circulating: *De Statische Beweging*.<sup>107</sup> It shows how the content focus was shifting too. Painting had to make way for kinetic art. Hence Verheyen and his Milanese friends Fontana and Manzoni were no longer involved in the project. Their absence did not prevent *Vision in Motion* from being a success and it is still on record as the first important ZERO event in Antwerp.<sup>108</sup> The event was instrumental in laying the foundation for kinetic exhibitions such as *Bewogen Beweging* in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, in 1961.<sup>109</sup>

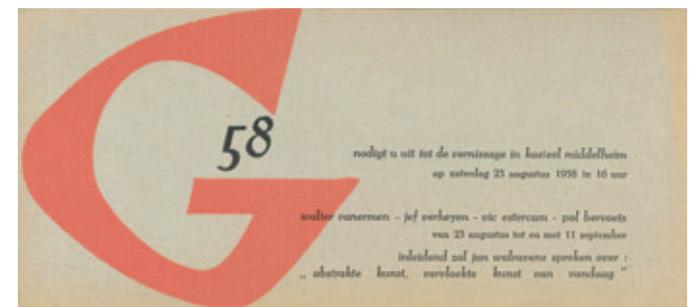
Verheyen was disappointed and, what's more, his vision on artistic innovation also diverged from *Vision in Motion*, "It is a pity that the Rot – Piene – Klein – Uecker exhibition was so poorly understood here. [...] The clearest proof of this is the title they gave to this exhibition: LE MOUVEMENT. Apart from Tinguely, whose work is still static despite its movement, there was little movement. Their works are rather examples of static."<sup>110</sup> For the first time, the exhibition highlights the division between Verheyen as a persistent painter and the other neo-avantgardists who want to leave the canvas and explore the potential of other media.

The Milanese momentum once again shows that Verheyen – perhaps in contrast to some of

FIG. 27  
Two visitors looking at *L'air est plein de ta chaleur* (The Air is Full of your Warmth) at the opening exhibition of G58 at the Hessenhuis, photo Gust Philippi

FIG. 29  
Jef Verheyen, *L'air est plein de ta chaleur* (The Air is Full of your Warmth), 1958, oil on canvas, 64 × 53 cm, Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan, inv. 84

FIG. 28  
Invitation to the exhibition G58 – Walter Vanermen – Jef Verheyen – Vic Estercam – Pol Bervoets in Middelheim Castle, Antwerp





his contemporaries from G58 – was a visual thinker, someone who was constantly conceptualising and reconceptualising his own ideas. Klee's influence was of crucial importance in Verheyen's continuing search for ways to be an intellectually self-aware artist, but the discovery of Klee in 1957 gained depth during his visits to Milan in the years 1957–1959.

#### *Le plus important, c'est l'idée*

For in northern Italy, Verheyen's enthusiasm for monochrome painting was primarily fuelled by his friendship with Piero Manzoni. The dialogue with Fontana led to a further entrenchment of the importance of the concept or idea behind the work of art. This also related to their shared hesitation to be classified under the name ZERO.<sup>111</sup> Fontana and Verheyen would rather speak of "*Mouvement Spatial – Monochrome – Achrome – Vibration*".<sup>112</sup>

Apart from this search for a more appropriate conceptual framework, one should note that the evolution of the oeuvre of both Verheyen and Fontana gained momentum at the end of the 1950s. They first met in 1957 at the Biennale of Sculpture in the Middelheim Park in Antwerp, where Verheyen was showing a monumental ceramic work. Shortly after, in February 1958, Verheyen wrote extensively in his notebook about his visit to the studio of *le beau vieux*.<sup>113</sup> He writes that Fontana's most sophisticated work is one with "pieces of glass, all colours, one below the other on canvases with holes".<sup>114</sup> This created a play of light and space that Verheyen describes as a cosmic space. He adds, "I couldn't stop looking at it, all that splintered glass. it's magic. [...] He asked me what I thought and well, what could I say? I wasn't able to think with all those miracles filling my eyes."<sup>115</sup>

He perceived Fontana as a modern magician, a shaman whose work exerts a mesmerising power. This is also visible in his preserved sketch of Fontana's ceramics (Fig. 30, 31). In that drawing, Verheyen makes a link between Fontana's perforated ceramics and the pre-Columbian culture of the Mixtecs and Tarascans in Mesoamerica.<sup>116</sup> Examples like this once again highlight Verheyen's transhistorical way of thinking in which past and present, east and west, north and south are connected. Fontana undoubtedly strengthened the visual thinker Verheyen in his growing desire for the evocation of the mystical and the universal. The latter is also evident from what Verheyen notes in his essay *FROM A = A TO PANTA RHEI*, "Fontana's spatialism drilled through the dimensions, the enormous spaces

became conscious. His fifth dimension broke the boundaries, he opened the way to infinity. The idea of a human being as "emptiness in the fullness" was synthesised by Fontana."<sup>117</sup>

Fontana and Verheyen opened the gate to infinity at about the same time. Fontana's thinking about visual art radicalised in 1958. Shortly after the first meeting with Verheyen he started on his famous *Concetto spaziale* and the slashed *Tagli* canvases. The importance of the idea, the concept and the gesture was growing. Or, in the words of the Italian-Argentine master, "As a painter, while working on one of my perforated canvases, I do not want to make a painting: I want to open up space, create a new dimension for art, tie in with the cosmos as it endlessly expands beyond the confining plane of the picture"<sup>118</sup>. (Fig. 32)

This subtle but major shift as well as the exploration of the boundaries of the art of painting is also reflected in the letters exchanged between Verheyen and his Italian friend. As a mentor, Fontana emphasises that the idea is more important than the execution. In his letter to Verheyen he stresses that "*Le plus important, c'est l'idée*", indicating exactly at which tipping point the neo-avantgarde found itself at the end of the 1950s (Fig. 33).<sup>119</sup>

#### Alone facing nothingness

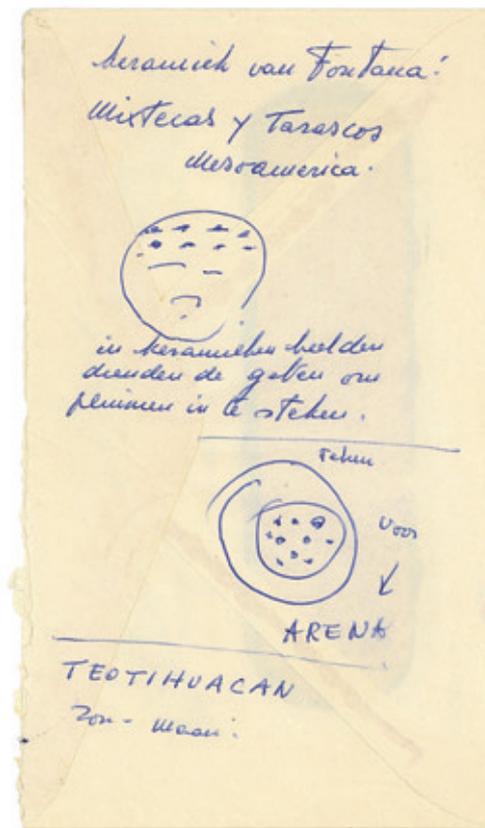
To liberate the potential of the idea, Manzoni and Fontana passed a zero mark. They exhausted the artistic possibilities of painting, as it were, in order to explore the freedom of a new visual thinking, starting from that tabula rasa. Verheyen not only witnessed that unique moment in Milan; he also brought the momentum back home.

Fired up by his experiences abroad, he began to question his own artistic practice more critically than ever before. He developed into a "visual thinker". In August 1958 he wrote, "Everything ceases to exist when it becomes the object of a subject. That is why a painting has to be subjective. It is the viewer who must become and remain an object. It must span across him, he must be in the middle of it, he versus the unoverseeable, the abstract, the subjective, the I."<sup>120</sup>

It very much looks like Verheyen is linking a theoretical reflection to an experience that has recently completely overwhelmed him. Just as Mark Rothko makes the viewer disappear into a painted surface, Verheyen too had almost fallen into his own black space, "I have now been working on the same theme for two months and it is going on forever. I can't feel any form anymore, only vibrating spaces, my canvas is the

FIG. 30  
Annotated study sketch by Jef Verheyen regarding Lucio Fontana's ceramic work, Jef Verheyen Archive

FIG. 31  
Lucio Fontana, *Concetto spaziale* (Spatial Concept), 1958, stoneware, thrown and hand-shaped, with perforations, 17.8 × 14.5 × 14.5 cm, Design Museum Den Bosch, inv. K1995.101





space itself and I don't feel limited to the surface I am working on. So it makes sense that I no longer have any notion of the plane, that I feel like the centre of the space, me alone facing that space, alone in front of nothingness."<sup>121</sup>

In this state of mind, at the end of 1959, the painting *Le voile du mystère* (The Veil of Mystery) was created, an absolute key work within the painter's oeuvre (Fig. 34). In 1962, Verheyen revisits this work in his notes and is able to explain exactly why it is that important:

"Four years ago I made a black painting that I called *The Veil of Mystery* without actually realising what that enormous and obscured world held inside in terms of evidence, roads and pit stops. It took me more than 4 months before I was capable of breaking through that wall and building a bridge over that painting. Slowly I stumbled along the road that became increasingly narrow until all I had left was a thin thread spanned tightly across the black abyss into which I fell several times. I often broke everything around me in the darkness, but I always found the beginning of the thread again. And at last I became a good tightrope dancer."<sup>123</sup>

In the months and years to follow Verheyen indeed learned, like an equilibrist, to use the potential of space to evoke a kind of vibration, an almost mystical sense of full-ness within the viewers of his work. In this context, the artist liked to refer to a quote of the Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi, "This silence is like the unity of heaven and earth. This unity may be called meaningless or dark, but it is the secret-full possibility."<sup>124</sup>

Conveying that feeling of stillness in time and space informed Verheyen's desire for essence and universality, a desire that was at odds with the speed and disenchantment inherent to scientific modern times.<sup>125</sup> Verheyen's search for what is essential about being an artist, relates closely to the iconic neon slogan of the American conceptual artist Bruce Nauman, "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths".<sup>126</sup>

### **New painting, new language**

This calling of the artist caused quite some contemporaries from the ZERO movement to say goodbye to painting in the early 1960s. But *Le Peintre Flamant* continued to stand by his old tried and trusted medium. His visual thinking regularly pushed him to the edges of the conceptual, but he remained essentially a painter.

Verheyen did not conquer the "zero mark" by rooting around in performance, pop art, conceptual art, nouveau réalisme or anti-peinture.<sup>127</sup> On the contrary, with his monochrome canvases

- 76 Fondazione Lucio Fontana inv. 9I. This is the first of in total three works by Verheyen in the personal collection of Lucio Fontana.
- 77 Ivo Michiels, “Brief uit Milaan. Waar de avant-garde blijft voortbestaan”, *De Periscoop*, December 1959, page unknown.
- 78 The collection was established by Mariada Di Stefano’s father, and continued by her and her husband Antonio Boschi. She was a ceramist and active in the Scuola di Ceramica, he was an engineer and worked for Pirelli in the Milanese suburb. The art collection is still kept in its entirety and on display at Casa Boschi.
- 79 Ivo Michiels, “Brief uit Milaan. Waar de avant-garde blijft voortbestaan”. Other noteworthy objects in the collection are a marine by Constant Permeke and a drawing on paper, *Christ’s Entry Into Brussels*, by James Ensor.
- 80 He starts his experiments with plaster or stucco, see: Piero Manzoni, letter to Verheyen, 1959 (inv. JV\_06\_02).
- 81 *Per Una Pittura Organica. Pour une Peinture Organique* was published in two languages in June 1957 and signed by Piero Manzoni with Guido Biasi, Mario Colucci, Ettore Sordini and Angelo Verga. It is the first of nine manifestos that Manzoni was to write together with the “nuclear” late-informal painters of the Movimento Arte Nucleare. See: Martin Engler, “The body, its image, its actions and objects. Piero Manzoni and the Biology of Art”, in Engler, *Piero Manzoni. When Bodies Became Art*, 16.
- 82 Quoted from the original trilingual manifesto *Contro lo stile. Contre le Style. The End of Style*.
- 83 Jef Verheyen, draft of a letter to Kenneth Coutts-Smith, 1977 (inv. JV\_06\_02).
- 84 Engler, “The body, its image, its actions and objects. Piero Manzoni and the Biology of Art”, 16–17.
- 85 Engler, *Piero Manzoni. When Bodies Became Art*, 234.
- 86 Verheyen refers to this manifesto in numerous letters preserved in the archive, for example to Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Agostino Bonalumi, Jean Tinguely, Guy Vandenbranden, Kenneth Coutts-Smith, Jean F. Buyck, Gerhard Storck, Udo Kultermann. In the end the plans are never realised.
- 87 Vaes, “L’espace Verheyen”, 44.
- 88 Quoted from the artist’s notebook, 1957–1959.
- 89 Idem.
- 90 Quoted from Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn*, (Paris: Obelisk Press, 1939), 110–111. Verheyen quoted the French publication in his publication *Pour une peinture non plastique* (1959), n.p.
- 91 On Sunday 27 November 1960, Klein published his own newspaper *Le journal d’un seul jour* and distributed it across the whole of Paris. The cover features the now well-known but highly choreographed photo of Klein jumping out of a window, *Saut dans le vide*. See: Colette Angeli, “Les premiers hommes dans l’espace. Yves Klein et Takis”, in *Le Ciel Comme Atelier. Yves Klein et Ses Contemporains*, ed. Emma Lavigne (Metz: Centre Pompidou, 2020), 112–113.
- 92 Like Verheyen, Fontana also buys a monochrome painting from Yves Klein, see: Luca Massimo Barbero, “Lucio Fontana, Une Altérité Créatrice”, in Lavigne, *Le Ciel Comme Atelier*, 25.
- 93 Verheyen, letter to Coutts-Smith.
- 94 Gerhard Storck, “ZERO neunzehnhundertneunundfünfzig”, in *ZERO-Raum*, ed. Wend von Kalnein (Düsseldorf: Kunstmuseum der Stadt Düsseldorf, 1973), n.p. About *Monochrome Malerei*, see also the essay by Thekla Zell in this publication.
- 95 The letters are kept in the Jef Verheyen Archive (inv. JV\_06\_02).
- 96 Piero Manzoni, letter to Verheyen, January 1959 (inv. JV\_06\_02). Manzoni in particular furnished several important contacts, including Hans Sonneberg, Dutch gallery owner and “manager” of the Rotterdam ZERO group that Manzoni also belonged to. Verheyen in turn facilitated the introduction of Manzoni to Swiss gallery owner Hans Liechti (Galerie Bernard).
- 97 In the Hessenhuis from late March 1959 the group exhibition *Vision in Motion / Motion in Vision* took place. See: Jan Ceuleers, “Totaal nieuwe media scheppen”, in *Nieuwe Kunst in Antwerpen*, ed. Jan Ceuleers (Antwerp: M HKA, 2012), 49–56.
- 98 The agreement and preparatory documents have been preserved. This also shows that Verheyen and Van Gils were invited to Stavelot at the same time to create a ceiling painting for the hospital (inv. JV\_07\_13). Further research and possible image material can provide more clarity about this.
- 99 Callewaert, “Vijfde expositie van G-58”.
- 100 Brice Aubusson, “La nouvelle exposition G58”, *Le Matin*, 25 August 1958, page unknown.
- 101 Quoted from the notebook of the artist, 1957–1959: “*Perhaps you know those painters too, they exhibit in the Hessenhuis and the Centre for Fine Arts, sell to Trouillard and other good Antwerp people, they drive a car and have a business that employs twenty people [...] They then paint in a tiny room [...] Painting, oh, they can’t spend all day doing that. They don’t see the bankruptcy of their paintings, empty rubbish, some crap, some not, isn’t it nice to paint in your spare time[...]*”
- 102 Dani Franque, letter to Verheyen, 23 November 1958 (inv. JV\_06\_02). As of all the participating artists, a portrait of Verheyen taken by Frank Philippi hung in the stairwell of the building.
- 103 Fondazione Lucio Fontana inv. 84. This is the second of in total three works by Jef Verheyen in the personal collection of Lucio Fontana.
- 104 An undated note from Franque to Verheyen also corroborates this (inv. JV\_06\_03).
- 105 Originally this “*large international manifestation around De Beweging*” was given the title *De Beweging (Le Mouvement)*, but it quickly adopted the title of Marc Callewaert’s catalogue text, which refers to the book *Vision in Motion* by Lázló Moholy-Nagy (1947). *Le Mouvement* was the title of a gallery exhibition at Denise René in Paris (April 1955). See: Ceuleers, “Totaal nieuwe media scheppen”, 49–56.
- 106 Klein in the end did not submit any works, but he did show up in person at the opening by way of a performance.
- 107 The concept *Statische Beweging* was thought of by Paul Van Hoeydonck and became the title of a series “white-on-white” paintings, *Lightworks*, which were first seen at *Vision in Motion / Motion in Vision*. See: Marc Callewaert, “*Statische of dynamische beweging?*”, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 10 February 1959, page unknown; Jan Ceuleers, *Paul Van Hoeydonck (Drogenbos/Antwerp: FeliXart Museum/Pandora Publishers, 2011)*, 17–19.
- 108 See: Johan Pas, “ZERO in Antwerp in ZERO. Artist-Curated Group Shows, 1959–1964”, in *The Artist As Curator. Collaborative Initiatives in the International ZERO Movement 1957–1967*, eds. Tiziana Caianiello and Mattijs Visser (Düsseldorf/Ghent: ZERO Foundation/AsaMER), 159–172.
- 109 On *Bewogen Beweging*, see: Andres Pardey, “Curating Bewogen Beweging”, in *The Artist As Curator*, 221–235.
- 110 Quoted from the artist’s notebook, 1957–1959. Verheyen is not the only one who wonders about the broad scope. Daniel Spoerri writes to Dieter Roth in New York: “On March 2, there’s a huge amusement-park exhibition of 2000 square metres in Antwerp where anybody who is interested in movement in any form should, can, and may contribute... you’re invited too.” Quoted from: Pas, “ZERO in Antwerp in ZERO”, 168.
- 111 The artistic network that circles around Fontana is much wider than only the movements of ZERO or Nul, and other names can be linked to it like Arte Nucleare, Spazialismo, Gruppo T, Gruppo N, as well as artists like Yves Klein, Jef Verheyen, Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani, Dadamaino, Nanda Vigo, Francesco Lo Savio, Paolo Scheggi, Luciano Fabro, Julio Le Parc, Dan Flavin, Bruce Nauman, James Turrell et al. See: sketch *La Nébuleuse fontanienne* in Da Costa, “Fontana: L’espace infini de l’art”, 130.
- 112 Verheyen, letter to Coutts-Smith.
- 113 Quoted from the artist’s notebook, 1957–1959.
- 114 Idem.
- 115 Idem.
- 116 In that culture the holes in the ceramic also served to hold feathers. In the sketch Verheyen mentions the capital Teotihuacán, also known as City of the Gods, of the Pyramid of the Sun and the Moon; and the myth relates the Birth of

- the Fifth Sun. See: George C. Vaillant, “Teotihuacan and the classical Toltecs”, in *The Aztecs of Mexico*, ed. George C. Vaillant (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 65–82. The artist owned a copy of this book. (inv. JV\_70\_04\_04).
- 117 Quoted from Jef Verheyen, “VAN A = A TOT PANTA RHEI”, *De Tafelronde 8: ESSENTIALISME*, 41–42.
- 118 Quoted from McEvelley, “La peinture monochrome...”, 22. Quoted from Gilbert Brownstone, “Un évolutionnaire de l’art”, in *Lucio Fontana*, ed. Enrico Crispolti (Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris/Claude Tchou, 1970), 9.
- 119 Lucio Fontana, letter to Verheyen, 4 July 1961 (JV\_03\_02).
- 120 Quoted from the artist’s notebook, 1957–1959.
- 121 Idem.
- 122 Quoted from the notes of the artist on the back of a photo (inv. JV\_39\_36\_22).
- 123 Quoted from the notebook of the artist, 1962 (inv. JV\_08\_33).
- 124 Quoted from the notebook of the artist titled *Contre le rien. Pour le tout*, 1959–1960 (inv. JV\_08\_25). The discovery of the potential of mono- or achrome painting, according to Verheyen, followed new rules. Unlike the Impressionists, this painting required greater involvement from the viewer. It was a matter of participation, where feeling is more important than seeing: “If you feel nothing, you will see nothing. Because the big difference between the Impressionist and the current take on light is that the Impressionists view light as ‘to be seen’ and we view it as ‘to be felt’. In a monochrome or achrome painting light must be felt more than it is seen. It is more a matter of participation.”
- 125 In the *Moderne Encyclopedie der Wereldliteratuur* the Essentialism of Verheyen is defined as follows: “As a reaction against the experimental expressionism of the international Cobra group and Kafkaesque existentialism, painter Jef Verheyen confessed his true colours. [...] Essentialism postulates a reality beyond temporality, one that lies beyond art, that exists before and after it. In an ideoplastic sense it follows the path of Plato, Bruegel, Kandinsky, Klee and Mondrian [...]” See: José Aerts, A.G.H. Bachrach, Garnt Stuiveling (eds.), *Moderne Encyclopedie der Wereldliteratuur* Vol. 2 (Ghent: E. Story-Scientia 1963), 579.
- 126 The work *Window or Wall Sign* (1967) belongs to the collection of Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands, inv. KM 117.492.
- 127 The term “anti-peinture” was coined by fellow artist Walter Leblanc, see: Pas, “ZERO in Antwerp in ZERO”, 173–177.
- 128 J.M. [author unknown], “Zero Internationaal Antwerpen: Licht, Beweging, Kleur”, *De Rode Vaan* (January 1980), 22–23. The exhibition *ZERO Internationaal Antwerpen* was an initiative of Jef Verheyen and took place in KMSKA in 1979–1980. It was the second “retrospectieve” exhibition about ZERO (the first one took place in Kunsthaus Zürich) with a focus on the role played by Antwerp in the international network of the neo-avant-garde in the late 50s and early 60s. See: Pas, “ZERO in Antwerp in ZERO”, 157.
- 129 V.d.B. [author unknown], “FORUM 62, une provocante panoplie d’oeuvres d’avant garde!”, *La Métropole*, 12–13 May 1962, page unknown.
- 130 Ivo Michiels, “Uit de tijd naar het tijdeloze”, in *De kunst-meridiaan 1 & 2: Hedendaagse schilderkunst in België 1945–1959* (September 1959), 9. About the cult book *Het boek Alfa* Verheyen said in an interview in *Podium*: “[...] things that truly give the essence of something. [...] *Het boek Alfa* is the best novel I have read. It is totally essential, in atmosphere, and time-less, me-less.” The manuscript of *Het boek Alfa* is kept in the Jef Verheyen Archive.
- 131 The first principles were formulated in Grenchen (Switzerland), during Verheyen and Englebert Van Anderlecht’s visit to Hans Liechti, who would continue to encourage Verheyen in writing *Nouvelle Ecole flamande*: “I would like to spend a few months a year with you to get to know you even better, it seems important to me, also for posterity, to write a lot about the matter of the Ecole flamande, I become more and more convinced that Flemish painters are celebrating a rebirth that must be quickly recognised.” Quoted from: Hans Liechti, letter to Verheyen, 31 December 1965 (inv. JV\_I5\_02).
- 132 Pas, “Naar een Vlaamse Zero?”, in *NEONLICHT. Paul De Vree & de neo-avant-garde*, 46–67.
- 133 The pamphlet for the New Flemish School was written bilingually, together with Paul De Vree. According to a letter to Van Anderlecht, they quickly receive a positive response because of the Belgian State. Nevertheless the “school” will encounter a lot of criticism, such as accusations of utopian idealism and an optimism of progress from which the ZERO movement in general also “suffered”. However, it is not a political battle that Verheyen wanted to fight, but a way to join an international quest, without giving up one’s own identity. The New Flemish School, following the example of the historical avant garde around Paul van Ostaijen, can be seen as a form of Flemish (inter)nationalism. In that context, see also the article by Verheyen’s contemporary Nic van Bruggen, who recognises an attempt to put the Flemish artistic avant garde on the international map: Nic van Bruggen, “Jef Verheyen: Dominant in een hernomen revolutie”, 46–52. This does not alter the fact that, just like the ZERO movement abroad, Verheyen is also sometimes perceived as an artist who deliberately searches for a zero point in order to wash his hands of a charged nationalist past, partly because of his contacts with some Flemish writers.
- 134 For a contemporary account of Antwerp, see: Paul De Vree, “Brief uit Antwerpen”, *De Periscoop* (December 1961), 14.
- 135 Verheyen, draft letter to Marc Callewaert, October 1960 (inv. JV\_02\_06). In this letter, Verheyen responds to Callewaert’s criticism that the New Flemish School was “neither new, nor Flemish, nor school”.
- 136 Quoted from separate note sheet of the artist (inv. JV\_09\_I25).
- 137 Idem.
- 138 Quoted from the artist’s notebook, 1959–1960. Verheyen refers to a text that Van Ostaijen had published fifty years previously about Bruegel’s five-hundred-year-old work, see also: Verheyen *Pour une peinture non plastique*, n.p. According to Verheyen, Van Ostaijen pointed out the aformal in the essay on Bruegel and thus explains a lot about the achrome, or aformal painting: “Breughel’s landscapes are practically achrome or purely spatial, without contrast and of an indeterminate colour.” For Verheyen, the almost silver haze over Bruegel’s landscapes is therefore almost identical to Chinese painting.
- 139 Any De Decker, “Jef Verheyen. Groter raadsel als hij spreekt dan wanneer hij schildert”, *Nieuwe Gids*, 1965, 11.
- 140 Quoted from: *Jef Verheyen* (Grenchen: Galerie Bernard, 1961), n.p. The essay “Die einzige Dimension” was reprinted in: *Ad Reinhardt – Francesco Lo Savio – Jef Verheyen* (Leverkusen: Museum Morsbroich, 1961), n.p.; Paul De Vree (ed.), *De Tafelronde 8: ESSENTIALISME*, no. 3 (April 1963), 32–33; Seide, “Monographie für Jef Verheyen”, n.p.
- 141 Thwaites, “Vier Puristen der Malerei: Zu Ausstellungen von Fontana, Reinhardt, Verheyen und Lo Savio”.
- 142 About Verheyen’s exhibition projects, see: Pas, “ZERO in Antwerp in ZERO”, 159–172.
- 143 Quoted from the artist’s notebook, 1962. As Pas notes, this is in line with the humanist view of the painting as “a window on the world”, and Verheyen thus once again confirms a connection with the tradition of which he was so aware. See: Pas, “Nouvelles Recherches Flamandes”, 31.
- 144 Quoted from Paul van Ostaijen, *Verzameld Werk Poëzie I* (The Hague: Bert Bakker, 1974), 100.
- 145 Fragment of a conversation between Günther Uecker and Annelien De Troij, 12 October 2023: “Jef Verheyen was a real mystic, more like me.”
- 146 Jef Verheyen, draft of a letter to Günther Uecker, n.d. (inv. JV\_06\_02).
- 147 Quoted from Sol LeWitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art”, in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999), 106.
- 148 Quoted from *Jalons et les actualités des Arts*, no. 19 (December 1975), 13. One copy was kept by the artist.

For him, “Panchrome” meant as much as making light paintings in which artist and viewer can *think* of all the crystal-clear colours at the same time, without actually having painted them all. His anti-Mondrianism was provocative but not seriously meant to be disparaging. After all, Verheyen purposefully renamed his *Hommage to Monet* to *Hommage à Mondriaan – Monet* (1970), possibly because of the geometric structure of the artwork. This would indicate that Verheyen was well aware that both Monet’s preoccupation with light and clear colours and Mondrian’s ideological abstraction through esoteric knowledge were modern breakthroughs on which he was able to build in his light paintings. His great appreciation for the constructivist Jozef Peeters, who was a pioneer of abstract, theosophically inspired art in Antwerp during the

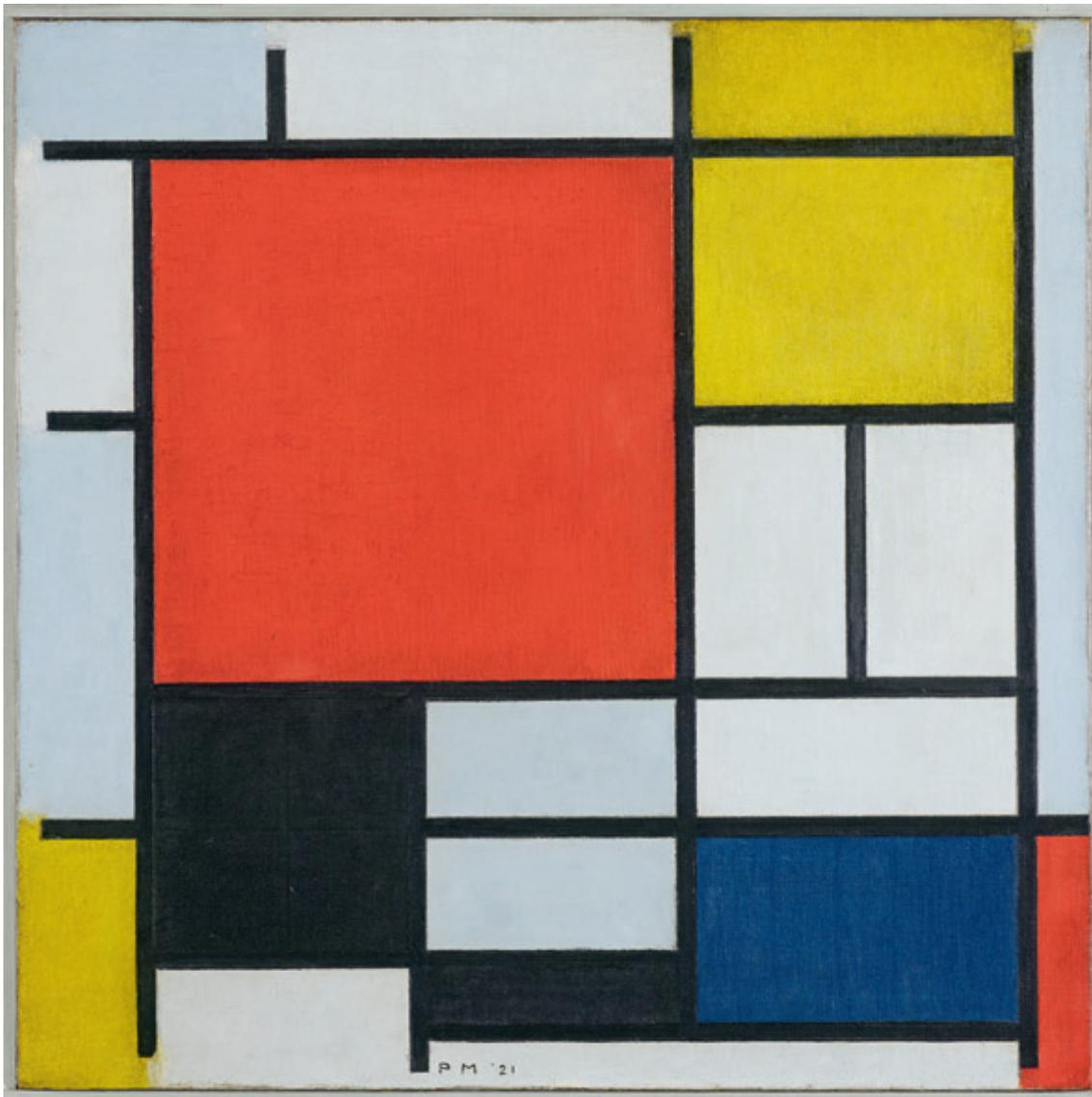
first interbellum years, must also be understood in this way (Fig. 49, 50).<sup>93</sup> In short, Verheyen both bridged and personalised many lessons of his predecessors.

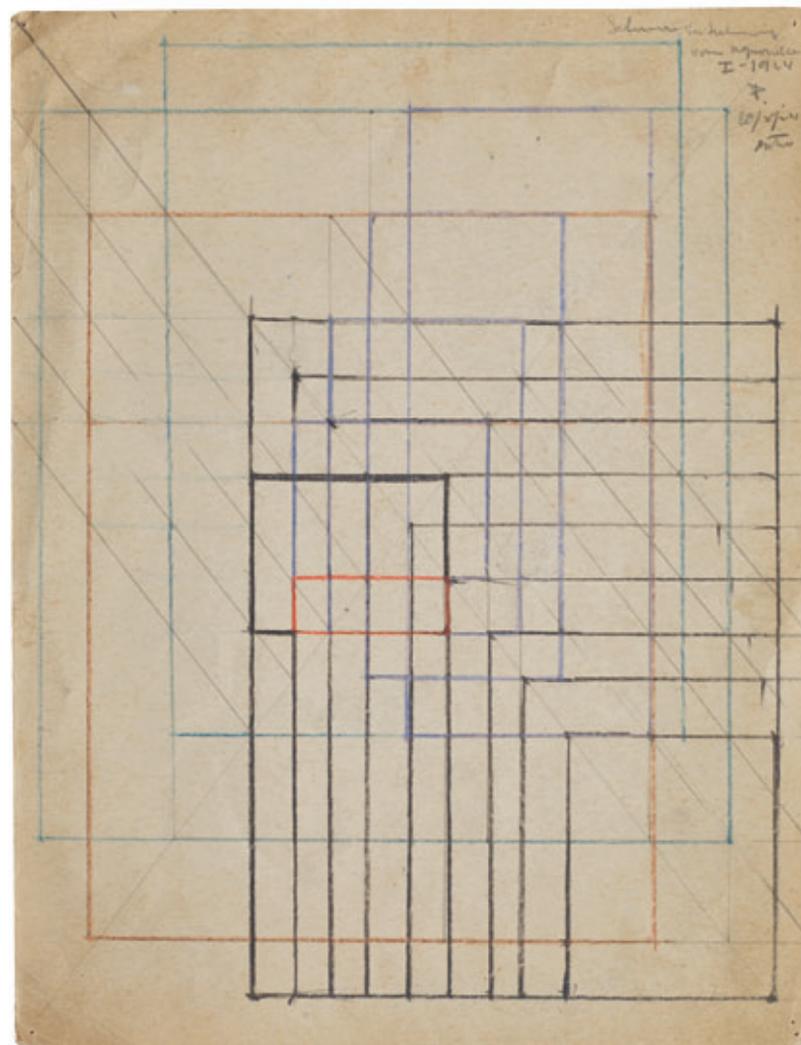
Finally, in the spirit of this treatise on predecessors, the rather playful question may also be asked whether Verheyen’s light can be associated with the later work of the Ostend artist James Ensor (Fig. 51, 52). Although Verheyen never mentioned any knowledge of this late work, he did consider Ensor, for example in the context of his New Flemish School, as a guiding light for modernism in Flanders. Until Ensor came across Monet’s work at the Les XX salon in 1886, he had ignored the retinal art of the Impressionists. And following on from his most well-known and imaginative phase, the one with the brightly coloured mask paintings, he developed – starting

FIG. 48  
Piet Mondrian, *Compositie met groot rood vlak, geel, zwart, grijs en blauw* (Composition with Large Red Plane, Yellow, Black, Grey, and Blue), 1921, oil on canvas, 59.5 × 59.5 cm, Kunstmuseum Den Haag, inv. 0333329

FIG. 49  
Jozef Peeters, untitled, 1958, after a schematic drawing from 1924, oil on canvas, 60 × 47 cm, formerly Paul De Vree collection, private collection

FIG. 50  
Jozef Peeters, *Schematische tekening* (Schematic Drawing), 1924, pencil and colour chalk on paper, 30.3 × 23 cm, private collection





around 1900 – a style that was non-conformist in his time; a lyrical, and to this day usually negatively regarded, luminist style.

The painting *De verzoeking van de heilige Antonius* (The Temptation of Saint Anthony the Great) (1927), composed in mainly pinks and whites, illustrates this radical conceptual adaptation. Here, a classical theme has been released onto the canvas amidst an atmosphere dominated by zinc white pigments. That bright white environment affects the contours and contrasting forces of colours and shapes. Ensor explained himself by proclaiming that while painting the “delicious effects” of the radiant light of “Ostend, queen of opal dressed in iris” he had no room on his palette for “indigestible colours”, only for “soft blues, velvety pinks, extra fine greens”.<sup>64</sup> In contrast to some of the

abstract or abstracting predecessors specifically cited by Verheyen, Ensor obviously was much less inclined to ignore observation, subjective naturalism and mimetic representation. But like Verheyen, the older Ensor based his work on the white pigments as the most dominant pictorial source of pure light. Jos Macken, a friend of Verheyen, poetically reflected on “the all-encompassing purifying White, which opens the world, the full void, mother of all, beginning and end”.<sup>65</sup>

#### Outro

Verheyen’s striking non-plastic development from darker to lighter and away from the material was also verbalised by the painter himself, “The contrast between my earlier work and work today is enormous, the earlier work was less clear, less pure, less light, a kind of mysterious



FIG. 51  
Jef Verheyen, *Brugge*  
(Bruges), 1967, matt  
lacquer on canvas,  
150 × 150 cm, Lenz  
Schönberg collection,  
Tyrol, inv. VER-15

FIG. 52  
James Ensor, *De Ver-  
zoeking van de Heilige  
Antonius* (The Temptation  
of Saint Anthony the  
Great), 1927, oil on  
canvas, 58.6 × 68.6 cm,  
Royal Museum of Fine  
Arts Antwerp, inv. 4003



dark light that [sprung from] my psyche had to be present, now all of that has disappeared and everything is clean, pure, in me too. My aspirations also changed, the light I used to see around me is within me... I want to present the mystery of light at its very lightest [...] Charging colour

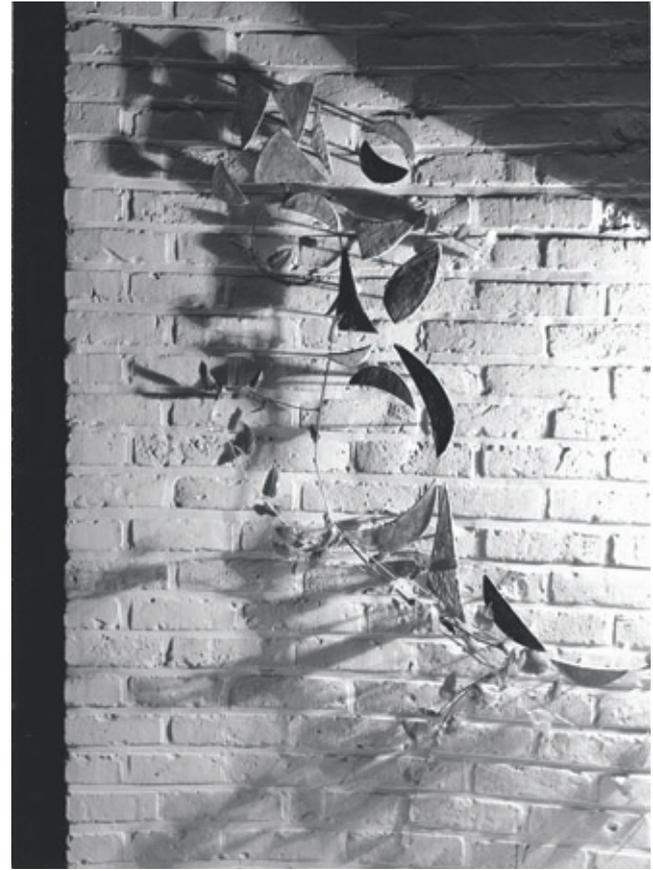
with my spiritual energy, charging in the stream of light, showing the joy of being. The light mystery, ridding the primal forces of the mysterious impurity, against Expressionism, giving *l'action physique* a final kick, away with the personality... Onward with the light."<sup>66</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> *Tussen het zwart en het wit* is an unpublished collection of poems and theoretical notes by Jef Verheyen, fellow painter Serge Larget and poet Paul De Vree. An initial mock-up of this bundle exists (Paul De Vree Archive), but the project was cancelled due to uncertainty about financing. Parts of Verheyen's text were disseminated through other channels, including through the magazine *De Tafelronde*. The title of the collection is typical of the dialectic that these artists used to seek absolute, universal knowledge, philosophical and pictorial essences. "*Want antithese, conflict, contrast is dit bewegen van Serge en Jef 'tussen zwart en wit', een herhaald stikken in het immanente (het zwarte, geslotene) om in het transcendente te ademen.*" We also read essential ideas about the spectral space between black and white and the "temperature" of the colour in: Jef Verheyen, *Pour une peinture non plastique* (Weert, 1959). In the poetic text "HET" from 1962 Verheyen also hints at the space in between these two non-colours: "*Waarom leef ik tussen de dingen? Tussen de werelden van het waarschijnlijkste en het onwaarschijnlijkste? Ergens tussen zwart en wit?*" See: Jef Verheyen, "ESSENTIALISME", *De Tafelronde* 8, no. 3 (1963), 37.
- <sup>2</sup> For Verheyen, the absolute truth "*afnemend licht is toenemend donker*" was a leitmotif. He wrote the sentence in a prominent place on an annotated sketch from 1959 (Jef Verheyen Archive, inv. JV\_09\_175). The term "*weer-spiegelingen*" (re-flections) was also used by the artist, even as the title of a publication: Jef Verheyen, Ivo Michiels, *Weer-spiegelingen* (Vondel, 1979).
- <sup>3</sup> Jef Verheyen, notebook 1957–1959, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_28).
- <sup>4</sup> Jef Verheyen, "On nait peintre comme on nait roi", in *Jef Verheyen. 9 tableaux* (Brussels: exh.cat. Galerie Carrefour, 1974), n.p. In a notebook from 1968, Verheyen expressed this painterly search for the unknown differently: "My paintings are in fact nothing more than milestones (determinations) that show me where I was on my enormous journey into the unknown." See: Jef Verheyen, notebook *Gedachten over het waarom. Vreemdeelingen en uitverkorenen*, 1968, 27 (inv. JV\_08\_13).
- <sup>5</sup> Jef Verheyen, "ESSENTIALISME", 13–15.
- <sup>6</sup> "Essentialism is the Rhythm of life. Interview with Jef Verheyen", *Le Peintre Flamant. Jef Verheyen* (Brussels: ASA Publisher), 5–12.
- <sup>7</sup> For insights into the paint and materials used by Verheyen, see: Jenny Trautwein, "Materiality and Transcendence of Colour: Jef Verheyen's Painting", *Le Peintre Flamant. Jef Verheyen*, 83–92.
- <sup>8</sup> Freddy De Vree, *Lux est Lex* (Ghent: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon), 21.
- <sup>9</sup> Antonino Von Hoerde, "Champs de lumière", unpublished text (inv. JV\_02\_27).
- <sup>10</sup> Jef Verheyen, *Pour une peinture non plastique* (Weert, 1959) (inv. JV\_70\_01).
- <sup>11</sup> "Essentialism is the Rhythm of life. Interview with Jef Verheyen", 9.
- <sup>12</sup> Jef Verheyen, notebook 1957–1959, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_28).
- <sup>13</sup> Important examples include: Lucio Fontana and Jef Verheyen, *Rêve de Möbius*, 1962 (see Fig. 79); Englebert Van Anderlecht and Jef Verheyen, *L'un et l'autre – Ni l'un ni l'autre*, 1960 (see p. 141).
- <sup>14</sup> Jef Verheyen, Paul De Vree, *Nieuwe Vlaamse School* (1959–1960). He himself stated that Verheyen remained "100% a painter" in a long biographical letter to Jean Buyck, former curator of modern art at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp. This letter can be consulted in its entirety online: <https://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/brief-jef-verheyen/>
- <sup>15</sup> Jef Verheyen, notebook *Contre le rien. Pour le tout*, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_25).
- <sup>16</sup> See also in this publication: Annelien De Troij, "The Artist who Makes Paint Dream. The Liberation of the Idea in the Oeuvre of Jef Verheyen (1950–1960)", pp. 16–43.
- <sup>17</sup> See also in this publication: Dieter Schwarz, "Monochrome, Achrome, Panchrome. The Painting of Jef Verheyen", pp. 270–285.
- <sup>18</sup> Jef Verheyen, "On nait peintre comme on nait roi", n.p. for more information about the meaning of Fontana for Verheyen, see: De Troij, "The Artist who Makes Paint Dream" and Schwarz, "Monochrome, Achrome, Panchrome". A solid, contemporary text is: Frits Ursinger, "Discours prononcé à l'occasion du vernissage de l'exposition *Verheyen – Fontana – Goepfert* dans la Galerie Loehr Nieder-Ursel/Hesse", 21.4.1965 (inv. JV\_02\_22).
- <sup>19</sup> "Essentialism is the Rhythm of life. Interview with Jef Verheyen", 5.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with the artist by Albert Baronian, 1971 (inv. JV\_02\_92).
- <sup>21</sup> On 21 October 1959, a critic of the *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* wrote a review about Verheyen's exhibition in 't Venster. He made the comparison with Rothko. Verheyen noted next to the review: "beautiful comparison". In 1980 he drew the attention of Jean Buyck, curator of modern art at the KMSKA, to this historical comparison. "Apparently proceeding with extreme trepidation, Verheyen listens to the voice of his mediums, dwelling for a long time on minimal effects. Mark Rothko, who works in America, does something similar, but in American, very large formats. Yves, the son of the charming painter Frits Klein, takes a small but decisive step further and goes beyond painting." See: DW, "Jef Verheyen in 't Venster," *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* (21 October 1959) and Maarten Liefooghe (ed.), "A letter from Jef Verheyen to Jean Buyck", *De witte raaf*, no. 139 (March–April 2009). Consulted via: <https://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/een-brief-van-jef-verheyen-aan-jean-buyck/>
- <sup>22</sup> Ivo Michiels described the *spacescapes* as follows: "It is, I imagine, a movement to that high elevation area where the spacecraft, just before it is put into orbit, experiences that one moment when moving and not moving are merged into each other, dissolved, over there, in those regions where colour too has ceased to exist, where everything is only [...] dark clarity and silence [...] The light vibrates over the surface of the canvas [...] only crystallisation, no exuberance of colour, but a miraculous, a-chrome clarity." See: Ivo Michiels, introduction to the exhibition 't Venster in 1959 in Rotterdam (inv. JV\_02\_78).
- <sup>23</sup> Udo Kulterman, "Monochrome Malerei – Eine neue Konzeption", *Monochrome Malerei* (Leverkusen: Städtisches Museum Leverkusen Schloss Morsbroich, 18.3–8.5.1960), n.p.
- <sup>24</sup> Baumeister took part in *Monochrome Malerei* with paintings from the 1940s. Baumeister's sense of the original had led to the creation of "ideograms" in the 1940s: floating, elemental forms in monochrome spaces that are reminiscent of prehis-

- toric and transcultural influences such as indigenous African art forms, Stone Age rock paintings, cuneiform writing and hieroglyphs. “But, these archaeological models can only be a key to descend deeper into a primary, lost “Wesensschau” (vision of intrinsic nature).” Quoted in: Brigitte Pedde, *Willi Baumeister 1889–1955. Creator from the Unknown* (Epubli GmbH, 2014), 71.
- 25 During Verheyen’s first trip to Milan (late 1957) he made contact with Galleria Pater. He exhibited there in February 1958. Comhaire had a solo exhibition in the gallery at the same time.
- 26 Jef Verheyen, notebook 1958–1959, 3–8 (inv. JV\_08\_26).
- 27 Jef Verheyen, notebook 1957–1959, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_28). In the manifesto *Essentialisme*, Verheyen writes that Yves Klein’s claim to the invention of monochrome painting was unfounded. Verheyen stated: “Twenty-nine years ago, Paul Klee had already established the principle of the ‘representation of black.’” Jef Verheyen, “ESSENTIALISME”, 13–15.
- 28 Jef Verheyen, notebook 1957–1959, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_28).
- 29 Ibid.; elsewhere Verheyen wrote: “Paul Klee did not want form without function. The inner world he discovered gave the archesigns their painterly value and function again. The momentum towards inner space had begun.” See: Jef Verheyen, “From A = A to Panta Rhei”, *De Tafelronde* 8, no. 3 (1963), 40–42.
- 30 Jef Verheyen, notebook 1958–1959, 21–22 (inv. JV\_08\_26).
- 31 Willi Baumeister, *Das Unbekannte in der Kunst* (Stuttgart: Schwab, 1947). For this essay I consulted the English translation: Willi Baumeister, *The Unknown in Art*, ed. Joann M. Skrypzak (Berlin: epubli GmbH, 2013).
- 32 Thomas Hofmann speaks of the Unknown in art as the “Self-Positioning of an Artist in Inner Emigration”. See: Willi Baumeister, *The Unknown in Art*, 269–286. For an illuminating analysis of Baumeister’s search for the Unknown, see: Helen Westgeest, *Willi Baumeister en het universele Onbekende in de kunst* (Zaandam: Kwak & Van Daalen & Ronday BV, 1999).
- 33 Jef Verheyen, notebook 1962, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_33).
- 34 Jef Verheyen, *Pour une peinture non plastique* (Weert, 1959).
- 35 Willi Baumeister, *The Unknown in Art*, 175.
- 36 Ibid., 86.
- 37 Jef Verheyen, notebook 1959–1960, *Contre le rien. Pour le tout*, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_25).
- 38 Willi Baumeister, *The Unknown in Art*, 86.
- 39 Ibid., 119.
- 40 Paul De Vree, Jef Verheyen, *Nieuwe Vlaamse School* (October 1960).
- 41 Johan Pas pointed out this similarity with Van Ostaijen in Johan Pas, “The Last Modernists – Jef Verheyen, Paul De Vree and the ‘Flemish Landscape’ of the 1960s”, *Jef Verheyen. Le Peintre Flamant*, 125.
- 42 Jef Verheyen, notebook 1959–1960, *Contre le rien. Pour le tout*, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_25).
- 43 Jef Verheyen, notebook 1959–1960, *Krabbels*, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_41).
- 44 Freddy De Vree, *Lux est Lex*, 33.
- 45 Jef Verheyen, *Krabbels* notebook, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_41).
- 46 Jef Verheyen, notebook *Contre le rien. Pour le tout*, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_25).
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Jef Verheyen, notebook 1962, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_33).
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Paul Delmotte, “Foreword”, *Jef Verheyen. Retrospectieve* (Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1979), n.p. At the time, Delmotte was responsible for Kunstverspreiding en Internationale Culturele Betrekkingen (Art Dissemination and International Cultural Relations) at the Ministry of Culture.
- 51 Lawrence Alloway, “Some notes on abstract impressionism”, *Abstract Impressionism. An Exhibition of Recent Paintings Arranged by Lawrence Alloway and Harold Cohen* (University of Nottingham: Department of Fine Art, 1958), n.p.
- 52 William Seitz, “Monet and Abstract Painting”, *College Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (autumn 1956), 35.
- 53 Clement Greenberg, “The Later Monet”, *Art News Annual* 26 (1957), 132–148; Claude Pommereau (ed.), *Nymphéas. L’abstraction américaine et le dernier Monet* (Paris: Beaux-arts & Cie, 2018).
- 54 “Essentialism is the Rhythm of life. Interview with Jef Verheyen”, 9.
- 55 Lydia Harambourg, *École de Paris (1945–1965): Dictionnaire des peintres* (Ides & Calendes, 2010). The piece about Nicolas de Staël was consulted in whole via: <https://www.applicat-prazan.com/fr/artistes/nicolas-de-stael/>
- 56 “Il y a des gens qui regardent pour peindre, moi je peins pour voir.” See: Jef Verheyen, notebook 1961, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_34).
- 57 In the article “Expressionisme in Vlaanderen”, published in the magazine *De Stroom*, Van Ostaijen writes about ideo- and physioplasty for the first time. In avant garde circles, these terms circulated, among other things, through the book by the physiologist Max Verworn: *Ideoplastische Kunst: ein Vortrag* (Jena: Verlag von Gustav Fischer, 1914). See also: Matthijs De Ridder, Ewald Peters and Dennis Van Mol, *Hoort hoort Floris Jaspers heeft een portret van Paul van Ostaijen getekend. Wat wat jawel Jaspers Van Ostaijen portret* (Antwerp: Paul Van Ostaijengenootschap & Walden Art Stories, 2017).
- 58 Guy Vaes, “L’espace Verheyen”, *SPECIAL* 15, no. 754 (13 September 1979), 44–45.
- 59 Quoted in: André Kamber, “Jef Verheyen, peintures monochromes”, *Art Actuel International*, no. 16 (1960), n.p.
- 60 Quoted from a loose studio note (inv. JV\_09\_84).
- 61 Letter from Jef Verheyen to Axel Vervoordt from Provence, 18 June 1976.
- 62 “Essentialism is the Rhythm of life. Interview with Jef Verheyen”, 7.
- 63 When Jef Verheyen co-founded the Antwerp avant garde group G58, Jozef Peeters was given the honorary chairmanship, together with another artist from an earlier generation: René Guette. This indicates that the artist group regarded the then highly undervalued work of these artists as a basis for their own innovations. After Peeters’ death, Verheyen wrote a beautiful eulogy. See: Jef Verheyen, notebook *Krabbels*, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_41).
- 64 James Ensor, “Discours de monsieur le baron James Ensor”, in *James Ensor. Mes écrits ou les suffisances matamoresques* (Tournai: Tournai de graphic, 1999), 80–81.
- 65 Jos Macken, “Voor Jef”, *Retrospectieve Jef Verheyen* (Museum voor Moderne Kunst Oostende: Stichting Kunstboek, 1994), 43.
- 66 Jef Verheyen, notebook 1962, n.p. (inv. JV\_08\_33).



Jef Verheyen in front of his work *Composition pour 5 blancs* (Composition of 5 whites) in his studio on Rubensstraat, Antwerp, 1956



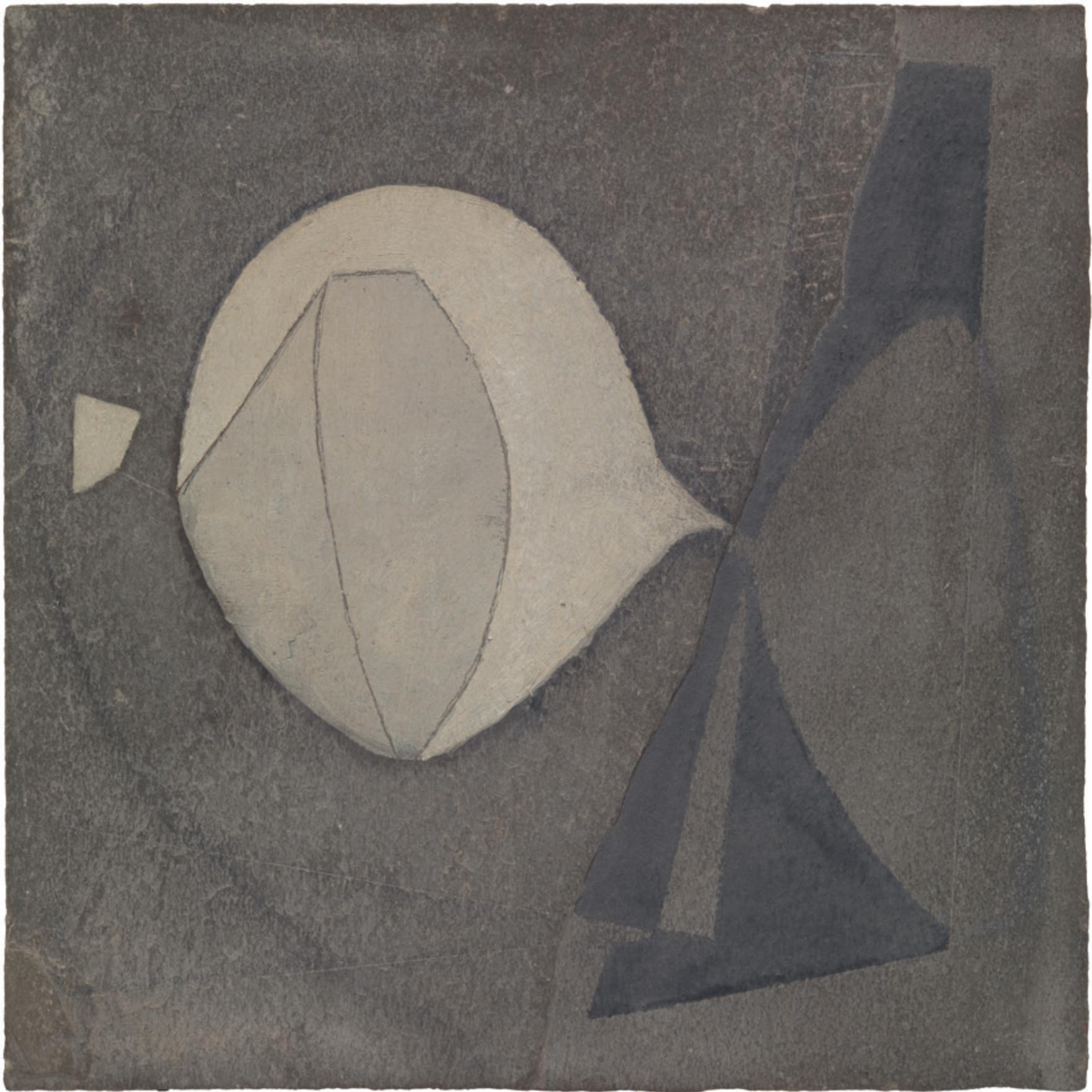
Installation of a wall sculpture, 1961, photo Frank Philippi

Jef Verheyen in his studio on Rubensstraat, Antwerp, 1956



Untitled, 1957,  
oil on fibreboard,  
75 × 60 cm,  
private collection

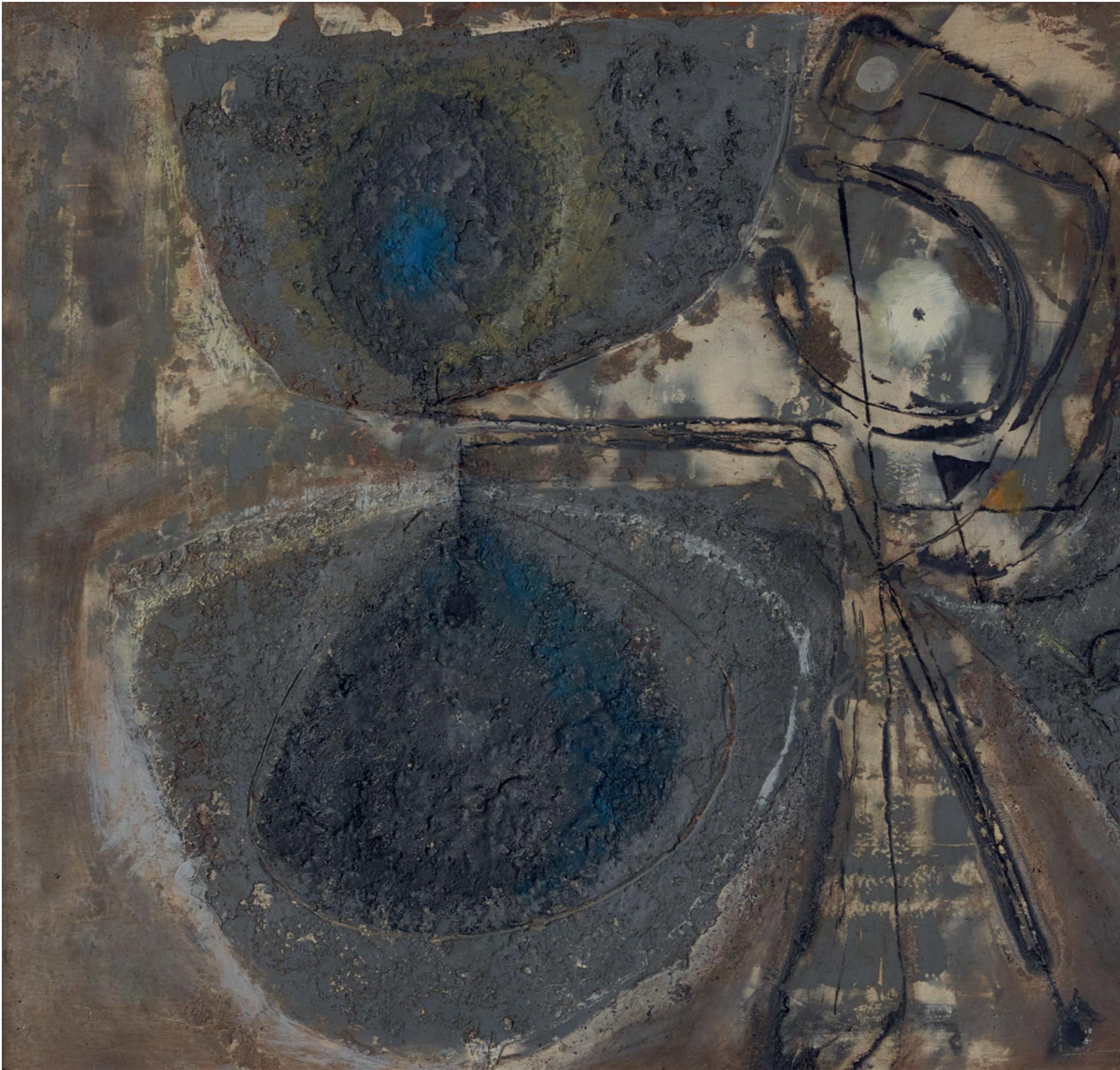




Untitled, 1956,  
painted slate,  
40 × 40 cm,  
private collection

Untitled (*Still Life*),  
1957, oil on fibre-  
board, 46 × 66 cm,  
Jef Verheyen Archive





Untitled, 1956,  
mixed media on  
panel, 49.5 × 71 cm,  
private collection





*Construction lyrique*  
(Lyrical Construction),  
1956-1958, oil on  
fibreboard, 85 × 130 cm,  
Jef Verheyen Archive

Untitled (*Ceramic  
Lovers*), 1956,  
oil on fibreboard,  
72 × 61 cm,  
Jef Verheyen Archive

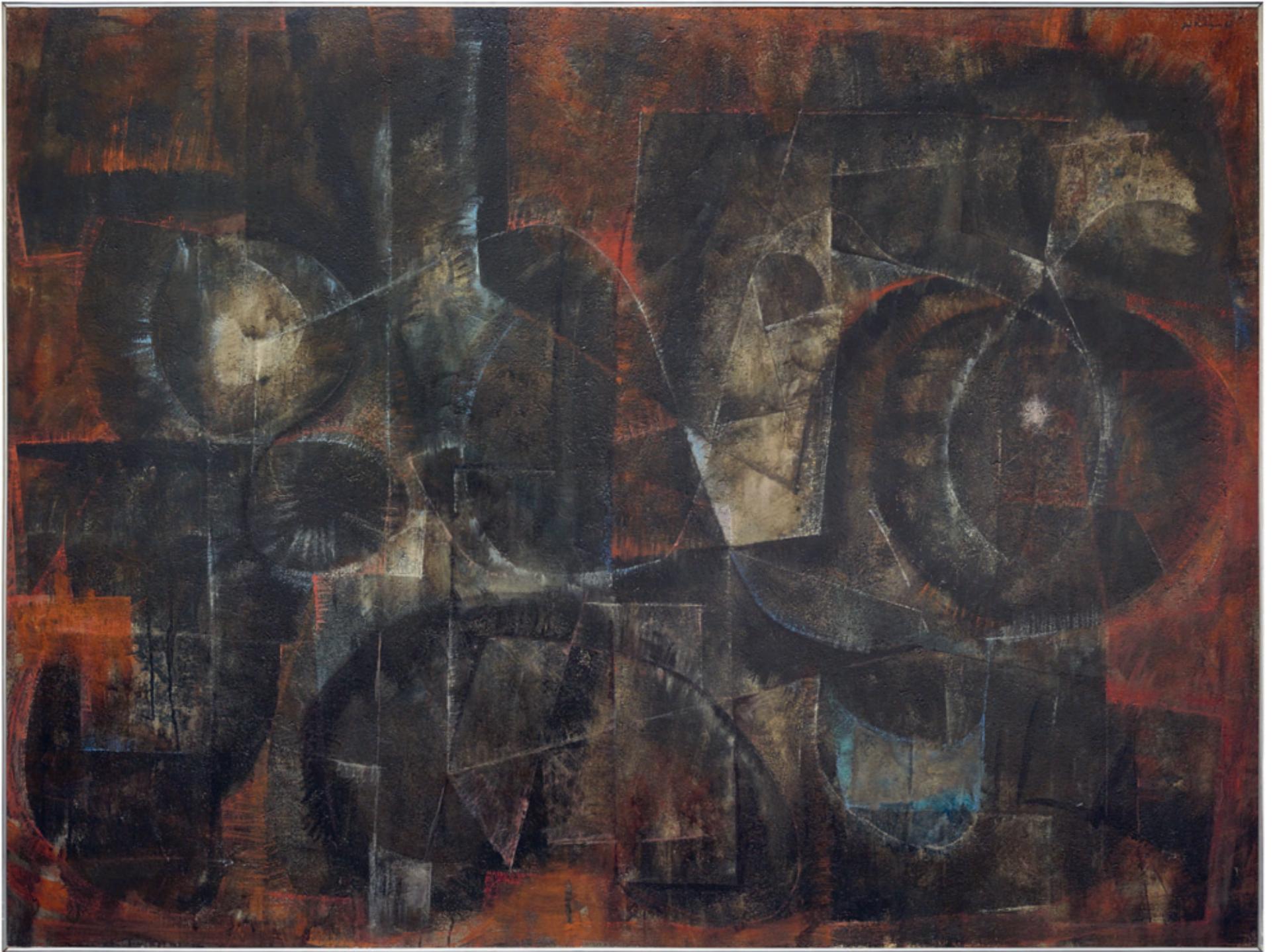




Untitled, 1957,  
oil on burlap,  
100 × 81 cm,  
Callewaert  
Vanlangendonck  
collection

Gianni Dova, *Figures  
on the Screen*,  
1956, oil on canvas,  
113.5 × 143.5 cm, Royal  
Museum of Fine Arts  
Antwerp, inv. 2848





*Aan mechanische  
goden* (For Mechanical  
Gods), 1957, oil on chip-  
board, 122 × 162 cm,  
Jason Poirier dit  
Caulier collection

*Zelfontmoeting*  
(Self-contemplation),  
1958, oil on burlap,  
200 × 114 cm,  
private collection

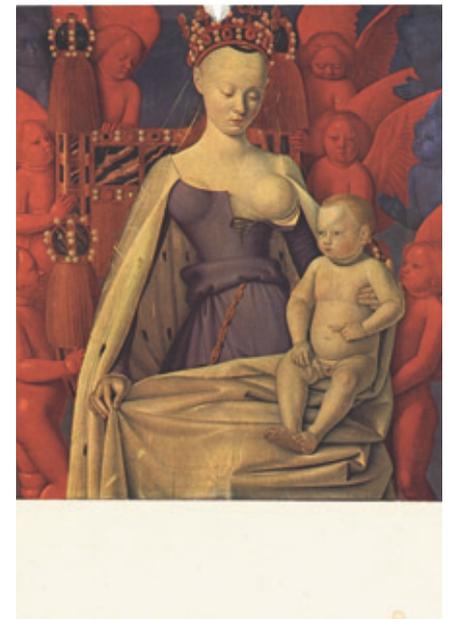




Study, ca. 1957,  
watercolour on  
paper, 26.8 × 35.7 cm,  
Jef Verheyen Archive

Untitled (*Mirror  
Mosaic*), 1957, glazed  
earthenware and mirror  
glass, 74.5 × 64 cm,  
private collection





1972  
Jef Verheyen  
working in his studio  
on Hoogstraat,  
photo Paul Ibou

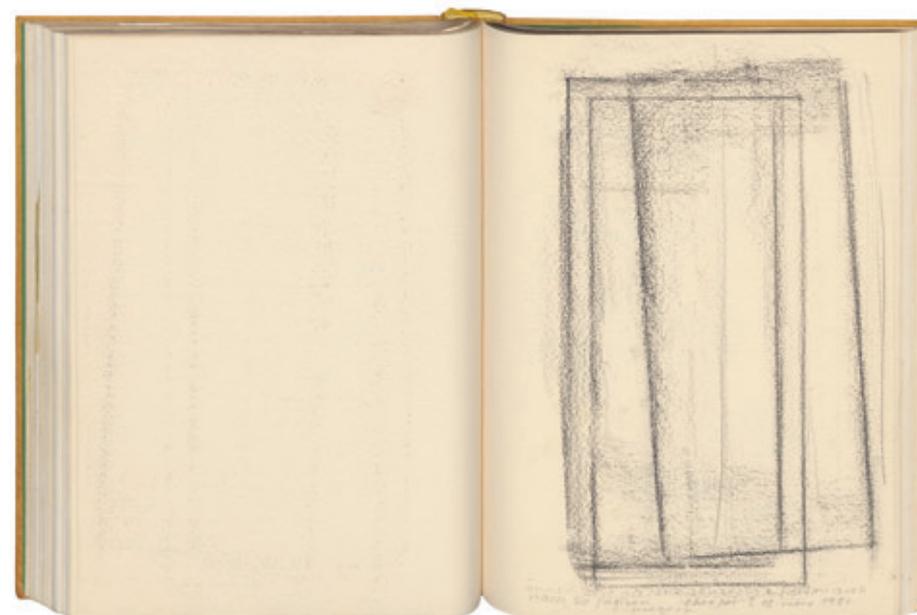
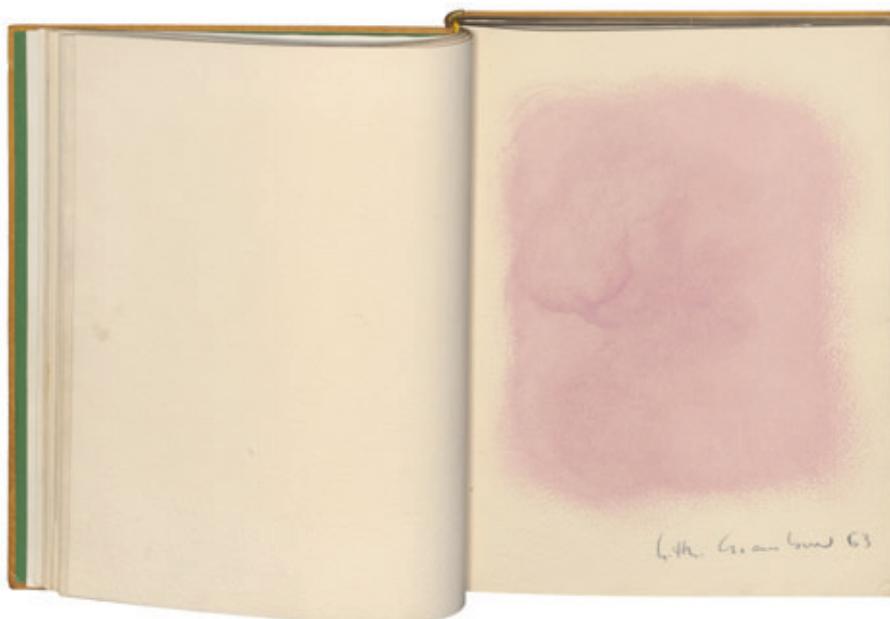
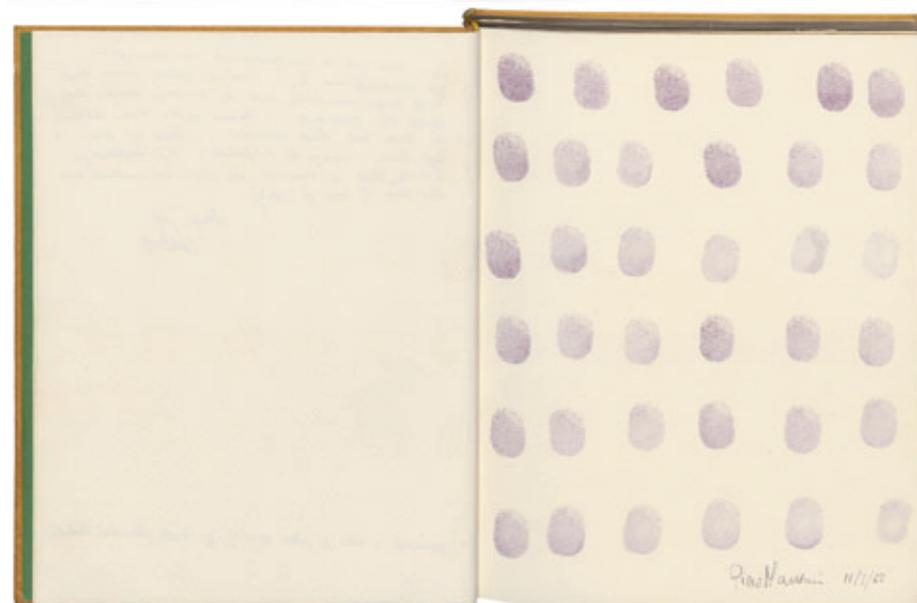
1973  
Poster for the solo  
exhibition in Muzeum  
Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź

1975  
Installation view of  
the solo exhibition  
*Lux est Lex* at Abbaye  
Saint-Michel de  
Frigolet, Tarascon

1975  
Postcard from  
Verheyen's studio  
of Jean Fouquet's  
*Madonna Surrounded  
by Seraphim and  
Cherubim* (ca. 1450)

1962-1984  
Jef Verheyen's *Liber  
Amicis* with contribu-  
tions from Piero Manzoni  
(top), Gotthard Graubner  
(centre, left), Günther  
Uecker (centre, right)  
and Christian Megert  
(bottom).

Other invitees included  
Lucio Fontana, Hermann  
Goepfert, Dominique  
Stroobant, Pol Mara,  
Roger Nellens, Albert  
Szukalski, Blinky Palermo,  
Gerhard Richter, Vic  
Gentils, Nanda Vigo,  
Serge Larget, Rochus  
Kowallek, Guy Vaes, Ivo  
Michiels, Hans Liechti,  
Hugues C. Pernath,  
Hergé, and more.



## COLOPHON

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The publication and exhibition are the result of a close collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA), Flemish Centre for Art Archives (CKV) and Jef Verheyen Archive.

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Editing of this publication  
Annelien De Troij (M HKA)  
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Essays  
Roel Arkesteijn  
Albert Baronian  
Bart De Baere  
Annelien De Troij  
Adriaan Gonnissen  
Dieter Schwarz  
Carmen Willems  
Thekla Zell

Contributing artists  
Carla Arocha & Stéphane Schraenen  
Ann Veronica Janssens  
Kimsooja  
Pieter Vermeersch

Dutch-English translation and editing  
Elise Reynolds

Research and archive work  
Annelien De Troij, Jef Verheyen Archive

Digitalisation  
M HKA / Flemish Centre for  
Art Archives (CKV)

Image research  
Madeleine ter Kuile (KMSKA)  
Eline Wellens (KMSKA)

Image processing  
Pascal Van den Abbeele

Hannibal Books project management  
Hadewych Van den Bossche

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Thomas Soete

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Cover image  
Jef Verheyen, untitled (*Homage to Van Gogh*), 1976, matt lacquer on canvas, 125 x 125 cm, private collection

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And all of the staff of KMSKA and M HKA

The exhibition at the KMSKA will be followed by a sequel at the Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen (DE), *gegen den Himmel. contre le ciel. Jef Verheyen / Johanna von Monkiewitsch*, from 15 September 2024 to 23 February 2025.