

heart

ZERO

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ZERO at the HEART Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art as part of the 7th Socle  
du Monde Biennale from 22 April until 27  
August, 2017.



# ZERO

the international art movement  
curated by Tijs Visser

Museum of Contemporary Art  
Herning, Denmark



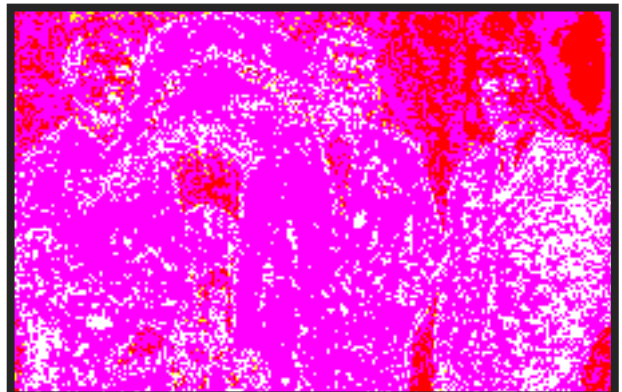
*Nul* exhibition, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1965  
Photo by Andre Morain  
Collection 0-INSTITUTE



Jiro Yoshihara, Hans Haacke, Henk Peeters, Rotraut Uecker, Jan Schoonhoven, Lucio Fontana, Pol Burri, Giani Colombo, Mrs Fontana, Eddy De Wilde, Mrs De Wilde, Yayoi Kusama, George Rickey, Soto, Otto Piene, Nanda Vigo, Alfred Schmela, Heinz Mack, Emile Soestbergen, Günther Uecker

# A Matter of Nothingness

by Tijs Visser



Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, Günther Uecker



Nothingness, as the antagonist of matter and as a philosophical question, has been part of the human world from the very beginning. And yet, it is the abundance of the material world that primarily imposes itself on our senses. The artists of ZERO dedicated themselves like no other art movement to raising awareness of what is not immediately tangible. They focused their artistic thinking and action on what surrounds matter, what makes it visible, and what transforms it—and which is therefore capable of intensifying our perception of the world of things.

Between 1958 and 1961, Heinz Mack and Otto Piene published the three issues of their ZERO magazine as a dynamic vehicle for—or rather conveyor of—their novel ideas. Artists from Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Switzerland identified with these same ideas and were already

so that in many cases they began collaborating with the Düsseldorf artists. Consequently, within a short time ZERO became a European movement from which numerous projects emerged in the continent's war-torn nations. This was the context for the major exhibitions at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1962 and 1965.

Half a century later, the copies of ZERO magazine that still exist have become coveted collectors' items, while the historic ZERO exhibitions are being researched extensively. But there is still a need to familiarize today's generation with ZERO by way of publications and exhibitions, and to make them aware of the relevance of this movement—whose strategies and networks have remained pertinent, tangible, and visible—in the context of other art trends such as Pop art, Minimalism, Arte Povera, Fluxus, and Conceptual art.



Jan Henderikse, Jan Schoonhoven, Armando, Henk Peeters



Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, Jean Tinguely, Daniel Spoerri, Pol Bury, Yves Klein, Emmett Williams

## A Matter of Nothingness



Arman, Jean Tinguely, Rotraut Uecker, Daniel Spoerri, Jaques Villeglé, Pierre Restany

What is ZERO's legacy? Where and how is the relevance of this innovative and international network expressed? These and related questions inspired us to explore ZERO in a research project spanning several years, both collaboratively and from various institution's own specific perspective. The resulting exhibition, held in New York, Amsterdam, and Berlin in 2014 and 2015, extend an invitation to discover ZERO anew as a sweeping and significant international artists' movement of the post-war era. They provide access to current documents and findings on this extraordinary group of artists and their ideas. In addition, the publications and exhibitions provide insights into the political significance of ZERO's international orientation and open-mindedness for the seventy years that have passed since the end of the war—and into the topicality of the creative work of the ZERO artists, who have



Günther Uecker, Otto Piene, Yayoi Kusama, Heinz Mack

been represented at biennials from Moscow to Venice to Kobe.

Just as a number is increased by a whole order of magnitude when the digit zero is appended to it, this project would be nothing without its friends and supporters. The research undertaken by the ZERO foundation received generous support from the State Capital of Düsseldorf, and from the Rhineland Regional Council.

I owe my greatest debt, however, to the artists who opened up their archives and works for us, and who supported and advanced this project with unfailing patience through their ideas, questions, and suggestions. Special thanks goes to Heinz Mack, Henk Peeters and Otto Piene for their bountiful assistance, and also for their visionary suggestions and their determination to keep ZERO alive as a global energy





Enrico Castellani, Heinz Mack, Piero Manzoni,  
Carl Laszlo

and international movement, and to allow it to progress indefinitely.

Special thanks goes also to Holger Reenberg, who invited me to conceive a first international Biennale, dedicated to the international ZERO movement, and link the Biennale to a younger generation of artists, working in the spirit of ZERO, consciously or unconsciously.

One of the earliest to recognize this was Daniel Birnbaum, who proposed, after having seen the historical “Zero Room” at the Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf, to meet and talk with artists as Olafur Eliasson, and find out what the importance was of ZERO today.



# **Museum of Contemporary Art Herning**

22 April - 27 Augustus  
2017



1

2





PIERO MANZONI





8

9

10





YVES KLEIN



OTTO PIENE, GERHARD VON GRAEVENITZ,  
DADAMAINO, HEINZ MACK, JAN SCHOONHOVEN,  
ARMANDO, ENRICO CASTELLANI

PAUL GADEGAARD, PIERO MANZONI, PAUL VAN  
HOEYDONCK, HERMAN DE VRIES, HANS SALENTIN









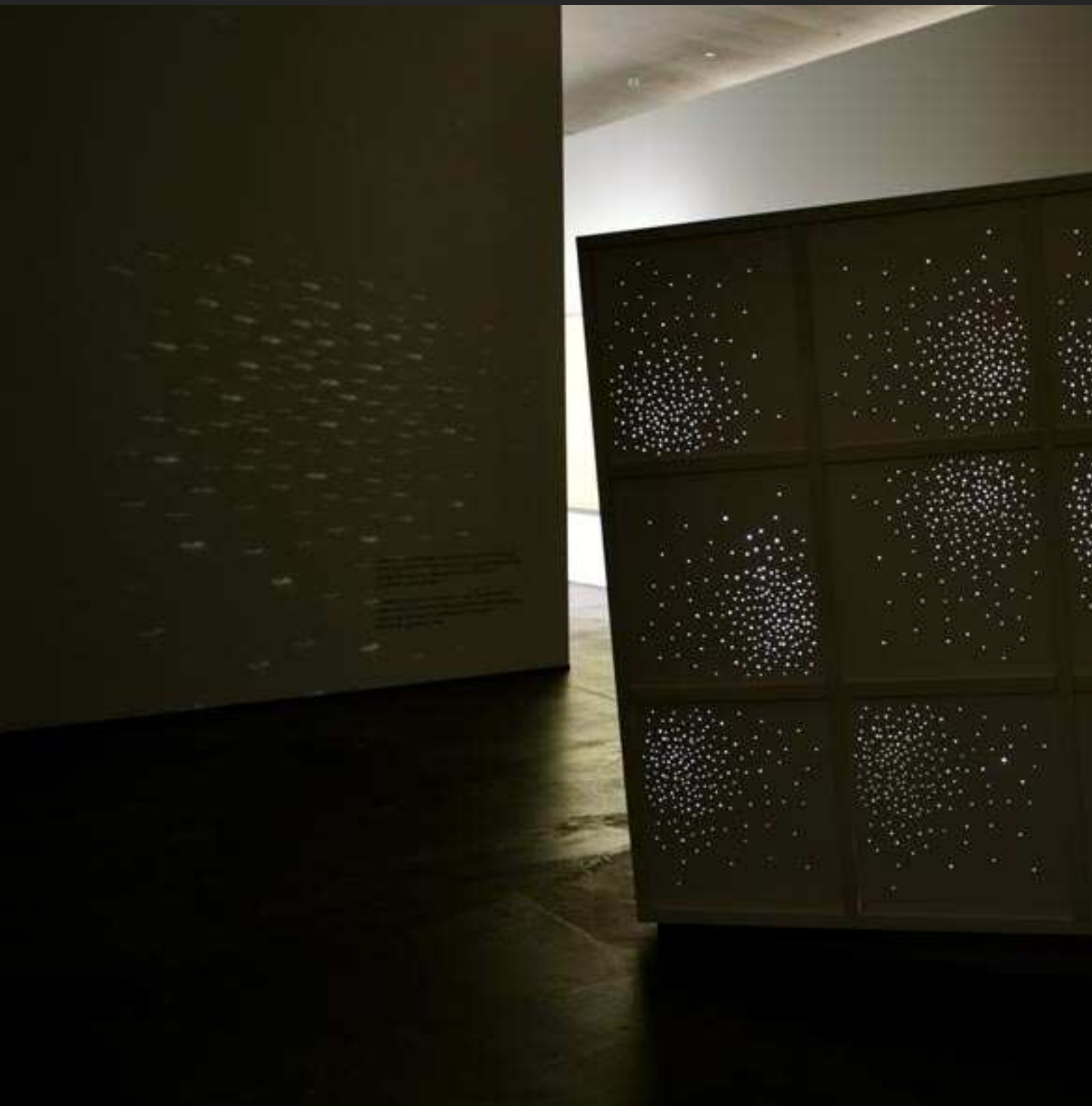
HERMANN GOEPFERT, HANS SALENTIN, HERMANN  
BARTELS, CHRISTIAN MEGERT, WALTER LEBLANC,  
ADOLF LUTHER

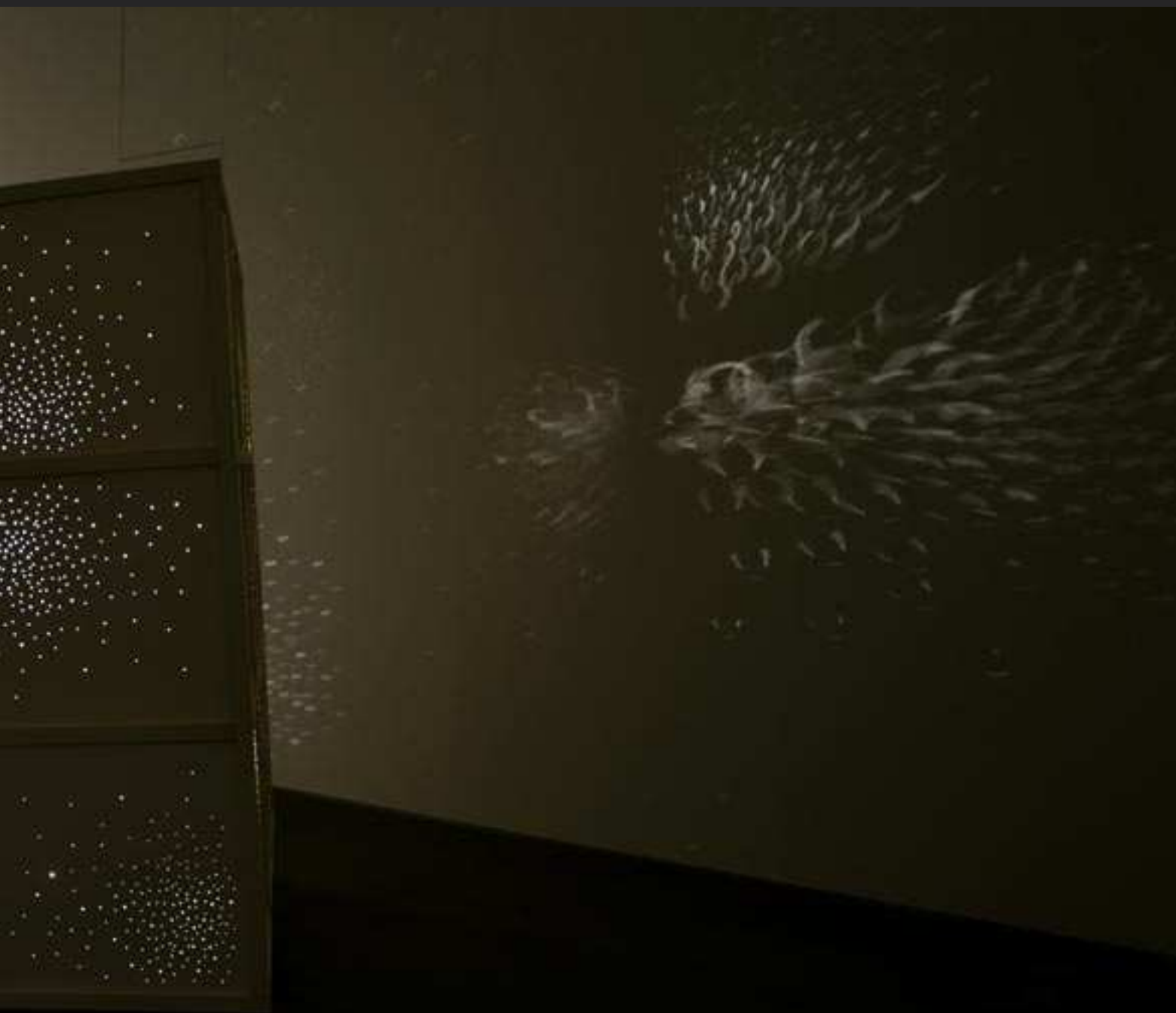


PIERO MANZONI

## HENK PEETERS







OTTO PIENE



HEINZ MACK





OTTO PIENE



OTTO PIENE



GUNTHER UECKER



GUNTHER UECKER



JAN SCHOONHOVEN

GIANNI COLOMBO





JAN SCHOONHOVEN





ENRICO CASTELLANI

GIANNI COLOMBO



HENK PEETERS

NANDA VIGO



HANS HAACKE



HERMANN GOUPFERT

HANS HAACKE

CHRISTIAN MEGERT





NANDA VIGO

HENK PEETERS



HEINZ MACK



HANS HAACKE



1  
**LUCIO FONTANA**  
Concetto spaziale, Attese  
1966  
Diluted ink on slited canvas  
164 x 114  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

2  
**LUCIO FONTANA**  
Concetto spaziale, Natura  
1959-60  
Bronze Ø 71  
Sammlung Rira

3  
**LUCIO FONTANA**  
Concetto spaziale  
1959  
Oil and pencil on perforated  
canvas  
80 x 100  
Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast,  
Düsseldorf

4  
**JEF VERHEYEN**  
Witte Ruimte  
1957  
Paper and casein paint on  
canvas  
65 x 81  
Archiv Verheyen, Heffen

5  
**PIERO MANZONI**  
Achrome  
1959  
Kaolin on pieces of canvas on  
canvas  
91 x 70  
Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen

6  
**PIERO MANZONI**  
Achrome  
1959-62  
Cotton wool on wood

92 x 73 x 12  
Private Collection, Mönchen-  
gladbach

7  
**PIERO MANZONI**  
Achrome  
1958-60  
Kaolin on canvas  
100 x 70  
Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen

8  
**PIERO MANZONI**  
Achrome  
1960  
93,4 x 74,4  
Silk in squares  
HEART - Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art

9  
**PIERO MANZONI**  
Achrome  
1961  
Diameter: 45,5  
Wooden box: 46,9 x 46,9 x  
46,9  
Ball of rabbit skin on plinth of  
burnt wooden cubes  
HEART - Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art

10  
**PIERO MANZONI**  
Achrome  
1960  
White flannel in squares  
81,6 X 121,7  
HEART - Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art

11  
**YVES KLEIN**  
Monochrome orange sans titre  
(M 111) 1955  
Pigment and resin on plate  
21,7 x 35,2

ahlers collection

12  
**YVES KLEIN**  
Monochrome vert sans titre (M  
105)  
1956 ca.  
Pigment and resin on gauze  
on plate  
18 x 12,5  
ahlers collection

13  
**YVES KLEIN**  
Monochrome jaune sans titre  
(M 74)  
1957  
Pigment and resin on gauze  
on plate  
12,5 x 24  
ahlers collection

14  
**YVES KLEIN**  
Monochrome bleu sans titre  
(IKB 191)  
1962  
Pigment and synthetic resin on  
canvas on plywood  
65 x 50 cm  
ahlers collection

15  
**YVES KLEIN**  
Monochrome vert sans titre (M  
103)  
1957  
Pigment and synthetic resin on  
canvas on panel  
22 x 16  
ahlers collection

16  
**YVES KLEIN**  
Monochrome rouge sans titre  
(M 64)  
1957  
Pigment and resin on plate

16 x 42  
ahlers collection

17  
**YVES KLEIN**  
Monochrome blue sans titre  
(IKB 167)  
1960  
IKB pigment and synthetic  
resin on gauze, laid on wood  
73,5 x 28,5  
ahlers collection

18  
**OTTO PIENE**  
Kreisweiß  
1957  
Oil on canvas  
69 x 96  
Hubertus Schoeller Stiftung,  
Leopold-Hoesch-Museum,  
Düren

19  
**GERHARD VON GRAEVE-  
NITZ**  
Regelmäßige große konkave  
Punkte  
1959  
Acrylic on panel  
80 x 60  
Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar

20  
**DADAMAINO (EDOARDA  
MAINO)**  
Senza titolo  
1961  
Slits in painted canvas  
70 x 50  
Museum Voorlinden, Wassenaar

21  
**HEINZ MACK**  
Weiße Wüste  
1958  
Plaster and synthetic resin on  
wood

90 x 110  
Atelier Mack, Mönchengladbach

22  
**JAN J. SCHOONHOVEN**  
R62-16 1962  
Latex on paper mache with  
cardboard on chipboard  
81,5 x 61,5 x 6  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

23  
**ARMANDO**  
6 x wit 1963-71  
Tin plate on chipboard  
78 x 61,5  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

24  
**ENRICO CASTELLANI**  
Superficie bianco  
1961  
Acrylic on canvas stretched  
over nails and wooden frame  
100 x 80 cm  
HEART - Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art

25  
**PIERO MANZONI**  
Achrome  
1961  
Straw: 68,3 x 45,8 x 44,5  
Wooden planks: 19,5 x 51,5 x  
50,6  
Box of straw and kaolin on  
plinth of burnt wooden planks  
HEART - Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art

26  
**PAUL GADEGAARD**  
Achromat  
1960  
Oil on canvas  
130 x 97  
HEART - Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art

27  
**PIERO MANZONI**  
Achrome  
1960  
130,5 x 97,6  
Kaolin on squared canvas  
HEART - Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art

28  
**PAUL VAN HOEYDONCK**  
Progression with diagonals  
1959  
Oil on canvas  
60 x 100 cm.  
Sammlung Rüdiger K. Weng,  
Düsseldorf

29  
**HERMAN DE VRIES**  
Wit  
1961  
Paint and silver sand on can-  
vas  
114 x 138 cm  
Sammlung Rüdiger K. Weng,  
Düsseldorf

30  
**HERMAN DE VRIES**  
Lange draaipaal  
1962 (Reconstruction 2015)  
Paint and silver sand on wood  
315 x 9 x 9  
0-INSTITUTE

31  
**HERMANN GOEPFERT**  
Weißes Strukturbild  
1961  
**71 X 50**  
Oil on canvas  
Sammlung Rüdiger K. Weng,  
Düsseldorf

32  
**HANS SALENTIN**  
Dachziegelrelief

1960-61  
Roof tiles in concrete, zinc  
frame, exterior house paint  
100 x 42 x 10  
ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf

33  
**HERMAN BARTELS**

#90  
1961  
Resin on canvas  
120 x 95  
Hubertus Schoeller Stiftung,  
Leopold-Hoesch-Museum,  
Düren

34  
**CHRISTIAN MEGERT**

Struktur  
1958  
Textile collage on hardboard,  
caparol, pigment,  
100 x 70  
Christian Megert, Düsseldorf

35  
**WALTER LEBLANC**

Twisted Strings  
1962  
Wolf threads and latex on canvas  
100 x 81  
Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast,  
Düsseldorf

36  
**ADOLF LUTHER**

Lichtstruktur  
1961  
Eggshells in plaster on wood  
54 x 58 x 11,2  
ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf

37  
**PIERO MANZONI**

Wit in wit  
1962 (Reconstruction by Her-  
man de Vries, 2015)

Wood, light  
270 x 240 x 240  
0-INSTITUTE

38  
**HENK PEETERS**

Hommage à Manzoni  
1962 (Replica 2013)  
Plastic film  
75 x 75  
HEART - Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art

39  
**OTTO PIENE**

Lichtballet (weisser Licht-  
kubus) 1994  
Holz, Carton, Electric Motor,  
Electric Light  
200 x 200 x 200  
Elizabeth Goldring Piene and  
Otto Piene Estate, Groton

40  
**HEINZ MACK**

Joy  
1965  
Steel, chrome plate  
265 x 18 x 6  
Beck & Eggeling, Düsseldorf

41  
**HEINZ MACK**

Dynamische Struktur (Schwarz  
auf weiß)  
1962  
Synthetic resin on canvas  
130 x 120  
Atelier Mack, Mönchengladbach

42  
**OTTO PIENE**

Pearl Flower  
1965 ca.  
Metal, wood, steel spring  
51 x dia. 12  
Private Collection

43  
**OTTO PIENE**

Ein Fest für das Licht  
1958  
Oil on canvas  
170 x 170  
Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast,  
Düsseldorf

44  
**GÜNTHER UECKER**

Unvollendete Säule  
1959  
Nails and graphite on canvas  
on cardboard, sprayed  
70 x Ø 16  
Private Collection, Düsseldorf

45  
**GÜNTHER UECKER**

Kosmische Vision (5 Licht-  
scheiben)  
1961-81  
Nails on canvas on wood,  
sprayed, electric motor, spot-  
lights  
240 x 720 x 40  
Private Collection, Düsseldorf

46  
**GIANNI COLOMBO**

Strutturazione acentrica  
1962  
Plexiglass  
65 x Ø 60  
Private Collection, Milano

47  
**JAN J. SCHOONHOVEN**

Kartonrelief (wand)  
1964 (Reconstruction 2006-  
14)  
Installation  
HEART - Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art

48  
**ENRICO CASTELLANI**

Superficie bianco  
1965  
Acrylic on canvas stretched  
over nails and wooden frames  
200 x 250  
Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast,  
Düsseldorf

49

**NANDA VIGO**

Cronotopo  
1963  
Varnished tinplate and glass  
60 x 60 x 20  
ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf

50

**HENK PEETERS**

Akwarel  
1966 (Reconstruction 2011-14)  
Water filled plastic bags  
300 x 300 x 8 cm  
HEART - Herning Museum of  
Contemporary Art

51

**HANS HAACKE**

Kondensationswürfel 1963-  
67 (Replica 2010)  
Plexiglass, water  
76,2 x 76,2 x 76,2  
Collection Hans Haacke

52

**CHRISTIAN MEGERT**

Spiegelkette  
1961  
Mirrors on wood  
240 x 90 x 20  
ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf

53

**HERMANN GOEPFERT**

D 64  
1964  
Brushed aluminum plate on  
wood, metal springs made of

polished aluminum  
192,5 x 100 x 20,5  
Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast,  
Düsseldorf

54

**HEINZ MACK**

Verschiedene Stelen  
1960-2016  
Plexiglas, glas, steel, alumin-  
ium, electric motor  
Installation  
Atelier Mack, Mönchengladbach

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**YAYOI KUSAMA / HENK  
PEETERS**

Globe  
1965 (Replica 2010-2017)  
Ø 120  
Handgloves on chickenwire  
and metal  
0-INSTITUTE

Front Page

**OTTO PIENE**

Rasterbild ohne Titel  
Oil on canvas  
25 x 30  
Helga und Edzard Reuter,  
Stuttgart

Not included in the plates

**LUCIO FONTANA**

Concetto spaziale  
1960-61  
Oil and watercolor on perfor-  
ated canvas  
85 x 70  
Sammlung Rira

**OSKAR HOLWECK**

Reißrelief  
1960  
Torn paper  
70 x 70  
0-INSTITUTE

**YVES KLEIN**

Monochrome blanc sans titre  
(M 100)  
1961  
Pigment and synthetic resin on  
canvas on plywood  
41 x 70  
ahlers collection

**GÜNTHER UECKER**

Symmetrische Struktur  
1959  
Nails and plaster on canvas on  
wood, sprayed  
130 x 80 x 13  
Museum Morsbroich, Lever-  
kusen

**GÜNTHER UECKER**

Weiß Horizontal  
1958  
Oil on cardboard  
51,5 x 45  
Private Collection, Düsseldorf

**NANDA VIGO**

Cronotopo  
1963  
Varnished tinplate and glass  
100 x 100 x 5,5  
Archivio Nanda Vigo, Mailand

YAYOI KUSAMA / HENK PEETERS





1968  
"L'arte è un atto di violenza  
contro la società e la cultura  
dominante".



1968  
"L'arte è un atto di violenza  
contro la società e la cultura  
dominante".



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PIERO MANZONI



# ZERO TODAY: HISTORY DOESN'T REPEAT ITSELF, BUT IT DOES RHYME

An Interview with Daniel Birnbaum





**Mattijs Visser:** When I started with the ZERO foundation, I was often asked, not only by museum people and politicians but also by artists, if ZERO really had any relevance for today. This was followed by the question of which artists could be seen as ZERO artists, and if ZERO was a German group or an international movement.

Here is an anecdote that I think is interesting and revealing when it comes to ZERO and their artistic conception. Mark Rothko came to Otto Piene's opening at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York and told Piene, "I could have also been a ZERO artist." Piene explained to me that Rothko was trying to paint pure light using paint, and discovered only at the opening that one could also paint with the very essence of light. So is Mark Rothko a ZERO artist?

Daniel, you have been president of the Academic Board of Advisors since the start of the ZERO foundation. Maybe you can answer the difficult question of what the relevance of ZERO is today, and not only from a given historical perspective.

**Daniel Birnbaum:** If we ask the question of an art movement's relevance today, with emphasis on "today," we shouldn't only consider whether its works are found in important collections, or how much they sell for. We should ask what ZERO means for new generations of artists. Do we find traces of its work, echoes or re-

percussions in what happened afterwards? Is it influential in that sense?

The whole idea of influence is complex, and many art critics and literary scholars have examined it. Harold Bloom's book, *Anxiety of Influence*, tries to come to terms with poetic influence. Not only does "A" lead to "B"—a linear understanding of influence in which something that happened long ago was necessary for something happening today. No, there is also an inverted mechanism: what happens today is also important for our perception and understanding of what went before. This sounds simple, but what does it imply? In what way do today's developments influence our perception of former periods?

For example—to mention a canonical figure of the last century—I would say that Marcel Duchamp was one of the most influential artists of his time, leading to conceptual approaches in art and a critique of traditional notions of the artwork. But as I said, contemporary artistic production also influences our perception of Duchamp's work: what happened after Duchamp keeps his legacy alive. After Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, etc., Duchamp appears in a different light. From the emergence of Pop art on, Duchamp is not quite the same anymore. Our understanding of what it is to put a mass-produced commodity on display has perhaps been normalized through Pop, but this also shifts



Marcel Duchamp, using a “drawing-machine” by Jean Tinguely, Iris Clert Gallery, Paris, 1959

our perception of Duchamp. There are many other examples. The essential question is: Which contemporary figures are of relevance for our understanding of ZERO today? And, on the other hand, it would be interesting to identify artists from before the emergence of ZERO who were somehow brought back into the conversation through ZERO.

**MV:** The difficulty in talking with younger artists, but also with artists directly after the ZERO generation, is that few of them would acknowledge being influenced by ZERO. We both know that Olafur Eliasson says that ZERO’s influence on his work is minimal. And Camaron Robins, his wind drawing machines even look like those by Tinguely, but he “discovered” his work only after journalist referred to Tinguely. James Turrell may not acknowledge having seen a Yves Klein show in New York. But below the level of con-



Jean Tinguely, “drawing-machine”, Biennale de Paris, 1959

scious influence, previous artists certainly exert an unconscious impact on later art practices.

**DB:** Olafur Eliasson is someone I know well. He is an artist who does a lot of reading and research. Many of the things he has dealt with are present but not always immediately visible in his work, maybe not even to himself. I am not claiming that there are “secret sources” he avoids mentioning, but I think there is always a certain degree of zeitgeist you can’t escape. Certain things happened

when ZERO emerged in the late 1950s, early '60s. One can observe recurring themes. I think it was Mark Twain who said that “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” Which is very true, considering the 1960s, with all the experimentation in art, the notions of collaboration, and interdisciplinary work between theatre, art, and music, the advances in technology, as well as experimentation with new forms of communication.

These things, of course, had happened before, for example, in the 1920s: think of collaborations between Sergei Diaghilev, Igor Stravinsky, and Pablo Picasso. It was not the same as in the '60s, but there was a profusion of new ideas—with Duchamp and the Futurists in the background. You can find moments that seem to be connected. One can never prove that there is an inspirational link between the 1920s and the 1960s, but certain ideas that were formulated, let’s say in Paris, re-emerged in a totally new environment. One can find these links.

To come back to the relationship between ZERO and today’s artists: in the early 1990s, there were ideas of collaboration and collective production. There was an interest in the link between art and architecture, as well as other disciplines, in the work of artists that have often been called relational, and others. One can link those practices to the experimental approach

ZERO stands for. An example of this is the total installation room that Mack, Piene, and Uecker created for documenta III in 1964.

In this legendary *Light Room (Homage to Fontana)*, which is today part of the collection of Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf, and is the highlight of the ZERO exhibitions in New York, Berlin, and Amsterdam, there are things that I think Olafur and his generation appreciate. By that, I don’t mean to say that that *Light Room* “led” in any way to works Olafur Eliasson has made. But they have a lot in common.

To complicate things, let’s turn the tables. The *Light Room* was legendary, and many scholars knew all about it. I am sure some people saw this work as very interesting and intriguing—but for years, not many people paid attention to it. Then, suddenly, there are artists like Carsten



Camaron Robins, “Wind drawing-machine”, 2017



Zero, *Light-Room - Homage to Lucio Fontana*, Documenta, Kassel, 1964

Höller or Olafur Eliasson. They stand for a certain approach, which is not the same approach as that of ZERO, but there is nevertheless a similarity in the appearance of their art, with a general interest in collaboration that establishes links to other disciplines.

So I think that, through contemporary artists, the *Light Room*, which could have fallen into oblivion, is suddenly more “present” than it used to be. In my eyes, this idea of retroactive activation of a work can be very inspirational. It’s hard to find a scientific model for this idea of *nachträglich* (a Freudian term), or retroactive production of meaning. But I think it is something that happens all the time. I think that looking at the ZERO artists through the lens of some of our contemporary practitioners today is important.

**MV:** I am still wondering how it is possible that certain forms or concepts repeat

themselves without direct contact with the first instance of their invention, if it can be called “invention” at all. Thinking about Kazimir Malevich, inventor of the Black Square; he also conceived a magazine called Zero to publish articles on nothingness and beyond. Fritz Lang, the filmmaker, invented the countdown for a spaceship launch in his 1929 movie, *Woman in the Moon*. Kazuo Shiraga founded the Zero-kai artist group in Japan to assert that art should develop by itself out of the nothingness, without any reference to history. Heinz Mack and Otto Piene were completely unaware of this when they “invented” their ZERO in 1957. So how is it possible that a Russian artist, a group of Japanese, and the two Germans all came up with similar ideas, almost simultaneously, without being aware of each other? Or is this *zeitgeist*? Maybe *zeitgeist* can travel—not only in time, but



Carsten Höller, “Light-installation”, 2002

also geographically?

**DB:** I would say that there are certain links that are hard to explain, certain forms of synchronicity, or zeitgeist-related things that maybe relate. Sometimes technological or theoretical innovations create new possibilities, and then we find that people in different parts of the world relate to these with artistic expressions that seem synchronized, although the people were not aware of each other.

What I am trying to say has nothing to do with whether influences are conscious or not. Another example is how, when Piene emerged as an artist in the late 1950s, and created his first *Light Ballet* in 1959, some critics were quick to point out that similar things had been done before. Piene himself wrote in his manifesto, “Paths to Paradise,” in issue number three of ZERO: “I only heard later that I was the son of a half dozen fathers whom

I did not know as such.” What does he mean by “fathers”? They did not give birth to him, because he didn’t even know them. It is almost like you give birth to your own parents.

You asked in what sense an influence can exert itself retroactively. The physical objects are there; they don’t change. So, obviously, no one who creates art today can change the physical substrata of an art piece. We are not changing the collections in museums or in the secret archives anywhere. What changes is the understanding of these works. Art is not only a material medium but is also produced by the audience and by its context, by its continuous reading by generations of artists. Therefore, the significance and ultimately the meaning of artworks do change overtime. And not only because we dig deeper and deeper into what they once meant.

**MV:** So we are contemporary archeologists of a sort. We dig up certain historical elements or happenings and bring them forth. How do we decide which ones? You work all over the world with emerging artists: What inspires you while digging through history? And how do you decide if it makes sense for today to reactivate these archeological finds?

**DB:** Yes, what is it that one looks for? When does it feel (and this is a silly word) “fresh” or relevant? It is, of course, something that you have to feel, and then you



Olafur Eliasson, “Light-installation”, 2018





Henk Peeters, proposal for *ZERO on Sea*, to be held 1965 at the Pier of Scheveningen

can try to formulate ideas. What is it that makes something relevant today? I think it has to do with intuition. It is not something you can prove. You can spell out relevant themes the ZERO artists shared, but when you try to understand it, you find things that are recurring. The interests are still there, or they have taken on renewed relevance.

The approach to art that ZERO represents has an interest in the phenomenology of embodiment, in the fact that a viewer is there. The viewer becomes part of the artwork in the sense that the artwork is almost behind your eyes rather than in front of your eyes. That is actually a James Turrell quote: “Art itself is not the technological setup, the machinery necessary to produce a certain experience; it is the experience itself.” This is something that has to be recreated over and over again, because it actually takes

place in the here and now with an individual, singular subject. So one can return to the same old artwork over and over again, but it is also totally relevant that new human beings, who are embodied selves, actually encounter things anew. Perhaps the limit that some of these radical artists are looking for is very similar: the void or the limit where language can no longer signify, or the kind of objectless space where we have reached beyond all empirical perception. We only perceive perception itself.

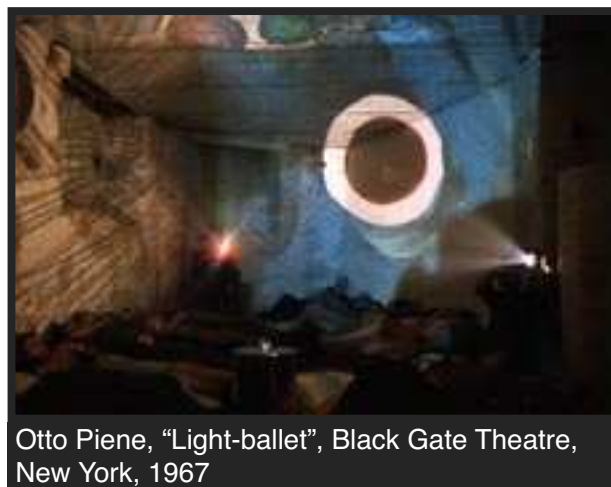
We can find words to describe a certain kind of border, but I think it is not surprising that artists return to the same, or almost the same, ambition, only in a different form, because we are in constantly new environments, new technological environments, and new political environments. You asked me when I found—and you did indeed help me, be-



*ZERO on Sea*, Pier of Scheveningen, organized by TodaysArt, 2015

cause I saw some of these things with you—strong moments where I felt: This is great; this is fifty years old, but it could have been done yesterday. It doesn't matter when it was made; it is of relevance for us now.

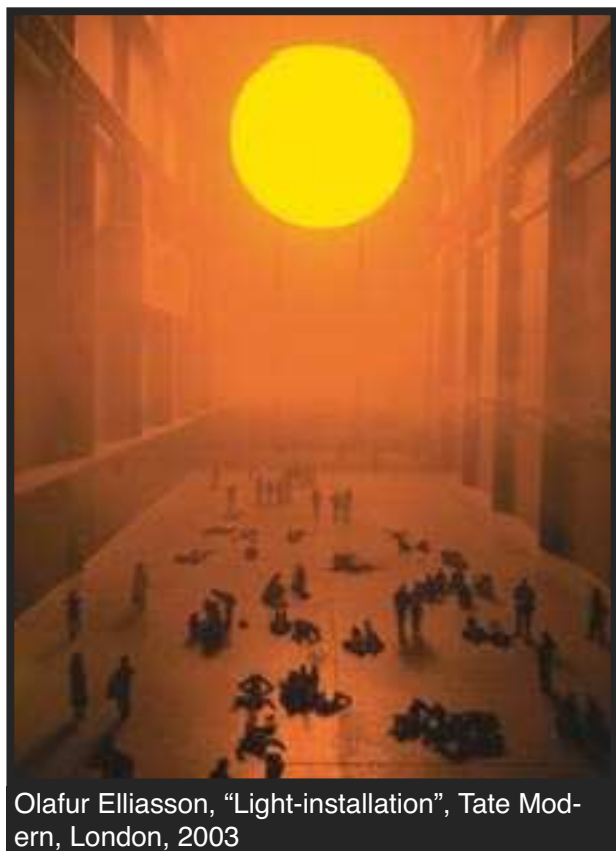
**MV:** We restaged Otto Piene's multimedia performance, *The Proliferation of the Sun*, from the mid-1960s, first in Düsseldorf, then in Stockholm, and recently in Berlin, and I know that we both shared the "feeling" that this "archeological treasure" is relevant for our time.



Otto Piene, "Light-ballet", Black Gate Theatre, New York, 1967

What does that mean?

**DB:** Let's just think about contemporary artists as a kind of prism through which we look at things that happened before. They look at the past and they emerge changed somehow. There is a kind of obsession with the sun as a heavenly body, the source of light—at least our cosmic source of light. I found this obsession in many artists: in Spencer Finch, and again in Olafur Eliasson, for example. A kind of heliophilic drive, almost—an obsessive, recurring interest in the sun as a source, and the sun as a metamorphic body, as the center of cosmology, and as the strongest lamp around, one that can take many shapes. Gustav Theodor Fechner, an early psychologist who stared into the sun until he turned blind, fascinated Finch. Olafur (it is so obvious that one hardly has to say it) is the producer and manufacturer of enormous suns. The



Olafur Eliasson, "Light-installation", Tate Modern, London, 2003



most famous one was *The weather project* at the Tate Modern in London in 2003. But it is almost like there is a heliophilic drive in everything he has done. Suddenly seeing *The Proliferation of the Sun* by Otto Piene again, which uses such beautiful old technology that seemed almost obsolete, with its slide projectors, but was so visually appealing, was one of those moments when I felt: That work could go into any show with contemporary artists who work with similar themes today. It doesn't feel like some old archival piece; it would fit into a young artists' show.

**MV:** Is art a machine to produce experiences for a public? Thinking about Otto Piene, it is fantastic to see people coming out of an exhibition or event and to know they have had a different experience of an artwork and a different feeling. Does art only produce feelings or experiences?

**DB:** One could say that is not such a small thing. If it actually does produce emotions and feelings, I think that is already something to take seriously. I, for one, think it does. Art has to do with shifts in emotions. But I think this happens through very intellectual means, also. I would say that one of the things that makes the ZERO group attractive for many artists today is the interdisciplinary nature of their work and their interest in technology and scientific research, something they all shared early on. Otto Piene

stood for this his entire life. For many years, he was not very visible as an artist. He was a teacher and researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and he saw his work as a kind of open-ended research project. Of course, there were results; there were artworks being produced, but it was also the beauty of the path—the beauty of the research. That kind of very non-commercial, very non-art-market-oriented approach that also challenges the structures of the art world with its institutions, gallery system,

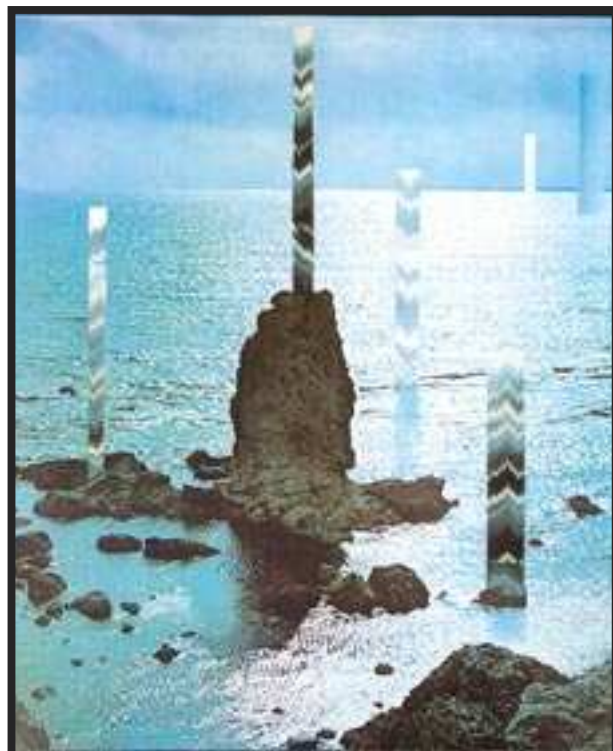


Olafur Eliasson, "Watterfall", Chateau de Versailles, 2016

and all of that, is something that exerts a fascination on many people, myself among them. I think there is a link to science and research that makes the art of the ZERO group special, and keeps coming back as one of the ingredients or reasons why it is attractive to many people working today.

There is also their philosophical take on things. It is not really a given what an artwork is. It is something that has to be explored. I think, deep down, the ZERO movement stands for an exploration of perception, experience, and what art can be—even a kind of open exploration of what the role of an artwork can be. That has to do with the limits of perception, the boundaries of what is in our minds and in our psychological make-up, in our biologically given perceptual apparatus maybe, and what is then added and changes technologically. There are previous moments in advanced aesthetics and writing about art that have tested these limits before, like Walter Benjamin's 1930s study, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. They have to do with the idea that technology doesn't merely add something to our perception; it shifts our perception. It can maybe even reorganize our perceptual apparatus.

This can be found in other, later philosophers as well. Take someone like Gilles Deleuze; he is interested in what it is to become a subject. It is not something that



Heinz Mack, proposal for *ZERO on Sea*, planned in 1965 for the Scheveningen Pier

is determined once and for all, but rather is molded through subjectivization, in relationship to a language, socialization, and technology. I think that, if one explores the ZERO artists, one can find such ideas in their writings and their projects. They are interested in the boundary between nature and technology being redrawn in new ways; it is not simply a given.

**MV:** You mentioned ZERO as a laboratory in which many groups of artists participated with their own laboratories. Do you see any artists today who are able to include other artists in the same way? Do

they include the outside world in their research, in their experiments?

**DB:** It is sometimes more a rhetorical figure than a real fact. But I think that the artists we are talking about, because they are obviously of relevance for today's exploration of art, space, and technology—people like Olafur Eliasson and Carsten Höller—do indeed do what you describe. Olafur's studio is a laboratory. These artists produce big machineries for exhibitions, but they also experiment in a kind of quiet, open-ended way with architects and scientists. Olafur was a professor for a while, so he was able to bring into his studio a number of interesting guests: thinkers, writers, philosophers, sociologists, and starting artists. The studio was part of a big, Berlin-based, laboratory-style exploration of what art can be in society, and what art can be in relationship to audiences and to other disciplines.



Tomás Saraceno, event with "inflatables", 2020

There are examples of collaboration today, for example Carsten Höller, who often refers to his work explicitly as a kind of laboratory. He talks about a "laboratory of doubt." He has done many works about the extreme limits of perception. For example: How can we shift our perception if we wear glasses that turn things upside down? Our brain tries to process what we see, and in the end it all looks alright. Then you take off the glasses and are really confused. That is just one example. But he has done many, many things that



Spencer Finch, "Prussian balloons", 2014



Yves Klein, event with blue balloons, Galerie Iris Clert, Paris, 1957

are about destabilization.

**MV:** But the whole idea of turning everything upside down has been studied before, so what is so experimental about it? Or is the experiment about sharing his moment of discovery with a wider public?

**DB:** I think there are some experiments that very few people know about, and he is testing those things—maybe pushing their boundaries with a different goal in mind. But he does have a scientific background. He is one of the few contemporary artists who would read advanced scientific books, because that's part of his education and background. You might say that he brings this knowledge into another public sphere—a way to look at his experiments that is not uninteresting. What does it mean to recreate extreme scientific experiments in an opera house, as he did once—or in front of a big audience who normally have little to do with



Heinz Mack, event at the riverbank as an homage to Yves Klein, Düsseldorf, 1962

such things? Of course, Gestalt psychology and cognitive science have done similar experiments in a very specialized scientific community. But I think Carsten is trying things out in public in a relatively open-ended and interesting way.

**MV:** Talking about crossing borders, or pushing boundaries: Heinz Mack developed projects for the Sahara in the late fifties, and Otto Piene designed sculptures for the sky. Yves Klein designed a space rocket and Piero Manzoni placed our world on a plinth. Several of these ZERO artists tried to challenge spaces outside of the museum. To what extent do you think they succeeded in landing there, in this so-called other world? Nowadays, we live in this very commercial world, and everything has to be materialized. Do you think it is still important to carry on with this challenge to find other routes outside the White Cube, the





Günther Uecker, "Zero-event", Riverbank of Düsseldorf, 1962

museum, and the market structure?

**DB:** I think it has become a bit of a predictable expectation, or even something that can almost be reduced to a slogan, to think that art that criticizes institutions or the White Cube as a standard space is automatically of interest. But I do think that there is constantly a big outside world waiting for us. It can take different shapes. I am not sure that the ZERO artists were so successful at this, as not many people realize what they were doing with the desert or bringing outer space into their work. But I think we can today find moments of inspiration in thinking about them—we can always find predecessors, etc., but it was brave and new for them at the time. I think they invented it, or at least they had the sense that they were breaking new ground.

**MV:** Do artists perhaps need scientists more than scientists need artists? When

you ask scientists, they are not really interested in artists; it's the other way around completely. What is it that artists look for in science?

**DB:** It is something that brings them outside a kind of cliché understanding of the artist as something already formulated fully—something that may open up new possibilities for the role of the artist. There are many versions of this, of art looking for interdisciplinary connections to enrich the idea of what art and an artist can be. Do scientists need artists? Maybe not for science per se, to be successful as scientists. But I think that scientists as human beings do need art—but that is a totally different question. On the other hand, some great thinkers who have scientific ambitions (some of them have been very rigorous) are interested in innovation as something that is not limited only to technology or small adjustments inside scien-



Tomás Saraceno, "Wind and solar-powered object", 2013



Heinz Mack, "Zero-event", Riverbank of Düsseldorf, 1962

tific theories, but involves more profound shifts in understanding who we are. A younger artist we have not spoken about yet is Tomás Saraceno. He was educated as an architect but was not very successful in that field. Now he has turned out to be a very thought-provoking installation artist using natural science in his work. I am not even sure I should say science: if you want to know about nature, you usually study what scientists have found out about nature. It might be spider webs, or it might be new materials. It might be things that have changed our perception of what it is to be part of nature, what nature ultimately is, and what form and shape it takes. If you see a tree as architecture, it is a very sophisticated piece of architecture, and then you might start thinking about everyday things in a slightly different way. One could say that Tomás turns certain scientific explorations

and findings into artistically interesting situations.

We've spoken about several different artists, but we have yet to mention any women. At the Venice Biennale in 2009, I opened the show at the Arsenale with a remarkably strong female artist from Brazil, Lygia Pape, who was from the generation of ZERO artists. It seems to me that the ZERO movement was an allmale European group of artists.

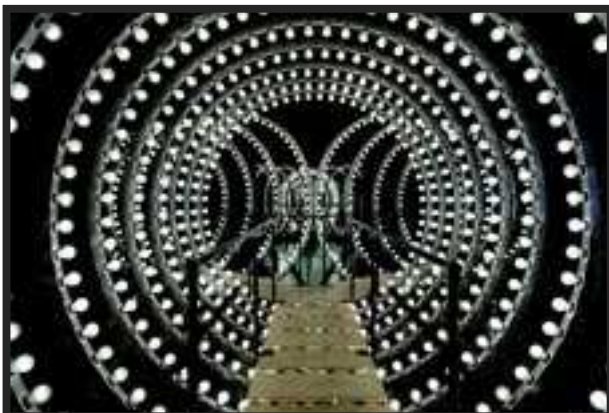
**MV:** Oh no, not at all. Of course there were female artists in the international ZERO network from the very beginning in the 1960s, some of them very active. I think, especially after World War II, if they were not married and didn't have to take care of a family, women really had a chance to start a career as artist. And as Otto has told us, ZERO was not a group with a membership; ZERO had no president. ZERO was a vision, and open to



Lygia Pape, Biennale di Venezia, 2009

like-minded artists. No one was to be excluded.

We recently discovered that Hal Busse is still alive; she participated in one of the earliest ZERO shows, in Otto Piene's studio. At the time, she was making red monochrome paintings with thousands of dots, and Uecker-like paintings with nails— not white, but in different colors. Her work is very closely related to the obsessive *Infinity Nets* by the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. A few years later, Busse married the artist Klaus Bendixen and had to take care of the family. In Italy, the architect Nanda Vigo played a very important role for the ZERO network. She invited Lucio Fontana and Enrico Castellani to do installations in the houses she designed. But she also did independent art work for the ZERO shows. Eduarda Maino (whose artist name was Dadamaino) was from the outset active in the



Carsten Höller, "Mirror-installation", 2017



Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Mirror-room*, Castellane Gallery, New York, 1966

Italian Azimuth group. Yayoi Kusama, at that time already in New York, participated in almost all ZERO shows from 1961 onwards. She did her first mirror installations after participating in an early ZERO show in Amsterdam. Lygia Pape could have been a ZERO artist, but decided after a near-fatal accident in Germany not to come back to Europe. Atsuko Tanaka, one of the founders of the Japanese Zero-kai group, created (with her Electric Dress an icon) a very female expression that is at the same time highly technical.





Christian Megert, "Mirror-room", Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1962

Other female artists were around at that time who were pursuing slightly different agendas but were closely connected with ZERO artists: Yves Klein's wife, Rotraut Uecker, and Niki de Saint Phalle, who was married to Jean Tinguely. And not to forget Hanne Darboven, a student of Almir Mavignier, whose early work displayed a number of parallels with that of the ZERO artists. Mary Baumeister, at the time married to Karlheinz Stockhausen, organized in her studio meetings with and for [ZERO] artists. That some of them did not play a role within the ZERO network does not mean that they are not important for us today. And I am sure we will be able to find more female artists with an exciting history in the 1960s. Atsuko Tanaka was one of them, completely forgotten until I included her in a ZERO show in 2006. Her husband, a conceptual artist from the Gutai group, had stopped working so she

could concentrate on her career.

**DB:** But let me come back to the beginning of our conversation, to the question of why I think ZERO is so attractive again today—beyond the kind of theoretical, philosophical attempts of mine here to talk about retroactive animation and things like that. I simply think that their work is just really interesting to most people who think about art, look at art, and want to experience art. And I'm not talking only about people involved in producing, selling, and collecting, but also people trying to understand how the history of our life on Earth has developed. There are many alternative histories. ZERO is now becoming a more widely known story, or part of a well-known narrative. It is my attempt and my wish, when involved in conversations like this, not to solidify and canonize a certain group of artists, but to remind ourselves of the fact that there are constantly alternative stories. And the story of art is far richer than that of real life. Plus, it rhymes.



SADAMASA MOTONAGA

# Outdoor Installations

by

Sadamasa Motonaga, Heinz Mack, Günther Uecker  
Christian Megert, Herman de Vries

commisioned by

HEART Herning Museum of Contemporary Art





HEINZ MACK









GÜNTHER UECKER







CHRISTIAN MEGERT









HERMAN DE VRIES

## **CREDITS**

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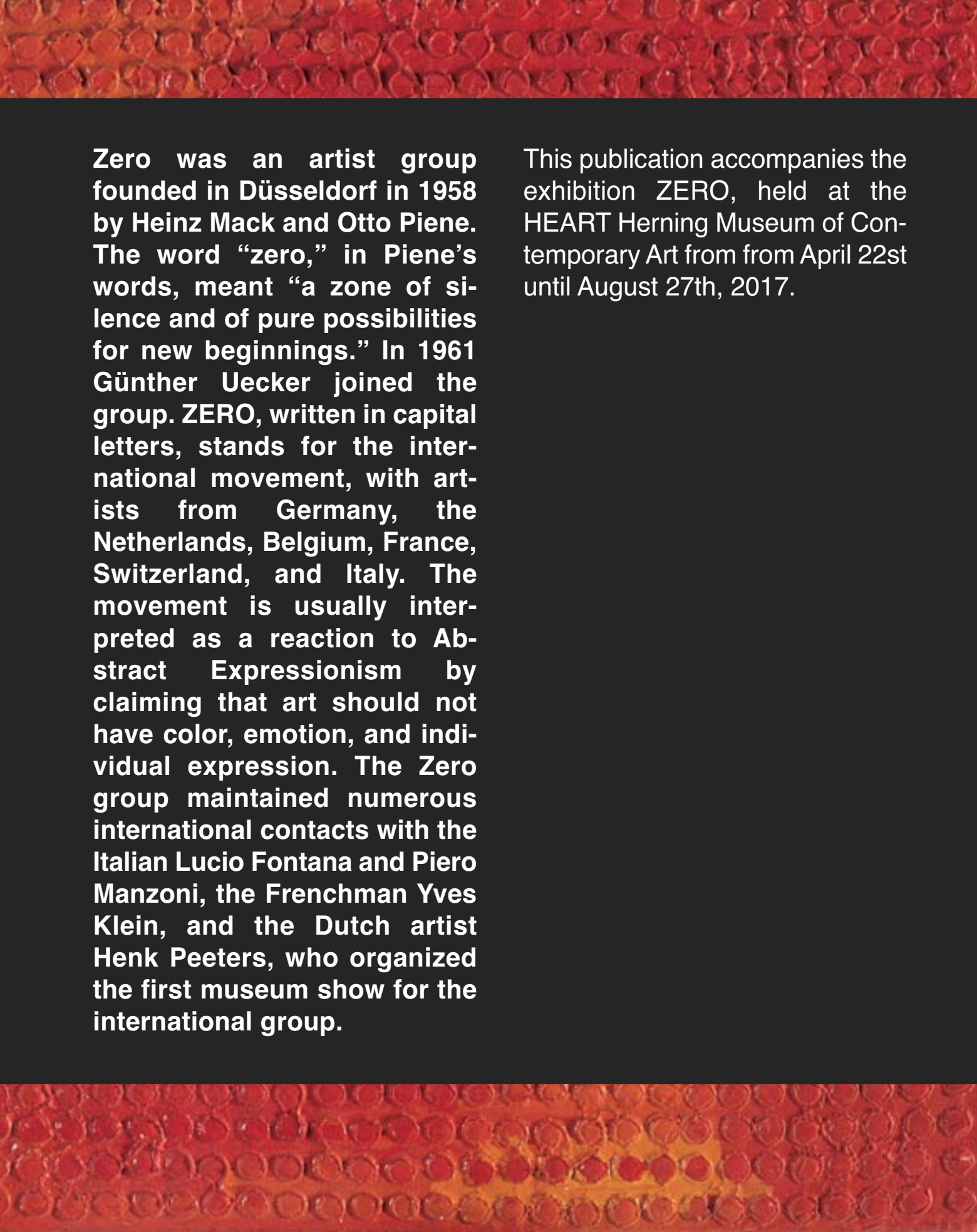
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**Zero was an artist group founded in Düsseldorf in 1958 by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene. The word “zero,” in Piene’s words, meant “a zone of silence and of pure possibilities for new beginnings.” In 1961 Günther Uecker joined the group. ZERO, written in capital letters, stands for the international movement, with artists from Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Italy. The movement is usually interpreted as a reaction to Abstract Expressionism by claiming that art should not have color, emotion, and individual expression. The Zero group maintained numerous international contacts with the Italian Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni, the Frenchman Yves Klein, and the Dutch artist Henk Peeters, who organized the first museum show for the international group.**

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