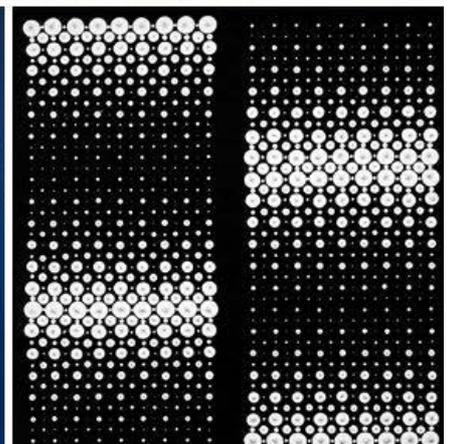


Irreverence and Manifestos: German Collective "Zero" at the Guggenheim

BY MEDIA FARZIN, MODERN PAINTERS | NOVEMBER 30, 2014



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Installation views of "Zero: Countdown To Tomorrow, 1950S-60S." (Bottom, left to right) Piero Manzoni's "Achrome" 1961 and Almir Mavignier's "Convex-Concave II (Konvex-Konkav II)" 1962. (David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York/© 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS)/SIAE Rome Photo: Ellen Labenski © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York/© Almir Mavignier Photo: Almir Mavignier)

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ZERO: Countdown to Tomorrow,
1950s–60s

A black flag emblazoned with the word *ZERO* hangs outside the museum, less ominous than classically revolutionary.

Inside, a projection screen in the rotunda shows selections of films and printed matter from the exhibition upstairs.

The signature image is a rocket launch, a perfect expression of the technologically inflected postwar optimism that

defines the German art group Zero and the larger “Zero network” of like-minded artists, whose members hailed from various Western European capitals (and included outliers from America and Japan). Taken together, their work reveals a shared preoccupation with natural processes, everyday materials, plays of light and texture, and moving parts, both optical and mechanical.

“ZERO: Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s–60s,” which fills all six floors of the Guggenheim through January 7, 2015, was clearly an ambitious undertaking by Guggenheim curator Valerie Hillings (it is Zero’s first major museum survey in the United States). The group’s core members — Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, who met as students in Düsseldorf in 1959, and Günther Uecker, who joined them in ’61 — are relatively established figures, but less is known about their collaborative work and connections to the larger European scene. By focusing on exhibitions and events, such as a foundational 1959 show in an Antwerp warehouse that is reconstructed here to great dramatic effect, the viewer is offered a revealing cross section of collective activity as well as insight into individual bodies of work. Zero’s utopian ambitions were symptomatic of a generation fed up with the emotional expressionism that defined painting in their day. At their best, the artists produced mature explorations of new processes and materials: the balanced play of sheen and matte in Mack’s 1958 *Sand Picture with Silver Rotation* paired here with the ghostly shadows of Francesco Lo Savio’s 1959 painting *Light Space*; the immersive music-box appeal of Otto Piene’s installation *Light Ballets* of 1961 and 1969; or the delicate liveliness of Jesús Rafael Soto’s relief *Vibration*, circa 1959. Of course, far from starting at zero, the artists were responding to a constellation of inherited influences, from Bauhaus pioneers like László Moholy-Nagy to Op artists like Victor Vasarely. But their ultimate allegiance was to the two-dimensional space of the canvas, whether reduced to a single color; roughed up; smoothed down; abused with nails, smoke, and fire; or made to glow, reflect, rotate, and rearrange itself. The occasional magazine burning and flag waving notwithstanding, they were a rather well-behaved and aesthetically minded bunch.

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If Zero's artistic conservatism somewhat contradicts the fervor of their manifestos, the incongruity is exacerbated by the visible aging of their "new materials." The rusting patina of Piene's *New York Dance* 1965, for example, carries the work that much further from the radical anti-art posturing of the Situationist International or the neatly printed multiples of Fluxus. Yet nowhere in the wall texts, labels, or exhibition catalogue do we find any acknowledgment of how *funny* some of these works are: the visceral humor of Manzoni's tuft of white fiberglass (*Achrome*, 1961) or the anthropomorphic twitching of Henk Peeters's chicken feathers (*Trembling Feather* 8-14, 1961/67); the gravity with which Lucio Fontana pokes holes just so in a canvas, or how Yves Klein, in a bow tie, wields a blowtorch, with a fireman hovering anxiously behind him. And what to make of *Tele-Mack*, a 1968 made-for-TV documentary of Mack running around in a silver space suit in the middle of the African Sahara? The 45-minute film has neither subtitles nor gallery seating, as if to discourage the viewer from lingering.

"It looks like wet toilet paper," a young girl pointed out thoughtfully to her parents, on seeing one of Piero Manzoni's *Achromes*. The artist, who went on to can his own shit, would have been proud to have her recognize his desire to reduce the surface to trash. The show's strengths — its careful elucidation of processes, strategies, collaborations, and influences — would have been strengthened by a lighter touch, a more imaginative understanding of its iconoclastic irreverence. But despite a didactic curatorial framework, the works capably demonstrate the unintended humor that frequently offsets the naïveté and grand ambitions of postwar utopianism.

"We had to choose among these three possibilities," Piene is quoted in the catalogue, "splendid resignation ..., prosperity ..., [and] optimism.... We did choose the absurd position of optimism, the 'positive attitude.'" In Piene's remarks we hear a rueful acknowledgment of the contradictions of their stance, and a glimpse of what it meant to be young and German in the 1950s. The historic situation they had inherited — a political context never really accounted for in the show — made for extremely limited ideological options. So with the blithe determination of youth, they found a way to move on, voicing an affirmation and optimism that, given the circumstances, could well be considered quite absurd. Ultimately, the cheerfulness with which Zero took on their limitations is a marker of their courage: the determination with which they set out to bring about a tomorrow they could not envision in any real way, except that they knew it had to be different from yesterday.

A version of this article appears in the February 2015 issue of Modern Painters magazine.

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