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ZERO: We Live

Jane Clark

After the Second World War, many young artists in Europe wanted to restart the world. The scale of devastation and loss of life between 1939 and 1945 was unprecedented in human history. As Heinz Mack remembers, Germany in particular was ‘a kind of poorhouse, comparatively speaking; in the backyard, surrounded by ruins, we were enclosed by a cultural cemetery, an information vacuum that is unimaginable today.’[1] Most of the ZERO artists were teenagers in 1945, having grown up under the National Socialist regime when avant-garde art was labelled ‘degenerate’. This new generation felt an obligation to create art anew.

Of the Zero founders, Otto Piene had been drafted into Hitler Youth, spent 1943–45 as an anti-aircraft spotter and then two years in a British internment camp. Günther Uecker, living on an island in the Baltic Sea, had buried bodies washed up after Allied bombing raids. With the hardening of the East–West political divide, he moved from Berlin to Düsseldorf in 1955 (the Berlin Wall was not constructed until 1961). ‘One could not stand in a meadow and paint flowers,’ he has said. Düsseldorf had been the target of round-the-clock air attacks and a seven-week bombardment in the spring of 1945. However, as capital of the new federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, and with considerable Allied investment, the city’s reconstruction had proceeded rapidly.

The Polish-born Stanislaus Ostoja-Kotkowski was a beneficiary of reconstruction programs funded by the United States, with a scholarship to the Düsseldorf Academy from 1946 until he left for Australia in 1949. He remembered ‘plenty of information about contemporary art in France, Italy and England, . . . being on the border of Germany and France.’ Although Mack found only ‘three or four old books left’ in the once comprehensive Academy library, and there was no exhibition infrastructure for emerging artists, he received a state scholarship to visit Paris in 1950. Mack met Yves Klein through Jean Tinguely, discovered Lucio Fontana’s slashed and punctured canvases at the Venice Biennale of 1956, and saw artworks by Robert Rauschenberg and Roy Lichtenstein in the American Embassy in Bonn.

It's no coincidence that the Zero founders quickly found like-minded connections in Paris, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Milan and Zagreb: key cities in a historical network of trade and culture that is still a backbone of the European Union. Having founded Azimut, their own gallery in Milan, Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni drove an old Fiat 500 to affiliated exhibitions from Amsterdam to Zagreb (then in Yugoslavia, now Croatia: Yugoslavia saw rapid economic development at this time, having broken with the Soviet Union and opened its borders in 1955). Freedom to travel, to communicate faster and more widely than ever before, was enormously appealing to young artists. The postwar *Wirtschaftswunder*, the German economic miracle, meant Düsseldorf was now linked to all those forward-looking industrial centres by rail, autobahn and, increasingly, by air. Düsseldorf was '*eine Welt für sich offen für die Welt*', as one colourful 1950s tourist guidebook proudly announced—'a world in itself wide open to the world'.

Those years saw the beginnings of a federal Europe, transformed politically, socially, technologically. West Germany achieved sovereignty and NATO membership in 1955. It was a founding member of the European Economic Community with Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Luxembourg in March 1957. Just two weeks later, Mack and Piene staged their first one-night exhibition event—with readings, music, performance and light displays. By September that year, they'd thought up the transnationally recognisable name for their consciously permeable collective. And in April 1958, in collaboration with Klein, they announced Zero to the world.

The artists whose work you see here at Mona were united not by style or manifesto—in fact what they've said is often quite contradictory—but by mutual inspiration and a sense of what Mack called 'unexpected possibility' in the here and right now. Art that is neither painting nor sculpture, non-traditional materials, effect over object, playful invention, performative presentation and new ways of interacting with audiences; a refusal to make rules, and no old-fashioned notions of what art should be—all these things were shared. So too an optimism tinged with urgency: the sense that, to quote Klein from the first *ZERO* magazine, 'One must—and this is not an exaggeration—keep in mind that we're living in the atomic age, where everything material and physical could disappear from one day to another, to be replaced by nothing but the ultimate abstraction imaginable.' That tension, still—indeed increasingly—relevant today, may account for some of their renewed appeal.

Of course, for all their radical newness, aspects of the wider ZERO movement were founded in earlier art. The origins of kinetic art, for example, lie partly in mechanised objects created by Marcel Duchamp, Lázló Moholy-Nagy and Alexander Calder (even making an ironic nod to eighteenth-century and earlier automata). ZERO's explorations of light and movement build on centuries of artists' probing of visual perception. The somewhat utopian spirit of the networked groups Zero, Nul, Azimut, Gruppo T, Nouveau Réalisme, New Tendencies and so on, as well as their call for the conceptual and for truth to materials, is reminiscent of Bauhaus teaching in the aftermath of the First World War. Similarly, ZERO's revolutionary spirit owes something to Dada (although there was a major art historical Dada exhibition in Düsseldorf in 1958 and the Zero founders distanced themselves from what they saw as its 'nihilism').

Art as street spectacle had a long tradition in Europe, though more often royal or religious than straight from the studio. The first exhibition event organised by Mack, Piene and Uecker that included the word 'Zero' in its title was ZERO: Edition-Demonstration-Exposition of July 1961, inside and outside Alfred Schmela's gallery in Düsseldorf's Old Town.[2] Streets were blocked off and a circular 'Zero zone' was marked out on the cobblestones—an empty space distinct from 'hardening mechanisms and principles of order'. The third and most ambitious *ZERO* magazine was launched; fireworks and a spotlit hot-air balloon rose above aluminium flags and young women, wearing black capes emblazoned with 'ZERO' in white paint, blew soap bubbles. There on the night were Joseph Beuys (another Düsseldorf Academy graduate), Nam June Paik from Korea via Tokyo, Henk Peeters from the Netherlands, Pol Bury and Jésus Raphael Soto (Belgian and Venezuelan respectively but both Paris-based). As were print media and TV.

Works by the original Zero artists were first shown in Australia in 1968, by which time, of course, the founding trio had gone their separate ways. The exhibition 'German Painters of Today' in Adelaide and Sydney included two monochrome 'dynamic structures' of 1960–61 by Mack and two Fire Flower paintings, 1963–64, by Piene, on loan from Galerie Schmela.[3]

Also in 1968, an exhibition in Sydney included artworks by Jean Tinguely, Victor Vasarely, Julio Le Parc, Yvaral, and Bridget Riley, purchased for the university's Power Bequest art collection. This was installed in the new Australia Square tower by the building's famously European-modernist architect, Harry Seidler, with the kinetic objects dramatically lit in a

darkened space. The *Australian Women's Weekly* of 3 April reported 'Flashing, sparkling, and changing lights, revolving light-catching discs, moving mobiles, time and color sequences transforming fluted or curved plastic wall plaques, modern paintings, even a busy little machine (meant for doing precisely nothing).' However, reactions in the press were mixed, with one critic condemning the show as Eurocentric.

A review of documenta 4 published in the Melbourne Contemporary Art Society's broadsheet in September that year noted Christian Megert's *Spiegelraum* (Mirror Room), Dan Flavin's *Schwarzlichtraum* (Black Light Room), and works by Bury, emphasising the stark contrast with expressive painted narratives as 'pursued in Australia by Boyd, Nolan, Blackman or Tucker'. Where ZERO artists were addressing the very nature of artmaking and artistic experience, a majority of their Australian contemporaries—artists, critics, collectors and institutions—remained somewhat fixated on the abstraction-versus-figuration debate and on what it meant to be Australian.

There was some resistance in Australia to art seen as too 'intellectual'. Or too 'commercial'—in the sense of being new-media, or 'technical' rather than emotive. Many of the European artist exiles who did settle here worked largely in isolation. Ostoja-Kotkowski, already mentioned, had a reasonably successful career but was never acclaimed for the electronic lightworks he exhibited from 1964 (partly inspired, he said, by the shimmering coloured light in Central Australia) and for art experiments using lasers. Although based in Adelaide, he was able to travel to the United States, England, Europe and Japan in 1967 and found in Germany ideas 'so close to my own, that we could have interchanged final results'.[4] Here, he was sometimes judged arrogant or conceited.

Perhaps the most remarkable demonstration in Australia of the international ZERO network's long reach, interpersonal complexity, and lasting influence can be found in John Kaldor's Public Art Projects, which continue to this day. The first, in 1969, was Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Wrapped Coast* at Little Bay in Sydney. Christo had previously stayed in Piene's studio complex in Düsseldorf, a former furniture factory, while preparing to exhibit with Schmela. Uecker and Mack also sublet spaces there in the 1960s and Kaldor acquired a nail 'painting' by Uecker in Germany around that time. By 1969, Piene was in Philadelphia, and had coined the term 'Sky Art': he first sent a performer aloft with balloons in 1968. Kaldor's fifth Project—Nam June Paik and the radical cellist Charlotte Moorman in 1976—

saw Moorman performing high over the Sydney Opera House. A year before, she'd worked with Piene as part of a team from the Massachusetts' Institute of Technology and she believed the success of this Sydney *Sky Kiss*—her finest ever, she said—was technically down to him.

[1] Heinz Mack, quoted in Joseph D. Ketner II, *Witness to Phenomenon: Group ZERO and the Development of New Media in Postwar European Art*, Bloomsbury, London, 2017, p. 261.

[2] Alfred Schmela, a trained architect and painter, had opened his Galerie in 1957 with a Klein exhibition; it was soon a centre for Zero activity.

[3] In Sydney retitled Modern German Painters, 10–24 July 1968. Mack and Piene were singled out in the catalogue as the artists who had 'brought the Zero group to great international attention'.

[4] 'Art and Technology, by J. S. Ostoja Kotkowski as told to Len Porter', *ASEA Bulletin*, February 1968.