

Preface: Encounters in Space

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On April 5, 2019, Peter Weibel, curator and CEO of ZKM | Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, opened the exhibition *Negative Space*, an overview of sculpture from the last hundred years. The thesis behind this amazing exhibition may be briefly summarized as follows: the traditional sculpture broke free from the marble socle and the cast bronze of historical monuments at the beginning of the twentieth century, and, from Russian Constructivism until today, a sculpture no longer exists as a closed body, a volume, a mass, but as a field of dynamism, of moving power, of internal force.

As a kind of epiphenomenon, the interest of art historians has shifted from the *motivation of the artists* to the *motivation for the spectator*. If the marble sculpture has indeed burst into fragments, then what is now important is no longer only the will of the author to recombine the parts but also that of the audience to reconstruct an artwork.¹ Take a piece like László Moholy-Nagy's *Licht-Raum-Modulator* (Light Space Modulator) of 1930, or, more contemporarily, a video installation. While interdisciplinary work lying in the interstices between architecture, theater, performance, philosophy, expanded cinema, media theory, and fine art has been widely discussed over the last fifty years,² the ZERO movement

has been greatly under-represented in these conversations, both as a result of their rather short-lived reputation among US art critics and the fact that most modern and postmodern art theory was written after the mid-1960s.³ An attempt to fill this lacuna is one of the reasons behind *Between the Viewer and the Work: Encounters in Space*.

A second motivation for this publication is the observation that it was in 1958 that Allan Kaprow used the term "happening" for the first time to describe his ideas about the participation of the audience in his art, without using words such as "theater," "performance," "game," or "total art."⁴ That same year the ZERO artists Heinz Mack and Otto Piene published the magazine *ZERO 2 (Vibration)* and organized, on October 2, the evening exhibition *Vibration* in their Düsseldorf studio building on Gladbacher Strasse 69. Although the audience was not part of an installation, they were surrounded by artworks organized around grids and patterns. In none of the paintings could be found a subjective artist's ego as with the Informel, and in none of the paintings was there a hierarchy within a single image. While Kaprow gave the audience an instruction to act, ZERO gave them entry to a loss of orientation by looking at art. Yet both—as much Kaprow as the ZERO

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- 1 I described the terms and theory of "art" and "aesthetics" in detail following the theories of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Herbert Read, Immanuel Kant, Gerhard Gamm, Umberto Eco, Pierre Bourdieu, Arthur C. Danto, David Hume, Wieland Schmied, Franz von Kutschera, Ernesto Grassi, and the "rhetoric" of Aristotle in my publication *Ethik und Ästhetik der Werbung: Phänomenologie eines Skandals* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 149–82. My point is that art always needs a profound understanding and an ethical awareness of the audience.
 - 2 Just thinking of authors like Charles Jencks, Jean-François Lyotard, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Judith Butler, John Austin, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Rosalind Kraus, Jean Baudrillard, Henri Lefebvre, George Maciunas, Gene Youngblood, Peter Weibel, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Friedrich Kittler, Peter Burger, and so on et al.
 - 3 See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (2003), trans. Jeff Fort (Minnesota and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
 - 4 See Philip Ursprung, *Grenzen der Kunst. Allan Kaprow und das Happening; Robert Smithson und die Land Art* (Munich: Schreiber, 2003), 43.

artists—removed *the genius artist's ego from the reception of art*.⁵

Also in 1958, Guy Debord published in Paris the pamphlet *Nouveau théâtre d'opérations dans la culture*. He proposed arranging situations involving artists and a completely unknown, random, and unaware public. He also planned to film the situations for an archive.⁶ In the rather opposite direction, the Zero artists Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, and Günther Uecker were invited in 1962 by Gerd Winkler to take part in a documentary film, for which they organized a great event at the Rheinwiesen in Düsseldorf.⁷ As with Debord's ideas, ZERO art and events on the shore of the Rhine were attractive to "nearly a thousand visitors, who stayed until well past midnight."⁸

The European postwar avant-garde abandoned the art space, galleries, museums, and studios very early on in order to make the *daily environment the playing field for their interventions and public performances*. And the following aspect is also new: between the art and the viewer you no longer find the art institution, but public space.⁹ It is this change that provides a third aspect for scrutiny with respect to ZERO art between the artist and the viewer.

Let me present a fourth and final argument as to why a theme such as *Between the Viewer and the Work: Encounters in Space* is worthy of discussion. In 1959, while driving in a car from Antwerp to Düsseldorf, Yves Klein, Heinz Mack, and Otto Piene talked about their upcoming plans. Otto Piene recounted this episode in an exhibition cat-

alogue for the Galerie Seide, published in 1960: "I suggested that parachuting should be an exercise that is performed nearly every day, with the goal of empowering people to control, or at least to influence, the period of hovering in the air as they wish, so that they do not simply endure this state, but are in a position to achieve it consciously and deliberately. ... Yves Klein said that this agrees well with his view that people must develop the ability to fly on their own, without technical aids, above all by developing enhanced sensitivity. ... Heinz Mack suggested building a construction which would allow people to move like a pendulum or rotate. It would thus neutralize the normal sense of statics and call forth a new 'equilibrium' and with it, a new attitude to life."¹⁰

The ZERO movement dreamed of shaping natural forces like clouds, air, or gravity as one would a sculpture, of painting the earth like a canvas.

"They ask: can the project be realized?/I answer: yes!" With these words begins Heinz Mack's 1959 written concept "The Sahara Project."¹¹ Although the artist was absolutely sure about this from the outset, many art historians, up to and including those of the present day, refer to the Sahara Project as utopian and ZERO art as a utopian idea. The word "utopia" derives from the Greek and means "no (or not) place": a place that does not exist in reality. For Expressionism, Futurism, and Surrealism, for example, outer space was never-never land, a fantastical idea. Yet after World War II, that changed: descriptions of the macrocosm

5 See Umberto Eco, "Form as Social Commitment," in *The Open Work* (1962), trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 122–57; Jürgen Claus, *Expansion der Kunst* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1970), 20–24; Laszlo Glozer, *Westkunst. Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, exh. cat. Museen der Stadt Köln (Cologne: DuMont, 1981), 217–33.

6 See Roberto Ohrt, *Phantom Avantgarde*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Edition Nautilus; Berlin: Lukas & Sternberg, 1997), 175; Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa, eds., *Situationists: Art, Politics, Urbanism*, exh. cat. Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (Barcelona: Actar, 1996).

7 See Dirk Pörschmann, "'M.P.U.E.' Dynamo for ZERO: The Artist-Curators Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, and Günther Uecker," in *The Artist as Curator: Collaborative Initiatives in the International Zero Movement*, ed. Tiziana Caianiello and Mattijs Visser (Ghent: AsaMER; Düsseldorf: ZERO Foundation, 2015), 35.

8 Ibid.

9 The very first have been the Gutai movement in Japan. In 1955 they showed outside in the "Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Mid-Summer Burning Sun," Ashiya Park, 1955. See *Gutai: The Spirit of an Era*, exh. cat. National Art Center Tokyo (Tokyo: National Art Center, 2012).

10 Otto Piene, "Vergangenes—Gegenwärtiges—Zukünftiges," in *Das Einfache, das schwer zu machen ist*, exh. cat. Galerie Seide (Hannover: Galerie Seide, 1960), n.p./Nachlass Otto Piene, ZERO foundation. Translated by Gloria Custance.

11 Heinz Mack, "The Sahara Project," trans. Rory Spry, *ZERO*, no. 3 (1961), n.p.

and microcosm were no longer restricted to the imagination and science fiction novels; they had become research fields of science that, with advances in technology and information systems, extended human perception into outer space.

The avant-garde art of the late 1950s recognized this and applied it consequentially. The former concept of spaces, including the spaces of museums and art galleries, were regarded as merely special examples of a space that was universal. Günther Uecker expanded the number of objects that could be shaped by art, and so the street in front of the gallery became a kind of objet d'art, just like a stool or a piano, albeit with far larger dimensions. A film or a documentary could also be shaped by art.

The *Encounters in Space* could also literally be: *art and natural science both make their research on the Earth, about the Earth.*¹²

As the culmination of the conference *Between the Viewer and the Work: Encounters in Space*, this publication marks the beginning of an ongoing discussion about ZERO art. We are very much looking forward to continuing this discussion about what happened in the space between the audience and the art.

Before I thank all the people who so generously provided their invaluable assistance for the event *ZERO: Please turn!*—the conference was a part of it—I would like to first thank the founders of the ZERO foundation: Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, and Günther Uecker, their families, the city of Düsseldorf, and the foundation's board of directors: Chairperson Friderike Bagel, Claus Gielisch, Felix Krämer, Harry Schmitz, and Jürgen Wilhelm. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Friends of the Düsseldorf ZERO foundation. Without friends life would not be half as good. Very heartfelt thanks go to Hubertus Schoeller, the chairperson, and all the ZERO friends.

I sincerely thank Mayor Thomas Geisel and Head of Cultural Affairs Hans-Georg Lohe of the City of Düsseldorf for their support over the last eleven

years and the exceptional assistance for the ZERO Weekend. The Ministry of Culture and Science of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia has made it possible for us to exhibit the work of young artists around Hüttenstrasse and the Fürstenplatz. For this, I would like to express our warmest thanks to Minister Isabel Pfeiffer-Poensgen. Warmest thanks also go to the Kunststiftung NRW. I am well aware that the Kunststiftung NRW only supports projects that meet their exacting standards, so we are grateful for the confidence they placed in us, and we thank President Fritz Behrens and Secretary General Ursula Sinnreich.

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Many thanks also to the speakers and writers: keynote speaker Julia Robinson, Cornelia Escher, Zabet Patterson, Seth Riskin, Ulli Seegers, and Luke Skrebowski. Also to Johan Pas and Margriet Schavemaker who skillfully chaired the conference sessions. Big thanks go to Francesca Pola for the film premiere of *Piero Manzoni and ZERO: A European Creative Region*.

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Last but not least, I would like to thank the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, its chancellor Jörn Hohenhaus, and Professor Robert Fleck for the opportunity to hold our meeting at the academy on October 18–19, 2018, in the place where nearly seventy years ago three young students—Mack, Piene, and Uecker—began their studies, never dreaming of how successful they would all become.

12 See *Kunstforum* 85, "Kunst und Wissenschaft" (October 1986); Horst Bredekamp, "Die Kunstakademie als Ort spielerischen Austauschs (1993)," in *Bilder bewegen. Von der Kunstakademie zum Endspiel* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2007), 121–35; Martin Kemp, *Bilderwissen. Die Anschaulichkeit naturwissenschaftlicher Phänomene* (Cologne: DuMont, 2003); Barbara Könches and Peter Weibel, eds., *unSICHTBARes. Kunst-Wissenschaft* (Bern: Benteli, 2005).