

Introduction: Please Turn ...

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The conference *Between the Viewer and the Work: Encounters in Space* took place on October 18–19, 2018, at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf to open the event *ZERO: Please turn!*, organized by the ZERO foundation to celebrate its tenth anniversary and the sixtieth anniversary of ZERO. Even if we were aware that the title *ZERO: Please turn!* could sound obscure, we chose it not only because a work by Otto Piene in our collection is entitled *Please turn* (fig. 6) but also because it can be completed in different ways that fit the topics of the conference, as we shall see below.

A general tendency toward abandoning painting can be witnessed in the art around 1960: from two-dimensional pictures to relief-like objects and assemblages, spatial installations and the integration of performative elements, the works increasingly encroach on the space of the viewer and demand different grades of participation. The expansion of the work into the space was a precondition for the reduction of the gap between work and viewer. As Frank Popper, a pioneer in the study of kinetic art, wrote in 1975, “it is precisely the *conjunction* of these two problems—that of the environment and that of the spectator—which is of... vital importance for the overall development of contemporary art.”¹ What role does the international ZERO movement play in this development? Although the literature about ZERO has increased significantly in recent years—not

least thanks to the efforts of the ZERO foundation²—ZERO’s involvement in the expansion of the artwork into space and in breaking barriers between the viewer and the work had not as yet been adequately explored.³ Thus the conference was dedicated to this subject. In the following, I’ll introduce some topics of the conference.

PLEASE TURN ... THE PAGE!

In 1958, sixty years before the event *ZERO: Please turn!*, the artists Heinz Mack and Otto Piene “turned the page” by publishing in Düsseldorf the first issue of the magazine *ZERO*, which would be the catalyst for a new artistic movement (fig. 1).⁴ Three years later, in 1961, appeared the third and last issue of the magazine, which contained the contributions of over thirty artists from ten different countries (fig. 2). Included were, among others, the French artists Yves Klein and Arman, the Italians Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni, the Swiss Jean Tinguely and Daniel Spoerri, the Europe-based South Americans Almir Mavignier and Jesús Rafael Soto, in addition to German artists. The issue provides an excellent overview of the international art movement that turned away from Art Informel and was then named ZERO after the magazine. This pivotal document of the ZERO movement already advocates for narrowing the gap between the viewer and the work. Sticking out from the last page of the issue were a sunflower seed and

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1 Frank Popper, *Art: Action and Participation* (London: Studio Vista, 1975), 7.

2 See, among others, the following books edited by the ZERO foundation: Dirk Pörschmann and Mattijs Visser, eds., *4 3 2 1 ZERO* (Düsseldorf: Richter/Fey, 2012); Tiziana Caianiello and Mattijs Visser, eds., *The Artist as Curator: Collaborative Initiatives in the International ZERO Movement, 1957–1967* (Ghent: MER. Paper Kunsthalle, 2015); Dirk Pörschmann and Margriet Schavemaker, eds., *ZERO*, exh. cat. Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin; Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (Cologne: Walther König, 2015).

3 The subject of the conference was discussed at the meeting of the Scientific Board of the ZERO foundation in Söll, November 16, 2017.

4 The three issues of the magazine *ZERO* are reprinted in facsimile in Pörschmann and Visser, *4 3 2 1 ZERO*.

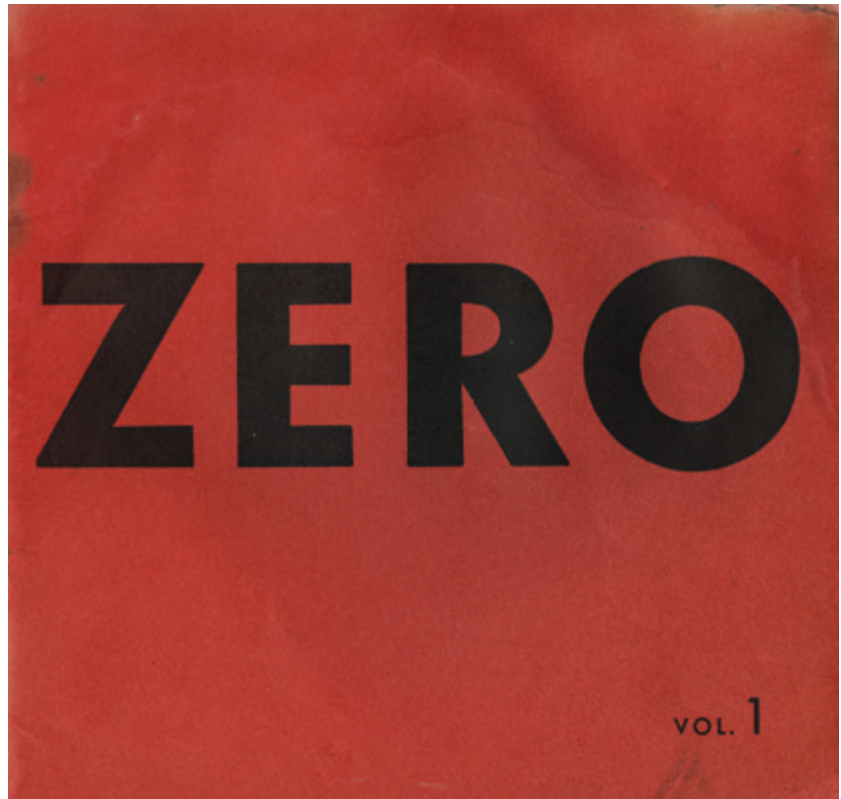


fig. 1 Cover of the magazine ZERO, no. 1, 1958
Heinz Mack records, ZERO foundation,
Düsseldorf

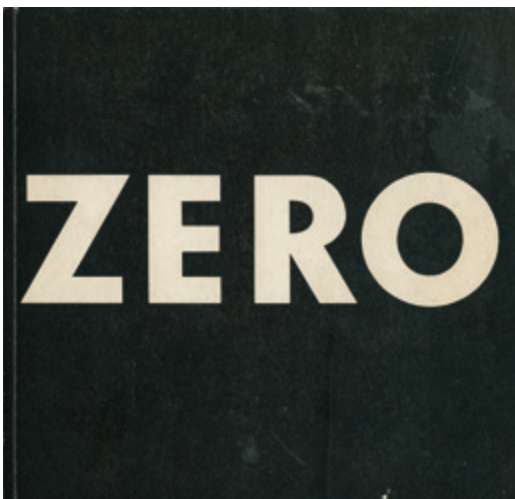


fig. 2 Cover of the magazine ZERO, no. 3, 1961
Heinz Mack records, ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf

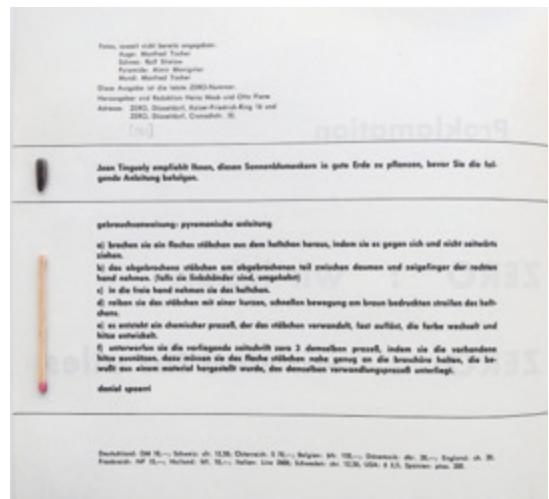


fig. 3 Contribution by Daniel Spoerri and Jean Tinguely
to ZERO, no. 3, 1961



fig. 4 *ZERO: Edition, Exposition, Demonstration*, Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf, 1961
Photo Paul Brandenburg / Heinz Mack records, ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf

a match accompanied by instructions for their use: the sunflower seed should be planted in good soil; after that, the match should be used to burn the magazine (fig. 3). These instructions, written by the artists Jean Tinguely and Daniel Spoerri, require the reader's intervention.

In 1969, Piene retrospectively provided background information on his own contribution to the third issue of *ZERO*: "When I was writing my *ZERO 3* text in 1961, I wanted to give it the title 'Expansion.' Then, I changed my mind and named it 'Ways to Paradise.' The means I discussed were various means that lend themselves to expansion of art works and expansion of art: light, smoke, fire. The physical spaces that I suggested were all spaces and spots that permit expansion: large rooms, spherical rooms, the sky."⁵

In the same issue of *ZERO*, Heinz Mack published his *Sahara Project*, which, conceived in 1959, could be realized only in 1968. With this project that was documented in the 1969 film *Tele-Mack*, Mack intended to break out of the narrow museum

space and create an interplay of art and nature, using the strong light of the desert to enhance the radiant effect of the artworks (fig. 5).

According to Piene, the expansion of works into space also implicates a stronger impact on the viewers: "I do not believe that expanding pieces expand only in order to demonstrate physically and three-dimensionally what painters and sculptors have suggested in their conventional work during the Style Age. Expansion means that works of art go to people, become more visible, communicate with more viewers/participants."⁶ As a matter of fact, for the presentation of the third issue of the *ZERO* magazine, Mack and Piene, together with Günther Uecker who henceforth collaborated with them, organized an action in front of the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf that would attract numerous spectators. Some of the spectators were directly involved in the action—or "demonstration," as it was called at the time—making, for example, soap bubbles and helping to make a balloon rise in the air (fig. 4). Already at an early stage, Mack, Piene, and Uecker also used television to present their art to a wide audience. In 1962, they staged a demonstration at the Rhine in Düsseldorf specifically for the shooting of the documentary film *0 × 0 = Kunst*, directed by Gerd Winkler for broadcaster Hessischer Rundfunk. Unexpectedly, on that occasion nearly a thousand people convened. These examples show that some key artistic developments of the 1960s—such as the elaboration of new strategies in painting, the increasing use of performance or performative elements, and the expansion of the work into space—can be tracked down not only in already acknowledged contexts such as Fluxus but also in the *ZERO* network. The archives of the *ZERO* foundation provide ample evidence of this. According to Julia Robinson, author of the keynote in this publication, it is time to "turn the page" in *ZERO* studies. She encourages the consideration of the collected archival material from broader theoretical perspectives and launches a methodological discussion.

⁵ Otto Piene, in *Otto Piene: Elements*, exh. cat. Howard Wise Gallery (New York: Howard Wise Gallery, 1969), n.p.

⁶ *Ibid.*



fig. 5 Heinz Mack in the Tunisian Desert, 1968
Still from the film *Tele-Mack*, 1969
Camera E. Braun

PLEASE TURN ... ON!

At the end of the 1950s, a number of artists began to expand their artworks not only into space but also into time, including movement, predefined sequences, and process in their works. Consequently, duration in real time, which had been characteristic of theater and film, found its way into other art forms.

The ZERO movement contributed to this general tendency by creating kinetic works and multimedia installations with performative characteristics. Such artworks explicitly included the space of the viewer, and differed from traditional works of sculpture in that they dissolved the boundaries between the work and the viewer's environment, making use of light and real movement. These works are not closed objects but—according to the definition formulated by the artist and art historian Jack Burnham in 1968—can be defined as open “systems”: “The object denotes sculpture in its traditional physical form, whereas the system (an interacting assembly of varying complexity) is the means by which sculpture gradually departs from its object state and assumes some measure of lifelike activity.”⁷ In the context of ZERO, many artists made use of motors, light spots, and time switches, which—when turned on—gave life to the works.

The formative influence of early ZERO's work on the evolution of Burnham's theory of systems aesthetics is analyzed in the present volume in Luke Skrebowski's contribution, “Jack Burnham, ZERO, and Art from Field to System.” As Skrebowski emphasizes, Burnham focused particularly on the use of field structuring in paintings, sculptures, and reliefs by Mack, Piene, and Uecker that—according to him—opened art up to its environment.

PLEASE TURN ... THE WHEEL!

The works created in the context of ZERO can stimulate different levels of participation: from

objects that heighten their observer's perception to works that require a direct intervention of the spectator like *Please turn*, which was created by Otto Piene in 1961 (figs. 6–7). This work invites the viewer to slowly rotate the perforated disc illuminated by spotlights. Light projections thus start to move on the wall, and the spectator participates in the creation of a Light Ballet, causing the spatial limits to disappear.

This work does not constitute an exceptional case in the context of ZERO, as the following examples show. For the Edition MAT (Multiplication d'Art Transformable), which was curated by Daniel Spoerri in 1959, Mack conceived a square relief that could be rotated by the viewer to create different light reflections.

In 1961, Mack then realized an installation intended to be used by children, the so-called *Farborgan* (Color Organ), for a school on Rolandstrasse in Düsseldorf. Turning a wheel, the viewer rotates planks painted in different spectral colors so that the color combination changes (fig. 8). Uecker also created an installation for the school that involves the spectator, who can rotate the white discs that compose the work to create variations of light and shade (fig. 9).

While these works can be modified by the viewer, *Base magica – Scultura vivente* (Magic Base – Living Sculpture) by Piero Manzoni (1961) turns the viewer into the work itself, as soon as the viewer steps on it. The pedestal—an element that was traditionally used to separate the space of the work from the space of the viewer—identifies in this case the work of art with the viewer (fig. 10). The relationship between Piero Manzoni and ZERO was addressed at the conference through the preview of the documentary *Manzoni and ZERO*, introduced by the Italian scholar Francesca Pola.⁸

7 Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 10.

8 See Francesca Pola, *Piero Manzoni and ZERO: A European Creative Region* (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2018), accompanied by an USB stick with *Piero Manzoni and ZERO*, video documentary, 52 min., devised, written, and edited by Francesca Pola in collaboration with Fondazione Piero Manzoni (Turin: Zenit Arti Audiovisive, 2018).



fig.6 Otto Piene, *Please turn*, 1961,
at the exhibition *Nul*, Stedelijk Museum
Amsterdam, 1962
Photo © Manfred Tischer, The Estate of
Manfred Tischer, www.tischer.org

fig.7 Otto Piene, *Please turn*, 1961
Donation Otto and Elizabeth Piene,
ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf
Photos Franziska Megert





fig. 8 Heinz Mack, Installation for the Rolandstrasse primary school, Düsseldorf, 1961
Photo Gunnar Heydenreich



fig. 9 Günther Uecker, Installation for the Rolandstrasse primary school, Düsseldorf, 1961
Photo ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf

PLEASE TURN ... AROUND!

Environments—in other words, works that take up physical space and can be entered—activate the viewers who are stimulated to explore the space of the work. Early examples of environments were created by Lucio Fontana, who was an important reference for the artists of the ZERO network. It was to him that Mack, Piene, and Uecker dedicated the installation *Lichtraum (Homage à Fontana)* (Light Room [Homage to Fontana]), which they created for Documenta 3 in 1964 in Kassel (fig. 11). The programmed Light Rooms by Mack, Piene and Uecker—like the automatic Light Ballets by Piene—combined the dimension of time (the programmed sequence) with the immersion of the viewer in the space made of light. Although the spectators—as in a cinema—cannot change the programmed sequence, their attention is not focused on one screen, as the light projections pervade the whole space. In contrast to the situation in cinema and theater, viewers thus need to look around to get an impression of the entire environment. They can move freely in the space and interact with each other.

The environmental aspects of the works from the ZERO context present parallels and connections with approaches in the architecture of the time, as Cornelia Escher demonstrates in her contribution “GEAM and ZERO: Spaces between Architecture and Art.” The architects of the Groupe d’études d’architecture mobile (GEAM) developed a concept of architecture based on change that enhanced the bodily experience of space.

To this day, the ZERO experiments with light and space retain their topicality, as the interview by Margriet Schavemaker with the artist Seth Riskin (director of the MIT Museum Studio) in this publication shows. In Riskin’s Light Dance performances, the movement of light instruments mounted on his body lets viewers perceive the architectural environment as fluid and transmits the performer’s body experience to them. According to Riskin, artistic experiments with light and perception can offer inputs for neuroscientific research on vision, permitting art and science to learn from each other.

PLEASE TURN ... TOWARD THE FUTURE!

The artists from the ZERO movement had an optimistic vision for the future and believed in the possibility of shaping it. In order to create a better world, it was essential to engage the public. And it was under these premises that spatial works involving the spectator were created. The latter was not only a viewer anymore, since the works activated different senses, also making use—in some cases—of technology in order to expand the sensibility of human perception. According to Ulli Seegers, author of the essay “Art for All: Lines of Tradition and Development of a Central Narrative of Art since ZERO,” the opening of art to a broad audience and to participation after World War II had precursors that can be traced back to the nineteenth century. However, the ZERO artists—in contrast to the uses of art for educational purposes and political propaganda in the nineteenth century and during the National Socialist period—created open works that do not convey a predefined meaning, but rather offer a constellation of elements that the interpreter can freely combine, so that different relationships and



fig. 10 Piero Manzoni, *Base magica - Scultura vivente* (Magic Base - Living Sculpture), 1961
Photo © Fondazione Piero Manzoni

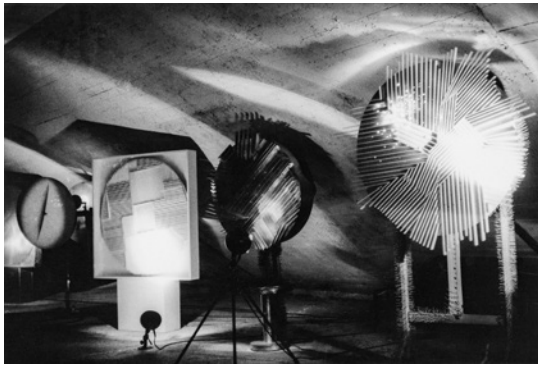


fig. 11 Mack, Piene, Uecker, *Lichtraum (Hommage à Fontana)* (Light Room [Homage to Fontana]), Documenta 3, Kassel, 1964
Photo Gitta von Vitany / Otto Piene records, ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf

configurations are possible.⁹ In the case of ZERO, the author did not die,¹⁰ instead becoming more hospitable: to the same extent that the personality of the artist stepped back, the recipient was invited to take a more active role.

Although the faith of some ZERO artists in technology could in certain expressions appear, in retrospect, naive,¹¹ according to Piene ZERO strived after a balanced relationship between technology, nature, and human being—an objective that is still particularly relevant today: “One of our most important aims proved to be the attempt to reharmonize the relationship between man and nature ... not putting the artist into the position of a fugitive from the ‘modern world’ but rather having the artist use the tools of actual technical invention as well as those of nature.”¹² The

artistic use of “technical invention” should thus prevent technology from becoming monopolized by governments, who develop and deploy it particularly for aggressive ends, and contribute to its shaping for peaceful intents.

The further development of the art of individual artists from the ZERO network after 1966 confirms their interest in environmental experiments that involve the spectators in new ways, exhibiting both breaks and continuities with the ZERO period. Thus, although Mack, Piene, and Uecker ended their collaboration as early as 1966, and this year is generally considered to be the end date of the whole ZERO movement, the symposium also took the late 1960s into consideration.

A clear break in the collaboration between Mack, Piene, and Uecker and the subsequent development of their work represented the impact of New York City, the prototype of a modern metropolis. In 1964, Mack, Piene, and Uecker went for the first time to New York, where they had an exhibition at the Howard Wise Gallery.¹³ After this show as a trio, each of them had at least one solo exhibition there and continued to be promoted as a “member of Group Zero,” even after 1966, with their participation in several group exhibitions at the same gallery until 1969. While this experience indeed provoked a response in their work, Mack, Piene, and Uecker also left important traces on the New York art scene. For example, Andy Warhol appropriated some of the visual effects and technical devices from Piene’s *Light Ballet* for his multimedia show the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, first presented in April 1966.¹⁴ The

9 For the definition of “open work,” see Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Italian original: *Opera aperta* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962).

10 See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” trans. Richard Howard, *Aspen*, nos. 5–6 (1967), <http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>.

11 It is always difficult to make generalizations in the case of ZERO, since it included very different positions. For example, Jean Tinguely’s machines can hardly convey a faith in technology. Differences can be recognized even among Mack, Piene, and Uecker. Uecker’s *New York Dancer* (1965), for example, makes use of a motor, but it can hardly be interpreted as a glorification of technological progress.

12 Otto Piene, “The Development of the Group ‘Zero,’” in *ZERO*, ed. Heinz Mack and Otto Piene (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), xxiii, edited reprint of the text originally published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, London, September 3, 1964.

13 *Zero* [alternative title: *Group Zero*]: Mack, Piene, Uecker, Howard Wise Gallery, New York, November 12–December 5, 1964.

14 Joseph D. Ketner II, “Electromedia,” in Aldo Tambellini: *Black ZERO*, exh. cat. Chelsea Art Museum (New York: Boris Lurie Art Foundation, 2011), 41. Ketner, *Witness to Phenomenon: Group ZERO and the Development of New Media in Postwar European Art* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 194.

light projections by Piene also found a response in the context of the multimedia discos that gained currency in the then contemporary New York scene.¹⁵ The art collective USCO played a major role in this context. They were involved, for example, in the conception of *The World*, an early discothèque located in a former airplane hangar in Long Island's Garden City, which opened in April 1966 and offered a multimedia show with cutting-edge technologies. The USCO presented work in different group exhibitions in which Mack, Piene, and Uecker also participated, such as *KunstLichtKunst* in Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven in 1966 and several exhibitions at the Howard Wise Gallery. Zabet Patterson's contribution, "Turning On: Technological Circuits in USCO and Zero," compares the different ways in which the artists from Zero and USCO used light, space,

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and time to effect perceptual transformation. While in March 1967, Piene, together with the Italian American artist Aldo Tambellini, opened New York's Black Gate Theatre, which presented multimedia performances (fig. 12), New York developments inspired Uecker in July of the same year to create—with the participation of other artists, such as Mack—a disco in Düsseldorf: *Creamcheese*. At *Creamcheese*, artists combined art and entertainment in order to reach a broader audience than traditional institutions such as museums and theaters. Through very loud music, strobe lighting, and projections, patrons were exposed to a sensory overload intended to expand their consciousness, and help them to penetrate into unconscious levels of their minds. The year 1967 marked the beginning of the student revolt in West Germany. Only a few days before the opening of *Creamcheese*, a policeman killed the student Benno Ohnesorg during a demonstration against the state visit of the Shah of Iran in West Berlin. Although Mack, Piene, and Uecker had already used light and music in their



fig. 12 Otto Piene, *The Proliferation of the Sun*, Black Gate Theatre, New York, 1967
Photo unknown, Otto Piene records, ZERO foundation, Düsseldorf

Light Rooms and ZERO festivals, *Creamcheese* clearly testified to a changed situation. While the Light Rooms from the ZERO period were quite meditative, the psychedelic disco aimed to challenge perception habits and conventional ways of thinking. The simultaneous projection of images from different contexts was intended to encourage a critical attitude, and at that time no contradiction was seen between the sensory overload and the exhortation to take a stand.¹⁶

Finally, despite all the contradictions in ZERO's relationship with new technologies and with the viewer, we can agree with Frank Popper, who concluded his investigation about participation in the work of kinetic artists, including several artists from ZERO, with these words: "Even if they have not entirely been able to bridge the gap between science, technology and art, nor between the productive system, the political issues which spring from it and the creative process, they have nevertheless helped to lay the foundation of a new art, a truly DEMOCRATIC ART."¹⁷

15 Tina Rivers, "The Proliferation of the Sun: Group ZERO and the Medium of Light in 1960s America," in *The Medium of Light in the Context of the Neo-Avant-Garde of the 1950s and 1960s*, ed. Andrea von Hülsen-Esch and Dirk Pörschmann (Düsseldorf: University Press, 2013), 75–106.

16 Tiziana Caianiello, *Der "Lichtraum (Hommage à Fontana)" und das Creamcheese im museum kunst palast. Zur Musealisierung der Düsseldorfer Kunstszene der 1960er Jahre* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005), 95–163.

17 Popper, *Art: Action and Participation*, 12.

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