

0 / 60 / 10

## Turn ... slowly, extremely Calibrating ZERO to Changing Time(s)

JULIA ROBINSON

I should start by explaining my title, which obviously picks up on the title of the event *ZERO: Please turn!* and the expressed aims of this conference. *Please turn!* seems to urge us to turn a page, historically, naming that as the present task. In addressing ZERO at sixty, and the challenges of the ZERO foundation at ten, the turning and calibration I announce have to do with a body of work that has *changed* in the decades since its creation—as every historical object does—and which is arguably more different today than it has been in any preceding decade. The task now, in part, would seem to be to take up these various *times*: the ZERO moment and its historical backdrop in modernism, the perspectives we have built up since, as historians, and the impact of contemporary visual experience on an art movement so engaged with a technically or technologically inflected visuality. There are pressing questions associated with each phase. In the first: Can we deepen this history by further interrogating the specific legacies of modernism taken up by the Zero/ZERO artists? In the second: How do we develop and expand the context of this network in its own time? What would be the effect of considering the aims and strategies defined by the Zero group in relation to contemporaneous initiatives with which their project is not typically aligned? And following from this, at the third level: Can we go further in differentiating the mechanical, kinetic, and optical models of the period (e.g., Tinguely through GRAV), to bring out the specificity of Zero's vision of spectatorial engagement? And the

flipside of the latter: How do we approach the fact of all this being seen today with new eyes? Inevitably, changing technology has changed Zero—to an extent that urges special attention, indeed precision, vis-à-vis the methodology and terminology adopted in its ongoing study and theorization. While attempting to address a complex set of issues, I hope this paper can also be of practical value. To this end, I would wish to say something at the outset about the driving force of the foundation since 2008—or one of them—namely, the archive. Of course the importance of the collection goes without saying, as the ambitious array of exhibitions mounted—from the Kunstpalast's *ZERO: Internationale Künstler-Avantgarde der 50er/60er Jahre* (Düsseldorf, 2006) in the moment before the foundation's founding, through to the Guggenheim's *ZERO: Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s–60s* (New York, 2014), the ZERO foundation's *ZERO: Die internationale Kunstbewegung der 50er und 60er Jahre* (Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, 2015), and the Stedelijk Museum's *ZERO: Let Us Explore the Stars* (Amsterdam, 2015) almost a decade later—have amply shown us. But what I want to say about the archive concerns a more subtle, if no less powerful, impact. The historical work on Zero/ZERO initially required creating a detailed “map” of its activities, and this has been invaluable to the scholars who have made use of it. In all of this, the archive cannot but be, for lack of a better word, *foundational*.<sup>1</sup> The first phase of study is, inevitably, at the level of the “what”:

27

---

1 If this language of the archive's “foundational” status at the foundation seems circuitous, verging on the tautological, that effect is intended. In a Foucauldian (or Broodthaersian) sense, I seek to highlight the way in which archives—particularly very complete ones—risk doing more than aiding the writing of a history, to the point of defining its terms or circumscribing them. This is less to say that the ZERO archive is such a case, than that, after a decade of its centrality in putting all the history in place, the kind of study/theorization in its next chapter might shift.

getting it all on the record. And a significant percentage of the existing scholarship on ZERO reads like this: as accounts of what happened, who met who, exhibitions, demonstrations, and publications. What is exciting at this moment of *turning the page*, so to speak, is the chance to focus on the stakes of all that is now in place, theoretically, and from new, perhaps broader perspectives. If all histories entering the larger narrative and canon of modern and contemporary art have first to be solidified and defended—and we have seen this in many newer 1960s histories ranging from Fluxus to the *other* minimalisms (e.g., originating in sound or dance rather than sculpture), *inter alia*—the *subject* becomes newly thrilling when the “what” becomes “so what?” At this point, with the luxury of having enough in place to move on, the questioning can shift to the “why?” / “why does it matter?”

In terms of the bigger picture, the immense amount of new scholarship on 1960s topics, which has so enriched and complicated the field over the past decade or so, has obviously changed the stakes of ZERO studies as well. And the work the ZERO foundation has accomplished in the same period, leading to groundbreaking exhibitions and publications, has created many new openings for wider research. It is clearer than it ever has been, for instance, how many of the key artistic strategies we associate with the advanced art of the 1960s were present in the founding Zero/Düsseldorf context at the turn of that decade. The early activity of Otto Piene and Heinz Mack now reads differently. Not only at the level of their own art but in terms of all they initiated: the implications of the *Abendausstellungen* (evening exhibitions) and collective publications, and the so-called network approach. We can see more clearly than ever how much this anticipated. But rather than continuing to compare like with like, or staying within the frame the ZERO network created, I would like to start things off by sketching out a broad field of examples, touching on issues concerning the

further theorization of Zero/ZERO more than the group themselves and their works. I state this up front, as a kind of caveat. So my paper is framed in a manner that is intentionally tentative and open-ended. Coming at the start, this seemed only appropriate; conclusions will come later.

In the interests of thinking through the task of historical mapping, and certain critical questions in ZERO studies going forward—focused through a dual sense of contemporaneity, *its* time and ours—I have structured what follows via three criteria. Chosen expressly to open up topics this conference has named as subjects, and ideally to spark an initial set of questions for our collective consideration, I think they drop us into some core issues. They are:

- (1) The Monochrome
- (2) Performance/The Performative
- (3) The Immersive

Each comes with its own *baggage*, some heavier than others. Obviously, the monochrome is a well-trodden topic, which is why it may need some fresh thought. And of course “the monochrome” stands as a summary category for the larger one of “painting” as the conduit of much 1960s iconoclasm and invention. The topic fans out when we consider expanded strategies of non-composition, seriality, “found effects” (more ambient than those derived from a palette), canvas as object (to be penetrated), and so on, which countered the gestural, expressive painting of the time. I will address this admittedly vast topic first by touching on some foundational modernist examples that may be valuable to think anew, or reposition. And other postwar interventions prior to and at the time of ZERO—both oft-cited and under-acknowledged—will serve as reference points, as a way of getting more out of the models defined by the Zero artists.<sup>2</sup> Again, we are ultimately not so interested in the “what”—or *firstness*, at the level of chronology—but the “why

---

2 If Yves Klein’s example is unavoidable, how is it and the monochromes in ZERO affected by considering those in Gutai (e.g., by Atsuko Tanaka), or others by the small contingent of women artists in this period (e.g., Yayoi Kusama)? In this case, difference, and independence, make for provocative as well as productive counter-models.

does it matter?": the motivations and stakes of each statement in painting. Lastly, as much as the topic of the monochrome provides a common base for discussion—as it has for quite some time—its greater interest, to me, concerns how any presumption of *sameness* almost instantly brings out difference. Or it should. To get at this I will touch on an issue that is virtually inextricable from the monochrome—and entrenched in the comparison default of art history more generally—but which seems to plague new histories in a special way: the problem of "pseudomorphism." This is a trap for curators as much as art historians. Think of all the white paintings that have been marshaled to contextualize the *achromes* of Piero Manzoni, in shows as well as books. An example is the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition *There Will Never Be Silence* (2013–14), where a collection piece (Barnett Newman's *The Voice*, 1950) was used as context for the second, graphic version of John Cage's *4'33"* (1952/53).<sup>3</sup> The second criterion, performance/the performative—on which I was asked to speak—will involve a kind of pedantic cleaning up of definitions on which we may or may not be able to agree. The term "performance" remains fairly clear, simply as a genre, even if there is nothing generic about it in the decade we are considering. More complicated is "performativity," a term that is now so used and abused as to have become almost meaningless. But it can do good work for us—both terms can, in tandem—if we can sharpen up their application. As you may have noticed, the term "performative" has shifted from a noun to an adjective in recent years. Initially drawn from its coinage in linguistics, *the performative* signified a kind of utterance, which, depending on the speaker and the context, can change a reality, even the status of the subjects implicated, by a slight of language. In its current (adjectival) sense, it has come to refer to just about anything that enters the realm of perfor-

mance. In the process of this change and broadening of the word's application—something that happens all the time in language, and is not a negative per se—it has hemorrhaged meaning, and its original precision; we can glean neither historicity nor efficacy from the general usage of "performative" today. Perhaps this problematization will be productively developed in light of Margriet Schavemaker's essay in the *ZERO: Countdown To Tomorrow* catalogue.<sup>4</sup> My sense is that since the ZERO project cannot be considered "performance art," notwithstanding the fact that the key figures created events, street activities, and room-scale installations—all of which sought to change the conception of painting and the conditions of perception art engendered—the efficacy of *performativity* is perhaps more useful in reading their activities than *performance*.

The third criterion, "the immersive," seems key to thinking through Zero's relationship to technology in its time (versus ours); its dominance as a topic among these papers suggests as much. I would simply like to open things by asking how the term is motivated now, when we use it. To ponder this in preparing my lecture, I took out the vast tome of the multivolume, miniscule typed, Oxford English dictionary, and its appended updates, to look back at how the word was used in the past. In fact, I was pressed by the nagging feeling that it might not have been used at all in the 1960s, at least not in any sense related to its current application. It probably does not surprise you that a large proportion of the definitions had to do with being literally underwater (submerged), marinated, or baptized. A search of newer sources essentially convinces one of the dating of "immersive's" present use to a post-digital, post-video game, and post-internet era. The discussion often touches on the kind of experience needed—almost drug-like, said one source—by millennials. So we have something of a gap, then, when we retroactively

3 Was the thought that the museum did not own a set of Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*—the example Cage himself cited as his inspiration—so the white Newman would do?

4 Margriet Schavemaker, "Performing Zero," in *Zero: Countdown To Tomorrow, 1950s–60s*, ed. Valerie Hillings, exh. cat. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2014), 44–55.

baptize Zero with this “hot” idea. *Hot* has to do with the vast number of announcements and PR statements one sees every week that tout the quality of being “immersive” as the main draw for an exhibition or performance. I would like to use the opportunity of this topic being so strongly present on the conference agenda to begin some collective work on both critiquing and historicizing it. Without such an effort, the *soup* of an ahistorical, undifferentiated “immersive” could run from Louis Daguerre’s dioramas to Pipilotti Rist. And here I would want to attend to Zero’s standard periodization: 1957/58 to 1966. The reason for this is that one might persuasively argue that Otto Piene veers in a direction that could carry this descriptor, for some, in 1967. But can we call the 1950s and early 1960s “immersive”? If pushed, one might find an example or two in Gutai that could (tenuously) fit the bill. But I would want to see this debated further. Gutai’s exhibition concepts, and works, remain fairly exceptional for their time. Even in the early 1960s one is hard-pressed to think of works that would qualify as “immersive.” In part because of the need, first, to break through the viewing conditions of painting into literal space, that moment would seem to warrant some distinction, and reaffirmation, of its activated constructions of room-scale installations. While some would not agree that “immersive” conjures a passive spectator, I tend to think this becomes the case by the degrees—in the exhibition format—and that those degrees have to do with the extent of the technology. I do not consider happenings and environments (1959–64) in the United States or museum installations like *Bewogen Bewegung* (1961) or even *Dylaby* (1962) immersive. Just as the first uses of the stimuli of light at the hands of Zero artists—whether from reflective materials or flashlights and bulbs—still seem to engender different, more active, one-to-one encounters, even in the midst of wall-to-wall installations. In the later 1960s—in part as a result of drug culture

and discos (to put it too simply)—the immersive as a condition becomes somewhat more plausible, even if it still seems that the concept was not quite comparable to its recent applications.

## THE MONOCHROME

Given the proliferation of the monochrome in the ZERO context—in exhibitions from *Das Rote Bild* in 1958 through *Monochrome Malerei* in 1960, among others—it seems worth starting this discussion with some general examples to bring issues into focus that seem critical to thinking about ZERO’s deployment of painting in general and the monochrome in particular.

Concerning the trap of similarity, it is worth clarifying the issue of pseudomorphism. As it has been diagnosed most aptly with examples in abstract painting, it should bear on analogies that have likely annoyed the ZERO artists over the years. Originally defined by Erwin Panofsky, the term had to do with formal analysis when confronted with “morphologically analogous ... even identical” looking examples, which happen to be “entirely unrelated from a genetic point of view.”<sup>5</sup> In one lucid explanation of this, Yve-Alain Bois gives the examples of works by Cage and François Morellet. I will risk the friction this might cause—introducing an artist associated with GRAV in the context of ZERO—on the off chance that it can be productive as a case of false alignment. Morellet’s painting *5 lignes au hasard* (Five Random Lines; one of a series) dated 1971 is juxtaposed with an excerpt from Cage’s score material for the piece *Music Walk* (1958), which in fact premiered in Düsseldorf in September of that year at Jean-Pierre Wilhelm’s Galerie 22. The similarity of patterns achieved by the artist and the composer is of course utterly striking. Both are the product of chance, as Bois points out. What we then need to know is that although Morellet made the painting in 1971, he initiated the series as sketches in 1958, the same year as Cage; they remained unpainted for years because there was no interest in them.

5 Erwin Panofsky, cited in Yve-Alain Bois, “Chance Encounters: Kelly, Morellet, Cage,” in *The Anarchy of Silence: John Cage and Experimental Art*, ed. Julia Robinson, exh. cat. Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (Barcelona: MACBA, 2009), 188.

So the dates line up, but can this justify making any more of a connection between these very different works? How could that difference best be described? Bois puts it succinctly: one is autonomous, as a painting, even though it is part of a series, which all use the same template; one is not, as only part of a score, which will come together with other parts in a different chance configuration every time it is used.<sup>6</sup> But both had their chance and systems of permutation in common. This said, neither composer nor artist knew anything about the other at the time, or ever, which is only the tip of the iceberg as to why remarkable likeness is utterly flawed as an argument.

Now let's consider two exuberant monochromes, which bookend the decade we are considering. Barnett Newman's 1951 *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, with its vast expanse of deep red, and Andy Warhol's 1963 *Orange Car Crash Fourteen Times*, in a more orangey red, are of course nothing alike. First of all, we have to note that Newman's is one painting, divided; Warhol's is two paintings joined, only one of which is a pure monochrome, whatever *pure* might mean in Warhol's case. It is their *unlikeness*, arguably, that allows us to track a certain trajectory of the aspirations tied to the monochrome, and a radical shift in its status from one decade to the next. Granted, this is an extreme pairing. In any case, what do we have? In the Newman, a chromatic and spatial plenum resulting from deep moral thought about the subject of painting in the aftermath of war, an utterly precise parsing of the field by the vertical dividers ("zips"), and the artist's stipulation that the vast canvas be viewed at a very short distance, thus implicating the viewer in the luminous red field more profoundly than would a standard (pictorial) distance. By contrast, Warhol's "monochrome" canvas seems shockingly

empty, to a degree that is difficult to articulate, but which puts it in a different universe from the Newman. For Warhol it was one of the "blanks," as he called them; a frame for nothing much that takes up space and time, like frames at the end of a film reel, or the interruption of a commercial break. "It just makes them bigger," he said, "and mainly makes them cost more." Of course this is not to argue that monochrome, as a profound statement in the 1950s, is null and void in the 1960s; it is simply two limit cases. As we contend with what became a very crowded field, it may help us think precisely about how each different monochrome functions at the moment it is formulated.

To put the problem of historical limits and possibilities in the postwar period somewhat differently, it is instructive to ponder the challenge put by one master of the monochrome, Ad Reinhardt: "Some day every artist has to choose between Malevich and Duchamp."<sup>7</sup> In Europe, one imagines the decision could equally have been between Kazimir Malevich and László Moholy-Nagy. So how do we make sense of the monochrome model that was introduced to future ZERO artists in 1957?<sup>8</sup> Although Yves Klein is always acknowledged in the ZERO context for making the monochrome matter in a new way, it seems worthwhile to keep thinking about *how* he made it matter. Certainly, he arrived in Düsseldorf riding a wave, with five shows having *invested* his invention, including the one he came for, as the inaugural exhibition of the Galerie Schmela.<sup>9</sup> But let's go back a bit further: How did Klein have the hubris to introduce the monochrome as new, when he was well aware of its history? As members of the emergent generation, Klein and Jean Tinguely contended with the dominance of painting in 1950s Paris, while working with and against the major

6 *Music Walk*, an indeterminate score, was created in parts to be assembled by the performer.

7 This story is relayed by Mel Bochner. Reinhardt said this to him and Robert Smithson on the streets of New York in the 1960s. He recalled that, by that point, the two young artists wondered: Why choose?

8 I say ZERO here to mark the discovery by Manzoni, with Klein's show at Galleria Apollinaire (Milan, January 2–12, 1957), and by the Zero artists at Galerie Schmela (Düsseldorf, May 31–June 23, 1957).

9 *Yves: Propositions monochromes*, Galerie Colette Allendy, Paris, February 21–March 7, 1956; *Yves Klein: Proposte monochrome, epoca blu*, Galleria Apollinaire, Milan, January 2–12, 1957; *Yves le monochrome*, Galerie Iris Clert, Paris, May 10–25, 1957; *Yves le monochrome*, Galerie Colette Allendy, Paris, May 14–23, 1957; *Yves. Propositions monochromes*, Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf, May 31–June 23, 1957.

modernist legacies—a particularly European pressure.<sup>10</sup> Tinguely paid his homage with titles like *Méta-Malévich*. Yet it seems the monochrome qua monochrome would not be as significant to him as the tactile, palpable surface incident the Russians called “faktura,” and Suprematism’s sense of movement.<sup>11</sup> Klein tended not to salute the masters of his own century. He would speak generally of “the painters,” referring to more proximate contenders, while Pierre Restany took the role of citing modernists (such as Malevich) to defend Klein against them.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the inventor of the *Black Square* and *White on White* did not pose the only threat to the enterprise of reinvention in the 1950s; Malevich was a purist, a utopian who kept on painting, *from Zero*, as he once put it. Rather, it was the breakaway Constructivist Aleksandr Rodchenko, whose *statement* of 1921—in the form of three monochromes in red, yellow, and blue—called the end to the myth altogether.<sup>13</sup> Next to that triumvirate, Klein’s blue, gold, and rose appear as a calculated reprise—to say the least.

After beginning with multiple colors in the mid-1950s, Klein narrowed the field to blue before widening it again. The 1957 “Blue Period,” as he called it (without naming Picasso), ushered in his “invention” with fanfare. In the first half of that

year, installations in London, Milan, Paris, and Düsseldorf were each staged differently, including staggered hanging, the accompaniment of 1,001 blue balloons, the presentation of pure pigment, blue gas, and even an empty space with only the artist present.<sup>14</sup> Thus Klein managed to resuscitate the monochrome in a manner as dramatic as it was arbitrary. And arguably, the extent of the arbitrariness was directly proportional to how interesting his project became for others. It was what he said about his paintings, and how he put them in play/on display—not to mention the messianic conviction with which he did this—that renewed the form. Inventing what we could potentially call the *postmodern monochrome*, Klein cleared the slate. After him, it seemed possible to define that model as almost anything one said it was. Here we find ourselves in the territory of performativity. The point being that one cannot have one without the other in the case of Klein.

The interesting thing about acknowledging Klein’s impact in this way is that, almost as soon as we do so, we notice that there is no example in Zero that does anything remotely like what he does with the monochrome.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, as it proliferates as a form, we begin to see that the idea of “the monochrome” obscures more than it reveals. A show like *Das Rote Bild* (The Red Picture, April

---

10 To specify this point, there was modernist pressure on the generation of Abstract Expressionists in New York—as there was for the Informel artists. But in the next generation, those born in the late 1920s and after, lingering pressures in Europe—tied to a long history of dominance in painting—were not felt in the same way by American artists. Pablo Picasso was still a figure for Jackson Pollock, in other words, but not for Allan Kaprow.

11 It also should be said that Constructivism (à la Tatlin) would become more important for Tinguely than Suprematism.

12 In Restany’s 1956 text “La minute de vérité” (The Minute of Truth), written for Klein’s show at Colette Allendy, he noted that his work was “somewhat removed, no doubt, from what is called ‘the art of painting.’” He distinguished Klein’s work from Art Informel, and the “senseless attempt to bring the dramatic (and now classic) adventure of Malevich’s square to higher power.” (Author’s translation of original document. Yves Klein Archives, Paris.) New in Klein’s paintings was that “there is precisely neither square nor white ground.” This same text, as we know, was read aloud at the Schmela opening the following year.

13 As Rodchenko put it, “I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, yellow. I affirmed: it’s all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no more representation.” Cited in Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 238.

14 This refers to the shows at Galleria Apollinaire in Milan, January 1957 (staggered hanging), and the two in Paris, at Iris Clert (with the 1,001 balloons, *Sculpture aérostatique*) and Colette Allendy (where he showed, among other things, loose pigment in a vat on the floor, a board of gas jets, *Feu de bengale*, and demonstrated the significance of the artist’s presence in an upstairs space).

15 I say this for Zero, meaning the artists from Düsseldorf, but there may be cases in ZERO (meaning the larger network); Manzoni comes to mind. His *Achromes* begin with a similar investment in the sheer presence of the painted object—even if this changes. At the level of medium, there are important differences of course—and we are still speaking of the 1950s: Klein’s “pure pigment” and Manzoni’s kaolin channel very different aims and effects.

24, 1958) is just one clue to how many very different talents could adopt the form for a single occasion. Paintings whose dominant color was red by over forty artists: a nightmare of an event for the pseudomorphism police. This continues through the white monochrome, whose examples through the larger ZERO network are of course legion. This is not a reason to ignore the use of just one color—though when more is at stake the *genre* itself can seem incidental—or forget that it stood for something in the postwar period. Even as artists transitioned into new materials, media, and effects, it is worth asking why they often kept it as a point of departure. What pressures this extensive field of activity, however, is still superficial aesthetic coincidence—the point I am trying to reach with the shorthand of pseudomorphism—and the persistent need to differentiate aims. The point of intersection between painting and the statement *on painting* still seems crucial to locate in reading the monochromes in ZERO. But “ready-made” factors play in as well, and prove vital to the cancellation of *expression*. For what else are the stencil patterns of Otto Piene, the play of reflections drawn from the given properties of metal in Heinz Mack, or even the nails whitewashed by Gunter Uecker, except surrogates for no longer desirable, handmade, painterly *incident*?

I would suggest that revisiting some unconnected examples, which are nonetheless often linked, might be productive at this juncture. Namely: the white matrices painted by Piene and Mack in the late 1950s, and those of Yayoi Kusama from roughly the same time. The works of two close peers pursuing related (but not aligned) tracks in Düsseldorf, and a young woman artist who had recently relocated from Japan to New York, just based on the circumstances in which they were created, are incomparable. The palpable difference between the stencil and other more mechanical means of

composition in the work of the German artists versus the organic “nets” of Kusama also makes them entirely different undertakings—despite their shared, perforated *whiteness*—as does their dramatic difference in scale. In particular, Kusama’s first, truly vast canvases were conceived under the impact of Abstract Expressionism, and Newman in particular; Piene and Mack’s paintings, to my knowledge, never exceeded the dimensions of the easel.<sup>16</sup> This may reflect the fact that *their* nemesis, like Klein’s, was Informel, which likewise remained mostly at a certain scale. Moreover, the mechanized, anti-expressive structures of Piene and Mack—in their different ways—contrast so starkly with the painstaking process of Kusama’s net paintings, despite their semblance of a related structure. But as dialogues tend to go, one cannot but note that after Kusama showed with the ZERO artists—another basis for the tendency of comparison, if not pseudomorphism—she went on to rename this work *Infinity Nets*. Finally, one might ask where comparability—of monochromy, for instance—reaches the limit of its capacity to generate something. For a random example at the other extreme: the well-known (staged) photograph of Uecker, with a television covered in nails spraying it white in 1963, no longer prompts questions about the white monochrome.<sup>17</sup>

#### PERFORMANCE / THE PERFORMATIVE

Performance and performativity crisscross the ZERO activity at a very interesting moment—just ahead of a decade when performance begins to reposition the work of art. A simple question I had reflected on to open up this subject was: What did the “evening exhibitions”—for which a day and an hour were given—do at the time to the standard format of the art exhibit, which typically spans around a month? If the conditions for an exhibition and a performance, or simply

16 Kusama is an interesting comparison because she appears in multiple contexts. In the period in which she showed with the ZERO artists at the Stedelijk, her net paintings became *Infinity Nets*. It also seems that the mirrored works she saw at that time might have pushed her in the direction of her own mirrored environments. For the impact of Newman, see Midori Yamamura, *Yayoi Kusama: Inventing the Singular* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

17 The “object” calls to mind the exhibition that year in Germany of Nam June Paik’s first “prepared TVs.” And once the object/technology element eclipses painting/sculpture, associations—more and less obvious—begin to proliferate: Mack’s *Lichtkuben* (Light Cubes), for instance, in relation to Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cubes*—and the list goes on.

an opening versus the run of an exhibition, collapse here to form the event, surely it changed the energy and even the urgency around what took place.<sup>18</sup> And this may be one place to begin a genealogy of staging in Zero, that would extend to the staging of artworks in dramatic spaces, and the total installations that would ultimately develop. Here the *event structure* of the showing of painting paves the way for a dramatic reframing of the conditions of seeing and perceiving works of art.<sup>19</sup>

The *image* of Mack dressed up in a suit and tie, and Piene in “smoking” attire, replete with white bowtie—so far from the paint-splashed artist in street clothes—also constitutes a decision at the level of style/formality. Piene had said that Klein’s sense of his status as a real artist had made an impression on them, and that in the German art world younger artists were not taken seriously. Perhaps the formal attire was a bid to change that. They were not alone in this. Cage was well aware that the more counter-conventional the presentation the more formally one had to present oneself. The Fluxus artists would follow suit—pardon the pun. As we know, through the decade of the 1960s the self-styling of artist groups became more conscious.<sup>20</sup>

So how does the performative play into this? To extend the definition I gave briefly at the outset, the performative was coined by J. L. Austin in the context of linguistics. Austin’s 1955 lecture series at Harvard University, published as *How to Do Things with Words*, took its title from his infamous characterization of performatives as

statements that *do something*—as opposed to “just saying something.” What they do depends on the speaker, and the context. From one moment to the next, a judge can say something and define a person as guilty or innocent. Saying “I do” can get you married—and so on.<sup>21</sup> So what if an artist defines a cobalt blue painting as a ravishingly unprecedented manifestation of art, and of a new “sensitivity”? Austin classes performatives as “masqueraders,” which seems to suit the theatrics we are seeing here as what I have been calling a kind of *staging* of painting. The more classic example of a performative in twentieth-century art is Marcel Duchamp taking an everyday object and designating it a work of art, which he could do because he was an artist. If I did it the effect would not be quite the same. And Duchamp’s act, his nomination of the readymade, was reiterated, over and over—like a kind of performance or re-performance, in his interviews and in the literature. Thus, we have accepted that original gesture and statement historically. This meeting of art, action, and statement is the sense in which I am trying to apply the concept of the performative here. If it has succeeded in changing art’s conventions many times since Duchamp, by what means has it done so? How, for example, do the paintings in ZERO intervene in the history of painting, and how it was heretofore defined? How do the various acts in relation to art (extending Klein’s *staging*)—from Piene’s use of light, to Uecker’s firing arrows, even to Mack’s expedition to the Sahara—add a performance that may change conceptions enough to have a performative effect?

---

18 After thinking about how this raises the stakes of the exhibit to a moment in time, and how that introduces performance qualities that have an effect on the traditional format of the gallery exhibition, I read that Lawrence Alloway had made a similar point in the 1970s. That, however, does not negate the relevance of that Zero strategy in the present context.

19 Visitors to Düsseldorf and the Zero scene—like Tinguely or Daniel Spoerri—surely contributed to this amplification via the event. One thinks of the name Tinguely came up with for a show of what were essentially still sculptures, or at least wall-bound hybrids of painting and sculpture: a “concert.” See *Konzert für 7 Bilder und andere Skulpturen*, 1959. Spoerri’s participation on that occasion (reading poetry) was, as we know, just one small instance of his widespread involvements at the time. And, as the circularity of a small art world tends to play out, Spoerri would also comment that he had been present to hear Cage, presumably in 1958, and it changed everything for him.

20 Examples are Warhol with the Velvet Underground, and the image that seems to be modeled on this, Seth Siegelab’s group shot of the four conceptual artists presented at the exhibition *January, 5–31, 1969* (1969).

21 J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (1952/1966), ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). The basic examples of performative utterances that Austin gives are: (1) “I do” in a wedding ceremony; (2) “I name this ship *Queen Elizabeth*” (as a bottle is broken over its bow); (3) “I bequeath”; (4) “I bet.” *Ibid.*, 5.



One element we should consider in this, since language is crucially operative: the role of the many artist statements and quasi manifestos in the ZERO context. Central to the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, these statements *in language* that give force to those *in art* return with a vengeance in the postwar period. In addition to the statements of Klein, and those Mack and Piene had already produced starting in 1957 (though the two ZERO magazines of 1958), Tinguely advances a particular mode of performativity and performance when he comes to Düsseldorf in 1959. His *Für Statik* statement, and the idea for distributing it by throwing it from the window of a plane, could hardly be less of a dramatization.<sup>22</sup> In developing our definition, we could call the photo shoot Tinguely arranged—with the documents and a plane that apparently never took off—performative. As for the statement itself, its language is so odd and contradictory that the sheer arbitrariness of the performative may be the only explanation of its “meaning.” It also followed the model of the manifesto, perhaps the original document that was deployed (by artists) because it *does something with words*. The context, of course, always reinforces the words, even when they defy the usual preconditions for immediately legible meaning. This might be said for the 1963 poem/manifesto by Mack, Piene, and Uecker, which begins “Zero ist die Stille,” and ends with the self-reinforcing tautology, “Zero ist Zero.” The outdoor “Demonstrations” of ZERO in 1961 and 1962 extend the dual functioning of the performance and the performative, first of all with this

title, which coincides with the notion of the political demonstration, as does the site of the street as the locus of the action (whether protest or festival). It is not possible to enter into detail in the limited scope of this paper, but certain aspects of these events seem ripe for future thought. The shuttering of the Galerie Schmela, as a kind of temporary withdrawal of its function of showing art in a conventional way, with the painted text privileging “Edition” and “Demonstration” (literally) over the exhibition (“Exposition”) is interesting as an obstacle in space and a parentheses in time. The difference in slickness, if not professionalization, between the 1961 event and that of 1962—with the mediatization in mind—is also striking as a fairly early instance of such consciousness in the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> At another level, it seems that the 1961 “Demonstration” proved significant for artists who witnessed it and would go on to be key figures in Fluxus (such as Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell), and for the activist practice of Joseph Beuys. Certainly, the modest performance activities in New York lofts and small gallery spaces (1959–61) that were one basis for Fluxus were far removed from the street actions of ZERO. And Paik was surely a “bridge” figure in this, mounting his own elaborate performances in this period in Germany before Fluxus began.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, to circle back to the subject of the manifesto, when Fluxus founder George Maciunas contacted Joseph Beuys to help secure the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf for performances, Beuys asked him if this new movement had a manifesto. Maciunas wrote one in reply. And finally, to circle back to the subject of painting,

- 
- 22 At some level, Tinguely gets his performative approach from his friend Klein—that is, the sense of performing something into being, ceremonially changing its status. Klein’s meticulously kept press books tracking every exhibition—openings, the installation, the media response, etc.—partake of the performative less obviously in revealing Klein’s vigilant calculation of his own *effect*. The patent (*brevet d’invention*) as a document falls more squarely into this category of the performative as *legislative*. Klein sought to patent his color, and Tinguely his *Métra-Matics*. Though the manifesto is such a document, in and of itself, context always instantiates it, and Tinguely’s idea to situate it within an event exemplifies this.
- 23 Margriet Schavemaker raises this issue in her essay “Performing Zero.” While her focus is largely in relation to the story of performance in the decade of the 1960s, my point has more to do with a media sense that was not present in the American context in the same way, for one thing because there was not the same coverage of culture in the United States as there was in Europe. Fluxus gets televised in Germany but not in New York, for example. There are several fairly isolated exceptions with the TV appearances of John Cage (on game shows in Italy and the United States in 1959 and 1960), and later Charlotte Moorman (who was, after all, an accomplished musician). It is largely with Warhol that this media consciousness becomes part of the understanding of the art.
- 24 Fluxus is launched at Wiesbaden with a series of concerts in September 1962.

one salient difference—among many—between ZERO and Fluxus is that the latter were not painters; in fact, many had abandoned painting and performance had replaced it.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the impact of the Zero concept of announcing an art movement, and specifically a magazine (as Fluxus originally was conceived), through real-time events has not been explored as an early example that momentarily aligns these otherwise quite different groups.

### THE IMMERSIVE<sup>26</sup>

When does an engagement with the ambient conditions of the work of art become immersive? I think this question is provocatively addressed by the pairing of Otto Piene's Light Ballets from the early 1960s and *The Proliferation of the Sun*, which Piene presented for the first time in 1967. In the first category of works, the viewer enters the space and actively moves through it, looking attentively, following the tracery of the light as it activates the architecture, and prompts the movement and discovery of the perceiver. In the second, viewers lie back on a carpeted floor, and allow the imagery to wash over them. In between, we might cite the *Lichtraum (Hommage à Fontana)* (Light Room [Homage to Fontana]) by Mack, Piene, and Uecker of 1964, which still seems to preserve something

of the one-to-one discovery, and even the perception, associated with sculpture, because of the physical encounter with objects (sculptural forms as light sources) that anchor the installation. Moreover, the relatively simple, isolatable technology sets up a palpable (or graspable) relay of cause and effect, which is still phenomenological, still felt with the body. This aspect tends to disappear with the escalation of the immersive, and most decisively with the end of analog technology.<sup>27</sup>

I don't have instant answers, but I feel it's worth closing by posing some questions. What are the conditions of the immersive? Can we call them technological/gauge them by this criterion? Are they defined solely in terms of the spectator/spectatorial experience? And what are the implications? Are there particular historical moments when they can be read as political?

Attractive as it may now be to apply "immersive" to the Zero installations, I wonder: Can we accept the perceptual lurch that the use of this term—overwhelmed as it is by its present meaning—presupposes for such vastly different eras of technological experience? Can we actually speak of the "immersive" at all in the analog moment? Or is this to impose a heavily exploited twenty-first-century brand to invigorate a distant precursor? When attributed to Zero, the immersive

25 Schavemaker mentions in her essay this ephemeral aspect that leaves no commodity, which is typically associated with performance activities of the 1960s. Her example is Allan Kaprow, who made a point of not having any residue (art) after his happenings.

26 The exception to my sense of the idea of immersion (if not quite "the immersive") being used at all in the 1950s is Yves Klein: "Then I immersed myself in the monochrome space, in everything, in the boundless pictorial sensibility." Yves Klein, "Overcoming the Problematics of Art" (1959), in *Overcoming the Problematics of Art: The Writings of Yves Klein*, trans. Klaus Ottmann (Thompson, CT: Spring Publications, 2007), 45.

27 In the interests of time and space—pun intended—I will end this series of thoughts with a brief indication of the exhibitions that help us track the idea of the "immersive." Exhibitions of course constitute a veritable subtext of ZERO. But let's map a slightly wider context, which precedes, exceeds, and includes the group. Since there is not the time to discuss each, I hope the list will be indicative of a certain progression, and serve as a basis for considering the kind of engagement—from one-to-one, or when the works remain discrete objects, even in a room-scale installation, through to a more diffuse or passive experience. For those who know the exhibitions, the logic will be clear, or at least food for thought. For those who do not, the list (only partial) may offer some ground for further investigation. *Le Mouvement*, Galerie Denise René, Paris, 1955; Gutai's outdoor exhibitions, Ashiya, 1955, 1956; Yves Klein, *Proposte monocrome, epoca blu*, Galleria Apollinaire, Milan, 1957; *Vision in Motion – Motion in Vision*, Hessenhuis, Antwerp, 1959; Otto Piene, *Lichtballett* (performance), Galerie Schmela, Düsseldorf, 1959; *Bewogen Beweging/Rörelse i konsten*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam/Moderna Museet Stockholm, 1961; *Dylaby*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1962; *Lichtraum (Hommage à Fontana)*, Documenta 3, Kassel, 1964; *The Responsive Eye*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1965; Paul Sharits, *Wrist Trick* and *Dots 1 & 2* (films), 1965; Mack: *Forest of Light*, Howard Wise, New York, 1966; Andy Warhol, *E.P.I. (Exploding Plastic Inevitable)*, Dom, New York, 1966; Otto Piene, *The Proliferation of the Sun* (performance), Black Gate Theatre, New York, 1967; John Cage, *HPSCHD*, University of Illinois, 1969.

condition would seem to forfeit modernist painting's complex DNA for the first postmodern forays, along with the perceptual encounters likely aspired to: an experimental, participatory engagement scintillatingly magnified for the not-yet-(sub)merged subject. In assessing the stakes of Zero, then and now, such questions seek to calibrate the scope of that art's intervention in the pre-digital age—to strengthen the framework we have for what came later.

## REFERENCES

Austin, J. L. *How To Do Things With Words* (1952/1966). Edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Bois, Yve-Alain. "Chance Encounters: Kelly, Morellet, Cage." In *The Anarchy of Silence: John Cage and Experimental Art*, edited by Julia Robinson, 54–111. Exh. cat. Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. Barcelona: MACBA, 2009.

Bois, Yve-Alain. *Painting as Model*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.

Klein, Yves. "Overcoming the Problematics of Art" (1959). In *Overcoming the Problematics of Art: The Writings of Yves Klein*, translated by Klaus Ottmann, 45–70. Thompson, CT: Spring Publications, 2007.

Schavemaker, Margriet. "Performing Zero." In *Zero: Countdown To Tomorrow, 1950s–60s*, edited by Valerie Hillings, 44–55. Exh. cat. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2014.

Yamamura, Midori. *Yayoi Kusama: Inventing the Singular*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.