

May 15, 2020

Dear Dr. Barbara Könches,

I hope all is well with you.

COVID-19 has gone on a rampage and the world is facing an unprecedented level of crisis after World War II. We wish all of the ZERO foundation staff good health.

As is the case with many museums around the world, the first special exhibition since our museum's opening, *ZERO IS INFINITY, ZERO and Yayoi Kusama* has been closed since only a few days after its opening. Unfortunately, the scheduled memorial lecture that we invited you to as one of the lecturers, which I was also personally very much looking forward to, has had to be canceled as well. However, as in the midst of the great division amongst countries after World War II, when many artists - including ZERO artists and Yayoi Kusama, were in contact with each other through correspondence, we would like to look back at this exhibition, which introduces the activities of ZERO and Yayoi Kusama, in the form of open correspondence, reflecting the present situation.

In recent years, a re-evaluation of ZERO has been taking place globally. One notices that a reason for this phenomenon could be an interest in how the international network created by ZERO with its unique utopic vision, which in its narrowest sense ended in 1966, provided a basis for transnational relationships between European countries that had previously experienced severe division after World War II. This point of view of transnationality also includes a multi-layered correlation, as Kusama was invited to the exhibitions related to ZERO as a "New York artist" rather than as a Japanese artist.

Meanwhile, as you know, our exhibition mainly intends to introduce the transnational development of Kusama's art, by highlighting the relationship between Kusama's activity in 1960s Europe with that of ZERO. In 1957, determined to become a world-famous avant-garde artist, Yayoi Kusama burned thousands of her works on the shores of a river behind her home and departed for the United States. Also in 1957, in Düsseldorf, Germany, Heinz Mack and Otto Piene repeatedly held their salon-style, one-night-only *Evening Exhibitions (Abendausstellungen)* in their studio. The next year, in 1958, Mack and Piene held their *7th Evening Exhibition – The Red Painting (7. Abendausstellung – Das rote Bild)* with more than forty-five artists participating, including Günther Uecker and Yves Klein. Along with the exhibition, they self-published the magazine *ZERO* and also publicly announced it as the name of the group. That same year, while living in the United States, Kusama began working on her series of monochromatic works, *Infinity Nets*, that were composed of repetitive net patterns. Later, their artistic expressions stemmed from two opposite concepts—"Zero" and "Infinity"—encountered at many exhibitions around Europe.

The first invitation Kusama received to participate in a European exhibition was for *Monochrome Painting (Monochrome Malerei)* by the young director Udo Kultermann, held at Städtisches Museum Leverkusen Schloss Morsbroich in 1960. This exhibition is considered to be one of the earliest exhibitions that rejected Art Informel or Tachism and introduced the monochromatic expression of artists from ZERO and European New Tendency. The most significant characteristic of European artists at this exhibition was their way of breaking away from illusionism in painting. By pointing to the two-dimensionality of flat structure, they embodied its pure visual element and effect by adopting the rigorous, formal component of monochrome. Kusama's work exhibited in this exhibition, *Infinity Nets*, was also a monochromatic piece with compulsively repeated net patterns. It is not hard to imagine the reason Kultermann was drawn to her. Kusama herself noted that the monotony produced by the repetitive patterns in *Infinity Nets* bewildered viewers, as its hypnotic serenity drew their spirits into vertigo around "nothingness". She considers that this series of works presaged the ZERO movement in Europe.¹

On the other hand, although ZERO artists' two-dimensional works and Kusama's *Infinity Nets* series are similar in terms of repetitions of single motifs and the pursuit of monochrome, we can suppose that the repetition of the net pattern by Kusama slightly differs from the rigorous single-form repetition by ZERO artists. Whilst ZERO artists reveal the grid as a pursuit of pure visual element and objectivity outside of the subject, Kusama's net seems a persistent search for the "subjective self" within the hallucinatory vision that constantly dominates her.

However, when generally talking about "ZERO artists", we are including such a number of artists who are related to the ZERO international network: the main ZERO artists, Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker; the Dutch Nul artists, such as Henk Peeters, who was one of the main supporters of Kusama's activity in Europe; and the artists like Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni. Their practices as individual artists are diverse, having so many differences with each other's.

Then, what was the background of especially the three artists - Mack, Piene and Uecker, who reached "monochrome" while keeping a distance from the expressionistic influence of that time? Considering the differences between their individual approaches, what was the relationship between the beginning of ZERO activity at the end of the 1950s and the fact that they started creating two-dimensional works of single motif repetition?

Seiha Kurosawa

¹ Yayoi Kusama, *Infinity Net: The Autobiography of Yayoi Kusama* (trans. Ralph McCarthy), 2011, Tate Publishing, London (Original work published in 2002), p.23



Düsseldorf, May 29, 2020

Kurosawa-San,

Thank you very much for the first letter. After the COVID-19 crisis, we are returning more and more to normality in Germany. Our team was not struck by the virus and I hope that the Kusama museum team is also healthy and in a good mood.

I am very sad that the lecture was cancelled in the end, but we all know why. It is a pity that the exhibition couldn't be shown for a longer time, since it was thoughtfully composed and very well curated.

Congratulations, dear Seiha and team.

I read your thoughts about the beginning of the ZERO movement and Kusama's first participation in this movement with great interest. As you mentioned, the exhibition *Monochrome Malerei (Monochrome Painting)* at the Städtisches Museum Leverkusen Schloss Morsbroich in 1960 was very important.

Just a remark on that: the ZERO foundation made an exhibition in Pohang, Republic of Korea, 2019/20, and we learned about the Dansaekhwa monochrome movement, which was active in the mid- 1970s in Korea and started with the exhibition *Korea: Five Artists, Five Hinsek 'White'* at Japan's Tokyo Gallery in 1975. In 2021, we will present the first exhibition *Meeting the monochrome* with artworks from ZERO and Dansaekhwa, accompanied by a conference.¹

Back to ZERO and Yayoi Kusama. I agree that ZERO artists like Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, Günther Uecker, Yves Klein or Piero Manzoni were interested in monochrome, but I don't agree that they arranged two-dimensional works.

The opposite is the case. Why?

Let us start with a person who was very important for the young generation after the Second World War. His name is Lucio Fontana.

Fontana was born in 1899 and is therefore older than most of the ZERO artists. His cut through the canvas was a revolutionary gesture in 1949. Fontana became a kind of artistic father to ZERO art because he opened up the space behind the canvas. This not only meant destroying the illusionism of painting, but also that he literally opened up the space behind the painting. For this reason, Fontana called his paintings with the cut surface: *Concetto spaziale (Spatial Concept)*.

¹ *Meeting the Monochrome: ZERO and Dansaekhwa*

The Meeting of the ZERO movement and Dansaekhwa art (translated "the monochrome image") is fed by astonishing parallels as well as avoidable misunderstandings. After all, what do two post-war art avant-gardes, 12 hours flying time apart, have in common when they dare a new beginning? The monochrome! While in the West the subdued colorfulness of Informel receded at the end of the 1950s in favor of a rhythmic structure, the East discovered its own tradition in the mid-1970s, making its own breakthrough into postmodernism.

In the exhibition, works by Herman Bartels, Chung Chang-Sup, Ha Chong-Hyun, Walter Leblanc, Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, Chung Sang-Hwa, Park Seo-Bo, Günther Uecker, Lee Ufan, and Kwon Young-Woo will be shown.

Another, younger artist also became a key figure in the development of ZERO. This was Yves Klein, born in Nice in 1928. Klein died very young in Paris in 1962, but his influence on the avant-garde is incredibly strong. Klein was a magical person. As a young man lying on the beach with his friends, he explained that the blue of the sky was the greatest monochrome. He made his signature in the air and declared the sky his work of art. Here you can see another essential characteristic of ZERO art: immateriality.

To complete my argument, I would like to refer to a third artist. This was Jean Tinguely, an artist born in Switzerland who lived from 1925 to 1991. Tinguely brought movement to art. In 1954, he connected a wire to a motor and kinetic art was born.

With Fontana, Klein and Tinguely, ZERO art can be defined as spatially related, immaterial and kinetic.

It is true that Mack, Piene and Uecker, and the other artists around ZERO rejected the subjective gestures of Expressionism, Tachism or Informel. They were not interested in art as a kind of visual extension of the artist's hand and mind, but in art as a possible space "Between the Viewer and the Work"².

The monochrome in ZERO art is the pulsating and luminous space that makes the viewer sensitive to the energy of art and nature.

Let us take a look at the art of Düsseldorf artists Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker.

Piene was born in 1928 and met Mack, born in 1931 at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Art Academy Düsseldorf) in the early 1950s. Both were young and in search of a new concept in art, and - as you mentioned in your first letter - they organized the *Abendausstellungen (Evening Exhibitions)*. In doing so, they became part of the avant-garde and created an international network.

Piene and Mack both subsequently studied philosophy at the University of Cologne. They were also interested in science, technology and nature. As a result, Mack used materials such as aluminium and honeycomb³ that had never before been used for a work of art. Piene constructed light-ballets through grids and electric light, which were as unusual as Mack's material. And Günther Uecker, born in 1930, found the nail – an industrially manufactured everyday object that set his canvas and objects in motion. These nails learned to dance and fight, and they built a realm of light and shadow, of calm and momentum.

After the Second World War, all young men and women felt hope for the future. They had all had terrible experiences as children or adolescents in the war situation. Now they enjoyed the opportunities to travel, to be free, to communicate across borders. At the end of the 1950s, Paris was the capital of contemporary art. It was just the last minute before New York took over instead. So if you imagine the epoch at the end of the

² See Tiziana Caianiello, Barbara Könches, ed, *Between the Viewer and the Work: Encounters in Space, Essays on ZERO Art*. Proceedings of the international conference, Düsseldorf, October 18-19, 2018" (Heidelberg, arthistoricum.net 2019)

³ a material from outer space research

1950s, beginning of the 1960s, you will see a lively art scene, with fresh and committed artists. You have Paris in Europe as the capital of the art scene and you find some very good galleries like Iris Clert's gallery in Paris or Alfred Schmela's gallery in Düsseldorf.

Try a summary:

- The following elements characterize ZERO art: space, immaterial forces and movement.
- The art of ZERO oscillates between chance and calculation.
- ZERO is an international network of friends who invite each other from countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland or Germany and people like Jesús Rafael Soto from Venezuela or Almir Mavignier from Brazil to participate in exhibitions and publications.
- Through reduction and concentration, they searched for essential results in art: black and white, monochrome, light and shadow.
- Structures, similar to those in cybernetics, could be inspiring, but structures were never machine-made or completely regular, but the opposite, namely free growing and unpredictable.
- There were not only artists, but also gallery owners, critics and curators who, like John Anthony Thwaites, Iris Clert or Udo Kultermann, fought for new development in art.
- ZERO art is one of the first art movements of the modern and postmodern epoch that can be defined by the aesthetics of reception.

I am looking forward to your reply.

Barbara Könches