

JUNE 18, 2018 ART

ZERO is the beginning

By Jenny Valentish



Spiegelenvironment (Mirror Environment), 1963; recreated in 2018, Christian Megert. Collection Christian & Franziska Megert, Düsseldorf © Christian Megert. Image courtesy Museum of Old and New Art (Mona)

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A new exhibition at Mona brings the light to Dark Mofo

It's a rite of passage for a small child to draw on the walls of the family home. Seven-year-old Mattijs Visser preferred to deface now-priceless artworks.

Correction. Not "deface". "Improve".

Visser was born in 1958, the same year, he says, as the art movement ZERO. (Correction. ZERO is not a “movement”. It is a “vision”.) You could say he was even born *into* ZERO. His uncle was Henk Peeters, whose work is currently installed in MONA, as part of a ZERO exhibition running until April 2019.

Conceptually, ZERO was a new beginning for creativity. Its artists were known for treating their works irreverently, or passing them from person to person to be customised. So it’s appropriate that young Visser did his bit.

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“I’m really not proud,” he laughs. “Our house was a kind of storage because my uncle had so many works from all his colleagues. The work I most hated was a little machine by Pol Bury and it would always be on when they had friends visiting. It was bits of metal scratching over each other, so it gave me terrible pain in my teeth.”

Inspired, young Visser cut a wire to disable the work. Next, he slashed a work by Lucio Fontana, but this time in the spirit of collaboration. No harm done. Visser is now the founding director of the ZERO Foundation and the curator of this exhibition. It features founding members Otto Piene and Heinz Mack (correction. There are no founding members. However, the two met as students at Düsseldorf’s Kunstakademie and put on shows), as well as Peeters, Günther Uecker, Adolf Luther, Fontana, Nanda Vigo, Grazia Varisco, Enrico Castellani, Gianni Colombo, Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein, François Morellet, Christian Megert, Jesús Soto and Yayoi Kusama.

ZERO had a barter system that gave it an energy. “You had two types of works,” says Visser. “The installations and then the mini works that you could put in your suitcase or car and gift to someone because he was giving you petrol money, or letting you eat at his restaurant, or being your dentist.”

Artists put money in a jar for the common goal: to pay for the catalogue, the exhibitions, the posters, the costumes, the bills, the insurance. “They wanted to bring the real world into the museum and art into the real world,” says Visser. “After the Second World War there was no money and there were no libraries where you could read about art, so you had to go into the streets to find plastic, artificial cotton and other cheap, mass-produced materials. Far better than going to a shop and buying paint and canvas.”

Take, for example, Peeters’ work at MONA, *Akwarel*. It’s a wall of water-filled plastic bags, first created in 1966 and since replicated as required. Or Adolf Luther’s *Flaschenzerschlagungsraum*. It translates as “Bottle Smashing Room”, and you can indeed enter and smash a bottle against a steel wall, causing a flash of light. All the works in the exhibition follow the theme of vibration, and those that do so most clearly are the kinetic works, such as Christian Megert’s *Spiegelenvironment* – a monochrome room of static and spinning mirrors that send a fixed light on a journey of motion. Or Enrico Castellani’s room of out-of-synch metronomes, titled *Il muro del tempo*.

As ZERO progressed into the 1960s, many of its artists were engrossed with Op Art. *Jesús Rafael Soto’s Doble progresión azul y negra* (*Double Progression Blue and Black*) looks like a soundwave rendered in metal. Grazia Varisco’s *Schema luminoso variabile R.VOD plus 2* presents as a sphere of flashing lights, but is constructed out of a silent motor that rotates a fixed pattern of globes behind a sheet of perspex etched with its own motif.

Eventually, ZERO spread from Germany to pockets around Europe, the United States and Japan, often swallowing up existing, compatible movements such as the Hollandse Informele Groep in the Netherlands, which Peeters had founded, and which he renamed Nul. The original ZERO group disbanded in 1966, but as far as Piene was concerned, ZERO is eternal. “It’s hard to say who is a ZERO artist because of this,” says Visser (who thinks contemporary artists Cameron Robbins and Olafur Eliasson are reminiscent). “The galleries would love to know, because when you’re a ZERO artist you have a few more zeroes of value.”

MONA curator Jane Clark says, “It was a classic case of being young, finding like-minded people to travel around with for a while, and then going your separate ways. David [Walsh, MONA owner] says to an extent it’s to try and get laid, but I guess they’re out of art school and they’re looking at how you make a career as an artist. Later, there were arguments about what the spirit of ZERO was and how to make this utopia.”

Which brings us to one last point. Grazia Varisco, Yayoi Kusama and Nanda Vigo are exhibited here, but why are female artists so under-represented in ZERO?

Visser looks pained. “I had a show at the Guggenheim and they asked me, ‘Where are the women?’ I had no answer,” he says. “I figured out that we made a mistake because there is enough information on the women from ZERO time.”

Looking into the matter further, he concluded that most of the female artists had children and faded from view, while a small handful fought ever harder to establish themselves. “So they could compete with the male pigs,” he says. “I call them male pigs because there were a few, like Yves Klein and Manzoni, who were very aggressive, to protect their own legend.”

Now he’s working on an exhibition for an auction house in London, which he originally decided to call *The Forgotten Women from ZERO Network*. However, upon consulting with some of them, he’s amended that idea. “You know what they said? ‘Fuck you, we’re artists, not women!’” he says. “And Nanda Vigo blamed me several times for not including enough works of hers compared with the others.”

At their behest, Visser gave up his female-only show in favour of fairer representation. “So now I make a show with a huge many forgotten women – and a handful of male artists.”

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JENNY VALENTISH

Jenny Valentish is a journalist and novelist, and the author of *Woman of Substances*. Her latest book is *Everything Harder Than Everyone Else*.

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