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Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art steps back in time with its playful new exhibition Zero

By [Dee Jefferson](#)

[ABC Arts](#) [Arts, Culture and Entertainment](#)

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One of the most striking works in MONA's new exhibition, [Zero](#), consists of a black wall covered in a meticulous grid of identical clear plastic bags filled with water. Curator Mattijs Visser cheerfully points out that it could be made at home.

This observation is interrupted by the sound of smashing glass from the gallery next door. In it, visitors are throwing glass bottles against a metal backing board — with the enthusiasm of power pitchers gunning for a strikeout.

Picking up a bottle, Visser points out that this also could be done at home.

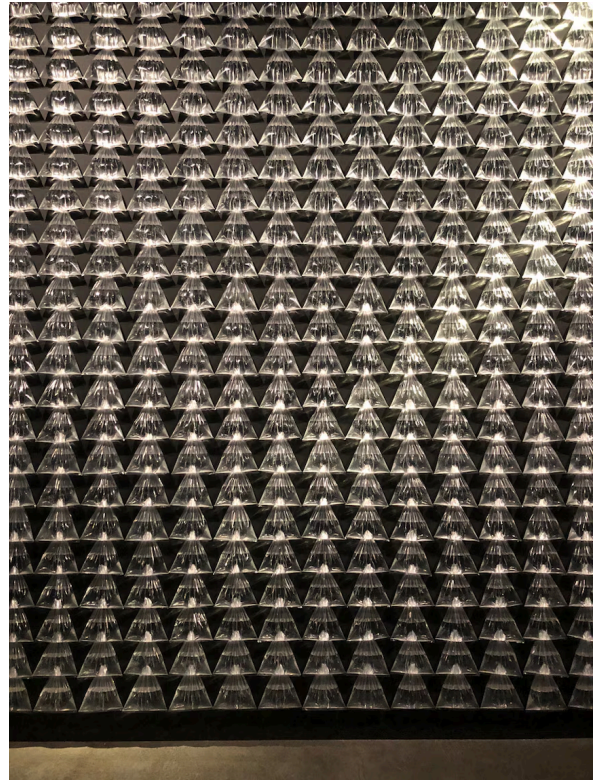
Smash.

Paradoxically perhaps, Zero is a dated show with the kind of "timeless" appeal that art sometimes achieves. In many ways it is, and feels like, a time capsule from the 1960s: a love letter to the era that gave us Sputnik and the plastic shopping bag, and a pastiche of art movements we associate with that period — such as optical art, minimalism and kinetic art.

But the exhibition's key appeal for a contemporary audience is likely to be its experimentation with everyday materials; many of the works in Zero could in fact be made at home.

Take for instance the line of metronomes, waiting for a visitor to set them in motion. Or the rectangle of pinstriped ticking fabric, stretched over nails so as to produce an optical illusion.

And the perforated cube, suspended from the ceiling and lit by a slowly-spinning lamp within, creating a "light ballet" on the gallery walls.



Henk Peeters' 1966 work *Akwarel* is one of many from the era that have been recreated for MONA's exhibition Zero. (*ABC Arts: Dee Jefferson*)



Mattijs (or Tijs) Visser, founding director of the ZERO Foundation, is nephew of the late Dutch artist Henk Peeters, who was part of the Zero movement. *(Supplied: MONA/Remi Chauvin)*

Visser says that this last work, by the late German artist Otto Piene, has its roots in childhood play.

"He was a child soldier [in the Hitler Youth]. During the Second World War they had to black out all the windows at home; if there was a little hole in the [blackout material] and it was day, then you see the light coming through the little hole. And it moves, because the sun moves. And Piene was fascinated, and dreamed about more light in the house. His wish was to open up and see the sun ... that's how he started making light sculptures."

Visser relates a similar childhood anecdote for German sculptor Gunther Uecker, who is best known for his work using nails.

"He was young and at home, and the Russian soldiers came to the village where he lived [in Germany], and he needed to protect his mother. He took a hammer and nails, and he boarded up all the windows, in order to protect his mother ... when you talk with Gunther Uecker, it all starts with the war, what he experienced as a child."



Adolf Luther's Bottle Smashing Room invites visitors to throw a glass bottle at the metal backboard. *(Supplied: MONA)*

In the beginning, there was Zero

MONA's exhibition showcases the post-war European art movement Zero, founded in 1957 by German artists Otto Piene and Heinz Mack (later joined by core member Gunther Uecker), who met at art school in postwar Düsseldorf: a rapidly-reconstructing centre of "Rhineland capitalism" in the newly-constituted Federal Republic (aka West Germany).

Mack [has described](#) the period as one of "material and intellectual vacuum. We were completely isolated from the world and had to find out very carefully what would happen to art after 1945."



Yves Klein's "swimming pool" of dry pigment in patented International Klein Blue was first exhibited in 1957 — the same year he exhibited at Düsseldorf's Galerie Schmela, and met Otto Piene and Heinz Mack.
(Supplied: MONA)

Piene and Mack had adjacent Düsseldorf studios, where they held regular art nights, incubating an art movement that is characterised as optimistic, forward-looking and communal, and which attracted like-minded artists predominantly from Europe, but also as far afield as South America, Japan and New Zealand (Len Lye exhibited in one of the Zero Group shows).

Major artists who passed through their studios include American painter Robert Rauschenberg, and Bulgarian environmental artist Christo.

Zero at MONA features many of the movement's associated artists: Lucio Fontana, Nanda Vigo, Grazia Varisco, Enrico Castellani and Gianni Colombo from Italy; Marcel Duchamp, Yves Klein and Francois Morellet from France; Henk Peeters from The Netherlands; Christian Megert from Switzerland; Jesus Rafael Soto from Venezuela; and Yayoi Kusama from Japan (with one of her early "infinity net" paintings).

While only a handful of these artists are household names, the importance of the Zero movement has gained recognition over the past decade, with the formation of the Düsseldorf-based Zero Foundation in 2008 (of which curator Mattijs Visser is the director), and a string of subsequent exhibitions — including the Guggenheim's 2014 showcase [Zero: Countdown to tomorrow, 1950s-60s](#).



Zero co-founder Heinz Mack experimented with new materials like plexiglass and aluminium in his sculptures. (*Supplied: MONA*)

Back to the future

The artists of Zero were interested in experimenting with new materials (plastics, nylon and aluminium became readily available after World War II) and forms.

"They certainly didn't want to repeat what all these painters had done — paint a landscape. [They felt] the reality was far more interesting than the painting of the reality," Visser says.

The Zero movement attracted artists who were rejecting Abstract Expressionism and its postwar European counterpart, Arte Informal.

"They wanted to make a big step forward, and not fall into the trap of 'the artist, his hand, his emotion'," Visser says.

"They had had more than enough of emotion from the Informal painters. But they were filled with emotions from the Second World War, so they needed to breathe, open up, start again — with Zero."

Heinz Mack formally disbanded the Zero Group in 1966, but as Piene once said: "It is not a style, it is not a group ... it's a vision of things."



Günther Uecker's Lichtregen (Light Rain) was first exhibited as part of the landmark 1966 exhibition Kunst Licht Kunst, alongside work by Dan Flavin. (*Supplied: MONA*)

The art of play

The aesthetic of the MONA's Zero exhibition is somewhat austere — a minimalist vision in blue, silver and neon white, bracketed by concrete gallery spaces.

But the nature of the works, many of which rely on the viewer's interaction to make them work, make a sense of play inevitable.

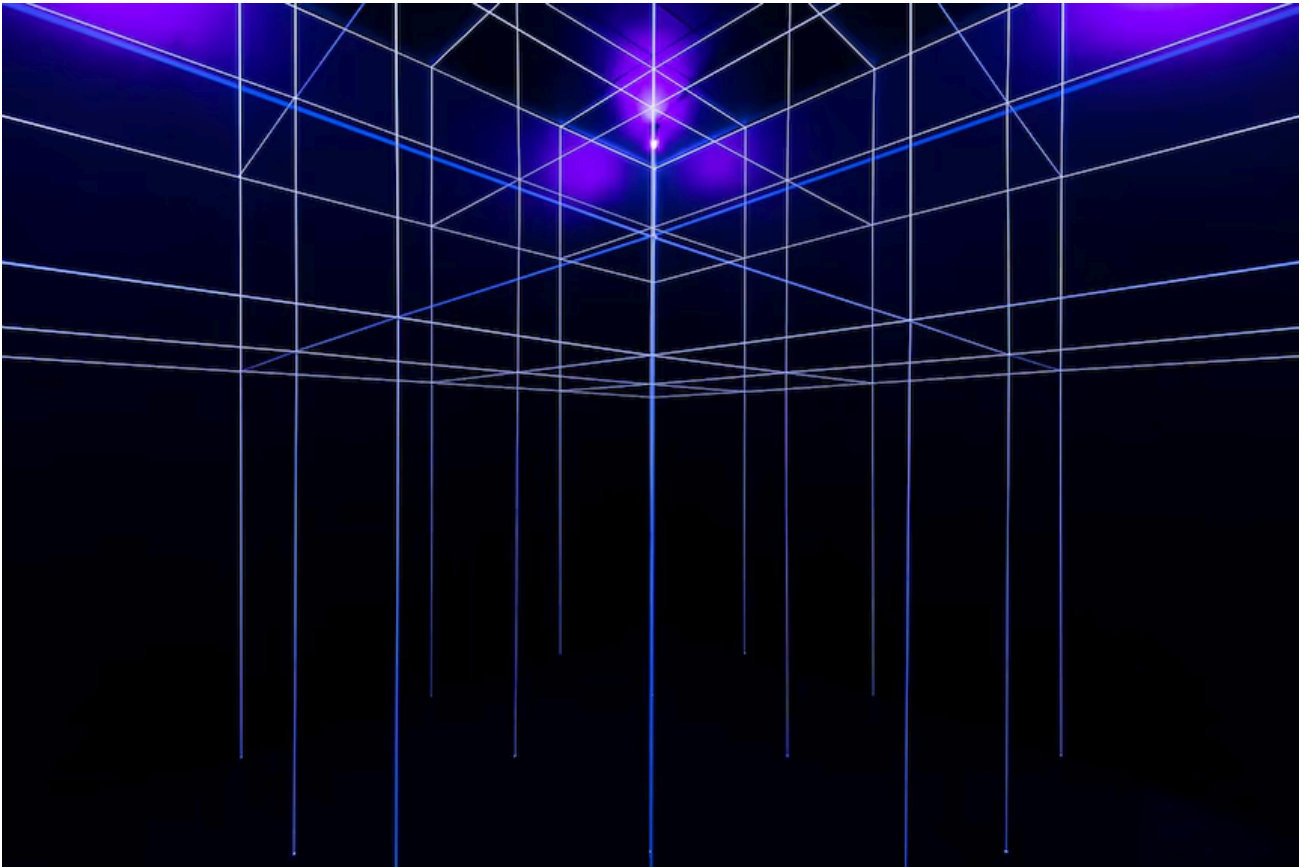
Uecker's Light Rain looks almost forbidding — until you realise you can walk in it.

Likewise Gianni Colombo's Elastic Space, which looks like a prototype from Vincenzo Natali's high concept horror film Cube, but is actually a gently perception-bending walk-in installation in which a grid of elastic cords seems to expand and contract around you.

Jane Clark, senior research curator for MONA and co-curator of Zero, credits the movement with pioneering "immersive installation art that you actually walk into, and you are necessary to

complete the work".

But even smaller-scale works in the exhibition demonstrate this aspect of play and interaction: Jesus Rafael Soto's portable op-art pieces, made from materials as simple as nylon and paper, require the viewer to shift their viewpoint in order to complete the optical illusion.



Gianni Colombo presented his walk-in environment *Elastic Space*, made from elastic cord, UV light and electric motors, at the Venice Biennale in 1968. (*Supplied: MONA*)

Democratising art

The interactive nature of the works in Zero goes hand-in-hand with the democratic philosophy of the movement.

Nicole Durling, co-director of exhibitions and collections at MONA, says: "So many of the artists involved with Zero believed that art was everybody and that it actually required people — the visitor, the viewer — to not just be a passive viewer but to activate the work. The work isn't complete without somebody coming in and working through it, or moving it, or shifting around in the room."

Where post-war Expressionism had valorised the artist's will and gesture, the Zero movement shared that power with the viewer.

This democratising spirit makes MONA an ideal spiritual home for the exhibition, in some ways. The museum's rejection of labels and wall text (in favour of their custom-designed digital app,

called the 'O') suits a show of works that were designed not to befuddle an audience with art theory and jargon, but engage them in the universal act of imagination and play.

Zero continues at Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) until April 22, 2019.

The journalist stayed in Hobart as a guest of MONA/Dark Mofo.

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