

Serge Lemoine:

Vibratio

Zero, the spirit it represents and the influence it has exerted, counts among the major art-historical phenomena of the second half of the twentieth century. Zero began in Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1957, with Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, who were joined shortly afterwards by Günther Uecker. This central ‘cell’ gave rise to an artistic tendency that spread throughout Europe in parallel with the birth and development of lumino-kinetic art and the manifestations organised from 1961 onwards in Zagreb by the movement New Tendencies.

Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, former students of the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, sought to react against the predominance of Art Informel and Abstract Expressionism, the prevailing tendencies of the time, while at the same time presenting their own vision. They wanted a neutral art, stripped of mystique and subjectivity, related to natural elements and close to its audience. They organised exhibitions at their studio, showing their own works alongside those of other artists they invited, and focusing on themes such as Red, Vibration and Dynamo. In 1958, they founded a journal entitled *ZERO*, of which three issues were published, the last in 1961. Zero as an art collective was dissolved in 1966 after having taken part in many international exhibitions, notably *Vision in Motion/Motion in Vision* in Antwerp in 1959; *Nul (Zero)* in 1962 at Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum; *documenta III* in 1964 at Kassel, where it presented *Light Room* in homage to Lucio Fontana; *The Responsive Eye* in New York at the Museum of Modern Art in 1965; *Licht und Bewegung* (Light and Gesture) at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1965 and the 4th Paris Biennale and *Kunst Licht Kunst* (Art Light Art) at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 1966. In 1962, Otto Piene said about Zero: ‘It is not a style, it is not a group, and I don’t want it to become one. It’s a vision of things.’

That 'vision of things' developed from their earliest productions to the collective works that Mack, Piene and Uecker showed in galleries, such as the Howard Wise Gallery in New York in 1964 or at documenta. The principal characteristic of their art is abstraction. Though they do not represent the visible world their pieces manifest a genuine relationship with nature: their works are constituted by light and movement as perceived in space and time. Their creations exclude any notion of composition and emphasise structure, uniformity and repetition. They are white or maintain the colour of their materials, such as glass and metal. They are neither painted nor carved but constructed, assembled or fabricated using a variety of techniques. In Zero's collective works, which are installations—sometimes on a large scale, with elements distributed in space and related one to another—movement, light and temporal sequences are foregrounded as a form of spectacle: many of their creations contain the word 'ballet' in the title and explicitly refer to the stage and dance, to theatre and its dramaturgy of lights and shadows. The meaning of these works is less an effect of the devices from which they are composed—these are only the technical means—than of the visual and sensory effects they produce on the person witnessing and enjoying the spectacle.

One of these effects, a particular focus of Zero, was vibration. This was the theme selected for the eighth 'evening exhibition' in 1958 in which Yves Klein, Oskar Holweck, Almir Mavignier and Adolf Zillmann took part with Mack and Piene, and it formed the subject of the second issue of the journal *ZERO*. This is the theme that has been selected for the exhibition here at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart. Vibration can be understood as the effect of parts of an artwork being set in motion. However, often it is result of an optical phenomenon produced by the work in the eye of the spectator because of its constituent parts: its contrasts of colour and form, for example, or the interaction between negative and positive. These vibration effects manifest in installations and reconstructions by artists from a number of different

countries: Germany (Mack, Piene, Uecker and Adolf Luther), Switzerland (Christian Megert), Italy (Enrico Castellani, Gianni Colombo, Grazia Varisco and Nanda Vigo), Venezuela (Jesús Rafael Soto), the Netherlands (Henk Peeters) and France (Yves Klein). The selection at Mona is completed by a choice of multiples on the theme of vibration, mostly produced by Editions MAT on the initiative of Daniel Spoerri.

The works of Mack, Piene and Uecker in this exhibition are characteristic of those artists' interest in the expression of movement and the diffusion of light. *Lichtregen* (Light Rain) by Günther Uecker, which dates from 1966 and was first exhibited at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York, was conceived as an interactive environment. With its mobile, hanging tubes it has many points in common with the contemporary suspended structures by Julio Le Parc and the somewhat later 'Penetrables' by Jesús Rafael Soto. In it, vibration, movement and instability find expression. Otto Piene's *Pirouetten* (Pirouettes), first created in the 1960s, is made of a cube pierced on each face with multiple openings and containing a lighting system that revolves on an axle. It thus becomes a machine for projecting rays of light into space, which simultaneously trace ephemeral forms as they pass across walls, constituting a veritable ballet of light. Heinz Mack's *Stelen* (Steles), 1960, was shown at the Howard **Wise** Gallery in New York and has evolved over many years: here at Mona is an installation comprising seven vertical steles, rectangular columns made variously from aluminium and Plexiglas, which reflect rays of light in all directions while their surfaces vibrate. Light as material and form lies at the centre of the corpus of each of these three artists.

Close to the work of Mack in its effect but executed with 'poor materials' is Henk Peeters's installation: *Akwarel* (Watercolour), shown for the first time at the exhibition *Kunst Licht Kunst*, 1966, is made up of plastic bags filled with water and hung at regular intervals on a wall; its multiple facets scintillate with the light that animates it. In *Spiegelenvironment* (Mirror Environment),

1963/2018, Christian Megert uses mirrors to multiply space and distort the reflected image. Megert presented his first environment using mirror-surfaces at the first Nul exhibition in 1962 at Amsterdam, exerting considerable influence over Yayoi Kusama, demonstrated in the latter's *Infinity Mirror Room* of 1965. Kusama has created many mirror works, distinct but employing similar methods, since that time (her *Dots Obsession—Tasmania* was commissioned for the exhibition *On the Origin of Art* here at Mona in 2016). Distortion is also the theme of Gianni Colombo's *Spazio Elastico* (Elastic Space), exhibited for the first time in 1967 in Graz, Austria: the cords installed as a cube and yet moving, immersed in darkness and seen only under ultraviolet light, create an unstable space in constant transformation. Enrico Castellani's *Superficie* (Surface), 1962, with its blue parallel lines slightly distorted on white cloth, produces a visual phenomenon of vibration. This is also clear in Jesús Rafael Soto's *Doble progresión azul y negra* (Double Progression Blue and Black), 1975: here the dense pattern of ascending and descending tubes produces an intense vibration effect in the eye of the moving spectator. This ensemble of works, united by the interaction between light, movement, reflection and vibration, is completed by others that take the diffusion of sound as their motif. Castellani's *Il muro del tempo* (Wall of Time), 1968, is one example: it comprises seven metronomes, all out of sync, beating out their own rhythm. By this means the artist introduces a rhythmic structure into space and engenders sound vibrations. In 1961, Adolf Luther made *Flaschenschlagungsraum* (Bottle Smashing Room), prefiguring the use that he would later make of glass, mirror, reflections and glinting light by throwing glass bottles against a metallic surface. At the point of impact, the bottles break and produce a sound vibration that spreads through the space.

All these artists rejected sentiment and did not believe in inspiration; for them, the goal was to place vision back at the centre of artistic creation. In some cases, a further object was to dematerialise the work so that only perception survives: this is what Yves Klein attempted with his installation *Pigment bleu*

sec (Dry Blue Pigment) presented for the first time in 1957 at Galerie Colette Allendy in Paris: the artist covered the entire floor area of an empty space with the colour that he had appropriated, a blue created by pure pigment, to which he gave the name 'International Klein Blue', or 'IKB'. The reflections of this blue set the whole space vibrating.

Procedures of this kind were common to many artists active in the 1960s and thereafter. We might cite, in Germany, Ludwig Wilding and Wolfgang Ludwig; in Italy, Getulio Alviani, Toni Costa, Edoardo Landi and Alberto Biasi and, in the preceding generation, Mario Ballocco and Franco Grignani. In France, they are found in the work of Julio Le Parc, Antonio Asis, Carlos Cruz-Diez and Yvaral and, in the 1950s, in the corpus of Victor Vasarely. Indeed, seeing Vasarely's art oriented Bridget Riley towards her work based on optical phenomena. In Belgium, we may cite Pol Bury and Walter Leblanc; and in the United States, Richard Anuskiewicz, Julian Stanczak and Francis Celentano added their contribution.

These preoccupations, all intensely expressive of their era, found an original application in Daniel Spoerri's creation of Edition MAT, a series of multiples produced in Paris in 1959 and exhibited in Düsseldorf later that year. He produced a second edition in Cologne in 1964. Anxious like many others to transform the status of the artwork and the role played by its creator, he set about publishing vibratory works that could be manufactured in great numbers, on a domestic scale, and consequently made accessible to a wider public. The artists include Yaacov Agam, Getulio Alviani, Pol Bury, Karl Gerstner, Julio Le Parc, Christian Megert, François Morellet, Jesús Rafael Soto, Paul Talman, Jean Tinguely, Victor Vasarely, Gabriele De Vecchi, Nanda Vigo, the founding members of Zero, along with Marcel Duchamp and Josef Albers. They too form part of this exhibition.

Zero—Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker—enabled the development of many new ideas and paved the way for the expression of new sensibilities: we owe them a great deal.