

YAYOI KUSAMA MUSEUM

草間彌生美術館

October 2, 2020

Dear Dr. Barbara Könches,

I read your reply with great interest.

Thank you very much for providing the details of Mack's Sahara Project and the commentary on the Demonstration. It was very informative to know that whilst the ZERO artists may have had less of an intention to make this event into an artwork rather than into performance art or a happening, it was instead something that occurred spontaneously with the visitor. On the other hand, they were also probably aware of the Demonstration being reported across various media outlets, and the fact that its performativity promoted the ZERO movement and made it even more popular is also interesting.

In this sense, we can say that Piero Manzoni's ironical practice had more affinity to Kusama in her treatments of body of artists involved in ZERO, rather than with the other ZERO artists. Manzoni's *Living Sculpture (Scultura Vivente)*, that we showed a video documentation of in our exhibition, is a performance that is based upon the artist's signature on the model standing on the pedestal. Through the excessive self-promotion of "corporeal presence", Manzoni's performativity subversively turned artistic authority and its structure into humor. I think this is similar to how Kusama strategically used the presence of the "self" in her performance to oppose American Pop.

To sum up, in our correspondences so far, we have exchanged opinions about many factors, such as the relationship between the ZERO network and Kusama, the similarities and differences in the use of new materials at that time, and the various uses of body. As discussed, we can point out that Kusama and ZERO share some formalistic similarities while simultaneously having many qualitative differences. As you emphasized many times, this is because ZERO formed an extremely complex network by taking in many artists and artistic contexts, making it difficult to overview. Although they did not have common instructions or a clear direction between themselves, ZERO artists forged the unique connections that overcame national divisions in the European continent by developing their art in distinctive ways. As if to emulate the rocket that launched from the postwar "silent zone" to "infinite utopia", they conducted a variety of experiments in less than a decade. Meanwhile, in the same period, Kusama resisted her "infinitely" proliferating hallucinatory vision from her childhood and established the methodology that obliterates the self into "zero=nothingness" as the basis of her art.

The exhibition held at our museum, *Zero Is Infinity*, focused on the bidirectional vectors that interact between the concepts of “ZERO” and “Infinity”. These two concepts should probably be understood as a set of pairs rather than extreme opposites. The artists who experienced a tragic war in their childhood became able to communicate across borders, as travel bans were lifted during the postwar reconstruction and travel gradually became freer. Although each practice varies in many different ways, they gazed hope for the perception of the future of that time. We can probably say that the twin creativities that were “ZERO” and “Infinity” were produced by artists who sprinted through the intense times of the 1960s.

Today, as economic disparity expands under global informational capitalism, Europe is again faced with the fluidity and divisions that have been appearing on various levels due to the revival of nationalism and the rise of populism, triggered by issues with migrants and refugees or the problematics of Brexit. Needless to mention, the global pandemic of Covid-19 occurred almost at the same time as the exhibition opening. The pandemic has been furthering empathy towards pessimistic and anti-foreign attitudes. This does not limit itself to Europe, but also on a more universal scale which is growing day by day. As you know, we had to decide to close the museum for most of the exhibition period. However, in the current circumstances, I think there are many things we can learn from the powerful energy that created a network which overcame the border divisions between Kusama and ZERO artists, or in other words, we should consider "ZERO as an attitude" as mentioned by Piene. Kusama has declared a message about the current situation, calling for a joint struggle, with love for humankind against the unprecedented threat of Covid-19. If you have any thoughts about the significance of looking back on ZERO in regards to this situation, please do let us know.

Seiha Kurosawa



October 28, 2020

Dear Seiha Kurosawa,

In your letter, you pointed out the dangers associated with the Covid-19 pandemic: The population of the world is increasingly being reminded of its local and regional presence. In order to organize or secure their national health systems, nations are re-forming along their political borders. In Germany, a state system based on federalism, the smallest administrative units are emerging, which differ greatly in their Covid-19 protection measures. People are insecure. In autumn, the number of new infections increases and politicians (still) appeal to people to stay at home - preferably alone, of course. The scenario of isolation and demarcation contradicts everything we have sociologically associated with being human so far. Man is a social being, “zōon politikon”, writes Aristotle. Man needs contact and communication with others.

The Covid-19 pandemic or the virus itself seems to attack exactly this social self-definition. Humans must be careful of humans, because each human contact increases the chance of the virus to multiply itself, multiply and multiply itself.

How can we react to the coronavirus? Can art help us here? Art that we can only marvel at with mouth-and-nose protection, in museums and exhibition houses that are temporarily closed, at exhibition openings where people meet from behind hooded faces.

There are many good reasons to be enthusiastic about ZERO art, which is so different and diverse. For me, there are two special features that stand out:

First, I admire ZERO for its infinite optimism: “We live. We are for everything,” explained Mack and Piene in their magazine *ZERO 3*. This generation of war-raised youth felt a refreshingly optimistic confidence in 1961, when *ZERO 3* was released, after all those dark, dangerous and traumatic years. They had survived the worst; everything that was to come had to be better.

Secondly, they celebrated the beauty of nature: the vastness of the sky, the radiance of light, the dynamism of movement. Nature was a peaceful ally in times of war. But in recent years, nature has shown us its other side, which is fed by a destructive force: Floods, drought or insect plagues have refuted the homo faber's self-assessment - that he could accomplish everything through the use of technology.

The ZERO artists have bowed appreciatively to nature and its aesthetic qualities. Nature was the reserve of art and freedom. The stars and the sky stood for infinity; fire created independent art forms in the process of transformation, as can be seen in the works of Otto Piene, Yves Klein or Bernhard

Aubertin. Heinz Mack made the Sahara his art preserve and Otto Piene demanded "to change the environment on a large - not just a small – scale". With this statement, Piene did not mean, however, to plunder nature, as is the case in many branches of industry in the extraction of raw materials, but to create art with air, heat and water.

I list these two points to make it clear that, of course, in the 1950s and 1960s nobody would have thought of such a dangerous pandemic as we are now experiencing with Covid-19. But ZERO art gives us two important, I believe vital, maxims to take along with us: Enjoy the beauty! And be optimistic!

When I sit in one of Otto Piene's quiet, meditative light rooms and see the sparkle like stars, I forget for five, ten or fifteen minutes the constant incidence numbers and new infections. Before the glittering and clinking of the light along Heinz Mack's aluminum and glass steles, I think of wide white landscapes of ice and snow, and when I stand in front of Günter Uecker's *Sandmühle (Sand Mill)*, which rotates endlessly around its own axis, the monotonous gliding of the strings along the thousands of grains of sand calms my eyes. The immeasurable dimensions of nature give us a feeling of infinity and freedom.

In the early years of their artistic work and their exhibitions, Mack, Piene and Uecker and the European ZERO network brought many people together across national, class and state borders. Today, this art helps us to survive the difficult phase of this worldwide pandemic by giving us confidence and beauty.

Dear Seiha Kurosawa, everything is on the move and when the pandemic subsides, our world will not be the same, but I hope it will be open to all human beings. Freedom and health are not negotiable.

Thank you for your ideas, your knowledge and your thoughts in correspondence, as well as in the exhibition. I like your documentary video about the exhibition *ZERO and Yayoi Kusama* on the website of the Yayoi Kusama Museum very much and find the combination of sound and image to be very successful.

Barbara Könches