

August 3, 2020

Dear Dr. Barbara Könches,

Thank you very much for your insightful and keen analysis of ZERO artists' practice, the use of industrial materials such as mirrors, and the surrounding European context and philosophical background. As you point out, one does have to be careful when referring to the term "utopia". It was also helpful to highlight that ZERO artists' practices need to be viewed through "critical humanism" as their background rather than through the term "utopia".

First of all, regarding the relationship you heard about between Kusama and Nanda Vigo. As you mentioned, when Kusama first visited Europe, we heard Vigo was one of the essential figures who helped Kusama connect with ZERO artists. Specifically speaking, we assume that after the opening of the *Nul* exhibition in Amsterdam in April 1965, Fontana instructed Vigo to drive Kusama to Fontana's studio in Milan. At the same time, as you know, *ZERO avantgarde 1965* was being held at Fontana's studio. Our records show that in May of the same year, Kusama attended the opening of this *ZERO avantgarde 1965* exhibition that went on to travel to Venice, and then she returned to Amsterdam the next day. Although further verification is necessary to identify the exact dates, during that time, we speculate that Vigo traveled with Kusama to some artists' studios across Europe by car. For example, Christian Megert himself told us that Kusama came to visit Megert's studio in Bern from Milan with Vigo. Like Henk Peters and Fontana, there is no doubt that Vigo, one of the few female artists who participated in ZERO, contributed in linking Kusama with the ZERO artist network and forming the basis of Kusama's activities in Europe.

Regarding your question of whether utopian thoughts influenced Kusama, I do not think this is precisely the case. Probably, the phrase "a shared utopic vision" that I used in my previous letter was not accurate enough. Like the ZERO artists, the wartime experience has a huge impact on Kusama's desire to make the world a better place and occupies a significant part of her avant-garde art practice. However, as you pointed out, her practice is not based on "utopianism", aiming for an ideal society that does not exist in reality (as -ism) by trying to escape from inhumane experience and mass consumerism. Rather, there were somewhat similar practices by ZERO artists and Kusama, testing the relationship between infinite space and time in the universe within a real place.

Similar to ZERO artists, Kusama also had a critical view of mass-consumerism at the time, as well as capitalistic desire, primarily led by the USA. The obvious manifestation of this view is *Narcissus Garden*, which was installed and filled in the 33rd Venice Biennale venue in 1966. Created with Fontana's support, approximately 1,500 silver-colored plastic mirror balls innumeraably reflected the surrounding environment on the mirrored surface of the spheres. As is well-known, Kusama sold the mirror balls without permission as a 'happening' there. This performance was immediately called off by the organizer. It implied a definitive criticism towards the commodification of art and capitalistic drive as significant motivational forces in the art market led by the United States. As we can observe from this performance, Kusama often felt sympathy for European artists, including Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni, more so than for other artists in New York.

We can say that this comprehensive installation unified Kusama's past experimentations for environmental turns through repetition (*Infinity-Nets*) and the use of mirrors. However, these formalistic or methodological developments are not important to Kusama—her focus is consistently on the “self” that obliterates into infinity. She also often mentions the infinite space (or her love) of the universe, especially in recent years, rather than in the 1960s. However, this is not necessarily based on the development of scientific knowledge or futuristic thoughts such as space exploration in the 1960s, instead it comes from an intuition that continues from her childhood: the obliteration of the self into infinitely expanding hallucinatory vision. This is why it was possible for her to directly connect this work with self-centered performativity in the numerous mirror ball environment. Meanwhile, a series of her happenings in New York at the same time, with a clear political message - such as anti-Vietnam War, show more anarchic and robust criticisms of reality. The inclusion of a clear political message in the relationship between the infinitely growing polka dots and the physical body seems to indicate Kusama's attitude of pursuing utopic possibilities within real society.

As a similar example, in Mack's “Sahara Project”, a series of sculptures in the shape of pillars that reflect light were set up in the Sahara desert. This was an attempt to realize an “artificial garden” that tests artistic conditions in the expansive natural space - the desert. In this garden, Mack wore a futuristic silver costume and experimented with the reflection and vibration of light. While it is possible to find similarities with Kusama's happenings mentioned above, this experiment seemed to correspond more with issues on the acceleration of space development in the 1960s, and tried to reach infinite space by overcoming the institutional limit of artistic space.

For ZERO artists, such performances with their bodies were a significant part of their work. Along with the publication of the third volume of the magazine *ZERO* in 1961, they conducted a performance—they called it “demonstration”—and welcomed participation from artists such as Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik, who were not included in the magazine. This would be the final question from my side: what was the significance of these physical performances, or “demonstrations”, in the practices and network of ZERO? I assume they were also held under the influence of the simultaneous trend of happenings in the United States. In what kind of aspects, could ZERO’s unique physicality be found in their performances?

Seiha Kurosawa



September 14, 2020

Dear Seiha Kurosawa,

It is again a great pleasure to read your fifth prudent letter, with interesting historical facts about the relationship between Yayoi Kusama and the ZERO artists, and thoughtful deliberations about utopic ideas and the question as to what extent the body may be involved in the art.

Maybe we can use the philosophical method of *Occam's razor*: If the art has an idealistic background - like the idea of Utopia - then it couldn't be part of the realistic biological environment. On the other hand, if the art wants to reach out into the biological environment, then it must have a physical enhancement.

As so often is the case, things in the ZERO-movement are more complex and they are reluctant to be pushed into one drawer.

As you mentioned Mack's "Sahara Project" is a wonderful example to scrutinize our thesis.

First of all, he himself is always speaking about the "Sahara Project" as a Utopian project, which he could hardly realize with only a few minutes of film. Mack's idea - to take the landscape as a canvas and use the sculptures as a brush - was a kind of precursor of American Land Art, no matter if Richard Long, Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria or Nancy Holt knew of the project or not. You mentioned his futuristic silver costume and that the costume recalls the first spacesuits for astronauts in 1959, which were very popular at the time. Mack published his idea for the first time in the magazine *ZERO 3* in 1961. Since he had no money and sponsorship wasn't usual in Germany at that time, it took seven more years to realize a little bit of his vision by working together with a film team in *Tele-Mack*, 1968. Sophia Sotke, who has just published a book about the "Sahara Project", explains: "That of his self-designed costume reflects the desert sun as if Mack himself was a Light object." The quote is interesting because it shows that Mack was not involved in the project as a performer but more like an object within other objects. And insofar that I think he is not part of the art work.

Let's now look at the *ZERO 3* publication *Edition, Exposition, Demonstration* in the Schmela Gallery in 1961. The magazine *ZERO 3* was still edited by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene and was an inspiring, new kind of publication: a completely new layout that brought dynamism to its 302 pages. 30 international artists contributed to the success of the magazine.

The release event took place inside and outside the small gallery. Inside there was an experimental exhibition where *ZERO* covers were hung from the ceiling and posters were stuck to the walls. A jukebox played music, and an old cash register rang when a copy was sold. Outside, large banners in black with white "ZERO" letters were hung and large transparent plastic balloons floated over the whole scene. The balloon was by Friedrich-Karl von Oppeln. Many visitors blew soap bubbles into the black night sky. Young girls wore black dresses with a white "ZERO" on the front. A man on stilts wrote "ZERO" with white paint on the house wall in front of the entrance to the gallery.

It was the first time that Günther Uecker was a part of the Düsseldorf ZERO art movement, but since the event at Galerie Schmela, Uecker remained part of the ZERO group until its dissolution in late 1966.

That evening, Uecker took a coarse broom, dipped it in white paint and drew a circle over the cobblestones in front of the gallery. In the middle of the audience were not only artists who had contributed to *ZERO 3*, but also fellow artists such as Joseph Beuys, Norbert Kricke, and Nam June Paik. The television station WDR reported on the event in a reportage. In this documentary, we see Joseph Beuys blowing soap bubbles in the front row. Beuys belonged to the Düsseldorf art scene and was a good friend of Alfred Schmela. Therefore it is not surprising to see him at the event. But we should consider that he was not so famous at that time. The radio and many newspapers reported about the event, as the ZERO movement - especially Mack and Piene - became more and more famous. The television report also shows that Uecker was the only one who wore colored pants and a sweater. Mack and Piene, on the other hand, wore a dark or light suit and tie that evening.

With the exception of Uecker, the performative contributions did not come from the artists, but the audience was drawn into the action with curiosity and harmless soap bubbles. In contrast to the Happening, which lives by an instruction from the artist, the actions of the visitors on this evening were not aimed at producing a kind of artwork, but rather at having fun. Mack, Piene and Uecker were, at best, aware that actions like soap bubbles, "ZERO" clothes and flags provide suitable images for media coverage. But neither the audience nor the artists were physically involved in any way comparable to a happening or a performance. ZERO took a third approach, which consisted of preserving the authentic artwork while at the same time involving the viewer as an active recipient. For the ZERO artists, the body was less a physical event than an aesthetic sounding board that transforms the vibrations, light reflections and frequencies of art objects, such as Otto Piene's ballet of light, Günther Uecker's nail painting or Heinz Mack's light stele, into a work of art and completes it as such.

Barbara Könches