

June 14, 2020

Dr. Barbara Könches,

Thank you very much for your reply.

We sincerely congratulate you on the success of the ZERO exhibition at Pohang Museum of Steel Art, Korea. I am also very fascinated with the ongoing exhibition project that focuses on the relationship between ZERO and the Dansaekhwa monochrome painting movement in Korea in the 1970s. The Dansaekhwa movement has been accepted as one of the most significant movements of Korean contemporary art. In recent years, there have also been some attempts by museums in Japan to relocate Dansaekhwa in the context of Asian postwar art. We may be able to say that a reevaluation of the movement is in process, just like with ZERO. I am very interested in the kind of contextual linkage ZERO has with not only Japanese postwar art expression like Kusama and Gutai, but also with Korean postwar art and Asian postwar art movements in general. I sincerely hope that the exhibition's preparations will proceed smoothly, even with the difficulties that have arisen due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Now, as you have elaborated in your reply, it was indeed probably not accurate that ZERO artists were interested in two-dimensionality. Artists related to ZERO – including the artists who were slightly ahead of ZERO's activities, such as Fontana and Klein – embodied spatiality, the relationship between materiality and immateriality, and kinetic characteristics of two-dimensional works. At the same time, they gradually started to experiment with the "environmental art" approach. On the other hand, each artist's expression did not fit into the rigid stylistic classifications of postwar art history. Instead it swayed from the planar to the environmental and went back and forth between two-dimensional and three-dimensional spaces, or overlapped with them. As you stated, their keen interest here is not a question of the difference between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, but rather the space "Between the Viewer and the Work". Another figure similar to the pioneer of kinetic art - Jean Tinguely, whom you mentioned, is Jesús Rafael Soto. His work, which utilizes visual illusion and produces a stimulating experience of two-dimensionality, was presented at our exhibition. Besides Soto's work, one of the works from Fontana's *Spatial Concept (Concetto Spaziale)* series, cutting the flat surface, was also exhibited at our exhibition. With the 'hole' in the canvas, Fontana's de-painterly experimentation moving from a flat surface into space had a strong influence, not only on the artists of ZERO, such as Piene, Mack, and Uecker, but also on Kusama.

In the mid-'60s, on the other hand, Kusama created her work out of soft sculptures in the shape of a phallus, attaching countless numbers of them onto household items and furniture. She also created a type of work called *Infinity Mirror Rooms*, such as *Infinity Mirror Room - Phalli's Field* (1965). In this work, the phallus proliferates infinitely using the effect of opposing mirrors. *Aggregation: One Thousand*

*Boats Show*, which was presented at *Nul 1965*, and her solo show at Internationale Galerij Orez included numerous soft sculptures continuing into the environment. Henk Peeters introduced Kusama to Internationale Galerij Orez and invited her to *Nul 1965*. At *Nul 1965*, Kusama met Fontana, who would later help her with her stay in Europe. From this viewpoint, it can be deduced that Fontana had a direct influence on Kusama's activities in Europe on a conceptual level, as well as on a practical level.

During this same period, Mack, Piene, and Uecker protested against 1964's *documenta III* for not inviting Fontana to the show; the three of them collaboratively created and exhibited *Light Room (Homage to Fontana) [Lichtraum (Hommage à Fontana)]*. Combining elements that each of the three artists used — such as illumination, rotors and nails — they created an environment by producing a distinctive light effect in the space. Kusama also envisioned *LOVE FOREVER*, her first installation using electricity, for the group exhibition *Zero on Sea* planned in The Hague, Netherlands. *Zero on Sea* was a grand plan consisting of a site-specific large-scale installation involving about 50 artists, but it was not realized due to financial reasons and weather conditions. Kusama's concept of *LOVE FOREVER* was a work in which viewers look into a small mirror-lined hexagonal chamber with lights. The idea came to fruition the following year at a solo exhibition at the Richard Castellane Gallery in New York. Since then, the mirror room has become a representative series of Kusama's. In the same way as the environmental works by Mack, Piene, and Uecker, Kusama also utilized electricity and mirrors to produce works that create "environments" in various forms.

Similar to the way that ZERO artists pursued the space "Between the Viewers and the Work", the continuity between a flat space and an environmental space had already been intuitively acknowledged by her hallucinatory visions of nets. It can be assumed that the difference between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space was not highly significant to her. On the other hand, she was striving to express an infinitely expanding image space that buries and obliterates the subjective self and surpasses the physical boundaries of the works. Thus, in some way, it may differ from ZERO's development into the environment, which emerged from the rigorous pursuit of the effects of light and color. Despite these perspectives, it can be assumed that in their practices of environmental art, there was a shared utopic vision of the epoch that aimed at infinite space.

This shared utopic vision might have been related to the fact that the wounds of the war began to heal, along with the miraculous postwar recovery in Germany and Japan in the 1960s, and that technological progress also further accelerated.

Can you tell me more about in what ways the fact that ZERO artists began experimenting with the use of industrial products, is linked to the societal backdrop of 1960s Germany or Europe in general?

From the end of the 1950s to the 1960s, the network of ZERO was activated, and gradually, the search for utopian spaces by creating 'environments' progressed. What kind of connection was there with the

background of that era? Besides which, it may also be possible to find a relationship between Piene's inflatable works and Kusama's subsequent expression. If the practices of individual ZERO artists varied and even more so during this period, how did ZERO artists each create their own expression while also influencing each other in the 1960s?

Seiha Kurosawa



June 18, 2020

Dear Seiha Kurosawa,

Your letters are a great pleasure to me and enrich me greatly. The story lies before us like a puzzle, but not every partial fact or assumption fits into the overall picture. You mention the strong connection between Yayoi Kusama and Lucio Fontana in the 1960s. Do you know anything about Kusama's relationship with Nanda Vigo? As you know, Nanda Vigo was Fontana's assistant. She had previously graduated from the Institut Polytechnique in Lausanne and studied in San Francisco in the late 1950s. I heard that Nanda was a good friend of Yayoi Kusama's and helped her a lot in getting to know the ZERO movement and its people. Do you know anything about these rumors?

Like Yayoi Kusama, Nanda Vigo and Christian Megert also worked with mirrors. In 2015, Megert and Vigo presented the exhibition *ZERO IN THE MIRROR* at the Museo D'Arte Contemporanea, Lissone, Italy. Christian Megert was also represented in your exhibition with *Mirror Wall (Spiegelwand)*, 1961/2020, and several other works. With his manifesto "A New Space (Ein Neuer Raum)", 1961, the artist called for space to be reflected upon by means of art.

As you mentioned in your last letter, the artists of the ZERO movement shared some formal approaches in their artworks and some aesthetic values in general, but there is no general description or instruction for art. For example, you find the use of glass - as we know the material from industrial production and usage - in the works of Nanda Vigo, Marc Adrian and Heinz Mack. Each of these artists used structured glass to evoke the phenomena of color and space. Since 1900, due to some important discoveries and developments, the material glass could be produced on a large scale and in large quantities. This had an impact on the architecture; from now on, instead of the older, smaller windows, the architects planned large openings in house and factory facades. Imagine buildings like those of Frank Lloyd Wright or Mies van der Rohe. When the artists of the ZERO movement used the material, they took this tradition of modern building into account. Another dream of modern architects was to build pleasant, affordable houses that were both practical and beautiful. This discussion about the material reflects typical characteristics of ZERO art; ZERO also wanted to bring art to the people - a democratic art, and they wanted to celebrate beauty. Like the architects, ZERO artists avoided the use of expensive materials, but tried to create immateriality with these cheap, industrially produced materials.

Something similar can be said about the material mirror. The mirror also forms a space, and since the industrial era, mirrors can be manufactured industrially.

But – as so often – the works of the ZERO artists are different. Within the movement, one finds artists who work in a combination of traditional materials and innovative methods, such as Jan Schoonhoven, Yves

Klein or painters like Piero Dorazio or Jef Verheyen; one also finds artists combining new materials/techniques with new methods, like Günther Uecker, Otto Piene, Heinz Mack, Henk Peeters, Yayoi Kusama, Ferdinand Spindel, Jesús Rafael Soto, Enrico Castellani, Piero Manzoni, Lucio Fontana, Christian Megert or Adolf Luther.

Could the use of new materials or new methods influence the concept of utopia often cited as typical of ZERO art? Or did the situational circumstances after the Second World War influence an idea of utopia? I'm not sure whether the prosperous post-war period in Germany is due to a miracle. The Marshall plan was a project initiated by the United States to rebuild economic foundations and to stabilize social life. It was a great success, and increasingly more people had some money at their disposal. Consumption became more important, society became richer and the so-called middle class grew. The Düsseldorf ZERO artists in particular often remarked that they did not appreciate the shopping and consumption mentality. They were more interested in aesthetic and human values. I think this observation applies to many other ZERO artists as well.

So did they dream of a utopian place? Utopian means beyond reality, but the artists of this generation have felt in their young lives a lot of strong realities: like war, like guns, like bombs and like death. Did they want to retreat into a kind of dream world, to escape reality? No, they wanted to improve the world, to avoid war, dictatorship and inhumanity. Perhaps it is possible that some critics and art historians have confused utopian thoughts with thoughts about the future, and confused themselves. In fact, some of the ZERO artists were very interested in science and technology and in the future issues of that time. The 1950s and 1960s were the era of great discoveries in space exploration. The competition for the conquest of space was accompanied by a political and military power struggle between East and West.

The ZERO artists did not provoke any direct political statement, but if we look at their criticism of mass consumption on the one hand and their enthusiasm for Western-oriented space exploration on the other, then the concept of utopia seems completely wrong here. Instead, a term such as "critical humanism" or "positive criticism" would be more appropriate. In future research, this complex situation must be examined more closely. And perhaps this is part of the mystery of why the ZERO artists in the 1960s worked so differently and yet still influenced each other.

There were some common and shared experiences, such as those during the wartime (a lost generation), or some common ideas, such as making the world a better place (humanism). They shared the enthusiasm for a Europe-wide modernity, even for crossing national borders in general. They felt like the avant-garde and a network of friends. That is why they invited each other to participate in exhibitions or to contribute to publications. They shared a great and good feeling, that connected some people who made formally similar art with other artists who did completely different things. And they were very interested in exploring the question "What does space mean?" - space as architecture, the space of institutions like museums, the infinite space of the universe and the relationship between space and time.

Last but not least, one answer to the strong network of ZERO artists may be the very simple argument that ZERO art was successful in the first place. There were critics who hated ZERO, there were curators who didn't appreciate the shimmering objects and floating lights, but on the other hand, there was a love of moving art, the fun of light ballets, the play of shadows and brightness. Whatever you think about ZERO art, it was never boring and never will be!

In retrospect, it is hardly surprising that all groups of artists, -isms and avant-gardes landed in New York in the 1960s: in the melting pot of cultures in the middle of the 20th century. The ZERO artists moved there not without success. Nevertheless, ZERO did not succeed in building on its European successes. Maybe the heyday of ZERO was over; maybe ZERO art with its philosophical roots, humanistic ideas and ethical concepts was also a typically European movement?

I would like to know what you think about utopian visions. Was Kusama influenced by them? What did she think about the art centers of Paris and New York?

You asked about similarities in the works of Yayoi Kusama and Otto Piene. Perhaps the common belief in the power and energy of the individual artist, who wants to make the world a better place, combines the inflatable objects of Piene with the works of Kusama.

Barbara Könches