

Daimler Art Collection

New Zero

Daimler Contemporary, Berlin

April 7 – June 10, 2001

Renate Wiehager

ZERO—in post European art this means the countdown to a new sense of being close to life, enthusiastic about technology and delighting in experimentation. The name is a paradigm for the vanquishing of Cubism, Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Action Painting etc. and for a successful attempt to put teamwork from a community of artists in a state of dynamic change in place of stylistic categories that had become anaemic. The artists in the international Zero movement each developed individual work concepts and production strategies, but at the same time agreed in their basic tenets: monochromy and seriality, light and movement, developing works for rooms, squares and cities, establishing a new unity for nature, people and technology. Artistic concepts and attitudes crystallized around the Zero avant-garde: these were to be of major significance for the artistic developments of the sixties, but they also offer explosive material for reflection and reaction to contemporary artists.

NEW ZERO—the title of our exhibition shows first of all that a new look is going to be taken at some aspects of the Zero movement and developments that happened in the 1960s. New acquisitions of essentially small-format works by Jan Henderikse, Henk Peeters, Martial Raysse, Jesus Rafael Soto, Jean Tinguely and Jef Verheyen, explicitly not intended for museums, express the historical spirit particularly vividly. These works were all acquired from the collection of Henk Peeters, one of the few original and significant Zero collections.

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Drawings dating from the 1970s/90s and intended to make a spatial impression were acquired from the Italian artist Dadamaino, as these illustrate the early Zero spirit in a highly authentic way. Representative examples of European Zero art are provided by works the Daimler Art Collection had acquired earlier by Enrico Castellani, Rupprecht Geiger, Almir Mavignier, Christian Megert, Francois Morellet and Yvaral, Victor Vasarely's son.

NEW ZERO—the title also indicates that contemporary artists relate to the Zero avant-garde in a number of ways, that they find prior formulations here of material definitions, views of works and an undogmatic, non-hierarchical view by art of itself that still offers material for debate and ideas for positioning today. By choosing Sylvie Fleury, Andreas Reiter Raabe, Simone Westerwinter and Heimo Zobernig we have concentrated on artists from the generation around 1960, who argue mainly in the context of pictures in our selection. An important feature of all of them is that they do not actually relate to individual works by their predecessors, but to the way in which they were received in terms of art history, to the breath of the 'auratic' and the 'revolutionary' that is often invoked in contemporary manifestos and in essays about these artists. Reformulations, from Fleury to Zobernig, aim to reject any claim to being absolute (by works/ artists), in order to use this as a way of finding a measure that we can use to address the artistic propositions of the historical avant-garde today.

The special exhibition 'Piero Manzoni – John Nixon. Works from Herring/Denmark' is a pars pro toto representation of the intensity of these dialogues. John Nixon is an Australian concept artist. He chose about twenty works by the 'achromatic' Manzoni to which he responds—arguing individually—with monochrome orange works from his 'Experimental Painting Workshop' (EPW). His credo, which also applies to the NEW ZERO exhibition as a whole, is as follows: "Radical Modernism is a project that cannot be brought to a conclusion, that represents the demand for experiment and the history of this experiment. My interest is not so much to return to history as to develop this history. I see my work as a continuation of the radical Modern project."

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Renate Wiehager

Speech at the opening of the "NEW ZERO" exhibition, Daimler Contemporary, Berlin, 6 April 2001

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'd like to start with a short report on the state of the European avant-garde in about 1960.

28 April 1958: Yves Klein opens his 'Le Vide' (Emptiness) exhibition in the Galerie Iris Clert. The empty gallery is painted in the same white that Klein used to use for his monochrome pictures.

June 1958: Marcel Duchamp travels to Paris from New York to see Jean Tinguely's exhibition 'Mes Étoiles – Concert pour sept peintures' in the Galerie Iris Clert, a 'concert' for seven motor-driven objects.

4 December 1959: The Galerie Azimut in Milan – Azimut is the Italian equivalent of 'Nul' and 'Zero'—opens with '12 Lines' by Piero Manzoni. The artist showed 12 small cardboard cylinders with the lengths of the lines, which were not visible themselves, noted on them.

July 1960: Piero Manzoni produces a line 7,200 metres long on the press roller of the Danish company Herning Avis, between 4 and 6.55 p.m.; he seals the roll of paper in a lead and iron container and buries it in the Herning park.

16 October 1960: Paris, Yves Klein, 'Leap into the Void'. A photomontage shows the artist apparently flying off into the sky like a bird.

23 October 1960: Arman opens the 'Le Plein' (Fullness) exhibition in the Galerie Iris Clert in Paris: the gallery, whose window opens on to the street, is filled to the ceiling with rubbish from the streets.

The turning-point around 1960: these are years in which artists, philosophers, musicians and writers were simultaneously discussing ideas about art after art's "zero point" in places that were very far apart, along with fundamentally new questions about the relationship between space, the work of art and the viewer. While Maurice Merleau-Ponty reflected about the "zero point of spatiality", Roland Barthes was writing his essay 'At the Zero Point of Literature' (1954/59); Gaston Bachelard was trying to realize the "new scientific spirit" as the radical project for an autonomous "aesthetics of language". Composers were working on abandoning

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musical discourse and emancipating individual sounds as autonomous units; John Cage published his 'Lecture on Nothing' (1959) and worked on pieces of music that intended to do nothing other than "create silence".

In the late 1950s a generation of young artists was setting off towards a new view of art: ZERO was a proclamation that "we are alive, we are for everything" and the countdown to a different view of artistic production, liberated from all conventions. Trans-European communication, team-work among art-lovers; works produced for rooms, squares, cities, for the monochrome expanses of the Sahara and the deep blue of the sky—all that is part of ZERO's imaginative world. Its aim and its Utopia was to achieve a new, substantial unity of nature, man and technology in the medium of poetic imagination, light and movement, seriality and system. It is the infectious spirit of a new beginning, the courageous revolt against an ossified art business and above all the mixture of artistic media—light, movement, images, drawings, objects, room-related environments, communal works, magazines, demonstrations, campaigns, films—that also make ZERO into more than just a set of art-historically relevant exhibition events—and above all from the point of view of the present day. Seen from today's perspective, ZERO as an international movement turns out to be one of the major intellectual forces at 20th century art's turning-point. It was in and around ZERO that the course was set for Happenings, Minimal and Concept Art, Op Art and Arte Povera, and there were momentous links with Fluxus and Land Art.

NEW ZERO—our exhibition title indicates that first of all a new assessment needs to be made of some aspects of the historical Zero movement and the developments that took place in the sixties. New acquisitions of essentially small-format works by Jan Henderikse, Henk Peeters, Martial Raysse, Jesus Rafael Soto, Jean Tinguely and Jef Verheyen in particular, explicitly not intended for museums, give us a sense of the historic spirit. We were able to acquire all these works from Henk Peeters's collection, one of the few original and significant Zero collections. At this point I'd like to say a word about the format of many of the works in this exhibition. It has long been customary—particularly given the monotony of many museum presentations—to assume that a work is important without further ado because of its size. One of the things that the works of the Zero period show is how misleading and misrepresentative this view can be. Zero loved small, intimate formats, conceived to address the perception of a single viewer. And this viewer was not intended to stalk past some distance away, but to take up a mental and visual dialogue with the work, eyeball to eyeball. And let us remember something

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else: young post-war European artists did not have large studios, they literally worked on the kitchen table, while Americans already had lofts or factory halls at their disposal.

NEW ZERO—the title also shows that contemporary artists relate to the Zero avant-garde around 1960 in a number of ways: here they find pre-formulated material definitions, views of work and an undogmatic, non-hierarchical artistic self-understanding, all of which they can still use as material to address and define their position today. So in choosing Sylvie Fleury, Andreas Reiter Raabe, Simone Westerwinter and Heimo Zobernig we have concentrated on artists from the generation around 1960 who deploy their arguments fundamentally pictorially in our selection. It is important for all of them that they do not actually relate to individual works by their predecessors, but to the way they were received artistically, to the breath of the ‘auratic’, the ‘revolutionary’ that is often cited in contemporary manifestos and essays about these artists.

So Sylvie Fleury reflects the day-glo orange of the paint in Rupprecht Geiger’s 1960 painting Exponent Signal with industrially produced ‘Flokati’ in the fashionable color of the season; Simone Westerwinter confronts the perspective, in-depth staggering of light and space in the work of Christian Megert with a chequered surface structure made up of studio dust and with check court-shoes cooled to a temperature of zero degrees Celsius; the idealism of the artistic formulation of ‘reality’ in the works of Morellet, Castellani and Dadamaino—as the reality of light and shade, space and movement—finds a succinct response in Heimo Zobernig’s picture called *REAL*: here the vocabulary of abstract 20th century art is presented in something like a construction kit principle, as a constellation of ‘real’ elements: form and color, concept and surface, square and geometry etc.; Finally, Andreas Reiter Raabe reports on various radical, creative Zero Art strategies—Lucio Fontana’s ‘slit’ and the unusual color quality in his later ovoid pictures, Manzoni’s ‘achromia’, which used the artistic material to address light and shade—without ever quoting any of these; it is much more as though they have found their way into his material directly.

The special ‘Piero Manzoni – John Nixon’ exhibition stands pars pro toto for the intense and intellectual nature of these dialogues. The previous history of this dialogue is this in brief: Piero Manzoni was invited to Copenhagen for an exhibition of his ‘Linien’ [Lines] in 1960, through the good offices of the Danish Fluxus artist Arthur Köpke. Here he met the clothing entrepreneur Aage Damgard, who made a studio available to him in his factory in Herning. Some of the most exciting works of 20th century art were produced here in the summer

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months of 1960/61: the achromatic pictures, air sculptures, the lines that taken together were supposed to be as long as the circumference of the earth, and above all the 'Socle du Monde', a plinth for the world. The little plinth in the exhibitions here belongs in that intellectual context: it makes everyone who stands on it into a work of art.

About four decades after Manzoni, the Australian concept artist John Nixon was offered the opportunity of working in Herning for several weeks. He picked out about twenty of Manzoni's works and responded to them—arguing individually—with the orange monochrome works of his “Experimental Painting Workshop (EPW)”. His credo, which can also be applied to the whole of the NEW ZERO exhibition, ran like this: “Radical Modernism (the historical avant-garde) is a never-ending project representing a desire for experiment and the history of that experiment. My interest is not so much in returning to history as developing this history. I see my work as a continuation of the radical Modernism project.”

(from the publication: 'New Zero', Stuttgart/Berlin 2001, pp. 30-33. You can purchase this book online.)

Daimler Contemporary

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daily 11 am - 6 pm

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