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## "Zero in New York"

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A reductivist abstraction embodying moral purification marked the beliefs of Group Zero (1957–1966) or, as it is often called, plainly, Zero. Whether with its white monochromes or its light works made with simple technology, the group would purge contemporary art of its debilitating expressionist incursions and, arguably, of the whiff of Fascist criminality still attached to Italian and German art a decade after World War II. As Heinz Mack and Otto Piene wrote in 1957: "The main tendency was the purification of color as opposed to the *informel* and neo-expressionism; the peaceful conquest of the soul by means of calm, serene sensibilization." The group's values ring of the utopianism of Yves Klein (who often showed with them), though most of their actual works seem more aligned with László Moholy-Nagy's book *Vision in Motion* (1947).

While marking a new, Italian-German entente, Zero represented more than the *idéés fixes* of yet another clique of perfectionist cranks and quickly became a proto-European Union, attracting many well-known French, Swiss (notably Jean Tinguely), Belgian, and Dutch artists, not to say Latin American and even Japanese artists (e.g., the Gutai group). Insofar as concerns Italy, works ranging from Enrico Castellani's elegant white reliefs to Piero Manzoni's more ambiguous Achromes are characteristic efforts, though the parti-colored staccato grids of Piero Dorazio were also welcomed.

To be sure, Manzoni's neo-Dada propensities were inimical to the Group's purism as enunciated in the Zero manifesto of 1963: "Zero is the stillness. Zero is the Beginning. Zero is Round. Zero is Zero." Manzoni's more notorious works—his tins of shit, for example—were only momentary embarrassments, today forgiven owing to his immense posthumous fame.

In Düsseldorf, Zero's originators were Mack and Piene, artists still difficult to categorize, since they made both sculptural and luminous pictorial ensembles and strove to unite the shimmering and the architectural in grand projects, many unrealized. Günther Uecker, the third founder, created a body of elegant paintings made of nails hammered in gridded or slanted, spiraling patterns.

Naturally, Zero's broader affiliations enhance its prestige far beyond the particular achievements of the initial organizers. The multivalent model of Lucio Fontana is paramount; he first felt the lingering *vergogna* tainting Italian modernism, and transformed it into purifying reductivism in his *Manifesto Blanco*, 1946.

The inspiring presence of Fontana—Zero's *eminence blanche*, as it were—amid the young Germans and Italians added luster to their ambitions. The group's idealism found sympathetic outlet in Paris, notably at Galerie J and Iris Clert's tiny gallery in the rue des Beaux-Arts. In addition to representing Fontana, Clert is best remembered for her early support of "Yves le Monochrome," though she also showed Arman, Pol Bury, and Jesús Soto. Not incidentally, Klein, through his wife, the painter Rotraut Uecker, was Günther Uecker's brother-in-law.

For me, the most felicitous moment in the Sperone Westwater exhibition, curated by David Leiber and Mattijs Visser, was the assembled trio of Klein monochromes, *Blue* and *Rose* and *Gold*—Klein's Marilyn, Liz, and Jackie, so to speak. Excellent works by Fontana were also included, as well as several impressive light sculptures by Mack. Outside of so thorough an overview, the Mack sculptures might seem "charming," in a period way; here, contextualized by a plethora of photographic documentation and collegial works, they shine (literally and figuratively) once again.

—Robert Pincus-Witten



View of "Zero in New York," 2008.