

Rethinking Art: Bernard Aubertin and Zero
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In order to recount the artistic journey of Bernard Aubertin we need to not only consider the cultural context in which he began working, Paris in the late fifties, and his enlightening encounter with Yves Klein, but also, and above all, his relationship with Zero, the artists' group founded in Germany in 1957.

Aubertin and Klein met for the first time in 1957 in Paris, the city where both of them lived. The Parisian artistic scene, which was yet again the hub for European avant-garde, was dominated by the gestural abstraction of Art Informel and Thacisme, known for its spontaneous brushwork, drips and blobs of paint that represented the sense of chaos and impotence perceived immediately following World War II. While visiting Klein's studio, Aubertin was taken aback when he saw canvases painted entirely in one color. Klein used pure pigments: green, yellow, orange, black, white, red, and the blue, that he experimented with for the first time that year, which would eventually become synonymous with his name (IKB - International Klein Blue).

Meeting Klein stimulated deep reflection and questioning in Aubertin about the very idea of painting, so much so that after a few months, he started painting his first monochromatic canvases. Driven by instinct, almost immediately he chose to use solely the color red, a color to which he associated a strong symbolic value. According to Aubertin, red possessed the same primordial force of fire, both freeing and regenerating, and was capable of transmitting the artist's desire to go beyond traditional painting and renew stylistic and aesthetic canons.

The visual potency of the color was amplified by the techniques that the artist utilized. Aubertin created his Monochrome rouge using spatulas to smear the color on the canvas, as well as using more common object like forks, spoons, and his hands. These techniques transformed the act of painting into a violent physical experience.

The urgency that Aubertin felt to redefine his own ideas of art and painting was shared with numerous artists in Europe, many of whom joined Zero or one of the similar groups which gravitated around it. Klein first realized the strong affinity between Aubertin's work and Zero and put him in contact with the founders, Otto Piene and Heinz Mack. Aubertin fully agreed with the spirit of the movement, whose goal was to allow new artistic energies to circulate in order to develop innumerable possibilities. This spirit found itself in a generally optimistic climate, favored by post-war reconstruction and economic growth. Therefore the expression 'Zero,' which is not a German term, did not have a negative connotation but underlined the group's international ambitions. The movement did not have a rigid structure and was open to the involvement of multidisciplinary experiences from a variety of geographical locations and fields. Vibration, movement, light, and repetition were some of the recurring elements in the members' experimentations.

Through the organization of events, exhibitions, performances, and the publication of a magazine, which had three issues, Zero quickly managed to create a network that united movements and individuals. Simultaneously similar groups were formed in Italy, France, Belgium, and Holland interested in experimenting with new materials and techniques, such as the French group: GRAV - Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (1960–1968); the Italian groups: Azimuth (1959–1960), T (1959–1967), Enne (1959–1964); and the Dutch group: Nul (1960–1965).

The events organized by Mack and Piene in Düsseldorf, which took the form of exhibitions/happenings/conferences, were central to the development of Zero's transnational strategy. Bernard Aubertin became an exponent of Zero on the occasion of one of these events. Aubertin participated in the exhibition ZERO – Edition Exposition Demonstration, in the Schmela Gallery in Düsseldorf, located on the same street where the third and final issue of the magazine Zero was presented. The central themes of this issue, published in July of 1961, were nature/man/technology. The magazine was divided into sections, each section was dedicated to an artist with photographs, texts, portraits, and projects. The first was about Lucio Fontana, who was considered the father and inspiration of the movement. Here, Aubertin first published his writing together with the contributions of Enrico Castellani, Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Daniel Spoerri, Arnulf Rainer, Dieter Roth, Jean Tinguely, Günther Uecker, along with those of Mack and Piene. The essay entitled, Situation picturale du rouge dans un concept spatial (The pictorial situation of red in spatial concept) offered a theoretical justification for his monochromatic choice and in particular his choice of red, which could also be read as an outright declaration of his adhesion to Zero.

A common theme amongst the exponents of Zero was the willingness to experiment and theorize about the power of a single color. From the metaphysical to the objective, each artist brought a different connotation to this practice based on her or his own personal sensibility. A couple of examples are the Achrome by Manzoni, white surfaces created with various techniques and materials where the essence of color is used to focus the viewer's attention on the materialistic qualities of the object's surfaces and the Concetti spaziali

by Fontana, monochromatic canvases slashed with cuts and holes. Mack's reflective surfaces were also part of this trend of researching the effects of light and refraction.

In Aubertin's work, the color red was not only protagonist in the series of Monochromes, but also in many other works, like the Tableaux-clous, created for the first time 1960 by vigorously hammering nails through a wooden board. Despite the violence of this action, the nails were arranged with great accuracy to form geometric shapes creating a play of light/shadow and an effect of seriality.

Around the same period, Günther Uecker, who joined the leadership of Zero in 1961, started applying nails on the surface of wooden boards. The alternation of light and shadow created by the nails evoked the sensation of movement. Unlike Aubertin, Uecker considered these wooden boards different from paintings, in fact, Uecker applied nails on different surfaces including objects.

Another common practice that Aubertin and other Zero exponents used was that of combustion. The artist first introduced flames in his work in 1961, as a natural derivation of his usage of red, when he created his first Tableaux-feu. This idea was further developed in other compositions where matches were applied to aluminum, cardboard, or paper (among this series of works are the Chemin de feu, the Parcours d'allumettes, the Dessins de feu, and the Feu sur bois). He also created sculptures by burning musical instruments, books (Livres brûlés), automobiles, and other common objects. The performative component always played a key role during the creation of these series of works, whether the artist created the piece in front of an audience or in his own studio. Fire was the real protagonist and author of the performative act. Aubertin left the canvas or objects to the mercy of fire: the final result was neither controlled nor premeditated.

This was clear in the performance piece, Le Disque de Feu Tournant, created by Aubertin for the exhibition at the CNAC (Centre d'Art Contemporain) in Paris with Fred Deux and Otto Schauer in 1972. Aubertin carefully positioned matches on a metal disk that was placed in a completely darkened room. With the audience present, he lit the matches and started violently spinning the metal disk thus giving life to the performance. The movement, which was out of the artist's control, became the real artifice of the piece by amplifying the power of the fire and surrounding the spectators with the light, heat, and vibration of the flames.

The act of burning was recurrent in the work of the artists who joined Zero and was often evoked by the presence of soot. Traces of combustion appear in the series of Peintures de feu by Klein, in the paintings of Piene and Henk Peeters, and in other works by Manzoni and Jef Verheyen. According to the members of Zero, including Aubertin, the connotation of this act was not destructive and did not seek to completely nullify the materials, but rather the contrary; the objective was to enliven the works with the element of randomness.

The use of monochromatic compositions, the use of nails, and combustion demonstrate how easily Aubertin adhered to Zero and how his work fit perfectly in the group's research. Participation in Zero was not only a matter of sharing theoretical and research affinities but also aspects of human relationships and close collaborations.

Aubertin's intense personal involvement in Zero's activities was shown by the correspondence that he kept with exponents of the group around Europe during the sixties and seventies (the group officially disbanded in 1966 but the artists continued to work individually). There are collections of letters, postcards, and telegrams with Klein, Manzoni, Mack, Piene, Julio Le Parc, Jean-Pierre Vasarely Yvaral, Jan Schoonhoven, Hans Haacke, Henk Peeters, and Herman de Vries in Aubertin's archive which is currently preserved at the Stiftung für Konkrete Kunst in Reutlingen, Germany (the city where the artist lived the last years of his life). These exchanges of letters coincided with a hectic exhibition schedule in which Aubertin showed his work in numerous group and solo shows which took place in Germany from Düsseldorf, Essen, Frankfurt and Stuttgart to the Netherlands in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Arnhem. He also took part in some of the most important Zero exhibitions such as "NUL" at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1962) and "Zero AVANTGARDE," held at the studio of Fontana in Milan (1965).

Aubertin's extended network of contacts was evident by the avant-garde magazines that published his theoretical texts (like the Dutch Nul=0 and Intégration, the French Robho and the Italian Lotta Poetica). Such interventions fully testify to the complexity of Aubertin's connections, not only to the other members of Zero, Nul, and Nouveau réalisme, but also more broadly to the European avant-garde art of his time.