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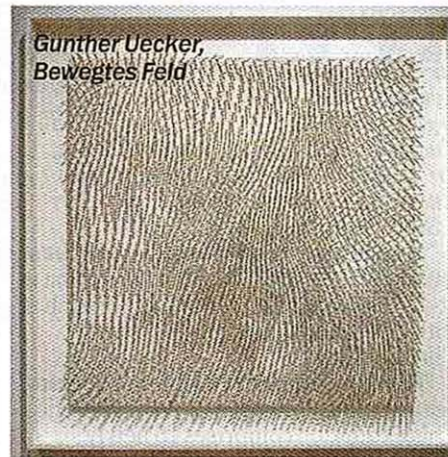
"ZERO in New York"

★★★★★

Sperone Westwater, through Dec 20 (see Chelsea)

Zero was less a movement than a fraternity; its artists worked and drank together in Europe in the '60s and have been underappreciated in the U.S. ever since. They shared interests in monochromatic painting, kinetic art, and nontraditional materials like shattered mirrors, pulsing lights and smoke. Underlying those methods was the desire to sweep away the pathos-charged painting styles of the '50s with work that would reflect the promise of technology and stimulate aesthetic and social awareness.

In 1961, the guiding lights of the movement—Otto Piene, Günther Uecker and Heinz Mack—wrote, "We live. We are for everything." Artists' utopian musings and manifestos are notoriously vague; this dense show, based on an encyclopedic survey put on in Düsseldorf last year, demonstrates that Zero's declared universalism made for odd juxtapositions, and for some pieces that now feel formulaic. Monochrome, a strategy for ridding painting of emotional references, was used widely in the Netherlands, Germany and Italy, and much on the show's large wall of all-white works (their surfaces variously pleated, pocked, accreted and divided) seems derivative.



Armando's 8/63 aggressively reduces painting to an industrial product, high-gloss enameled sheet metal; Arman's conglomerations of lightbulbs and aluminum discs seem Pop and fey by comparison.

The highlights here are not limited to Nanda Vigo's boxes of patterned glass or Christian Megert's construction out of mirrored shards, which variously refracts and reflects the gallery space. Zero pieces like those have been an influence on contemporary artists such as Olafur Eliasson, and have an enduring cultural legacy. And the sum of the group's efforts, even and especially in lesser-known pieces, conveys a breadth and depth of experimentation that is refreshing and inspiring in this overly commercial moment.

—Joshua Mack