

From Zero to Sky Art Interview with Otto Piene

by Annick Bureau

From April 9 to July 9, 2006, the Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf is holding a retrospective of the Zero “movement,” covering the period 1953–66, from the early experiments of the Japanese Gutai group to the end of the eponymous Group Zero in Düsseldorf in 1966. On February 2 Annick Bureau met Otto Piene, who founded Zero with Heinz Mack in 1957, to talk about his art and ideas. With his light-based sculptures and performance, his smoke and fire paintings and his “multimedia” shows and performances, Piene was one of the great transformers of art in the postwar decades. He then went on to invent Sky Art and settled in the United States, where he directed the Center for Visual Advanced Studies at MIT from 1974 to 1993.

You often said that "Zero" meant a "new beginning." What was your state of mind at that time, your vision of art, when you created Zero with Heinz Mack in 1957?

We were enthusiastic and also tired of seeing the continuation of the war during peacetime. It was the reconstruction, the “Adenauer Era,” in which rebuilding and economic power were generally considered a reason for national bliss. That resulted in the “Deutschland Wunder” (German Miracle) of which I was very critical. I believed in another kind of rebirth, and it had to be spiritual, intellectual, within the better areas of German history like art, humanism and the history of intellectual creativity. So, in a certain way, Zero happened out of a spirit of resistance to the growing new materialism and with a hope that a new spirit, a new beginning, would indeed create a new era of thinking, feeling and living. At that time the common understanding was that material welfare would produce human happiness. And I was against that. On the other hand, I was dismayed by the fact that the arts seemed to cling to the negativism of the war and postwar period. We were given a kind of “ruins sentimentality.”

How did Zero start?

Zero wasn't initially meant to be a group, it was a friendship. Heinz Mack and I had neighboring studios, we talked a lot and developed a kind of attitude to art, the idea that rebuilding could indeed be done in an artistic way if it started “with the mind.” I was

very much at the base of how Zero happened and why and what it was hoping for. The elements we saw that were intact were... the elements – literally, the natural elements. And elements of science and technology. Heinz Mack and I had worked on a first exhibition after the war where we were in charge of designing the science and engineering sections. That was quite inspiring. And I had actually studied philosophy for as long as I had studied art, so I was used to looking at things in a somewhat analytical and critical way. At the same time as I was hoping for new minds and new thoughts.

At this time there weren't any galleries in Düsseldorf where young people could show what they wanted to show. So, I started the "Night Exhibitions" in my studio and people liked that because it was "new art," in a setting that was unusual and unconventional. We invited other artists and we published a magazine that had three issues, *ZERO 1* in April 1958, *ZERO 2* in October 1958 and *ZERO 3* in September 1961.

Another element was the desire, and the experience, of emerging internationality. We had been in a state of physical and spiritual isolation. To meet people from different countries that had formerly been hostile was a deeply enjoyable and informative experience.

Two other important things: one is that the uniting, overarching "element" in the art that my friends and I made was light; the other is that I had always been interested in the development of "modern architecture." One desire was to combine art and architecture in a bigger way, so that became one of the intentions, one of the tendencies of quite a few Zero artists as well. You could say, there was a desire for integration of the arts, of art and architecture, or to be close to the new developments in science and, here and there, in technology also.

What was your approach to technology and science?

The technologies that were available to me at that time were very simple. And the techniques I used were on the level of the Bauhaus period, but they had been forgotten. It was then that we formed Group Zero, that some very new developments happened in the arts. It can be seen as a generational phenomenon: Yves [Klein] was my age, in music there was Karlheinz Stockhausen, in literature Günther Grass. And quite a few of these people were at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf: Beuys, me, Mack, Giercke, Grass....

This period saw the advent of the whole music industry, the beginning of television, the first video cameras and something that Zero co-invented together with people in other places: performance. I worked with quite a few media that were new at the time – I was one of the first video-television artists – and one of the media was performance. My greatest interest nowadays is Sky Art. There was a time in art and technology when people thought that the latest technology or the most advanced science would make

the best or the most advanced art. I think that is a misfiring of the optimistic spirit. But it is clearer now than it was in 1968, when I first came to MIT, that scientists really need the arts. What artists bring to the sciences is increasingly important to scientists because it has to do with general human values, with ethics, and a kind of wholeness of the human mind and the body system altogether.

You had a strong relationship with Yves Klein. There is even this “mythical” road trip, written about in almost every book about Zero, between Düsseldorf and Antwerp, on the occasion of the exhibition Vision in Motion – Motion in Vision.

I knew Yves from his exhibition that opened Galerie Schmela in May 1957. Yves, from the start, was a rather fascinating person. Shortly after, Heinz Mack and I visited him in Paris. We took part in the exhibition *Vision in Motion – Motion in Vision*, its title based on Moholy Nagy’s vocabulary, organized in 1959 in Antwerp by Tinguely, Spoerri, van Hoeydonck and Pol Bury. Mack, Yves and I drove to Antwerp. We talked about important projects, thoughts, intentions, values, and dreams. And one of them was the sky and what to do in the sky and how. I talked about gliding because when I was 13-15 I used to go gliding. Based on that experience, I was dreaming of people flying on their own. It was related to a set of drawings I had made when I was a student at the Akademie in Düsseldorf, in 1953. These flying people and flying in the sky had been on my mind for a long time and of course that goes back to World War 2 and the experience of the sky as a threat.

You created the concept and the genre of Sky Art?

Initially, it was more an idea than an intention or a realization. One of the reasons I went to the United States is because the resonance there was more important than it was in Europe.

But you had already “sketched” out some Sky Art Events while in Europe, with Group Zero

It was primitive. We used one borrowed balloon during the *ZERO 3 Event*, in 1961. In the United States, I was able to find materials, instruments and people. I also developed a sense of scale that I didn't have before. My sense of scale in the early days of Group Zero was formed by traditional art. But, I learned, partly from Zero, but especially in the United States, what it means to work surrounded by hundreds of people, inviting them to participate and build something together that becomes an event with a certain visible result. If a sculpture rises up and is seen by many people, really rises away from the gallery and museum space, and grows on the sense of communication that fires the human desire to talk, to enjoy shared energy, then you are getting back to the original role of art at its best. Two days ago, I reread a description of

Yves' exhibition of *Le Vide* (The Void). Here was an exhibition of nothing, or near nothing, and out there, those National Guards on horseback were parading and celebrating this event. This is close to the spirit of Zero. Zero tried to build near nothing with near nothing. There was a certain modesty in this. And in a certain way, it was an important part of what Zero had to contribute to the reconstruction of a "positive spirit" in Germany.

Several of your Sky Art Projects are based on tubes, including the five tubes of the Olympic Rainbow, for the closing ceremony of the 1972 Munich Olympics.

The biggest tubes I made were for the *Olympic Rainbow*. Those were the largest, the longest and the most complex and difficult to do because of the circumstances. The total object was 700 meters long, the part that actually appeared over the stadium roughly 500 meters. That is a very long art object, physically lighter than air, and its charm is that it moves.

The *Olympic Rainbow* was a moving and important experience in my life. On the one hand it existed powerfully as art because of its size and scale, and then it became an unforeseeable experience because of the terrorist attack. There were the long hours of waiting, not knowing what would happen and what had happened to the people who were most closely involved. Then they were killed. And when it was decided to maintain the closing ceremony, the weather got bad. And it was virtually minutes before the countdown for the *Olympic Rainbow* that the weather became manageable. From there on, it was all intense doing as opposed to intense thinking or imagining or hoping. When it was over, after it had worked, the release was incredible. People really got the feeling that there was a reason to hope, that not everything from now on would be disaster, death and destruction. On the other hand, the assault was the beginning of the form of terrorism we know today. It really was a world-shaking event.

What led you to propose those other shapes for your Sky Art sculptures, like the flowers, the stars, the animals?

Fascination with shapes. It also has to do with other art that I do. I still paint. A few things that come out in painting have roots in Sky Art. I also made fire gouache and paintings that "unintentionally" became the inspiration for *Sky Events*, in terms of shapes and of spatial relationships. Some of these things come from encounters with nature (I really like nature). Some went into performance. I created the Sky opera *Icarus* with Paul Earls and Jan Strasfogel in 1978–83. One "creature" that fascinates me is the minotaur. There are certain figures, certain stories that I really do like even after two decades of studying philosophy [laughs]. There is a certain magic in those figures and there is of course enormous magic in organic forms, flowers and plants. The sheer beauty of biophysics or structural physics or structural architecture, or

architectural structure, is incredible. The flowers I have made, some of which I have had flying, are based on Buckminster Fuller's basic geodesic forms: they are soft and become like organic beings. That is interesting because there is a transition from simple hardcore geometry and organic behaviors.

Part of your work has been collaborative work with scientists but also with artists, such as Centerbeam with the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, created for Documenta in 1977.

By definition, the Center was a place for collaboration between artists and scientists. That is what Gyorgy Kepes had in mind when he founded it. When we were invited to Documenta, it was clear that it should be a collaborative work. Each of us proposed a project and the group chose Lowry Burgess's suggestion. Decision by vote! All of this was voted on from the start, which is something that is generally considered insane—democracy and art (laughs). We invited professors and students from MIT to work with certain artists where the collaboration would make sense not only to the artist but also to the scientist.

And the theme, as it turned out, and the way I interpreted it later, was on the one hand, the human household — all the elements that are part of the human household were actively involved in *Centerbeam*: gas, steam, water, electricity; and every form of communication was represented, wire transmissions, radio and television, ... It was like the spine of a service track of a building—laid out horizontally. On the other hand it was a sculpture, the first obvious energy sculpture that I have seen. When the steam, the water, the light, laser and projections worked together, the whole thing was just vibrating energies. The sculptors at Documenta that year, 1977, were people like Bob Morris, Takis, Paik, Beuys, Trakas, D. Davis. Sculpture was in a completely different place (laughs). And the critics didn't know what to do with *Centerbeam* — essentially they ignored it. But it was a great popular success. Paul Earls and I, for the Washington version a year later, realized a performance on the theme of Icarus and the first outdoor performance with four thousand people spread all over the National Mall. So there really was, to use a cliché often used at that time by our friend Joseph Beuys, an expansion of art. It was really expanded.

You have put on a lot of Sky Art events within urban landscapes but also in wild natural settings, as with Desert Sun – Desert Moon.

Initially, I wanted to do *Desert Sun – Desert Moon* as art without an audience. The artists could concentrate on bringing their art into that fantastic landscape. I thought it would create, on its own, in itself, a valuable experience. But the Smithsonian decided to make a film of it [laughs]. So ironically, *Desert Sun – Desert Moon*, which was meant to happen in the “deserted desert,” became rather public as a result of that film. It was

a set of individual works, not a group work. I did a project with Charlotte Moorman. I had a big inflatable, one of the largest, the *Berlin Star*, which I used in four ways: first as a sculpture on the ground; then as a piece of portable architecture — you could go into the sculpture and Charlotte actually played a concert inside it —, then it became a flying sculpture, and for the fourth part, I wanted Charlotte in the *Star* flying and playing, amplified to the outside. But it didn't happen because the weather was difficult. So this is something still left to do.

During the Group Zero period, all of you, and Yves Klein as well, dreamt of theater in the sky, of huge projects in a natural setting. Some of these projects, like the Berlin Star in that desert, probably in a different way than you had imagined, actually occurred later, or as part of other projects.

That's an important question and asked very rarely. People in America don't listen when I say that one of my major contributions to the Center is that I brought to it many of the ideas and ideals—the vision let's say—of Zero. The relationship to the environment, particularly to the natural environment, and the ideas about the wholeness of nature, and the sense of performance, and the sense of actual interaction between the artists and the art-inspired society, have a lot to do with Group Zero. There was a very strong American element to the Center but also a very strong European one, some of that represented by Kepes, but much of it, or more of it represented by myself and some other European artists that were there in the beginning.

The last question is about Nam June Paik who passed away a few days ago. You were close friends.

I had known Paik since Germany. He credited me with two things: one was that I had made him decide to become a visual artist because of the *Light Ballet*; and the other was that I had brought him together with Beuys. On a very personal level, I have to say that some of the best things I have experienced as an artist, being and working with other artists, some of the best times, were with Paik. He was very open, very generous. He was extraordinary, an extraordinary artist. Paik was a giant.