

Tijs Visser

The Nul group was a collective of Dutch artists who manifested themselves between 1961 and 1966. Artists Armando, Jan Henderikse, Jan Schoonhoven and Henk Peeters formed the core of this group, which felt a kinship with the international ZERO movement that had started in Düsseldorf. They shared a quest for a new objectivity in art. The Dutch artists had previously exhibited as a collective since 1958, under the name Dutch Informal Group, and found in one another a common dedication to banish personal expression and to paint composition-free works. The exhibition "Nul" at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1962 was their first major event in the Netherlands, organized by Henk Peeters. It presented a broad overview of the international ZERO movement, including artists from France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland and Belgium. In addition to various exhibitions in Düsseldorf, Paris and Milan, another museum exhibition at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague followed in 1964. Entitled "ZERO-0-NUL," it featured works by Armando, Henk Peeters and Jan Schoonhoven, along with works by the German ZERO artists Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker. In 1965 came the exhibition "nul negentienhonderd vijf en zestig," again at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, in which artists from the Japanese Gutai group participated, along with European ZERO artists. As in Nul62, Nul65 also displayed the broad visual spectrum and the international reach of the ZERO movement, including artists' collectives such as Azimut from Milan and ZERO from Düsseldorf, as well as the New York-based Yayoi Kusama and American artist George Rickey. The various artists' collectives organized their own exhibitions and produced their own publications, in which they took a stand against the established order. They wanted to break with existing structures and institutions and displayed an unconditional optimism about the possibilities of technological progress. Exhibitions no longer necessarily had to take place in museums. They produced objects with modern industrial materials, such as plastic, aluminum and everyday objects, like light bulbs and engines, and created total installations using sound, light and motion. The planned, but never realized, project "Zero op Zee" (Zero on Sea), which was to have taken place in 1966 on the Scheveningen Pier, was an ultimate expression of their optimism about the possibilities of technology and their dedication to integrate art into everyday reality. At the same time, "Zero on Sea" marked the end of the movement. Each artist subsequently went his own way, remaining true to the movement's principles, striking out in new directions or giving up art production (for a time). Nul intends to signify a new start, more an idea and a climate than a particular style or form; it aims to abandon all that no longer has any viability, even the painting if need be. The artist takes a step back; communal ideas inspire virtually anonymous

works that have little left in common with traditional art. What emerges are objects, vibrations, structures and reflections... Not the banality of everyday life, nor simply the regularities of optical phenomena: Nul is the domain between "Pop" and "Op," or, to paraphrase [Otto] Piene: the quarantine zero, the quiet before the storm, the phase of calm and resensitization. With these words, Henk Peeters introduced the catalogue of the exhibition "nul negentienhonderd vijf en zestig." Art was stripped of its traditional forms as a painting or sculpture. In abandoning traditional media and in the intrusion of art into reality, ZERO stood at the dawn of a revolution in the visual arts that would unfold in the 1970s and was, therefore, a trailblazer for minimalist, conceptual and Land Art. In the wake of major exhibitions in New York (Guggenheim 2014), Berlin (Gropius-Bau 2015) and Amsterdam (Stedelijk Museum, 2015), there is now renewed interest in ZERO around the world. In 2008, the ZERO Foundation was established in Düsseldorf: a cooperative venture by ZERO artists Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, Günther Uecker, Christian Megert and Henk Peeters, with the Museum Kunstpalast and with financial support from the city of Düsseldorf. Since then, extensive research, more than ever before, has been carried out using historical archive material; worldwide symposia have been organized; projects and exhibition activities have received support. The renewed interest in ZERO cannot be considered separately from a renewed interpretation of the past through current developments, in which phenomena from nature and reality are isolated or magnified, and in which the boundaries between the artificial and the real are transgressed. Once again we find ourselves at a juncture in history, when we sense an urgency to break with existing attitudes and conventions, the way that ZERO and Nul did 50 years ago, offering new perspectives for the future in the process.

Translation by Pierre Bouvier