

**IS 573 ABO FA20: Advanced Topics in Collections (Vincler, J)
Short Research Paper, Amelia Ishmael**

***ZERO* magazine (Otto Piene & Heinz Mack. 1958 – 1961)**

1. Das rote Bild (The Red Picture) -- 2. Vibration -- 3. Dynamo. Seller: Tim Byers Art Books (Richmond, U.K.), priced at \$5,176.24 for collection of 3 issues. Provenance: Jürgen Claus, a colleague of the editors, with personalized illustrations and inscriptions by the editors to the former owner.

ZERO magazine is series of three (3) artist-made magazines, published and edited by Otto Piene (1928 - 2014) and Heinz Mack (1931-) in Düsseldorf, Germany between 1958-1961,¹ to transmit ideas of the Zero movement across an international forum and to draw attention to the innovations in contemporary art that were occurring throughout Europe in the post-war era. Otto Piene's biographer Ante Glibota writes of *Zero*: "It was the first time that a magazine had been basically carried out by artists, reflecting their artistic approaches, expressing their search for creative contacts, exchange of ideas and proposals for a new vision of art, furthermore in an impoverished, disintegrated country, where ruins were visible at every turn."²

Otto Piene had studied philosophy and studio art after World War 2, and acquired state-certification in education pedagogy. After completing studies in Cologne and Staatliche Kunstakademie in 1957, Otto Piene decided to remain in Düsseldorf and devote himself to his studio practice, yet he found his postwar Germany culturally stagnant. Artistic materials were difficult to procure and international-art news was slow to arrive. *Art Informel* and *Tachisme*

¹ The U.S. listings that I found through occasionally refer to "Herausgeber und Redaktion" as the publisher of these artists' books. This is most certainly a translation and interpolation error that emerged through copying records, as Herausgeber und Redaktion is not the name of a publisher but rather the German catalogue heading for "Publisher and editor," followed in German catalogue listings by Heinz Mack and Otto Piene's names.

² Ante Glibota, *Otto Piene* (Delight Edition, 2011), 28.

were the predominant movements occurring in contemporary art in Europe, yet there was a widespread urge for reconstruction—physically in regards to the urban reconstruction needed after the war, as well as spiritually and artistically. Though Otto Piene experimented with both styles, he found them inadequate to express the ideas of the new realities experienced by the second postwar generation's culture. One of the most direct qualities that these previous styles had in common was the emphasis on the medium of painting and formalist concerns regarding pictorial representation and materialism, and it was specifically this sort of culture and history surrounding painting which the second generation of postwar artists felt inhibited by and were pressed with the feeling that it was something that they had to somehow overcome—either by expanding broadly to free up what a painting could be, or by finding new artistic materials altogether. Otto Piene rather was part of a historic movement against the goal of art to be a personal expression, psychologically cathartic, or a biographical reference to the individual creator; These historic modes were replaced by Bauhaus-influenced interactions with industrial materials and techniques, international group and collective activities, and strengthened influences of nature and environment. Influenced by Klaus Jurgen-Fischer's concepts of information theory, Otto Piene did not agree with the idea that Art should be a residue or document of emotions, but rather that Art was a tool—a tool for communication, a transmitter of information that would be received by viewers. Although by the late 1950s the financial and cultural situation for artists in Düsseldorf was rapidly improving, yet most of its galleries and collectors were more focused on the established artists and styles of *Art Informel* and *Tachisme*. As an alternative to the commercial gallery structure, beginning in April 1957, Otto Piene and his friend Heinz Mack (a former classmate who had his art studio in the same building) began hosting the *Abendausstellungen* [evening exhibitions] series in their studios. The

Abendausstellungen were independently produced exhibitions (financed and organized completely by the artists themselves), open to the public for only one night, incorporating ephemeral events and performances, featuring their own works alongside their selections of artists who they identified as working with similar dynamism— as a way to provide a platform for new ideas, engaging viewers’ eyes and mind in the present, and looking forward with anticipation to the new era. Soon they had identified a name for their artistic movement—*Zero*. The metaphor of “zero” and “a new beginning” was prevalent across Europe, as artists were confronting the new world that they had inherited and felt that they needed to achieve a clear break from past traditions.

Between April and December 1957, Otto Piene and Heinz Mack hosted six Abendausstellung, each event growing more complex and ambitious, while also becoming more tightly curated (originally group shows many artists and culminating in one-man shows) as the group began identifying more tightly their vision and expanding their artistic network. The following year, 1968, they hosted two more—“Das rote Bild” and “Vibration” —the transmission of each event amplified with a simultaneous release of the first and second issue of *Zero*.³ The final Abendausstellung was held in 1960 at Galerie Schmela. The third and final issue of *Zero*, “Dynamo” was released a year later, in 1961. Each issue was a thematic artists’ statement or manifesto, and including submissions from multiple artists.

³ Refer to the following sources for more information about this historical summary of Otto Piene and Zero: Joseph D. Ketner, *Witness to Phenomenon: Group ZERO and the Development of New Media in Postwar European Art* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Robert Brown, “Oral history interview with Otto Piene, 1988 Aug. 4-1990 Feb. 22,” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian*, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-otto-piene-12872#transcript> ; and Ante Glibota, *Otto Piene* (Delight Edition, 2011).

Zero magazine fits within the history of artists' books defined by Johanna Drucker within her writings on the "democratic multiple" for its presence in the post-1945 era of art and literature, and its identity of a self-published journal during a time when mass-produced publications were becoming an available format for artists to work within due to the declining expenses of the reproduction processes. It is an example of artists using the codex format as an alternative to the system to the gallery structure, as artists were increasingly able to work outside of the art gallery to communicate, share, and develop new experimental ideas with an expanded reach to larger audiences and geographic regions. Historically, *Zero* magazine precedes Enrico Castellini and Piero Manzoni's magazine *Azimuth* (2 issues; published Milan; 1959, 1960) and anticipates later artists' journals such as Liza Béar and Willoughby Sharp's magazine *Avalanche* (8 issues; published 1970-1976; NYC).

Although some of Otto Piene and Heinz Mack's Abendausstellung events drew the support of local art critics, *Zero* was intended as an extension of the art studio, as "source material rather than commentary, as primary information originating from the same point as the works of art."⁴ The challenges that *Zero* faces with its historical legacy are contributed to by the fact that the three issues were all released before there was a critical reception in arts magazines or newspapers, an organized system of distribution for artists' books, and a lag from the art funding organizations that did not yet recognize artists' books as independent categories that could receive government funding. The *Zero* journals function simultaneously as exhibition catalogues, dissemination of emerging artistic theories for the *Zero* group, and (especially issue 3) as auratic objects that integrate the structure of the book within its intended viewing conditions,

⁴ Lawrence Alloway, "Viva Zero" in Otto Piene and Heinz Mack, *Zero* (MIT, 1973), ix.

intentionality and sensitivity to the structure of pages/spread/format in how it is designed, and a transmission of energy (visual and temporal) within the intention of how it disseminates the ideas that it contains.

The *Zero* magazine physical objects are offset printed, 20 cm height, with variable page ranges. The text blocks of each are printed in black ink on white paper. Issues 1&2 have paper covers, and issue 3 is hardbound. The covers of each issue are distinct in color: Issue 1 is printed with black title on a red-ink background, Issue 3's cover is white with a black-ink title, and Issue 3 is printed with the white inkless paper showing through for the title surrounded by a black-ink background. According to the Zero Foundation catalogue issues 1 & 2 were published in 1958, and issue 3 was published in 1961.

Issue 1, "Das Rote Bild" [the red painting], was published for release on the occasion of the 7th Abendausstellung on April 24, 1957.⁵ As one of the earliest-known exhibitions to focus its scope on monochrome paintings, "Das Rot Bild" had a significant impact on the western canon of art history and theory as color became recognized as a *content* of contemporary painting (preceding "subject matter" and opposed to color's use as an attribution subservient to design or form). As Otto Piene describes, color is freed from "classification, differentiation, and sign values;" Heinz Mack describes: "when we talk about painting we are talking about color." The first issue of the *Zero* magazine expanded the impact of this event, demonstrating the artists' systematic plan to distribute their art on a greater scale. Though its printing of *Zero* 1 is more-or-less straightforward, the manifestation of the artists-published journal of this scope is exemplary. Contributions were in English, German, and French, and included essay by Yves Klein, Heinz

⁵ See "Zero 1" in Zero Foundation catalogue, *Düsseldorf im Netz*, (Objektnummer: mkp.ZERO.1.VII.137), <https://emuseum.duesseldorf.de/objects/811777/zero-1?ctx=161061e8-f289-4e9a-800d-2001b4682159&idx=46>

Mack, and Otto Piene along with a reproduced text by Arthur Rimbaud, and statements responding to the question “Bewirkt die gegenwärtige Malerei eminente Formung der Welt?” [Does Contemporary Painting Influence the Shape of the World?] by Franz Roh, Max Buchartz, Arnold Gehlen, Hans Sedlmayr, Georg Muche, and Freidrich Bayl.

Issue 2 of *Zero* magazine was also published in October 1958, on the occasion of the 8th Abendausstellung, “Vibration,” which takes the theories of colors investigated earlier and expands Zero’s theories to light and visual movement, with a special focus on exploring the continuous sequences and all-over repetitive forms, of the entirety of the work as a grand experience, (divorced from previous artistic periods that were enamored with balancing petite precious moments or episodes within stagnant surroundings... and precipitating environmental arts and immersive installations)—to be sure Zero wanted to energize our experience of the world by altering our surroundings through activating our perceptions entirely.⁶ Contributors included Max Bense, Adolf Zillmann, Heinz Mack, and Otto Piene, with reproductions of artworks by Oskar Holweck, Almir Mavignier, and the editors. The black and white illustrations distinguish issue 2 from the first issue in utilization of the book format, yet the artists are not yet investigating unique ideas of the book as a physical medium/structure, as we will see in the next (and final) issue.

Issue 3 of *Zero*, “Zero bis ∞: Dynamo,” was published in July 1961 on an occasion of the Zero group’s gallery exhibition at Galerie Schmela. Though the two earlier issues of *Zero* display the artist-publishers’ interest in using the medium of the democratic multiple as a

⁶ See “Zero 2” in Zero Foundation catalogue, *Düsseldorf im Netz*, (Objektnummer: mkp.ZERO.1.VII.139), <https://emuseum.duesseldorf.de/objects/811779/zero-2?ctx=161061e8-f289-4e9a-800d-2001b4682159&idx=45>
Note: this issue is often erroneously catalogued as being published in [ca. 1959] or [ca. 1960] due to the more convenient impulse that as a serial it should have a regular annual release schedule, which does not pertain to artists’ books.

communication tool that can disseminate primary information on a global level...*Zero 3* evidences the series' most advanced involvement with the activation of the physical structure of the book, and a deeper involvement with typography—most likely due to the advanced development and resources of the group at this time and increased financial resources. Its photo-reproductions are combines as independent image-essays, fill the pages' spreads (with bleeds) and are conceptually interacting as the viewer interacts with the book (rather than used as illustrations). This issue has a unique feature where one of the pages (the final page of an essay by Yves Klein) has been burned horizontally across the entire leaf 2/3 of the way down the page (the artist described: "my text will not have any end... it will stop suddenly"), leaving a horizontal singed edge.⁷ In both cases the intentional destruction to the bound structure interrupts the printed text. In the original publication issue 3 also includes a sunflower seed glued to the last page (accompanying instructions from Jean Tinguely to plant), and a book of matches (with instructions from Spoerri to use a match to light the magazine issue 3 on fire—or more specifically thus "transform" it).⁸ Issue 3 was enclosed in a paper envelope that was printed on the front and back with the journal's title and a solid black circle, as well as an adhesive paper strip that was certainly used as a belt to fasten the wrapping. These strips, or were designed by Emmett Williams and were printed with "konkretionen" (visual or concrete poetry) that were composed of very small typography (best viewed with a magnifying glass) formally amassed in diagonal swarms within the band.⁹ The content of the issue exemplifies Zero group's move away

⁷ The MIT reproduction includes an English translation of Yves' essay, where the French version includes the unique burned edge and the English translation includes an additional unique feature— each issue has been torn horizontally across the entire leaf 1/3 of the way down the page.

⁸ The sunflower seed is commonly noted as missing from existing copies, leaving being glue remnants where it once was installed. The final instructions may suggest that the existing copies are intentionally much lower in quantity than originally printed.

⁹ See "Zero 3, Beschreibung" in Zero Foundation catalogue, *Düsseldorf im Netz* and "Korrespondenz von Emmett Williams an Otto Piene," in Zero Foundation catalogue, *Düsseldorf im Netz*, (Objektnummer: mkp.ZERO.2.I.859), <https://emuseum.duesseldorf.de/objects/472724/korrespondenz-von-emmett-williams-an-otto-piene>

from painting and towards kinetic sculptures, electric technologies, light, theater and performances, and time-based arts.¹⁰ Contributions were by Yves Klein, Werner Ruhnau, Jean Tinguely, J. W. Kluver, Otto Piene, Heinz Mack, Arman, Enrico Castellani, Piero Manzoni, Daniel Spoerri, Günther Uecker, Pol Bury, Marc Adrian, Manfred Kage, Bernard Aubertin, and Arnulf Rainer, with photographs by Manfred Tischer, Rolf Stielow and Almir Mavignier, and artworks by the aforementioned as well as Oskar Holweck, Diter Rot, Raphael Jesus Soto, Piero Dorazio, Hans Salentin, Paul van Hoeydonck, Ira Moldow, Henk Peeters, J. J. Schoonhoven, Boris Kleint, and Kilian Breier.

It is unknown at this time how many copies of each issue were printed, how the issues were distributed, or their original price.

To give an idea of the publications' presence in the United States, according to *Worldcat* there are 13 records for the items, in collections such as University of Pittsburg, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, Art Institute of Chicago, Getty Research Institute, and Yale University Library. These records include listings ranging from 1 to 3 of the issues, and show that the publications are typically stored in the Rare Book section of the collections. As journals, the issues are typically classified in catalogues and shelved alongside other arts periodical rather than artist-published art objects. Most of these institution collections are incomplete, commonly consisting only of *Zero 3*. It is likely that many more issues of this publication exist in public and private collections in Europe, as *Zero* did not have a US reputation until after the publication of

The only known surviving examples of this strip and envelope are in the Zero Foundation archive from the former collection of Otto Piene.

¹⁰ See "Zero 3" in Zero Foundation catalogue, *Düsseldorf im Netz*, (Objektnummer: mkp.ZERO.0.VII.2), <https://emuseum.duesseldorf.de/objects/452016/zero-3?ctx=161061e8-f289-4e9a-800d-2001b4682159&idx=43>

all 3 issues, when three of its most active representatives—Otto Piene, Heinz Mack and Günther Uecker—began exhibiting in the U.S. in 1966, namely at University of Pennsylvania where Otto Piene taught and Howard Wise Gallery in NYC where their work was curated within the gallery’s curatorial specialty of art & technology.

The only clue found indicating the size of the issues’ press run is the detail that 3,000 strips were created for issue 3 for the packaging of this issue. It is likely that *Zero* 3 had the largest edition, as *Zero*’s reputation and circulation grew greatly since the publication of the 1st issue. Issue 1 of *Zero* is quite rare, Issue 2 is rare but acquirable (valued at about \$700 by sellers), and issue 3 is rare yet the most accessible on the market (valued at about \$1000 by sellers). Given that this seller has all three issues and the provenance of this collection and the personalized inscriptions/illustrations to a colleague of the editors, and the increasing awareness of the significance of the historic *Zero* groups’ impact on international contemporary art, this would be a fantastic purchase for any artists’ book collection.

The *Zero* magazine issues 1-3 were reproduced by MIT in 1973 as hardcover edition of all three volumes. This book includes a forward by Lawrence Alloway, is protected with a printed dust jacket and the printed block includes the altered leaves of *Zero* 3, and a note from the publisher describing that “This unusual feature is actually the reverse of a defect—the fact that each copy of this book had to be processed by hand after printing and during binding enhances its value.”¹¹ Though this edition is now out of print, used copies are still accessible, selling for around \$200.¹² This reproduction is accessible on the market, especially as U.S. universities increasingly

¹¹ Insert, note from publisher. Otto Piene and Heinz Mack, *Zero* (MIT, 1973).

¹² “Zero,” *MIT Press*, <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/zero>. See “**14 Matches For:** Author: **piene, otto**, Title: **zero**, Imprint: **MIT**, Year (minimum):**1973**,” *viaLibri*, <https://www.vialibri.net/searches/202011220148858W1kkjV>

participate in aggressive deaccessions of their collection items based on circulation rates statistics. Since the reception of the Zero group continues to grow (based on art history's custom of 50-year lag until accepted by authorities into the cannon and increasing international exhibitions and conferences supported by the Zero Foundation-founded in 2008-and at venues such as the 2014 survey at NYC's Guggenheim), it is my opinion that this 1973 reprint will soon become inaccessible to purchase.