

ZERO 5

THE ARTIST AS CURATOR

COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES IN THE INTERNATIONAL ZERO MOVEMENT 1957–1967

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“BEFORE IT BLOWS UP”

ZERO'S AMERICAN DEBUT AND ITS LEGACY

Tina Rivers Ryan

Ich habe entschieden Alles getan, was ich für uns tun konnte und darüber hinaus für Zero und alle Beteiligten.

—Otto Piene, letter to Heinz Mack, October 15, 1964¹

Born in Germany in the late 1950s and shaped by the aftermath of the Second World War, the ZERO movement embraced the political rhetoric of transnationalism, bringing together a disparate group of (mostly) European artists who shared a fascination with physical forces, and especially with the universalizing medium of light. However, in 1964—on the heels of ZERO's inclusion in major exhibitions such as Documenta 3 and the XXXII Biennale di Venezia—a confluence of circumstances prompted the group's expansion from the Old World to the New. The circumstances themselves were pedestrian: Italian artist Piero Dorazio, who belonged to the ZERO circle and was then teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, invited one of the movement's German initiators, Otto Piene, to serve as a visiting professor in the fall of 1964, while Dorazio himself would be on sabbatical. Fortuitously, Piene had also received a phone call from Howard Wise, proprietor of the leading gallery for kinetic art in New York, inviting him to participate in a three-man show along with the other artists of ZERO's inner circle, Heinz Mack and Günther Uecker.² FIG. 1 When the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania then proposed to host a retrospective of his work, Piene—concerned

about being able to supply enough works for both shows—suggested that they instead mount the first American survey of ZERO, comprising works by around thirty artists.³ This idea became the genesis of a major group show, largely organized by Piene himself, which later traveled from the ICA in Philadelphia to the short-lived Washington Gallery of Modern Art (WGMA) in Washington, D.C.

The ICA show *Group Zero* was open from October 30 to December 11, 1964, coinciding with the show of works by Piene, Mack, and Uecker at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York, which was open from November 12 to December 5. FIG. 2 The WGMA version of the ICA show, *Zero: An Exhibition of European Experimental Art*, was open from January 10 to February 16, 1965; Douglas MacAgy, a curator then working with the Howard Wise Gallery, gave a lecture in D.C. in conjunction with the exhibition.⁴ Thus, in the span of only three months, ZERO debuted in three major American cities, at three leading venues for contemporary art.⁵ ZERO's reputation was further enhanced when the catalog to the ICA/WGMA show was republished by Arno/Worldwide Press in 1968, with a foreword by Samuel Adams Green, the ICA's director.⁶ The catalog—which included a statement by Piene and thirty black-and-white illustrations—was a major contribution to the effort to make ZERO accessible to an English-language audience; it was followed five years later by the translation of the three issues of the magazine *Zero*, which were published by MIT Press with a foreword by the influential British critic Lawrence Alloway, who was then living in America.⁷

Most reviews of the ICA/WGMA show tended to discuss it in general terms, often singling out only a few artists—especially Jean Tinguely, who had gained American notoriety when his work *Homage to New York* destroyed itself in the courtyard of the Museum of Modern Art in 1960. However, it is possible to reconstruct a more specific sense of the show—if not a precise list of the works it comprised at each location—through reference to the 1968 catalog.⁸ According to the publication, the show



1 Günther Uecker (left) and Heinz Mack arriving in New York, 1964. Photo: Lufthansa Archive USA; ZERO Foundation, Düsseldorf

included Armando, Pol Bury, Enrico Castellani, Piero Dorazio, Lucio Fontana, Hermann Goepfert, Gotthard Graubner, Hans Haacke, Oskar Holweck, John Hoyland, Robert Indiana, Yves Klein, (Yayoi) Kusama, (Francesco) Lo Savio, Adolf Luther, Heinz Mack, Piero Manzoni, Almir Mavignier, Christian Megert, Henk Peeters, Uli Pohl, Otto Piene, Hans Salentin, Jan J. Schoonhoven, Jesús Rafael Soto, Ferdinand Spindel, Jean Tinguely, Günther Uecker, Jef Verheyen, and Nanda Vigo. Collectively, these artists hailed from the United States, Venezuela, Belgium, Brazil, England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Japan, and Switzerland. Given its geographic and cultural diversity, it is perhaps no surprise that the movement was structured horizontally and sustained more by social bonds and elective affinities than programmatic ideologies. As Piene wrote in a short history of the movement published by *The Times Literary Supplement* in September 1964 (belying the extent of his own efforts on the group's behalf): "there is no president, no leader, no secretary—there are no 'members,' there is only a human relation between several artists and artistic relation between different individuals... The partners in ZERO are always changing."⁹

Notably, the ICA/WGMA show included a number of works by two of ZERO's brightest lights, both of whom had died prematurely in the preceding years: Yves Klein died in 1962 at the age of thirty-four, while Piero Manzoni was just twenty-nine when he passed away a year later. Their works in this show rather obviously corresponded to the group's fascination with light, as promulgated by Piene. For example, Klein's *Monogold*, a gold-leaf monochrome from 1961, reflected light off its textured surface, while Manzoni's *Line in Chromed Cylinder Box* from 1962 permanently encased a continuous scroll inside a reflective container, deflecting our vision (and attention) from the ostensible art object to its casing, and from there to the local environment. Other well-known works that represent the group's preoccupations at the time include Fontana's slashed canvases (which highlight the



2 Installation view of *Zero*, Howard Wise Gallery, New York, 1964
Photo: Heinz Mack / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn; ZERO Foundation, Düsseldorf

contrast between pictorial and actual space, and also between darkness and light), and Haacke's water-filled acrylic glass constructions (which open themselves to the influence of heat, or energy, from their physical environments). FIGS. 3–10 Of course, among ZERO's most enduring legacies are its mobilization of light and motion, and its incorporation of novel media, as seen in *White Lightmill*, 1964, a rare collaboration between Mack, Piene, and Uecker, which utilized an easel, spotlights, an electric motor, and nails. These mechanized works were inevitably susceptible to breakdowns (sometimes intentionally, as in the case of Tinguely's work), leading Green, the director of the ICA, to jokingly advise a reporter, "This show should be seen before it blows up."¹⁰

Judging by the response in the press, it seems the shows *were* seen, and furthermore, were generally well received. The British critic John Anthony Thwaites, who was then living in Germany, recounted the warm reception of the group in the pages of *Art in America* in 1965:

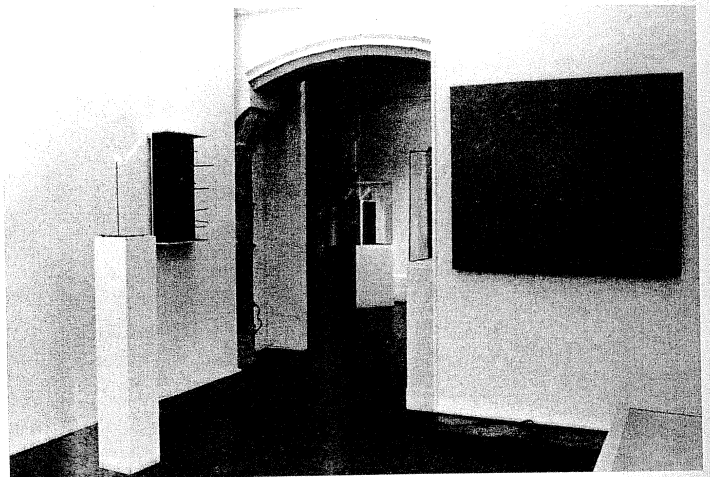
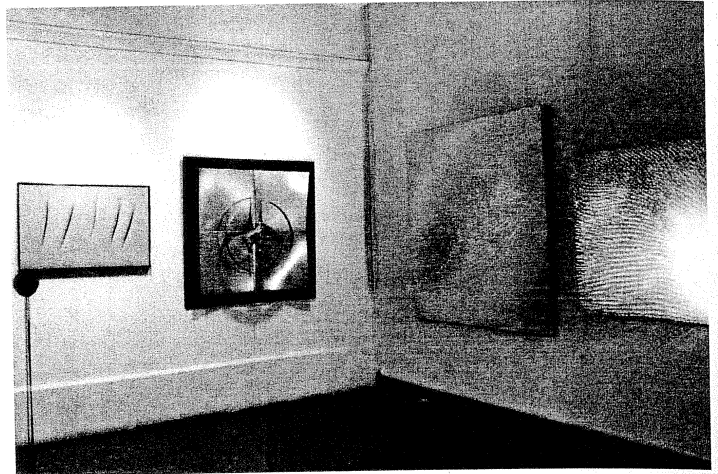
The New York critics accepted it as an authentic trend, unlike anything in the United States. In its extended form, most found it the best thing to come from Europe since the war. Zero anticipated op art by a good half-dozen years. Of course not alone, but then it never fell into the fallacy of Josef Albers or of Vasarely—pursuing optical effects for their own sake and landing in abstract *trompe l'oeil*. From the start, Zero has been occupied with light and movement. Mack's "light dynamos" and mirror-reliefs in aluminum foil, Piene's "light ballet" and Uecker's nail-reliefs and recent revolving figures all take these as their medium. But they are the means to a new space-concept, a visual poetry, a fresh vision of the world. Piene, the theorist, calls it "the new idealism," seen as the complementary opposite of *nouveau réalisme* in Paris. Here then is a real new movement.¹¹

In fact, in Thwaites's account, America was more receptive to the German ZERO artists than was their native country: he claimed that "official" German culture had ignored or even tried to suppress them, and that few German museums had bothered to acquire any works by them until their "New York success."¹² The "success" of Mack, Piene, and Uecker in New York is evidenced, for example, by Donald Judd's review of their Howard Wise Gallery show in *Arts Magazine*, which noted that the work "is unusual and unlike anything here. It is probably the best in Europe."¹³ Meanwhile, John Canaday of the *New York Times* referred to the show as "spectacular" and "a must."¹⁴

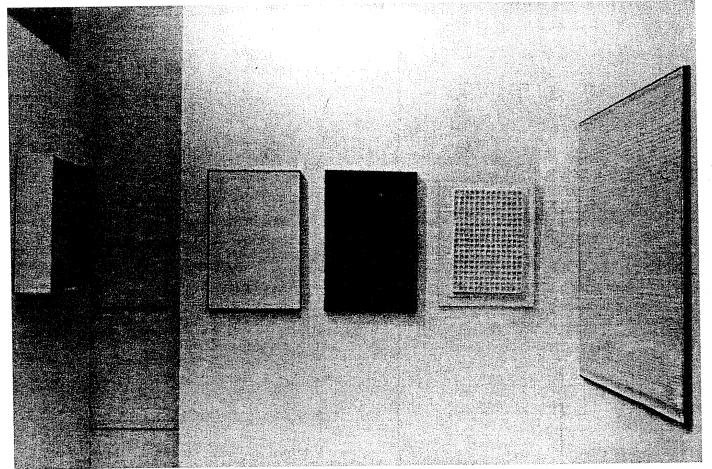
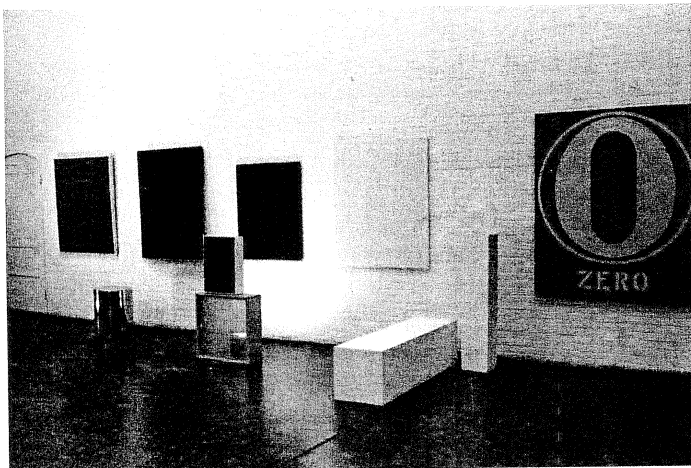
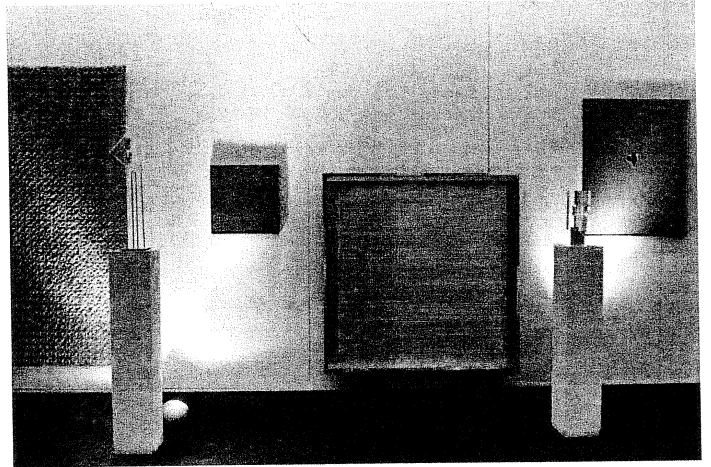
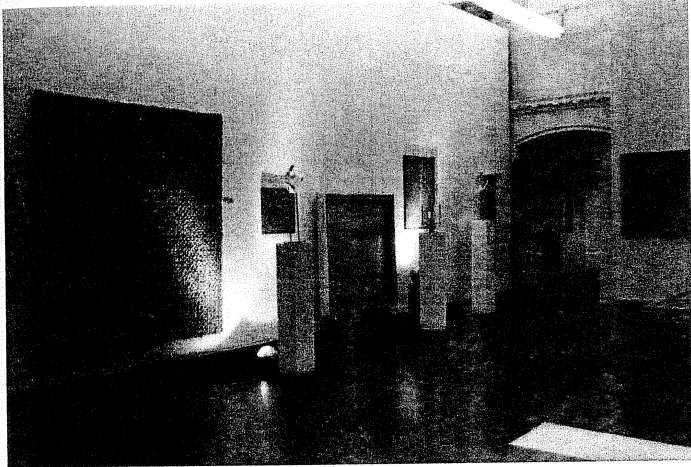
In contrast to the reception of the works by Mack, Piene, and Uecker in New York, the response to the ICA/WGMA show seems to have been mixed. Thomas Godfrey, Chairman of the Department of

Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote to Mack that the Philadelphia show "is very handsome indeed and elicited a great deal of enthusiastic response."¹⁵ However, the Washington iteration was not as well received: the show's so-called *Light Saloon* was referred to in one critic's review as "utterly enchanting," but the review in the *Washington Post* bore the derogatory title "They Aren't Art, But They're Fun," while the review in D.C.'s *Sunday Star* opined that "the artists banding and exhibiting together under the title Zero are interested in nothing and going no place."¹⁶ Attendance records suggest that the WGMA show was moderately popular, drawing about 3,200 people over the course of a month; this is a third better than the attendance numbers for the subsequent exhibition of Anthony Caro, and roughly the same as the historically notable show of *Washington Color Painters* later that summer (which was open almost twice as long)—but nowhere near the 73,450 people who attended the WGMA's Van Gogh show the previous year.¹⁷

Though varied in their appraisals, the reviews of ZERO's American shows were generally consistent in their attempt to render the work intelligible to American audiences through comparison to a more familiar, homegrown movement. As Thwaites pointed out, Piene himself had situated the group within its original context—namely, the postwar European scene—by juxtaposing their manipulation of natural phenomena with the cultural sampling of the *nouveaux réalistes*: though one privileged nature and the other culture, both movements effected a return to realism. In America, New Realism's counterpart, Pop Art, similarly became the movement against which to measure ZERO's ambitions and achievements. (The fact that the icon for the ICA/WGMA exhibition was a graphic black-and-white "0" designed by the American Pop artist Robert Indiana suggested that the movements might yet find common ground, even if they were typically related as antipodes.) An anonymous writer for the University of Pennsylvania student newspaper,



3-10 *Group Zero*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, 1964. This page: from left to right, top to bottom, works by (among others): Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, Lucio Fontana, and Hermann Goepfert; Otto Piene, Lucio Fontana, Hermann Goepfert, and Günther Uecker; Heinz Mack (background); Uli Pohl (left). Next page: from left to right, top to bottom, works by (among others): Uli Pohl; Uli Pohl (foreground); Robert Indiana (right); Jan Schoonhoven. Photos: unknown; University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts



the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, reinforced the contrast between ZERO's idealism and Pop's literalism, writing that "Unlike many 'pop' artists, [ZERO artists] are concerned with the beauty or beautiful potentials of their surroundings rather than with the way they actually appear. The art in the exhibit is a positive reaction to the time and it is concerned primarily with the future."¹⁸ Grace Glueck, a critic for the *New York Times*, explicitly asked Mack and Uecker their opinions of Pop: Though Uecker replied, "We are partial to pop," he also recapitulated their distance from Pop's literalism, noting that "we object to depicting the human body in a pop way."¹⁹

ZERO's objection to Pop's figurative depiction proved prescient: only a season after the group's American debut, the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted the infamous Op art exhibition *The Responsive Eye*, featuring more than a dozen of the same artists that had exhibited under the ZERO moniker in Philadelphia and D.C.²⁰ Though Op art—which was viewed by many as gimmicky, formulaic, or worse—would not survive its almost immediate devolution into kitsch, the nascent movement we now call Minimalism (spearheaded by Donald Judd, the same critic who hypothesized that ZERO made "the best [work] in Europe") would secure the hegemony of ZERO's preferred idiom of abstraction. Though ZERO is generally not associated with the rhetoric of Minimalism (excepting Hans Haacke, whose work is commonly associated with Post-Minimalism and systems aesthetics), there are some significant connections. Canaday's review of the Howard Wise Gallery show in the *New York Times* described the work in terms that anticipate Judd's definition of Minimalism: "What we are getting is an art form that hybridizes painting and sculpture, a form approached from both directions but sharing more the nature of sculpture than painting."²¹ Judd actually claimed the inverse—that "the new [Minimalist] work obviously resembles sculpture more than it does painting, but it is nearer to painting"—and also theorized that minimalist objects were neither paintings nor sculptures

(nor hybrids of both); however, he did invoke several artists who had been associated with ZERO—namely Yves Klein, Yayoi Kusama, and Enrico Castellani, all of whom were in the ICA/WGMA show—in his 1965 article "Specific Objects," which became a *de facto* manifesto for the movement.²²

The influence on American art of ZERO's tendency towards abstraction was perhaps more indirect than overt, but another of its hallmarks—its fascination with light—appears to have made an obvious impact, one which reverberates with ever greater force. This impact is most simply measured by assessing the exhibitions devoted to kinetic light art in the wake of ZERO's American debut; given their number and the popular attention they attracted, it is surprising that they were so totally effaced from our narratives of postwar American art.²³ While it would require further proof to posit any causality, there is certainly a correlation between Piene's orchestration of the American debut of ZERO and an increased interest in light as an artistic medium. Aside from challenging our narratives of postwar art, the American exhibitions of light art in the 1960s should point us towards larger questions about the increasingly important role of mediated light—and, more broadly, technology—in postwar culture. As Caroline Jones notes in her 2009 review of the ZERO retrospective at the Sperone Westwater Gallery in New York, Piene's early raster paintings (which, although handmade, mimic the forms and logic of mechanical reproduction) "seem to forecast the technocratic subject to come."²⁴ Unfortunately, ZERO's mechanized works and multimedia installations are the very works that are the hardest for us to reconstruct, given the paucity of full-color and moving-image documentation. It is precisely these works that we most urgently need to rediscover, in order to more fully appreciate the history and art of our own time.

NOTES

- 1 "I have definitely done everything I could do, for us and furthermore for Zero and everyone involved." Otto Piene to Heinz Mack, October 15, 1964, Vorlass Mack (hereafter cited as VL Mack), 1.1.963, ZERO Foundation, Düsseldorf. Piene is referring to his efforts regarding the organization of the exhibition *Zero* at the Howard Wise Gallery.
- 2 For more on Howard Wise's pioneering gallery, see Tina Rivers Ryan, "Wise Lights," *Art in America* vol. 102, no. 9 (October 2014), 148–55.
- 3 Otto Piene in conversation with the author, June 6, 2012.
- 4 As with the records at the ICA, the records of the WGMA (which was absorbed into the Oklahoma City Museum of Art in 1968) contain little information about the ZERO show. A history of the WGMA that was published by the OCMA claims that not only Douglas MacAgy, but also Michael Fried and Martin Friedman spoke about the show; see Barbara Rose, Gerald Nordland, Hardy S. George, eds., *Breaking the Mold: Selections from the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, 1961-1968*, exh. cat. (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma City Museum of Art, 2007), 124. However, Michael Fried disputes this, explaining that he spoke at the WGMA only on the subject of Anthony Caro (e-mail conversation with the current author, February 11, 2013). Fried's account is supported by a manuscript in which Gerald Nordland, director of the WGMA, refers to upcoming lectures by MacAgy on ZERO, Fried on Caro, and Friedman on the show "London: The New Scene" (Gerald Nordland, "The Washington Gallery of Modern Art," ca. January/February 1965, 6, Archives of the Oklahoma City Museum of Art).
- 5 While ZERO dissolved shortly after this period, the three main founders continued to show their work at the Howard Wise Gallery throughout the 1960s; for more on these shows, see Tina Rivers Ryan, "The Proliferation of the Sun: ZERO and the Medium of Light in Late 1960s America," in Andrea von Hülsen-Esch and Dirk Pörschmann, eds., *The Medium of Light in the Context of the Neo-Avant-Garde of the 1950s and 1960s* (Düsseldorf: Düsseldorf University Press, 2013), 75–109. Unfortunately, most accounts of the movement offer very little documentation or analysis pertaining to ZERO's brief but important appearance in America.
- 6 *Group Zero*, exh. cat. (New York: Arno/Worldwide, 1968).
- 7 Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, eds., *Zero* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973).
- 8 According to a newspaper preview (see note 10), the ICA show featured twenty-nine artists from eight countries; this is one fewer than the number given in the 1968 catalog and three more than the number of artists (twenty-six) given by a manuscript from the WGMA (though the show might have been altered for its second iteration; see Nordland, note 4). Unfortunately, the illustrations in the 1968 catalog, though paired with their artists, are not identified in any other way, such as by title, year, or medium.
- 9 This article was republished as Otto Piene, "The Development of Group 'Zero,'" (1964), in Otto Piene and Heinz Mack, eds., *Zero* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), xxiii–xxv. It was also excerpted and disseminated by the Howard Wise Gallery in promotional materials for the show.
- 10 Cited in "Zero Exhibit at Institute Premieres," *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, November 10, 1964, 2, University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts, Institute of Contemporary Art Records, Group Zero file. This quotation follows Green's discussion of Jean Tinguely's self-destructive sculptures.
- 11 John Anthony Thwaites, "Germany: Prophets Without Honor," *Art in America* vol. 53, no. 6 (December 1965), 111.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Donald Judd, "Mack, Piene, Uecker," *Arts Magazine* vol. 39, no. 4 (January 1965), 55.
- 14 John Canaday, "His Recent Sculptures in Stone on View," *New York Times*, November 14, 1964: 26. For Canaday's full review, see note 21.
- 15 Thomas Godfrey to Heinz Mack, November 2, 1964, VL Mack, 1.1.967, ZERO Foundation, Düsseldorf.
- 16 Cited in Nordland (see note 4), 4; Andrea Sue Halbfinger, "They Aren't Art, But They're Fun," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 1965, p. G8; Frank Getlein, "Cool Reception for Zero Exhibit," *The Sunday Star*, January 17, 1965, p. C5.
- 17 Untitled list of exhibition attendance numbers, ca. September 1966, Archives of the Oklahoma City Museum of Art.
- 18 "Zero Exhibit at Institute Premieres" (see note 10), 1. Very similar wording appears in Green's foreword to the 1968 catalog; most probably, the anonymous author of this preview was paraphrasing Green's own statements.
- 19 The connection between the two shows was already envisaged by a reviewer of the ICA show, who noted that "strong, widespread new developments involved with perception are examined here prior to the Museum of Modern Art's larger exhibit, *The Responsive Eye*, opening next February in New York, which will cover much of the same ground and include 15 of these artists" ("Philadelphia Art Calendar," *Sunday Inquirer*, September 8, 1964, n.p., University of Pennsylvania Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts, Institute of Contemporary Art Records, Group Zero file).
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- 21 John Canaday, "The Sculptor Nowadays is the Favorite Son," *New York Times*, November 22, 1964, p. X19.
- 22 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965), 74–82.
- 23 These exhibitions include: *Light as a Creative Medium* at Harvard University's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Cambridge (1965); *Art Turned On* at the Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston (1965–6); *Light in Art* at the Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston (1966); *Sound Light Silence: Art That Performs* at the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City (1966); *Light-Motion-Space* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and Milwaukee Art Center (1967); *Light and Movement* at the Flint Institute of Arts (1967); *Light & Motion* at the Worcester Art Museum (1967–8); *The Magic Theater: Art Technology Spectacular* at the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City (1968); and *Light: Object and Image* at the Whitney Museum, New York (1968). Of course, these shows have their European counterparts, which are much better documented in the historical record, such as the show *KunstLichtKunst* at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, in 1966. These shows herald the increased attention afforded to light art today, from the blockbuster exhibitions of artists such as Olafur Eliasson and James Turrell, to historical surveys such as *Light Art from Artificial Light* at ZKM, Karlsruhe (2006), *Light Show* at the Hayward Gallery, London (2013), and *Dynamo: A Century of Light and Motion in Art* at the Grand Palais, Paris (2013).
- 24 Caroline A. Jones, "Zero in New York," *Artforum* (December 2009). Available at <http://artforum.com/inprint/issue=200910&id=24240> (accessed March 17, 2014).