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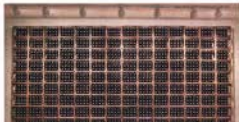THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2014

3 Men and a Posse Chase Newness

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pieces are by the Zero nucleus, with the rest by an additional 37 artists, from Europe, Japan, South America and the United States, who at some point partook in the Zero network. Their efforts have been assembled by Valerie Hillings, a Guggenheim curator and Zero devotee since graduate school.

This show is alternately dazzling and a bit thin: an essential walk-in history lesson that both reconfigures well-trod terrain and ventures into some new areas. It vividly captures the urge for innovation that generated both Zero and the network, and contains early glimmers of performance art, earthworks, interactive art and the dematerialization of the art object. But it is also a timely comment on the limits of newness as an artistic goal, especially when primarily achieved by new materials and processes.

By the time you reach the top of the museum's spiral, you may feel that you've experienced a surfeit of newness for newness' sake. There are a few too many instances of shiny metal, moving parts, glowing lights and their concomitant special effects.

Elsewhere, it may seem that established conventions — especially the Modernist monochrome — have been simply retrafined or embellished with unusual materials, like nails, barbed wire, soot, polystyrene or bread, not all of which are aging well. You can feel caught between objects whose futuristic sheen is devoid of meaning and works with a more antique, hand-wrought mien, accentuated by conventional titles like "Venus of Willendorf" (a 1962 soot painting by Piene) or "White Bird" (Uecker's undulate cluster of nails spray-painted white, from 1964).

Numerous objects point up the emptiness of quite a bit of current abstraction — specifically, monochrome formalism — while several environmental works foreshadow the onset of art as perceptual spectacle, a staple of large international exhibitions these days.

There is frequently a strong sense of déjà vu, too, since many

"Zero: Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s-60s" runs through Jan. 7 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; 212-423-3500, guggenheim.org.

The "Zero" exhibition includes Jan Henderikse's "Bottle Wall," top; "Sand Picture With Silver Rotation," by Heinz Mack, left; and Günther Uecker's "The Yellow Picture."

of the artists are better known for their affiliations with other movements, including Nouveau Realism, Arte Povera, Minimalism, Op Art and Kinetic art. Towering figures not generally associated with Zero are on hand, notably the Italian avant-gardists Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni, and Yves Klein, the French artist whose solo show of monochromes in Düsseldorf in 1957 influenced Zero's formation.

Also present are much less well-known affiliates, like Jan Schoonhoven, a Dutch artist whose white reliefs have the stillness of Mondrian, fitting Piene's description of Zero as "a zone of pure silence," and Dadamaino, an Italian who is one of three women in the show and is represented here by black-and-white paintings of homeophoric shapes created with scissors than with brushes.

The sensibility of Hermann Goepfert, a German artist who died in 1982, lives on in the 1961-62 "Optophonium," a mesmerizing choreography of shadow, light and sound that centers on a 7-by-8-foot white surface punctuated with small metal protrusions. Jan Henderikse is repre-

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More images from the show:
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sented by a re-creation of his 1962 "Bottle Wall," a barrier built of dozens of neatly stacked crates of bottled beer that would look completely at home in any number of Chelsea art emporiums or in a contemporary auction catalog.

In her catalog essay, Ms. Hillings painstakingly diagrams all kinds of interactions, collaborations and debates: when which artists met, began to correspond or were invited to take part in shows. A straightforward chronology would have clarified these developments, as would brief biographies, an especially frustrating omission, given the number of participants.

The exhibition has a wonderful opening act near the rotunda's ground floor. Here, Ms. Hillings has staged a partial reunion of the works and artists of "Vision in Motion — Motion in Vision," an important early exhibition (1959) at the Hessenhuis cafe in Antwerp, Belgium, which evidently included black walls, paintings

hung from the ceiling (sound familiar?) and the artists' last names stenciled on the floor.

In this reunion, Mr. Mack is represented by gently optical paintings, whose pulsating grids and patterns were created with special comb-like tools. An interest is visual vibration would soon lead him — and so, farther up the ramp — to textured aluminum discs rotating behind sheets of ridged glass, like glamorous saw blades.

At the same time, Piene was using stencils to texture bright monochrome surfaces with little beads of paint, but was soon using soot to create penumbral targets and lunar spheres. Mr. Uecker's small white painting, bristling with rows of nails, introduces but one of his many applications of this ubiquitous element. Used in various sizes and quantities, the stencils provide some of the show's strongest moments. He also shot arrows into canvases, resulting in jutting, pick-up-stick compositions.

The opening display also includes kinetic works by Jean Tinguely and Daniel Spoerri; a vivid abstract film by the American artist Robert Breer; and an untitled sculpture from 1959 by Dieter Roth that consists simply of a large open circle of steel, painted white and strung back and forth with twine, that viewers were once able to rearrange.

In the final gallery, at the top of the ramp, another restaging brings together seven kinetic sculptures by the original three Zero artists that were presented at Documenta 3 in 1964 as a homage to Fontana, but the results are not quite as felicitous. The two large collaborative works seem especially forced. They have gone the way of many artworks, becoming period pieces to be cherished primarily by true believers.

Whether or not you think the Zero network should become the defining phrase for postwar Eurocentric modernism, this exhibition is, in the main, an extraordinary accomplishment, from its fresh art-historical thesis to its demanding, impeccably executed installation. The determination to be new is hard-wired into most artists and art movements of any note. To better understand both the past and the present, it is valuable periodically to see this desire in such urgent, idealistic, if sometimes naïve, form.