ALMINE RECH

Piene, Mack, Uecker
Light, Space and Time

May 30 — Jul 8, 2026 | Paris, Matignon

Almine Rech Paris, Matignon is pleased to announce a group show highlighting the three founding members of group ZERO: Otto Piene, Heinz Mack, and Günther Uecker. The exhibition 'Piene, Mack, Uecker – Light, Space and Time' will be on view from May 30 to July 8, 2026.

Piene, Mack, Uecker: From the Absolute to the Infinite

"My greatest dream is to project light into the vast nocturnal sky." When Otto Piene articulated this wish in 1961, he was giving full expression to his artistic ambition: the immaterial manifestation of the absolute; the irrepressible power of light and its triumph over darkness; the conquest of the infinite through art. It was a pursuit the German artist would carry across decades and mediums, notably alongside his fellow members of the ZERO group, Heinz Mack and Günther Uecker, which he co-founded in 1957. At Almine Rech Matignon, the group exhibition titled 'Light, Space and Time' — three fundamental coordinates structuring our relationship to the world, and ones that proved so central to these artists' practice — brings together fourteen works, including several historic paintings by Piene.

In *Untitled* (1957/58), the earliest among them, the textured yellow pigment saturating the monochrome canvas could well evoke a saffron-hued expanse of land seen from above the clouds. In the cosmic *Burning Rainbow* (2006), a glowing celestial body seems to consume nearly the entire surface: we are face to face with one of the artist's celebrated fire paintings, which he began producing in the late 1950s by burning the canvas through pigment and fixative. In *Schwarzer Berg* (2010), completed four years before his death, it is the black of smoke that overtakes the canvas like a looming shadow. One might read it as a startling firework that, against the clarity of a white sky, erupts out of darkness.

Alongside these, four canvases by Heinz Mack extend this artistic inscription of the infinite by foregrounding two other foundational principles of ZERO: vibration and repetition. Acrylic gradients in grey, the use of synthetic resin, and hand-embossed aluminum together produce striated compositions that, while eschewing color entirely, enter into active play with light. It bears recalling: as early as 1958, the German artist (now 95) conceived his celebrated *Sahara Projekt* — a "wholly immaterial spatial painting" in the heart of the Saharan desert, animated by "luminous steles" made of Plexiglas, metal, and mirrors — a project he would ultimately realize a decade later in Tunisia. At the more intimate scale of the canvas, his tonal sequences orchestrate, much like that installation, a silvery ballet with light, drawing the work beyond the spatial limits of its support.

In Günther Uecker's work, it is nails driven into canvas that allow the pictorial space to be transcended. Their heads and tips cast shadows across the surface, shadows that will shift depending on the light source. This obsession traces back to his adolescence, during the liberation of Nazi Germany in 1945: as the Soviet army arrived in his town, the terrified young artist had nailed shut the door of his home to protect his family. Later, his "carpets" of nails on canvas would extend just as freely across furniture and everyday objects.

How, then, might we read these works today — so emblematic of a pivotal moment in art history? What can they still tell us, what can they still teach us, some nearly seventy years after their creation? The context in which ZERO was born remains worth remembering: a world in ruins laid waste by war, on the threshold of a new era marked at once by major technological advances and social transformation, and haunted by the threat of nuclear annihilation and the onset of runaway globalization, a world in which humanity would methodically accelerate the destruction of its own resources. Far from the lyricism of Expressionism or the dogmatism of preceding movements, Piene, Mack, and Uecker embraced a clean break with a striking freedom of form. Like any good cosmogony, their work would start from nothing, finding in destruction the welcome promise of a new beginning. Burned or nailed, the canvas sometimes became a battlefield — its ash and ruins the very substrate of a fresh cycle.

"Zero is silence. Zero is the beginning. Zero is round. Zero spins. Zero is the moon. The sun is Zero. Zero is white. The desert Zero. The sky above Zero. The night. (...)"
— Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, and Günther Uecker, poem originally published in German on poster and in leaflet for *ZERO – Der neue Idealismus, poetisches Manifest*, Galerie Diogenes, Berlin, 1963.

In the early days of 2026, as our world continues to erode amid cascading crises and devastating wars, the ZERO group's project might yet inspire through its unshakeable optimism. Against a "world felt to be wrong," as Piene put it, its guiding figures sought to recover a form of purity. Well before the emergence of Land Art and Arte Povera in the late 1960s, these artists unapologetically embraced their sense of wonder before nature, its power and its "incredible stimulations" (Otto Piene), while remaining anything but hostile to progress. At a time of relentless artificialization and human encroachment upon the world, they did not hesitate to bring new materials and technical production into dialogue with natural elements, seeking to highlight them in harmony. Against the noise and saturation of an ever-densifying environment, they offered a lesson in humility by celebrating the force of silence, the immensity of the desert and the sky. In a biographical note, Heinz Mack wrote: "The radical isolation of art will be a new freedom (...); ZERO, the expression of our limitless expectations." For "zero" is also the final count in a countdown — the last moment before the rocket lifts off toward a distant destination.

— Matthieu Jacquet, writer and journalist