

Otto Piene obituary

German artist who was a founder of Zero, one of the most influential movements in modern art

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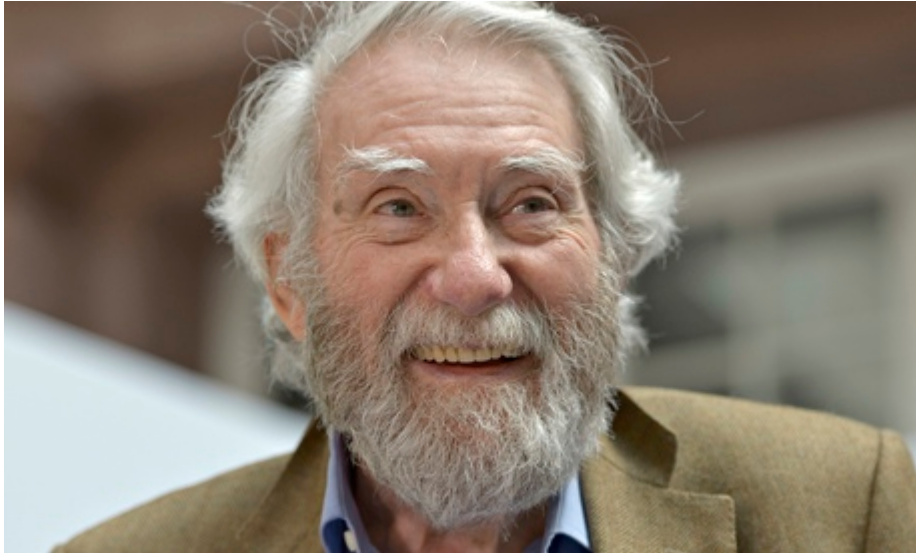


Otto Piene's sculpture *Plus léger que l'air* (Lighter Than Air) at the Nuit Blanche festival in Paris, 2008. Photograph: Gonzalo Fuentes/Reuters

Given the nihilist mood in German art after the war, it was only a matter of time before one group trumped all the others and called itself "Zero". The moment came in 1957, courtesy of a pair of young Düsseldorf artists, Heinz Mack and Otto Piene, who had studied together at the city's famous Kunstakademie. Piene, who has died in Berlin at the age of 86, would become the best known of Zero's creators. (Mack and another leading member, Günther Uecker, are still alive.) He was also the one who explained the group's choice of name. Zero, he said, was the last number in the countdown before a rocket takes off.

This was probably the most coherent explanation the movement ever gave of itself, otherwise living up to its reductivist handle by producing no formal manifesto or written philosophy. That did not check its rapid ascent. The group's dogged refusal to lay down laws soon found it friends in postwar Germany, then in the rest of Europe and Japan and, after a show in Washington in 1964, in the US.

By the time it ceased formally to exist – if it ever had – in 1966, Zero had become one of the most influential movements in modern art. A 2006 exhibition of its loosely allied members, at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg, brought together such disparate names as Jean Tinguely, Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana and Antoni Tàpies. The only obvious qualities shared by these artists were a more-or-less poetic existentialism and a dislike of being told what to do. There were good reasons why a combination of these should have emanated from Germany. If zero immediately precedes lift-off, then it also described the starting-point for German art after 1945. Given the country's recent past, there could be no looking back to a national tradition, or to anything that smacked of it. Instead, Piene and his fellow Zeroists worked in increments of gentleness and reticence.



After the end of the Zero movement, Otto Piene worked at the University of Pennsylvania and began to develop 'sky art'. Photograph: Michael Gottschalk/Photothek via Getty Images

While adherents of Art Informel and fellow-travellers such as Cobra went in for livid palettes, large gestures and bigger personalities, Piene developed his Grid Pictures – quiet, stencilled paintings in which muted points of colour shone through half-tone screens. These were first shown, as with all early Zero works, in the artist's Düsseldorf studio, in a series of one-day exhibitions attended by almost no one. If the Grid Pictures had appeared self-effacing, Piene's work soon became more evanescent. Where these first Zero pictures had seemed to play with light, his next ones actually did: the Lichtballette (light-ballet) works shone beams from moving torches through grids, introducing a kinetic element to Piene's art.

In the late 1960s, Piene took a job at the University of Pennsylvania and was experimenting with a new kind of work to which, in 1969, he would give the name "sky art". Best remembered for Olympic Rainbow – five spot-lit, 600-metre-long helium balloons, which hovered over Munich to mark the 1972 Olympics – sky art summed up its maker's genius for turning local swords into ploughshares. Where Albert Speer had erected a National Socialist "cathedral of light" over nearby Nuremberg using searchlight beams, Piene now used those same beams to defuse the nationalism of the Olympic Games in a work that suggested nature, tolerance and collaboration; hope after a storm.

Olympic Rainbow also had autobiographical echoes for its maker. Born in the small Westphalian hill village of Laasphe (now Bad Laasphe), Piene spent his childhood in the country town of Lübbecke nearby. From here, like other German boys of his generation, he was drafted as a Kindersoldat, or child soldier, into the Hitler Youth. He had spent the years from 1943 to 1945 watching out for the tiny spots of light in the sky that would presage enemy air attack. It was during the two subsequent years he spent in a British internment camp, from the ages of 17 to 19, that Piene began to paint, using a watercolour box and such paper as he could find. From there, in 1948, he won a place at the Fine Arts Academy in Munich, in the shadow of Olympic Rainbow, before moving on to study in Düsseldorf in 1950.

Piene's pacifist interests chimed with proto-new age interests, and in 1972 he was appointed professor of environmental art at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's famed Centre for Advanced Visual Studies. In 1974, he took over as its director, a post he was to hold for 20 years. In 1977, at the Documenta quintennial in Kassel, Germany, Piene oversaw the

Centerbeam project – a vast collaborative work that brought together a 45-metre water prism, laser projections and holograms choreographed by a small army of scientists and 22 artists. One of these last was Piene's wife, the American artist and poet Elizabeth Goldring, with whom he would spend the remainder of his life on a farm in Groton, Massachusetts.



Sculptures by Otto Piene at his More Sky exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, July 2014. Photograph: Soeren Stache/EPA/Corbis

For all Piene's rugged self-effacement, honours inevitably came to him: an emeritus professorship at MIT and an honorary doctorate from the University of Maryland; the Leonardo da Vinci prize; a 1996 award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He died back home in Germany, between giving the opening talk at a retrospective of his sky art work, *More Sky*, at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin and the launch of a new sky art event over the city. (The show will run to 31 August.) "Light is my medium," Piene said. "Previously, paintings and sculptures *seemed* to glow. Now they do."

He is survived by Elizabeth, their four children and a stepdaughter, and four grandchildren.

- Otto Piene, artist, born 18 April 1928; died 17 July 2014