

News

A Collection of Experimental Kinetic Art, Featuring Marcel Duchamp and Jenny Holzer

The Butler Institute of American Art received 98 works from the kinetic art collection of developer David Bermant, who acquired work that explored movement through the use of video, electronics, robotics, holography, magnetism, and light.



by Cassie Packard

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Marcel Duchamp, "Rotorelief No. 5 – Poisson Japonais" (recto) gif (via Wikimedia Commons)

[The Butler Institute of American Art](#) in Youngstown, Ohio, received a gift of 98 works of kinetic art from the collection of the David Bermant Foundation in Santa Barbara,

California. The substantial donation, which had been in the works for several years, includes pieces by Marcel Duchamp, Nam June Paik, Pol Bury, and Jenny Holzer, and is valued at about \$3.4 million.

Broadly speaking, kinetic art is defined as art that incorporates motion, whether actually or virtually. The Realistic Manifesto, an important Constructivist text written by Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner in 1920, tied kinetics to visual art, but the genre didn't enter the popular consciousness until 1955 when the Galerie Denise René in Paris held the group exhibition *Le Mouvement*. The show featured optical and kinetic work by an international cohort including Jean Tinguely, Alexander Calder, and Jesús Rafael Soto.

David Bermant, a bicoastal shopping mall developer and art collector who passed away in 2000, began building his collection of kinetic art in 1965, acquiring work that explored movement through the use of video, electronics, robotics, holography, magnetism, light, and more. In 1986, he established the [David Bermant Foundation: Color, Light, and Motion](#) to “encourage and advocate experimental visual art which draws its form, content and working materials from late twentieth-century technology.”

Among the notable works in the donation is [one of Marcel Duchamp's Rotorelief works \(1935–1953\)](#), a set of six double-sided discs illustrated with lithographs that produce playful optical effects when rotated on a turntable. In 1977, Bermant began hunting for a relatively affordable work by Duchamp, whom some believe kicked off kinetic art with his 1913 readymade bicycle wheel. The collector purchased a set of the colorful discs and motorized machine from *Art in America* publisher Paul Shanley in 1979. [The discs can be seen in motion on the foundation's website](#).

Another highlight is Nam June Paik’s “Virtually Wise,” a multimedia sculpture made for *The Howard Wise Gallery: TV as a Creative Medium*, 1969 exhibition held at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1994.

“This piece is an intersecting of my slight career in the art world and Howard Wise’s major career in the art world,” Bermant is quoted as saying in [a catalogue published by the foundation in 2012](#). In the work, a robot sits at a desk littered with the personal effects of multimedia and kinetic art champion Howard Wise, including Polaroid prints, a wallet, and an unsigned cheque made out to Paik — by Paik — for a cheeky \$1,000,034.

Wise, who founded media art nonprofit Electronic Arts Intermix in 1971, was Bermant's longtime friend and art dealer.

Bermant was also good friends with Butler Institute Director Dr. Lou Zona. The collector had gifted works to the Butler Institute in the past, and the museum's Beecher Center, a dedicated wing for new media and electronic art, already has a gallery named in his honor. The newest acquisitions will be installed in the Beecher Center and on the museum grounds; installation is already underway and is expected to be completed this summer.

Bess Rochlitzer, president of the David Bermant Foundation, said in a statement: "When we first began exploring a new location for the collection our goal was to keep David's collection intact and displayed at an institute he would be proud to support and be part of. Because of the long history between David and Lou who have collaborated on exhibitions since the late 80's, I knew David would be pleased with this outcome."

"A lot of people have not seen art based in technology," [**Dr. Zona told local news station WFMJ-TV of the new acquisition**](#), which he believes will draw people to the museum. "These are pieces that boggle the mind."