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GüNTHER UECKER: 'The Early Years'

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

L & M Arts

45 East 78th Street, Manhattan

Through Saturday

Few artists have put the common nail to such varied expressive use as Günther Uecker, a founding member, with Otto Piene and Heinz Mack, of the literal-minded postwar European Zero Group. That much is clear from this extraordinary, museum-quality survey of works, mostly from the late 1950s and '60s.

At the time, artists on both sides of the Atlantic — including Piero Manzoni, Lucio Fontana, Lee Bontecou and Yayoi Kusama — were striving to avoid traditional materials and techniques. Mr. Uecker, who was born in Wendorf in Mecklenburg, Germany, in 1930, came of artistic age in Berlin and lived in New York in the mid-1960s, took additional inspiration from Kandinsky's cosmic abstractions and Vladimir Mayakovsky's injunction that, "Poetry is made with a hammer."

Poetry is among the things that Mr. Uecker made, especially in a series of white painted reliefs in which fields of hammered nails create oddly soft-looking, undulant textures and clouds. Nails also served to scratch textured motifs — targets and stripes — into surfaces of wet paint and to turn found objects into bristling, fetishlike sculptures or veritable star bursts. An old chair with a seat and leg covered with nails seems alive, as if growing its own pelt. Another favored material is twine, which turns a chair into a cross between Rapunzel and Cousin Itt, and is also crucial to figures in "Sand Mill," a small mechanical indoor earthwork from 1970.

This exhibition underscores the amount of interesting art being made just as American art, at least, was simplistically divided into Pop and Minimalism.