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**'Moderne Kunst' and an Excursion into Polke's Black**

The longer we look at Sigmar Polke's work, the more clearly we see before our very eyes its special power of regeneration. A power that even extends to elements from far back, to previously unremarked features that then re-emerge under the guise of new 'finds.' Polke's work is replete with moments of covert and overt anticipation. A complex web of diversity is not only evident within individual pictures but also stretches – retrospectively – between works that might otherwise appear to be temporal and aesthetic poles apart.

As he goes, Polke sets traps that some interpretations would appear to walk straight into – particularly those operating within their own set limits, even although the work in question may in fact live and breathe limitlessness.

'Moderne Kunst' [Modern Art] from 1968 has rightly been credited with irony, parody and a 'tabula rasa' attitude that clearly demonstrates Polke's alert response to the feeling of the times. 'Moderne Kunst' – laconic and audaciously 'poster-like' in style – is unique in the history of post-war art. In the late 60s, when automatist abstraction and hollow, Modernist platitudes of pathos were rife, Polke displayed the courage, despite the prevailing currents, to remain faithful to painting. At the same time, however, with his jokily, satirical comic strip caption to the painting he was bravely but gladly running the risk of being disqualified for lack of seriousness. Today this picture still bears witness to Polke's belief in the necessity of pictorial clarity. 'Moderne Kunst,' with its

weight of rhetoric, prefigures a caesura in art. It points towards the time after Modernity has run dry: to all those ideas that have occupied and continue to occupy subsequent intellectual discourse in a huge and complex variety of ways.

If we look yet again at 'Moderne Kunst,' leaving aside its critical stance towards contemporary ideas which has now become common currency, we are left with the picture itself; only to discover that it already contains formal elements that are not to come into their own until much later.

'Moderne Kunst' embodies a culturally detached and an art-oriented view in one.

A painting with a white border and a title below like a frame in a comic strip and which opens up a view into a black cosmos. Here modern art is subjected to scrutiny without false humility, and in the form of a carefully constructed experiment, as it were, Polke spells out to us the alphabet of modern art: curlicues, splash, line, 'over-painting' to emphasise a corner, lilac as a subtle hint (or is it the proverbially heavy variety?) of his later extensive preference for violet.

In this work there is unmissable early evidence of Polke's delight in intersecting, cutting up, revealing and uncovering motifs that are both elemental and wilfully whimsical and which later on – abetted by unbridled curiosity – will lead his painting to artistic terra nova and realms of great complexity and potential for renewal.

By availing himself of comic strip techniques, in 'Moderne Kunst' Polke manages both to stylise a certain art form and to 'de-contextualise' traces of the most elementary yet crucial manual movements involved in picture

production. Although the all-pervasive black of the picture ground is partly a distant, mocking allusion to Kandinsky's cosmic black, it has much more to do with the 'graphic' black used in the language of popular imagery and which generally creates a sense of isolation. It is the same black that we find in the picture 'Polke as Astronaut' from the same year: in this work, as he sails past '2001,' Stanley Kubrick and Timothy Leary, Polke nevertheless seems quite certain that he will soon come back/down to art/earth.

It is the black of the picture grounds with painted flamingos stalking around on them, for all the world as though they had just taken flight from the printed 50s curtain materials that appear in some of Polke's pictures from the 60s: as in the printed picture ground of 'Obelisk' (1968), a carnivalesque scene of 'magie noire' with bones and skulls smacking of fanciful tales of dastardly deeds by pirates and Hells' Angels.

This black that Sigmar Polke uses serves as an antidote to the holy white of 'couleur.' It is, as we shall see here, an anti-fetish to the ever-so precious white papers used in collector's-item prints.<sup>1</sup> Polke's black fraternises with the common printers' black that Benday dots dress in when they set out on their endless perambulations across cheap, stoically short-lived, wood-based fibres. It is the same black that greets us every morning with the nonsense of the world, disguised as sense and described as news, in order to lull us into a state of general calm. With his black, Polke creates a short circuit between art and the reality labs that the media, unmasked, have set up in us all.

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<sup>1</sup> Early on Sigmar Polke was already producing numerous prints, in which he abandoned traditional, craft methods, showing a preference for offset techniques. See his 'Kieler Werkverzeichnis,' 'MU NIELTNAM NETORRUPRUP', Printed Works from 1966-1975, Kunsthalle Kiel, 1975.

Polke's lack of seriousness may be an entertaining diversion, but it is one which leads all the more efficiently to the real seriousness of the matter, because it catches the viewer unawares. The 'black light' of Polke's art illuminates many shadowy areas of our culture. But Polke would not be Polke if he did not at times also cast beautiful flocculations of bright light over other dim and dusty corners.

However, Polke also knows that burning black which cannot be escaped: the intransigent cauterisation of incurable injury. In 'Lager' [Camp], from 1982, the familiar shot of a concentration camp is in some ways reminiscent of the colours and sensibilities of one such as Mark Rothko, with the final point of an optically penetrating and mentally affecting view obscured by a black cloud on a burnt mattress-cover with holes singed into it.

The black of Polke's work is then joined, when the time seems right, by white – by the bucketful. This white has washed everything else away or subsumed it into some bright totality, like the light at the end of the tunnel. But Polke pictures make no promises. Instead they take the viewer aback by showing that promise is no more than a (false) spell and intrinsically worldly and shabby. In a picture from 1981 with the spiritualist-sounding title, 'Tischerücken' [Table Turning], a large white stain spreads out over cheap curtain material, otherwise known as 'drapes,' which in itself might be taken as a metaphor for obscuring perception, 'draping' something over it. In 'Tischerücken' notions of abstract art are curtailed and placed firmly in front of the curtain in that here abstraction is shown simply to be an amalgam of the debris of reality and only able to connect with viewers' brains in this form.

In 1978 Sigmar Polke painted the light in 'Dr Bonn' as a white wedge cutting diagonally downwards from the upper right corner across a checked fabric picture-ground. It is as though Polke is using this white light to underline the picture's function as a revealing spot-light, focusing on a scene in a local government or police office with pictures of wanted terrorists on the walls.

### **An Expansive One-Hander in 40 Parts**

The advantage of plays on a studio stage lies in the close contact that can be created between the few protagonists and the audience. The theatre is small and intimate. Music, too, has a particular, secular form reserved for the courtly chamber, as opposed to the more opulent, capacious forms used in church and at the opera.

The forty gouaches presented here are all 70 x 100 cm and were all made in 1996. In them Polke presents a contemporary chamber recital of "cosmic tasters" of his entire artistic output, at the same time affording an insight into its riches.

Their close proximity allows us to follow the artist's thinking with greater immediacy. If the sight of them creates an impression of tenderness and beauty, then this is a natural result of the processes involved and not of some contrived calculation. Transparency and vigour, a feeling of 'looking over someone's shoulder' are the predominant sensations as one gets to grips with these works and begins to understand how they have been 'produced.' Especially in Sigmar Polke's works on paper, one encounters a particular dimension which might be described as the extended 'understanding of understanding.' This derives from the artist's extremely open, relaxed attitude to his own work, allowing other powers to play a

part in the process he has initiated and is supposedly controlling. Polke's love of experiment is paired with a kind of critical humility towards knowledge and ability – both on a personal and a human-historical level. And, at the same time, there is also his sheer delight in his own artfulness. Clear snapshots of his thinking point towards the larger time-dimensions of his overall output which in themselves are the root of his capacity to anticipate and somehow to hold together the seemingly diverse.

The titles of the forty gouaches consistently break the bounds of convention. Polke has seldom packed so much into picture titles as into these. Highly charged, they also emit a charge of their own. In their unashamed profusion they transgress all the usual boundaries, lead a wild life of their own and, like tropical twining plants, extend linguistic tendrils towards the pictures; now handing out obviously rhetorical advice, now addressing the reader directly as in "Join in and Win!" or as in "How Long is a Metre?" – they give the impression that Polke has been out with a pair of secateurs cutting blooms in the garden of the so-called gutter press.

Sigmar Polke's books of sketches and collages from 1972/73 and 1982 contain rapid lines drawings accompanied by newspaper clippings with sentiments like "On a Knife-Edge of Horror" or "Dog Barked, Owner Bit."<sup>2</sup> The large-format pictures 'Zwei ›Steine‹ feiern Doppelhoheit' [Two 'Stones' Celebrate a Double Wedding] from 1984 and 'Die Dinge sehen wie sie sind' [Seeing Things As They Are] from 1992 go back directly to these collaged sketches.

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<sup>2</sup> See cat. 'Sigmar Polke. Zeichnungen, Aquarelle, Skizzenbücher,' Kunstmuseum Bonn, 1988, pp. 164–173.

For Polke, this interest in things that one comes across in newspapers is not restricted to rastered, Benday dot pictures. His response to detail plus his ever-extending horizons naturally also take in the language of the newspapers which in turn affects his own linguistic production. In 1976, in a largely ignored text for an art journal, Polke wrote the following:

"Answers to questions that have not been put but which spread like low-lying mist over the art-landscape, veiling contradictions in the valleys of our awareness. Dragging himself out of the artswamp by his own pony-tail, he found himself with a handful of aphorisms sayings absurdities: I lied formally, as logically slippery as an eel. Agreement between two areas of understanding, the interlinking and sinking of the usual wynkens, blinkings, nods and sods for a clear mental premiss art journal."<sup>3</sup> Now, twenty years later, Polke is passing on some handy domestic tips: "If you want to keep cucumbers fresh for a long time, give them one coat 'with thanks in advance.'" Of course we know Polke's early preference for this fruit, and will never forget his 1969 film with Kohlhöfer where cucumbers were not much less important than the leading role. Which brings us to the notion of anticipation once more, 'with thanks in advance,' that is.<sup>4</sup>

### **Tables of Elements**

In 1964 Polke painted eleven sausages spaced evenly across the canvas. They resemble curved brushstrokes. They are isolated and would make a good brain

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<sup>3</sup> The September 1977 edition of 'Kunst-Nachrichten' included my essay 'Das Lachen von Sigmar Polke ist nicht zu töten' [You can't kill Polke's laugh]. As a companion piece, Polke himself wrote an essay called 'Sie haben wohl ein Loch im Kopf, das Sie mit Kunst stopfen wollen? Oder sein Lachen ist nicht zu töten' [It seems you have a hole in your head that you want to patch with art? Or, You can't kill his laugh]. This was accompanied by a seven part photo pull-out. The editor responsible for that edition completely ruined the intended juxtaposition by suppressing both author and title of Polke's text and tagging it on to the end of mine, which must have struck the unsuspecting reader as a sudden attack of acute schizographemia. After all these years, may this old wrong be righted here.

<sup>4</sup> As Polke tells us, this title is also a homage to the poet, Schuldt, who contributed the ambiguous sentence 'Does art give tit for tat?' to the 1976 Tübingen catalogue.

teaser: "Ceci n'est pas une saucisse!" – this is not a sausage and it is not a cucumber either and I am a poor artist. I know all about the game of illusionism but my home is in the universe. I juggle with ideas from the USA, with serialism and all-overs. What should a person paint when people after the war had to deal with basic issues, specially after we could no longer expect any nourishment from the French brushstroke?

One of the pictures in this exhibition has the title 'using such laughably simple little words like "always" or "never" or "unfortunately" or "aw"!' (No. 12). Only too aware that the full might of world literature consists of precisely such laughably simple little words, we can only laugh with Polke at this ridiculously ambitious undertaking. Particularly with his pronounced leaning towards 'laughably simple' dots, lines and splats of colour, nothing is too menial in Polke's eyes to play a part in something ultimately grandiose.

One of the pictures, 'Black with Good Memories' (No. 7), recalls 'Moderne Kunst' with astonishing clarity. The brushstrokes on a black ground convey that element of colour-experimentation, optical isolation, revelation and dissection that we constantly encounter in Polke's work and which enable us to do perceptual splits of cosmic proportions. Scrutinising pictorial potential with laboratory-like thoroughness is one of the fundamental pre-occupations of this artist – which means that frequently his works are quite simply visual demonstrations of a form of seeing that explodes phenomenal space as we know it.

The lines in 'Black with Good Memories' give off a light as though they were made of a metal with the glint of velvet and silk, that could properly be described as 'hitherto unseen.' However, as far back as 1968 there were

already some small black works with simple, vertical silver lines and in 1966 Polke painted silver snowdrops on black linen – a combination of lines, ovals and blue spray – which means that the path to the faery magic of this work is in many ways already paved with good memories.

But these lines are not silver: instead they emanate an iridescent, sensually futuristic mother-of-pearl glow, like science fiction Baroque. These paints which Polke has used in a further seven pictures (Nos 5, 6, 17, 19, 24, 26 and 28) are known in the trade as interference paints. A chance irony? Interference is a form of disturbance created by the combination of two or more wave motions – a fitting description of the aesthetic principles underlying the art of Sigmar Polke, while the additional meaning 'interference' in the sense of 'bothersome' or 'meddlesome' is equally appropriate here.

Pictures using interference paints look different according to the light, and viewers are impelled to walk to and fro, hither and thither in front of them. Discovery and surprise are the outcome, for the viewer can find no stable standpoint, no fixed focus. Movement is the thing; Polke proudly presents his remote-pictorial-visitor-leg-controls.

Even the omnipresent Benday dots are encouraged to move, if only by the eye engaging in the different views, far away and close to, detail or overview. Sigmar Polke's picture surfaces are volatile, sensitive and magical: sometimes as picture carriers he uses fine fabrics worked with metallic threads creating pictures that oscillate from moment to moment between green and red. After 1980 Polke's immense experience of photographic processes in the dark room began to have a playfully-analytical impact on his picture surfaces, turning them into increasingly sensitive membranes,

often transparent and worked on both sides. Again and again the viewer is impelled to leave the terrain of dead certainties. And it hardly seems necessary to add that, in this process, conventional notions of linearity, of progression and of the clean separation of different worlds should swiftly be cast adrift.

### **Floating**

Paintings that seem compact and yet floating in space. The white spreading out apparently naturally in these works soon proves to be a material addition – painted: Polke's white is rarely the raw white of the paper. It appears like a messy cloud of glaze over black or as the matt-white lead of dripped poster paints, sometimes it is reminiscent of smudged make-up and powder as in his earlier 'Art Deco' of 1974 and 'Rokoko' of 1994. White plays an important part in the dense spatiality of the layers, the veils, the multiple levels and the perforations which the staccato of the raster melodies greedily scampers across.

Sinking right into the paintings, we find baffling collisions of things connected and disconnected. A wild profusion of images. In 'Sphinx from the Collection of Sigmund Freud, Greek Terracotta, Southern Italy, 5-4 BC' (No. 30) the white is covered with large, golden smears and two glowing, blue lines. With a minimum of fuss and none too precisely, the pictorial quotes placed on this surface<sup>5</sup> generate a spiral of domestic happiness and horror, turning the picture into a sheet of black ice where our fantasies skid out of control. Didn't someone mention Sigmund Freud a moment ago? And also the sphinx, that demon of death that Oedipus conquered?<sup>6</sup> The picture space is

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<sup>5</sup> Here Polke's method is no different to that in his large-format works: projecting slides he has made himself of found pictorial objects and then transferring these by hand on to the canvas, 'dot for dot' or as line drawings.

<sup>6</sup> As we all know: the Sphinx of Thebes set Oedipus a riddle: "What creature walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon, and on three in

filled by a rastered outline of a basic face shape with a wide open mouth reminiscent of Edward Munch's 'Scream.' But the gaping mouth also forms a circle enclosing an idealised couple in swimming costumes. Next, the face solidifies into one of those figures on a well-head, not just eternally gushing water but also bubbling with our own personal associations: Freud, the psychologist of ingrained family structures, with his analysis of the unease of our civilisation, Freud the collector, his house, his bourgeois patriarchal domesticity, the gold, the cardboard cut-out lovers, childlike smears, extravagance, a child making an unappetising mess, colours that evoke memories of lazy hours by the water, the sea, white clouds and sand. The picture title, as though it were a label for an exhibit in a museum, is the crowning touch to this panorama of ideas: we find ourselves right at the heart of our culture and, with that, in a museum of our own culture. No room for doubt here.

In No. 19 there is a cat playing a violin giving off a powdery white substance that might be taken as a visual portrayal of music. On closer examination, the childishly harmonious image of the oneness of player and instrument, of subject and object is in fact doubled. The double image of the cat might as easily allude to the phrase 'carried away' meaning 'ecstatically involved' as to 'caterwauling' meaning 'raucous abandon.' And of course this to and fro of image and meaning is neatly matched in the game of ping-pong between the boy and the girl.

Given the meeting in No. 18 of a rococo lady and a carefully coiffeured beauty from a not precisely new glossy magazine, it would seem from the rapid, slavering, rich, red running across the delicately distanced scene

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the evening?" Oedipus answered: "The human being." Up until then no-one had solved the riddle and the Sphinx had devoured them all. On hearing Oedipus's correct answer she hurled herself, defeated, into the sea.

with its symbols of elegance from two epochs, that an imaginary boudoir has been overwhelmed by the force of some elemental power.

In many of these pictures colour runs riot and luminous paints gleam extravagantly. There is such 'a wonderful taste of spring' in the union of yellow and green (Nos 4 and 37), and the green-white, inexplicably floating, just like the white and blue plus gold (Nos 14 and 39), becomes a kind of spongy stucco, a historicising foam architecture.

However, these pictures never create the impression of having been painted simply for the sake of painting per se. It is much more a matter of painting – cleansed of notions of purity, so to speak, and simultaneously infected with the whole world – coming back to life again.

In the early 80s Sigmar Polke presented a number of works that doubtless had the public secretly wondering what he was up to now? In one group of deep violet pictures from 1982, his 'Negativwerte,' the pigments are at times just loosely strewn across the canvas, some bound with oil and some underpainted with red lead. Here we already see the chatoyant colours that are to keep viewers on the move in his later works. There were no clear images to be identified and yet these paintings did not seem to be abstract pictures in the accepted sense, nor were they monochrome works, since the longer one looked the more the violet would dissolve into blue or black or even develop a bronze sheen. So what were they then?

If colour in the works of Sigmar Polke is clearly imbued with social and cultural meaning, then it is also true to say that pure Nature plus pure artificiality also claim a place in his universe. Or at least the idea of these because in Polke's work meanings in any case oscillate, corrode and

correlate. Since the 80s, besides magnetised iron shavings, graphite and even meteor dust, lapis lazuli, malachite and azurite pigments, Polke has also used synthetic paints and artificial pigments like the deep violet of the 'Negativwerte' of 1982.

In many ways Polke, more so than other artists, has the capacity to incorporate an excess of 'civilisation' into his works. And, every now and again, this in turn seems to generate an all the more powerful counter-position. Certain pictures demonstrate the same quality as Carl Einstein saw in the work of Hercules Seghers (1589–1638) where anthropocentric space is broken up into a kind of 'shredded Baroque' (baroque déchiqueté).<sup>7</sup>

#### **Things Flowing and 'Thinned Time'**

"Well spotted!" might be our response to No. 38 with its rastered Baron Münchhausen riding across red and yellow clouds of colour, particularly since these spreading colour spots are so reminiscent of cannon smoke. The liar-baron as a permutation of the 'Three Lies of Painting,'<sup>8</sup> as one of Polke's pictures is called?

This image captures a stylishly dashing figure coming galloping across the paper or rather, suddenly held still and finally captured for all time – 'immortalised' in a picture.

In 'Treehouse,' a large-format work on paper from 1976, we find the watery filling, the staining or colouring of the paper that is typical of

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<sup>7</sup> Carl Einstein, 'Gravures d'Hercules Seghers', Documents, 1929, no. 4, p. 202, cited in: Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Tableau-coupure, expérience visuelle, forme et symptôme selon Carl Einstein, in: Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, no. 58, hiver 1996, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> This is the title (translated) of a painting from 1994 and of the eponymous catalogue, Sigmar Polke, 'Die drei Lügen der Malerei', Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn 1997 [available in English as 'The Three Lies of Painting,' as above].

classical wet-in-wet watercolour techniques. But Polke quickly turns this, too, into a matter of utterly basic principle.

Question: How far is it from a spot to a dot? Answer: a huge leap in time, a vast interval.

Time seems to be falling apart, as in No. 10 where a film strip is broken down into raster dots. The frames show two split-second shots from a motion study of a falling droplet.

However, underneath the raster images of the droplet (most probably a hand-painted copy of a rastered newspaper photo of a filmstrip) we can see where two enormous real-life droplets have splashed onto the paper: one image superimposed on the other with the semantics of the images themselves causing them to constantly drift apart and back together again.

These two methods of portraying droplets also constitute a reference to the history of Modernism – in particular to two of its exponents who, in their day, opened up new concepts of time, namely Edward Muybridge (1830–1904) and Jackson Pollock (1912–1958). The droplet caught in free-fall and which is never to land may never be seen as such by the naked eye because it simply happens too quickly: Polke relies on the eye of the camera that breaks the image down into visible units which he then transfers meticulously onto paper. Dot for dot, in anachronistic, immensely time-consuming work.

The drop that has just splash-landed, on the other hand, unlike the one on hold in the air, has created its own image and without wasting a second

either. "One drop looks much like the next" one might think, but the examples here seem to contradict this old saying fairly conclusively.

Anyone who looks long and hard enough at this picture is letting him or herself in for a positive spiralling network of niceties. And the title adds the rest: 'When it comes to images he only has a non-productive, receptive organ, and when it comes to something as complicated as telling a story by means of images, then his brain is simply not constructed simplistically enough.'

Again and again Sigmar Polke plucks apart notions of time as they are portrayed in pictures. Whatever the large unspoken claims of art today such as tension, economy, elasticity of execution and all those other myths of painting – Polke prefers to leave it up to the material itself.

According to a note in a recent exhibition catalogue,<sup>9</sup> in 1985 Polke signed a work ('Untitled') with S. Polek. The catalogue of course also mentions the 'king of the drip,' explaining Polke's changed name as an allusion to the large splashes and drips on the white-spotted, red fabric ground. Furthermore the catalogue essay suggests that the comic-style drawing done over this work is a reference to the conflict between Pop Art and Jackson Pollock's Abstract Expressionism. But Pop Artists were interested in fast, mechanical production techniques, such as screen printing, as a means of freeing themselves from the viscosity of gesture and as a way of achieving anonymity for the painter's hand. Sigmar Polke's drawing, on the other hand, over the paint splashes, was painstakingly applied by hand.

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<sup>9</sup> Christie's in London, Contemporary Art (Part I), 25 June 1997, p. 140.

The traces of the human hand in Polke's pictures do not adopt a heroic pose: on the contrary it is playful and humbly devoted to carrying out the task in hand. His works purvey a subtle warmth with broadly-based human connotations although also with a degree of explosive energy. The investment of hand-work, which is often very intensive, creates a high level of concentration in Polke's artistic works – an ability both to pour over something plus what one might call, quite ethnologically, 'the art of sheer exuberance.' Nothing, nowadays, is more precious than time. Polke's true philosophical stature partly has its roots in the fact that, by now, he must already have painted hundreds of thousands of dots.

By contrast, in pictures where the paint simply flows and drips, the human presence retreats, although a certain level of input from the artist is necessary. Ultimately in these works we see the material itself as well as the force of gravity, that is to say, physical powers as they present themselves. Perhaps we are seeing evidence here of the workings of the 'Higher Beings' that once ordered the young Polke to paint pictures according to their instructions.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the case, in Polke's work processes and effects are intentionally initiated, inveigled and beguiled, observed by the artist and observed, too, by us with him. Here Polke reigns supreme – but only as a stand-in, for he is simply showing what has potentially been in the system for so long now: in the system of the world, of Nature, of art, of painting, of the macroworld and the microworld.

One of his exhibitions was called 'Farbproben-Materialversuche-Probierbilder' [Colour Tests-Material Experiments-Trial Pictures].<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say, this is not an example of the kind of vanity that leads

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<sup>10</sup> In 1969 Polke painted a picture called 'Higher Beings Commanded: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black!'

<sup>11</sup> Held in the Galerie Klein, Bonn 1986.

some to even display the rags that wiped the brush. If Polke, so to speak, gets behind the material in order to observe it, then this is not for the purpose of some vague, site-bound aesthetic build-up. Polke's small interventions are like the raising of the stone that will open up the accursed kingdom: carried away into elemental limitless, away from art, away from our time, away all at once from everything past and future. Conceived as a celebration of collective seeing: 'Join in and win!' as one picture is called.

In 1975 Polke painted 'Die Schmiede' [The Smithy] with a network of trails of red paint. Behind this four thugs peer down from the corners like a clover leaf as though we were sitting in a cannibals' stewing pot. This almost square picture once hung above the heads of the visitors to the 1983 Polke exhibition in the Boymans-van Beuyningen Museum in Rotterdam.

In the pictures in this exhibition there is not only a large quantity of white flowing around, milk is also referred to in the titles: 'It is no longer possible to prevent milk boiling over by sprinkling your face with thinned time' (No. 17). And beyond this the titles are teeming with references to food, completely in keeping with the sensuality of the images and the associations they invoke. For once in a lifetime someone is taking the contents of the kitchen seriously – the physical in kitchen-format, where fine-grained colour melts away (Nos 19 and 24) and brings to mind thoughts of flour between one's fingers, time running proverbially out.

Paint draining away is an optical image of time as a real process – not in the sense of hours and minutes but with a much deeper, direct connection to the world as we experience it. It is tapping into an awareness in us that is linked to our capacity for empathy. When we look at a paint-trail,

flowing across 'the body' of the picture, we can not only imagine a leaky jug but also the touch on our own skin.

Some of Polke's flowing forms have a certain similarity with plant growths, with vine tendrils for example (Nos 4 and 39). In No. 25 where the 'veins' cross there are distinct knots as found in all different sorts of networks in biology, botany and geology. In the realms of Nature invoked here there is also an allusion to time. Is it the contrast between the monotony of cyclical repetition and the one-off, irreversibly passing progress of human time? But in Polke's works these roles can also be exchanged, for sometimes natural forms emerge as unique wonders in contrast to the eternally repeated, tidal flow of washed-up newspaper reality, where the bikini-bunnies consistently multiply despite themselves as once did the bunnies in May (Nos 3 and 34).

Polke's observations of filigree coagulations of wrinkledywave-formed, crickledyline-drawn structures suggest something that is equally of concern to science today: identical processes of formation found in completely different worlds. Thus nutritional systems in plant leaves and road systems on an old town map can be virtually interchangeable. It is always the 'material' with its given properties that determines the structure, which in itself leads to perfectly natural unity in diversity.

### **Baroque Splendour and a Bleak Existence**

By the wayside in Polke's pictures there are embellishments, both large and small, ready to spirit the viewer – barely has he or she noticed them – away on the wildest of leaps into space. On excursions into universes where one asks oneself, are these the wonders of Nature? Or is this the power of human invention? Are these flowing meshes mutated golden harps or is this a

bridgehead to the Heavenly kingdom? Are these mirages of archipelagos drenched in quick-silver? How is it that a river of gold is rushing through an Alpine formation?

If one is searching in this paradise of visual images for some kind of stabilising comparison, then the closest would seem to be the luscious tendencies of Baroque art, with its controlled irrationality, the unfixed standpoint of the viewer and the hypnotic spatiality of its images; for the Baroque was itself an era during which scientific horizons were hugely extended and there seemed to be a wave of collective imagination sweeping unstoppably upwards.

The viewer is abducted, his or her own perceptions are taken seriously, sheer abundance awaits – profusion, seduction, ensnarement, toppling and falling – and the viewer's gaze is drawn by loops and knots (No. 15). One enters a space-ship and is immediately caught up in the 'fold' described by Gilles Deleuze in his book on Leibniz and the Baroque, along which painting, architecture, philosophy, music and poetry have all progressed. A fold, as in Polke's silky, flowing materials that could equally well be mathematical curves or physical and chemical reactions or biological conditions. As Deleuze says: "in the Baroque it [the fold] knows an unlimited freedom whose conditions can be determined. Folds seem to be rid of their supports – cloth, granite, or cloud – in order to enter into an infinite convergence."<sup>12</sup>

In Polke's world the link between milk boiling over and velvet insoles also becomes a fold as the title of this particular picture suggests, with its red paint pouring powerfully over a rococo room (No. 18). A fold that

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<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque', transl. by Tom Conley, London 1993, p. 34

changes abruptly from shining brightness into darkness. Early on – in 'Schweineschlachten' [Slaughtering Pigs] from 1976 – Polke had sprinkled the picture surface with liquid gold, almost imperceptibly, like a spray of blood. His hallucinatory settings repeatedly make it clear that the universe is filled with darkness and light and that the metaphysical dimension could banally and unexpectedly be the 'drüben' meaning 'over there' as in 'Päckchen nach drüben' – a drawing from 1963 where 'over there' in fact refers to the German Democratic Republic on the other side of the wall, which is in itself wholly in keeping with the dictionary definition of 'metaphysical,' namely as "an assumption of existence beyond tangible experience."<sup>13</sup>

### **The Spotted Zebra**

Sometimes dots run into each other, turn into plasma and raise questions as to where the boundary lies between dots and spots. Polke's answer: It is a printing error (No. 17). A break in the system, an incidental coincidence – Polke's predilection for 'errors' as creative input is not unlike the discovery of hallucinations in ready-mades.

Optical illusions, delusions and deceptions: nothing is too odd for this artist; Sigmar Polke's zebras have spots! "Una zebra à pois" as Mina, an Italian singer with a double beauty spot on her right cheek, sang in the 50s.

The 17th century saw the invention of the beauty spot, the 'mouche,' tiny discs of gummed, black taffeta – a small 'blemish' on the skin in order to artificially accentuate its delicacy. At certain times, otherwise calmly settled and harmonious, Polke's raster dots have something of the same

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<sup>13</sup> Transl. from: 'Der Große Duden', Leipzig 1970, p. 299.

effect as these minute assaults on the skin. And then no-one wants to remember their prosaic origins any more.

Polke does not only employ grids of dots and lines. These are joined by a myriad of freely improvised tricks and manipulations creating wondrous effects. A dot can become an apostrophe (No. 13), a line can become wool or barbed wire (No. 33) and one picture is even embellished with a pattern of spheres along the top edge (No. 8).

Sometimes dots dance the punch-card polka over the paper; as in the flowing images of the two constantly recurring faces which are drawn in such a way that they seem to clatter optically as the eye follows a dotted chain of decelerated lines (Nos 9, 32 and 36). After all that has been said so far, is there really any need to strenuously contradict the following title? – 'no sequence of tenses, no "when," no "during," no "not only but also" – nothing but the primitive, undifferentiated, uncouth "Here I am" of the picture' (No. 13). Sigmar Polke always has his sights on the pressing presence of the ultimate ontological purpose of his works and, making a play on 'Gemeinheit' meaning something low-down and mean and on 'Allgemeinheit' meaning something with a universal application, once implied that art could be both: "Paintings are mean – meaningful."<sup>14</sup>

### **Passers-By**

Like momentary blips on a radar screen, human figures emerge of their own accord in Sigmar Polke's pictures, passing through, dot-lives, forming abstract human queues, anonymous passers-by whose individuality has been lost through the sieve of the raster.

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<sup>14</sup> "Ein Bild ist an sich schon eine Gemeinheit – eine Allgemeinheit": conversation with the author on 18.12.1984, published in: Parkett No. 26, 1990, p. 10.

Compositions with no real vanishing point, as in 'Flüchtende' [Refugees], a memorable painting from 1992 with its fleeing figures on the horizon. Over the years fleeing human beings have played a definitive part in Polke's paintings, as in 'Amerikanisch-Mexikanische-Grenze' [American-Mexican Border] of 1984 and in 'Flüchtlingslager' [Refugee Camp] of 1994; dramas stripped of narrative that invade the picture all the more precipitately – symbolic and intense like the watchtower-hunting towers (No. 11) that remind us in so many of his pictures of the omnipresence of the forces of control and of our impotence in the face of them.

Pictures of this sort are saturated with blood-like red flow-lines and line-flows, a cloud of barbed wire up above, a grey bush of thorns as an expression for the all-encompassing power of mental terror (Nos 11 and 22). The people fleeing in No. 21 seem to be on a sheet of perforated metal. Power is conveyed through allusions to materials, fabrics, colours and moods. Once again, Polke is openly aiming for the perceptual responses that are unleashed by the spontaneous recall of specific sensual experiences. Trusting in the collective link through existentially formative moments of real pain and threat, Polke creates a kind of visual short-circuit and incorporates into his own work medially transmitted images of hearsay and of seeing at secondhand.

### **Music from an Unknown Source**

Modern art has taught us to see, how to see seeing, seeing that observes itself; and this is also part of what Polke's early painting, 'Moderne Kunst' tells us. But unlike other Modernists, Sigmar Polke does not take art as the starting point for his voyage of discovery: instead he starts from reality and what reality could become.

'Music from an unknown source: seal off the doors and do not enter the room' is the title of No. 39. Is this a grim comment on the house of art? Or on the houses of those who do not know Polke's art?

Polke's work is about the sensualisation of thinking: thinking that is anchored in perception. Let the music in – all of it! For Polke's art is a joyous hymn to thinking and tumultuous life.