frieze

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Cosmic Rays

Sigmar Polke's body of work since the mid-1960s has been consistently iconoclastic, enigmatic and technically innovative

The rules of attention

'For the second day of installing, Sigmar Polke has given us a hint that journalists may perhaps be allowed to photograph and film him at work,' read an email I received this summer. The press announcement was made on the occasion of Polke receiving the Rubens Prize, accompanied by an exhibition at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Siegen, Germany. Should I make the six-hour journey from Berlin to a town in the middle of nowhere on the off chance that Polke might grant us an audience? I could imagine the eager camera teams and microphone-wielders bustling around the artist, absorbed in deciding where each work should go. He would probably ignore many of the questions thrown at him and respond to only a few, either with enigmatic gestures (a local Cologne newspaper later reported that Polke answered the question 'Are you the great alchemist?' by throwing polystyrene packaging chips over his shoulder like confetti) or sibylline quips ('Mr Polke, why do you always try out new things?' 'It's got something to do with the fact that life goes on.'1).

At this summer's Venice Biennale, Polke exhibited his impressive cycle of paintings 'Axial Age' (2005–7). Brooding at the centre of the Italian Pavilion, their semi-transparent fabric – stretched onto lath constructions, soaked in lacquer and covered with pure violet pigment – gave off a golden iridescence, as though sheer stockings had been smattered with honey and cosmetics – or rather, given the vast size, as though a sunset sky was reflected in a deep, dark lake. Why rush to Siegen in pursuit of an artist known for his guarded privacy and capriciousness when there is so much to look at in the work? After all, it

wasn't certain that Polke would even show up. Months earlier, someone involved in preparing a retrospective of the artist's work at Museum Frieder Burds, Baden-Baden had mentioned that the artist had not returned calls for weeks. In May The New York Times profiled Polke in the run-up to Venice – nothing comparable had appeared in German papers for some years. Yet all the article included were a few of Polke's Delphic utterances ('There is green light and red light. Then there is black light, which is mostly danger.'), cursory impressions of his studio and a quote from John Baldessari, uttered in 1990 and passed off as new.2 It seemed a good idea to concentrate on the art.

The Siegen exhibition, which I visited a few weeks after the press call, was a remarkably lavish array of key moments from the past alongside current work buzzing with new techniques and ideas. Together with the Baden-Baden retrospective (which toured to MUMOK, Vienna), it seemed that there was a good deal to say not only about the dialectics of time and space, seeing and physicality, image and object, literalness and hermeticism in Polke's work, but also about the point at which they all converged: dimensionality and – an obvious element curiously absent in some of the most well-informed writing about Polke – humour. And yet, following in the 20th-century tradition of New Criticism, with the full knowledge that art works can, if not better, be understood abstracted from the personal idiosyncrasies of their creator, there still remains the nagging feeling with Polke's work that something might drag you back to the question of whether that person is, if not 'behind', then in these works. So let's start at the beginning.

The whole body feels light and wants to fly 'I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me.' As much as it bespeaks the libertine disposition of an 18th-century country vicar named Laurence Sterne starting his *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67)3 with mum and dad having sex, there is a similar audacity in the first line of a biographical note Polke published in 1976: 'The fact of my birth would otherwise be negligible for my later production, if it wasn't for the poor eyesight that I have had since then.'4 Because of this handicap (a not entirely negligible one for an aspiring visual artist) Polke was always forced to move his nose very close to printed halftone images and just saw 'lots of little dead black dots'.5 This had a truly sublimating effect, however, as young Sigmar literally hit on what would later become a central subject of his painterly practice: the equally spaced dots of varying size that compose images in reprographic print. Of course, if truth be told, it was also possibly American Pop art – namely Roy Lichtenstein's dot paintings – that were instructive. From 1963 onwards Polke's approach was distinctive in several ways, perhaps most notably in that 'mistakes', whether copied printing errors or paint spills during the manual transcription from source material to canvas, were a welcome part of the process, unmistakably marking the flatness of the picture plane.

Polke has never fully abandoned the dots; even today they remain his shorthand for the abundance of both popular and esoteric imagery throughout the centuries since the advent of printing technology, and the mind-boggling richness of public imagination they indicate. Three examples from three decades: in *Don Quichotte* (Don Quixote, 1968) the figures are almost drowned in black and white obscurity, but the picture successfully relies on our ability to project the familiar angular silhouette of the Knight of the Sad Countenance into it nevertheless. In *Polizeischwein* (Police Pig, 1986) we see a sniffer pig wearing a German policeman's hat, while its supervisor proudly crouches next to it; his face is a white emptiness in the otherwise dotted surrounding. And in a work from this year, the title of which translates as 'You Experience Countless Moments of Joy in Your Private Life Today' (*Sie erleben heute im privaten Bereich zahlreiche Glücksmomente*) – a name that sounds as though it's taken from a silly celebrity interview – black and white cherubs push and drag a chariot, only visible in fragments floating on an iridescent colour plane. In Siegen, hung across from a large panoramic window, the colours in the picture changed from dark purple to turquoise to lavender and back, depending on the angle from which you looked (Polke presumably used the kind of two-tone pigments that create a similar effect in custom car finishes): a continuous back-and-forth between super-flatness and ungraspable multi-dimensionality that he has modulated eloquently in ever new forms over the decades.

But back in the mid-1960s, when Polke first used dots, the variety of Pop he pioneered together with Gerhard Richter, Manfred Kuttner and Konrad Lueg (better known later as the gallerist Konrad Fischer) was drained of popping colours and multi-dimensional commodity allure, wrapped instead in the grey winter coat of West German middle-class culture. They called it 'Capitalist Realism', a

strategically ironic phrase playing the forced naivety of Socialist Realism – idealizing the people and their leaders – against the forced sophistication of the then still hegemonic 50s' styles of abstraction – made as though the people didn't exist.

In the ensuing years, more than anyone else in the group, Polke went beyond the limits of that point of departure, making ironies collide like dodgems. His series of works dictated by 'higher beings' play on so many different levels that the one on which they ridicule the cliché of artistic genius and divine inspiration seems almost minor. In one of the offset-printed photos included in the 1968 series 'Höhere Wesen befehlen' (Higher Beings Command) the artist stands inside the split bole of an old tree, with eyes closed, the title 'The Willow, For My Sake, Has Grown Up Hollow', suggests that he himself is that higher being. And the famous painting *Höhere Wesen befahlen: rechte obere Ecke schwarz malen!* (Higher Beings Command: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black!, 1969) uses the visual language of painterly abstraction – just a plain white field with a black corner. Yet in combination with the mock-military tone of the sentence – written, Conceptual-art style, in Courier font underneath – the abstract surface begins to recall Adolf Hitler's diagonal fringe. Obviously, both Conceptualists and Minimalist painters would have rejected any connection with pseudo-spiritual 'higher beings', even more so the idea of acting under the duress of totalitarian rigidity.

But as much as Polke pitted the artist-as-genius cliché against the normative power of avant-garde schools – whether 50s' abstraction or 60s' Conceptual and Minimal art – his invocation of higher spheres went beyond a mere impulse to comment satirically on art doctrines. Of course, building a simple hut-like grid structure out of wooden laths with potatoes placed at the intersections (*Objekt Kartoffelhaus*, Object Potato House, 1967) is a funny comment on the Minimalist grid, combining geometric precision with the bulbous dumbness of the tuber, but it also cheekily alludes to Wilhelm Reich's 'orgone accumulator', with its connotations of inspirational energy fields. And while *Apparat, mit dem eine Kartoffel die andere umkreisen kann* (An Apparatus Whereby One Potato Can Orbit Another, 1969), built using a small motor on a wooden stool, may imply a reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), it is also simply a deadpan model of a moon orbiting a planet, dramatically and comically confusing scales.

In a similar 'poor' vein, Polke, when asked to participate in Konrad Fischer's museum exhibition 'Konzeption/Conception' (1969) in Leverkusen, suggested he make a film in which he scratches himself and uses a pendulum. The resulting film *Der ganze Körper fühlt sich leicht und möchte fliegen* (The Whole Body Feels Light and Wants to Fly, 1969), made in collaboration with Christof Kohlhöfer, is a 35-minute flight of fancy in which, well, Polke scratches himself and uses a pendulum. He also reads from the esoteric 19th-century grimoires *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* (almost inaudibly as he keeps giggling all the time) and poses as the letter X, with parallel lines of white string connecting the legs of his trousers with the arms of his shirt, a DIY astral Spiderman. The point of all this silliness seems to be to infuse the 'small acts with big effect' ethos of Fluxus performance with the mind-expanding aspirations of beatnik and hippie culture: in other words, to take control of the body and yet let go at the same time.

Right from the start Polke stretched his work between the clarity of Pop and the idiosyncrasies of Fluxus: playing dumb yet hinting at possession of secret knowledge. The idea of contradictory humours, or moods, at play in the same work definitely has something to do with the psychedelic leanings of the era (in the '70s Polke spent time in Afghanistan, where at that time hippies from Europe and the USA were flocking – it's hard to believe now, but Kabul was then seen as a kind of oriental Amsterdam): the spaced-out stoner finding something completely banal suddenly mysteriously special and unique. And whatever substances may have helped to unravel or induce these humours in Polke originally, they seem to have stayed with him until today, incessantly worked through as his 'material'.

Tables Turning

In the 1970s, in his farmhouse near Dusseldorf, Polke experimented with photographic dark-room techniques, deliberately ignoring the standard rules: 'dropping the wrong chemicals onto the paper, turning on the light during development, brushing the developer on selectively, using exhausted fixer'.6 The 'mistakes' turned into inventive techniques: for example, he started to fold the paper during

development because the trays were too small for larger prints, but the welcome effect was that the image became obscured by blossoming chemical stains along the folds. This fitted well with Polke's psychedelic exuberance and interest in spatial juxtaposition (the flat, folded paper producing the other-worldly clouds), but it also harked back to the early days of photography, revisiting a time when the new technology was considered a medium in more than one sense – as a means to summon ghosts. Exposing surfaces to experimental mixtures of substances and light fed into Polke's painting, further fuelled by his ambitious research into ancient and new pigments and paint during trips to Australia and South-east Asia; just in time for the return of painting in the '80s.

Made on the back of all this, *Tischerücken* (Table Turning, 1981) has been described as a breakthrough painting, although it actually exemplifies several kinds of literal and metaphorical breakthroughs. There is the brownish-red furnishing fabric, which acts as the 'canvas' and slips through the lower end of the dark wooden frame it is stretched on like a fastened tablecloth (which, with its repetitive pattern of a gently curved and closed form, it could well be). The lower horizontal bar of the frame, however, is mounted in such a manner that it juts out from the wall as though it was a windowsill with a curtain stuck under it, letting the painting flip between the table and window association, between object and image. This movement is reflected by a large irregular puddle of white paint spilled on the cloth, apparently applied when the painting was horizontal, so that the oozing of the paint could be controlled by jacking its sides up or down; it is also reflected by the fact that on top of this puddle there is the black outline of a 'flying' table.

The tables in this work are, of course, those used for a séance, and the white spills directly reminiscent of ectoplasm.7 Yet the séance table was also Karl Marx's oft-cited metaphor for the strange machinations of commodity fetishism: for as soon as an ordinary wooden table 'steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than "table-turning" ever was.'8 Polke – pointedly at a time when painting resurged as a particularly sought-after commodity – seemed to juggle these different levels of meaning at once, while making sure that none of them became too securely fixed.

Charles W. Haxthausen, in his essay for the forthcoming Siegen catalogue, argues that during the '60s Polke established a potentially infinite pictorial space in the patterns of his dot paintings 'on the level of evocation',9 yet not in actual 3D space until his innovation of translucent, resin-drenched polyester supports in the late '80s. These allowed the viewer to see elements literally and not just virtually behind the surface of the painting, and Polke to explore the possibilities of 'polyphonic space'10 – of physical and illusory space being layered and locked in tension. Polke has especially made use of the stretcher bars as elements that structure – and sometimes dupe – that which is in front of them. In *Der Ritter II* (Knight II, 1992), for example, a knight in armour sits on a stool, contemplating a shoe he holds in front of a log fire. The laths connect his head, elbow and knee with the shoe and the fire, delineating the viewing axes of the composition while pressing the geometrical depiction of the space behind the knight against the picture plane. Yet at the same time they seem comically to emphasize the question of just why he is looking at a shoe this way in the first place, as though he is about to roast it on the fire and eat it.

Polke's 'polyphonic spaces' are created not only by layering physical and illusory space but also by playing around with the relative positions of things within these respective spaces. 'Excentric positionality' is what, in 1928, the philosopher Helmuth Plessner termed the ability of humans to reflect on their position in relation not only to their environment but also to themselves, as though stepping outside the centre of their own body. Crucially, Plessner links this idea directly to the phenomenon of uncontrollable laughter or weeping – signs of the body reacting to ruptures in its reflective routine.11

Polke awards his works this precarious status of 'excentricity'. Like the potatoes acting as planets, his works start to orbit themselves, shifting between micro- and macrocosm. In the series 'Negativwert' (Negative Value, 1982) one can sense how the experimental application of violet pigments and red lead under-painting creates a flickering not just of optical colour (between violet, blue, olive and gold) but also of space: from the ultra-flatness of an impenetrable surface – an oxidizing metal coating – through the

modest spatiality of layers of paint and faint figurative allusions to the vertiginous depths of cosmic nebulae.

Double Marriages

'What is below is like what is above; what is above is like what is below', is the famous dictum of Hermes Trismegistos, the imaginary Graeco-Egyptian father of alchemy and central figure of Hermeticism. It is one of those typically tautological insights that hover between profundity (there is a correspondence and interaction at work between micro- and macrocosm that needs to be explored) and dumbness (above, below, whatever). Polke has made pieces directly referring to Trismegistos; notably he used fragmented reproductions of a 15th-century floor mosaic in Sienna Cathedral, depicting Trismegistos granting the gift of writing and legal doctrine, for a set of four paintings ('Hermes Trismegistos I–IV', 1995). He also has repeatedly made reference to the codes and symbols of alchemy (naming, for example, his 1986 German Pavilion in Venice 'Athanor', after the alchemical furnace of transformation). And – probably most crucially – he has made quasi-scientific explorations into how chemical processes of transformation could become painterly processes of transformation, making use of materials such as arsenic, meteor dust or purple dye derived from snails. All of which has inevitably given rise to the widespread idea of Polke as the great alchemist.12

Polke's healthy antidote to this kind of mysticism is a mock dumbness, something often curiously absent in this line of critical assessment. Could it possibly be that he's a self-taught expert on alchemy and can eloquently cite it, yet with concerns in mind that differ radically from those of alchemists? Just the way that you can't assume, because he has made prominent use of bricks, that Carl Andre is a bricklayer? There are knowledgeable readings of the coded allusions to alchemy present in a picture such as *Zwei 'Steine' feiern Doppelhochzeit* (Two 'Stones' Celebrate a Double Marriage, 1984), for example, in which a sketchily outlined man and woman – with the title of the piece written across them – bend down to pick up a stone, the scene mirrored beneath as though reflected in water. Pointing out the references to the idea of alchemic conjugation (joining elements in transformation) and to the symbolism of the stone, it is not even mentioned in these readings that there is simple slapstick at work in the fact that the two will inevitably bang their heads together when bending down simultaneously.13

Another example is Polke's major piece *Laterna Magica* (1988–96). It quotes, in one of its translucent, glass-window-like images, an illustration from the 17th-century Mutus Liber (the 'silent book' depicting, by pictures alone, the secrets of alchemy) of a woman and a man, putting equal measures of sulphur and mercury into a flask that is located in a part of the image that Polke 'stained' red as though with the heat of a flame. Seen in the context of some of the other 'windows', the theme of transformation remains central. Like slides stuck together, motifs are superimposed as though they were time-travellers passing each other in a wormhole; a Baroque mermaid adorned with pearls seems to be chatting with a caricature '50s' bald gentleman; lizards lounging in front of a city wall (quoted from a well-known cartoon by J.J. Grandville) are being watched over by two toy Transformer robot–dinosaurs straight from the '80s.

But where do these transformations lead? Despite its excessive secretiveness, alchemy was intended to yield results helpful in achieving a goal. Polke's transformations, on the contrary, are held in limbo; there will never be a resolution. In Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* the naming of his newly born protagonist goes wrong owing to a mistake; his intended name, Trismegistus ('thrice-greatest'), ends up as Tristram ('sad sack'). Polke's 'alchemy' has gone similarly awry – albeit the other way round, from sad to great. If one understands alchemy as a technology (albeit a pre-modern one), he simply does the same thing to it as he does to modern reproduction technologies, which is to divert and mistreat them.

Seeing Rays

Polke's latest development is his 'Linsenbilder' (Lens Paintings, 2006–7), first shown in Siegen. Having previously made use of 3D hologram technology for a light-box commission in the Berlin Reichstag in 1999, Polke kept trying to achieve a similar effect by purely manual means.14 The solution was to create a layer of structure gel – a filling material normally used to thicken acrylic paint – and undulate it by evenly

sliding a long, saw-toothed scraper over the surface. Most of the results – the transparent layer being directly applied to a previously painted picture – look at first as though someone has forgotten to take the painting out of the bubble-wrap. But then it becomes apparent that in most instances the surface of that 'wrap' has been painted on, sometimes with a wash of white, sometimes with black outlines of figures. The light is broken in a sort of prismatic way, further complicated by these applications of paint, and although looking at these 'lenses' may not result in a clear back-and-forth between two images, it certainly lets parts of the scene shift in and out of focus as though through veils and blinds.

In Siegen the series 'Strahlen Sehen' (Seeing Rays, 2007) was exhibited in a small room, hung on the side walls so that on entering you would probably first approach it from a sharp angle, and thanks to the 'lens' effect – not adhered directly to the painted surface, as with most of the other 'lens paintings', but framed and fixed in front of it – it would gradually emerge from a milky fog, sometimes speckled with bubbles of yellow and pink. Two men – depicted in the style of an old engraving – are in an open field, watching a strange comet-like appearance in the sky above them; the seated figure gestures with his hand towards it, while the one standing, as though struck not by lightning but by rapture, bends backwards on his walking cane. Their gaze is emphasized by cones of lines emanating from an indistinguishable point somewhere between or above their eyes.

Another work based on the same source erases the actual appearance in the sky; there are just the titular 'seeing rays' disappearing into white blankness. The scene, more obviously than the first one, is manipulated by jogging the image source during scanning in a photocopier, a manipulation that exaggerates the standing man's rapturous pose to the point of cartoonish hysteria. However, this time it's not a comet-like thing that appears from the sky but an onslaught of silly, Casper-like ghosts. Finally, in another amber-coloured variation, covered not with the 'lens' but with a lacquered fabric akin to honeycomb, we finally get to see the spirit in the sky – not a comet but a dragon.

These are all variations, as Haxthausen's essay points out, of a scene originally from an engraving in a book by the monk Johann Zahn, *Oculus artificialis teledioptricus, sive telescopium* (Teledioptric Artifical Eye, or Telescope), published in 1685.15 Zahn had pioneered the principle of combining lenses of different focal length, a principle he himself adopted for the camera obscura and which is still used in telephoto lenses today. With the picture he meant to illustrate the phenomenon that a lit object would be seen differently from different angles, depending on the way the 'visual rays' would hit the eye.16 Yet why would the object have to be a dragon flying in the sky, rather than, say, an inanimate object on top of a hill? Perhaps Zahn wanted to point out how fantastic the phenomenon of vision actually is, but the irony is that the depiction of a mythical beast inevitably undermines the validity of a statement about everyday experience. Polke plays with this point, letting the dragon disappear for the most part. This is not least a comedy of seeing and being seen, and what seems at stake here is parallax, the optical phenomenon that provides the starting-point for Slavoj Zizek's *The Parallax View* (2006) – a book that Polke came across after having finished his series.17 Zizek defines parallax as the 'apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position'.18 He argues that the object is not just the passive element in this rupture of 'clean' vision, but actually the 'active' part – like Zahn's dragon – a reversal of the conventional understanding of the object being passively gazed at.19

Guardian of the Threshold

If you were looking for the artist in these pictures – a representation of Polke's own way of looking (his creative process) and being looked at (as a celebrated artist) – you might make him out not as one of the gentlemen but rather as the disappearing dragon or the ghosts that suddenly appear out of the mist. Counter to the ordinary lenticular images on postcards and tags, the 'Seeing Rays' paintings are not dependent on a clear A–B structure (eye open, eye closed) but are suspended in between: never quite A, never quite B. It's the kind of abeyance that, together with Polke's obvious eclecticism, inevitably makes him look like the Postmodern artist (there is a whole volume from 1996 entitled Sigmar Polke: Back to Postmodernity 20). However, maybe Polke is not really Postmodern but rather, in line with Bruno Latour's polemical assertion that 'we have never been modern' 21, an artist who realizes that modernity was never truly enlightened about itself in the first place – and thus not modern. The distinctions it made

between nature and culture, things and humans, are denials of the fact that it has nonetheless produced hybridizations between the two anyway (climate change, for instance, or sex change) Polke, one could say, deconstructs binary oppositions, albeit not just rhetorically but practically. His ‘misuse’ of technology and alchemy would consequently be not a return to the pre-modern but rather a leap forward into a kind of modern that has yet to be established.

Possibly the closest you get to a neat definition of Polke’s oeuvre is what Peter Schjeldahl described as ‘an art of cosmic pratfalls – or rather, cosmic prat-free-falls, which never encounter the embarrassing but reassuring security of a floor’.22 Indeed, it’s as though, after having played mock-dumb for long enough, Polke switched in the ’80s to playing wise-and-in-possession-of-secret-knowledge, yet leaving enough hints – sometimes disclosing his sources or methods, for example – that deciphering the enigmas in the work was not the same as actually experiencing and comprehending it. Inversions of proportions and positions, visual angles and dimensions, are there in the pieces, but not necessarily always in their iconographic ‘content’.

One painting in Siegen featured a large black and white scene of three laughing nudists (apparently a Danish snapshot taken from a book about the history of naturist movements 23); two men running away from a woman carrying a pitchfork, garlanded by a floral patterned textile and blocked at the bottom by two bars of black snakeskin fabric. It’s called *Hüter der Schwelle* (Guardian of the Threshold, 2004). There are allusions in image and material to the expulsion from Paradise and, in the title, to the mystical figure guarding the spiritual access to other-worldly spheres. So one could draw the conclusion that maybe Polke himself is the guardian of the threshold, controlling access to a notable number of key works (the Raschdorf Collection, which loaned much of the older work to the show, is named after his aunt Else Raschdorf, whom Polke credits with introducing him to photography 24), his studio, his library and himself. Yet the painting’s slapstick moment makes spelling out these references, readings and ruminations sound like a laborious explanation of the joke. Is someone guarding their chastity here or rather the doors of perception? Either way, there is laughter.

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