

WALL TEXTS

SIGMAR POLKE. EARLY PRINTS

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Offset

As a young artist, Polke chose to work with offset, an industrial printmaking technique that at the time hardly sufficed to satisfy artistic demands. He found the motif for his first published print *Girlfriends I* in a newspaper ad that had itself been printed with the offset method. He emphasized the raster-dot grid of his source by printing a greatly enlarged detail. Polke had already used the motif in 1965 for a painting. The fact that the offset technique permits the production of an edition of virtually any size means broader availability and low prices and thus suggests the democratization of the art market. The editions of the Polke prints here on display vary in size between 75 and 1,000.

Silkscreen

The *Weekend House* is one of the few silkscreens of Polke's early years. It was his contribution to the portfolio *Graphics of Capitalist Realism* published in 1968 by the Berlin gallery owner René Block. Like the offset print *Girlfriends I*, *Weekend House* is based on a small classified ad which has been taken out of its original context and freed of its advertising message.

The view of the modern bungalow being touted for the purposes of weekend recreation is partially blocked by a branch of blossoms in the foreground. The artist coloured the branch with vivid hues that contrast with the monotonous and impersonal design of the house.

Photography

At an early stage in his career, Polke also began using photographs he had taken himself as sources for his prints. Polaroid shots of a bright star-shaped form fashioned from a folding rule and positioned between a drawer full of tools and a carpet served him as the basis for his offset print *8 Measuring Stick Stars*. The print was published in the special edition of a portfolio on the occasion of the 1970 Cologne Art Market.

During his first trip to America, Polke took pictures of beggars in New York, producing images quite different in character from his staged photographic scenes. For the prints he made from these photos he underlaid four selected shots with the symbol of the Statue of Liberty. *New York Beggars* was published by the socio-critical activist Klaus Staeck in Heidelberg in 1974.

Reproduction

The creative use of already existing imagery is one of the main principles of Sigmar Polke's art. The reproduction of an image photographed from a television screen served as the point of departure for *TV Picture (Table Football)*. The artist chose a close-up view of the popular table football game. To the black-and-white image, which was already out of focus to begin with, he added additional signs of wear and tear: the photo was crumpled, smoothed out, and again reproduced. The conspicuous creases and light reflections contrasted strongly with the aesthetic expectations of the time.

Unicum

In 1972, on commission from the Ministry of Culture of the State of North Rhine – Westphalia, Polke supplied a 'lesson' in printmaking fulfilling the highest standards of quality. In the *School Print*, which was to be used for teaching purposes, the artist combined a wide variety of techniques: silkscreen, blind embossing and punching. He chose as his main motif a hashish-smoking fakir in an allusion to drug consumption in the schools, which was on the increase at the time. A penguin floating on an ice floe and staring up at the ascetic is rendered in shimmering colours and looks like a vision appearing to him in his state of intoxication. As the circular section containing the penguin was manually coloured in each of the 250 printed copies, the individual prints are to be regarded as unique specimens.

Interweaving

With the aid of collage, montage and overlapping, Polke interwove various motifs and artistic techniques in his works. The collage *Artists Fight*, printed as an invitation to an exhibition at the Galerie Erhard Klein in Bonn, demonstratively plays on the needs and abysses of the small middle-class family as mirrored in the media in texts and images.

The *Large Head* of the same year is not a work of printmaking. Owing to its complex interplay of overlapping images created with the stencilling and paper-cutting techniques, however, it exhibits fluid transitions between a conceptual printmaking approach and deliberately alienated figures.

Edition

Polke worked with a number of different publishers to produce and market editions of his prints. One example is his cooperation with the Griffelkunst-Vereinigung founded in Hamburg in 1925 and dedicated to offering its subscribers quality works of contemporary printmaking at reasonable prices.

For Polke's contributions of the year 1973, high-quality papers were chosen of the kind typically used for book bindings. Elaborate techniques were used to print photographs as well as texts and diagrams on these decorative surfaces. The printed layers are of a now magical, now pseudoscientific nature. The mystical and the occult encounter the everyday and banal and ultimately leave the viewer in the dark as to the works' meanings.

Fantasy

The artist Polke's bizarre fantasies are accessible to every viewer, but never at the cost of abandoning their complexity in favour of unambiguous content. The tongue-twisting title of the offset *Mu nieltnam netorrurup* can be deciphered by reading it backwards: *purpurroten Mantlein um* ("wearing a purple cloak"). Did the memory of the German children's song *Ein Männlein steht im Walde* accompany the creation of this work from photographic images? The striking scene of Indians worshipping an oversize fly agaric mushroom takes the beholder into dimensions of fairy-tale worlds, faraway peoples, colonialism, drugs and mysticism.

Inspiration

Already in his earliest works, Polke reflected on his own actions and addressed the issue of the role of the artist. The series *Higher Powers Command* was printed in the offset technique in 1968 after photographs. On the one hand the works present the *Possible Forms of a Palm Tree* fashioned from the simplest household objects. Like the flamingo and the potato, the palm tree belonged to Polke's personal iconography. On the other hand, staged photographs of the artist himself reveal an idiosyncratic self-conception accompanied by a distinct sense of mission. In these works the artist wittily and humorously satirizes the notion of creativity.

Omnipotence

Following five of his own manipulated photos of newspaper illustrations and a light source, the young Sigmar Polke collaborated with his artist friend Gerhard Richter to carry out a joint pseudoscientific work exaggerated to the point of absurdity. The *Metamorphosis* pretends to be an objective documentation of an omnipotent force competing with the force of nature. This claim is made possible solely by the exceptional imagination of a unified artistic energy.

Blockade '69

The exhibition at the Galerie René Block in Berlin ran from February to November 1969. Every month, a different artist had the gallery rooms at his disposal for the presentation of his works. Polke was the last. In the vacant gallery he presented a single sentence: *Polke imagines that a particle is orbiting this room*. The artist had cut the words out of cardboard and placed them on the gallery floor. His contribution moreover comprised a sketch that was printed in the exhibition catalogue, a film, and a performance broadcast on television. The television medium enabled Polke to create raster dots on televisions screens all over Germany, to scatter himself in the world in the form of particles, to transmit himself into every living room. The particles of the screen went even further, past the inner-German border, transcending all spatial and material blockades.