

# Atrium 1966–2009

Pages 3–5

“It’s about making things appear  
and disappear.” 2003

Polke refused to be defined by any one style or method. The works presented here reflect his persistent questioning of how we see and what we know, as well as his constant experimentation with representational techniques, from the hand-painted dots of *Police Pig* to the monumental digital print *The Hunt for the Taliban and Al Qaeda* (which he described as a “machine painting”). The double exposures seen in the selection of films presented here—which have never before been shown publicly—exemplify his fluid approach to images and materials as well as his embrace of chance as a way of undermining fixed meanings.

A preference for flux and a distrust of inherited categories are also evident in the way Polke questioned the distinction between high and low culture, as in *Season’s Hottest Trend*, where he mocked the art market’s reliance on rarity by making a painting out of tacky, mass-produced textiles. He also toyed with language, often using verbal and visual humor to make a claim while simultaneously positing its opposite—as for example, in the painting *Seeing Things as They Are*, whose title is reproduced on the back of a semitransparent textile so that, when standing in front of the work, one sees the words in reverse. Challenging the stability of perception, his was an oscillating vision shaped by a melancholy awareness that truth could be manipulated. In these works, Polke’s view is panoramic and taken from the perspective of an outsider.

# Gallery 1

## 1963–2004

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“It could be that I want to show this way how dependent we are on existing forms, how unfree our actions and thoughts are and that we are continuously resorting to what already exists, or that we are in fact obliged to do so, consciously or unconsciously. This is not meant as a critique, but as a phenomenon.” 1966

At the end of World War II, in 1945, Germany was in physical and economic ruins. Through a turbulent process of reconstruction, West Germany rapidly rebuilt and modernized. With this “economic miracle,” food shortages ended, consumer goods multiplied, and travel to exotic destinations became imaginable. Commenting on the glut seen in shop windows, Polke later said, “When I came to the West [in 1953] I saw many, many things for the first time.... It wasn’t really heaven.... *The Sausage Eater* from 1963, was critical in a way; you can eat too much and blow up too big. This attitude—looking at what is happening from a point of view outside—is still part of my work.”

Polke made most of the works in this gallery in his twenties, while a student at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, an influential art school where many of the major German artists of his generation studied. For this generation, the bravado of Pop art, which went hand in hand with the spread of American culture, was both a fascination and a target. By adopting an adamantly clumsy approach to figuration in his earliest drawings and paintings, Polke offered a sharp critique of consumerism, with its taste for both sleek new furnishings and kitschy decorations. As the juxtapositions of images and the contradictory approaches in his notebooks demonstrate, he remained a contrarian throughout his life.

# Gallery 2

## 1963–1970

Pages 8–9

“Everybody knows the images of war in Saigon only from the newspaper. Nobody knows the atrocity. But everybody says: ‘Oh my God, how terrible!’ And this ‘Oh my God, how terrible!’ is just as real as the atrocity that happens there. It’s a different kind of atrocity. A pseudo atrocity.... I tried to express it, together with the other events. You can only do this with a specific painting technique. And that’s how I came to use the *Raster* (halftone screen). Everybody knows the halftone from the newspaper as a cliché. And it is exactly like the clichéd thought ‘Oh my God, how terrible!’ that really does not touch you.” 1966

In the 1960s, Polke examined the desires and drab realities of postwar reconstruction by singling out images of food, housing blocks, and symbols of the often unrequited longing for leisure. His source images were frequently drawn from newspapers and magazines where the topics of the day occupied the same pages as cartoons and advertisements. He was particularly interested in the halftone reproductions (images made up of grids of tiny dots, which the eye blends to form a picture) that were common in cheaply printed mass media. From 1963 onwards, he created a series of paintings in which he painstakingly transcribed—albeit not always faithfully—the dots of his halftone source images. He often began by spraying a layer of paint through a perforated metal sheet; to the fields of dots this made, he added others by hand. By creating or amplifying distortions in his source images, Polke undermined photography’s alleged fidelity to reality and collapsed the distinction between figuration and abstraction.

# Gallery 3

## 1966–1971

Pages 10–13

“For the *Cardboardology* I studied at the Kunstakademie for eleven semesters / For the *Photo Circle* I studied Kretschmer for one week / For the Number Paintings I smoked a hell of a lot of pot / For the Sender Pictures I listened too much to the nonsense of others” 1973

Polke repeatedly used himself as a material. He embodied his own fluctuating view of reality by taking on such varied guises as a palm tree, his own doppelgänger, and a telepathic medium. Treating himself as a test subject, he manipulated the structures of science to question its rationality. Against the backdrop of worldwide political and cultural upheavals and the space race between the USSR and the United States, he made clear that the aims of science—such as precision, measurement, and objectivity—were not necessarily utopian or progressive. In *Cardboardology* and *People Circle (Photo Circle) I*, he used office materials to reflect how, despite the flimsiness of the science behind Nazi eugenics, a huge bureaucracy charged with the extermination of millions of people had developed around it.

These works also represent Polke’s caustic dialogue with art from the past and present. In *Constructions around Leonardo da Vinci*, his ambiguous respect for and skepticism about the station of artists in society is exemplified by an ironic but fond alignment of himself with the great Renaissance scientist and artist. *The Large Cloth of Abuse*, with its aggressive insults hurled across the canvas in a style reminiscent of Jackson Pollock’s famous drip paintings, is an assault on both the veneration of Abstract Expressionist painting and the subsequent emergence in the 1960s of Conceptual art, which often used analytical language as a primary medium.

# Gallery 4

## 1963–1970

“Modern Art “ 1968

Pages 14–15

When Polke studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the early 1960s, abstraction had returned—after having been deemed degenerate during the Third Reich—as the dominant style of modern art. But Polke was skeptical of this purportedly pure, non-referential visual language. In *Modern Art*, he catalogues an array of stereotypical non-figurative painterly forms, from geometric shapes to expressionist splashes; however, with its white border and hand-painted title, this pastiche looks like nothing more than a cheap reproduction. *Constructivist* alludes to the Soviet Constructivists, who heralded the utopian purpose of abstract art in the early twentieth century, but Polke’s black and white lines evoke a contrary association: by mimicking the form of a partial swastika, they suggest that the return to abstraction in West Germany was a specious attempt to mask the reasons for the style’s previous abandonment. In *Higher Beings Commanded*, he facetiously claims to be operating under the influence of paranormal or authoritarian forces.

Other paintings, in turn, conflate abstraction with the mundane realm of decoration and kitsch, as when Polke adopts the patterned grid—a key modernist motif—of store-bought fabrics that serve as both support and background for a series of ostensibly idyllic yet truly outlandish sunset scenes dominated by pairs of herons. However, Polke’s approach to abstraction is one of interrogation rather than absolute rejection; the careful composition, brushwork, and color combinations of the two *Stripe Paintings*, in particular, suggest that his relationship to abstract art is not without affection.



# Galleries 5 and 6 1967–1979

Pages 16–23

“Presumably you have a hole in your head  
you want to fill with art?” 1977

Most of the works in this gallery and the one directly ahead were made in the 1970s, a time of great social, political, and artistic unrest, as well as widespread experimentation with countercultural lifestyles and drugs such as hallucinogenic mushrooms. In these films, photographs, prints, drawings, and paintings, Polke created layered, mutable visions of everyday life, including altered states of consciousness. The dense constellation of works presented here is intended to evoke the stimulation of all the senses that occurs during a hallucination.

In 1973, Polke moved from Düsseldorf to a farm in nearby Willich, where the comings and goings of friends often led to artistic collaborations. His constant companion was his Beaulieu movie camera. To the handful of films he showed publicly during his lifetime, he added soundtracks by musicians such as the enigmatic Captain Beefheart (Don Van Vliet), whose innovative compositions blended psychedelia and blues. During this decade, Polke also traveled widely—including to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Lebanon—in search of unfamiliar experiences. All the while, he remained keenly responsive to the political climate in Germany, as in *Dr. Bonn*, a painting that responded to the controversial deaths in 1977 of imprisoned members of the Red Army Faction, a leftist German terrorist group.

Please be aware that some of these works contain sexual imagery.

# Gallery 7

## 1981–1983

Pages 24–25

“When I came home, I went straight to work and did a lot of painting.” 1984

In 1981, after returning from more than a year of travels, Polke entered a period of explosive experimentation as he rethought how and out of what to make paintings. He employed a broad array of both arcane and ordinary materials ranging from toxic Schweinfurt green paint to newspaper clippings capturing the anxious politics of the Cold War period.

Polke achieved complex results with minimal means. In the triptych *Negative Value*, he used a few materials—including a common, non-artistic synthetic purple dye—and burnished the surface of the painting to create iridescent gold, purple, green, and bronze colors that change depending upon the viewer’s position in the gallery. *Paganini* combines the figure of the eponymous Italian musician, who was said to have been assisted by the devil, with a demonic jester juggling symbols of nuclear extinction—an ever-present threat during the Cold War. As one looks closer, dozens of swastikas also emerge.

*The Living Stink and the Dead Are Not Present* juxtaposes painted rows of binders bearing clinical inscriptions—“Heilung” (healing) or “Besserung” (reform or recovery)—with a printed textile of Arcadian scenes by Paul Gauguin. Polke’s use of this kitsch fabric suggests an ironic view of his own love of the exotic, which was a subject of fascination during his earlier travels through Oceania and Southeast Asia. Making his images visually unstable and conceptually ambiguous was one of the ways he sought to thwart the possibility of a definite interpretation.

# Gallery 8

## 1978–1992

Pages 26–27

“It’s the procedures in and for themselves that interest me. The picture isn’t really necessary!” 1988

This gallery offers an intimate view of Polke’s experiments with materials and processes. He explored a variety of pigments, chemicals, and techniques, many of which he tested in small abstract paintings that he called *Farbproben* (color experiments). In the related film, liquid spills and piles of pigment seem to be characters animated by invisible forces as they explode, mix, and run across the canvas. Polke appears only briefly, pretending to paint his large canvas with a tiny brush.

The three works in the vitrine use photography, xerography, drawing, and printmaking to simultaneously degrade images and generate new, unforeseen ones. In *Purple*, Polke painted silk with a dye laboriously extracted from snails, harking back to a time when this pigment, known as Tyrian or imperial purple, was highly prized and could not be synthesized industrially. The wrinkled and pale result is anything but majestic, belying the hard work that went into making the dye. In contrast, in the subtle and delicate *Velocitas-Firmitudo*, Polke transposed marginal decorative elements from Albrecht Dürer’s 1522 woodcut *The Great Triumphal Cart* onto nuanced clouds of graphite dust and silver oxide, conjuring a granular, multi-dimensional space distinct from the clearly defined perspectival space of Renaissance painting that Dürer intensely explored.



# Gallery 9

## 1984–1991

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“The unforeseeable is what turns out to be interesting.” 1988

During a period of rapid and momentous developments—including the end of the Cold War, the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl, the fall of the Berlin wall, and the reunification of Germany—Polke worked with a broad view of history in the works exhibited here, which are among his largest paintings.

Between 1984 and 1988, he created a group of paintings in which a single watchtower is painted on surfaces ranging from bubble wrap to collages of patterned textiles. The kind of tower depicted is commonly used for hunting in Germany, but such structures also overlooked the border between East and West Germany as well as the perimeters of concentration camps during World War II. In these paintings, Polke used specific images and materials to convey his ideas about the fugitive nature of vision and memory; for example, in *Watchtower II* he covered the canvas with silver salts (light-sensitive compounds that darken over time) so that the image, like a repressed memory, would ultimately disappear in a black haze. Likewise, in four untitled works on glass from 1990, Polke obscured a once-transparent surface by using an ancient oil lamp to create ornamental skeins of soot.

# Gallery 10

## 1986–2010

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“I’ve lost count of how many dots I’ve painted in my life.” 2003

Throughout the 1990s and the first decade of this century, Polke expanded his range of tools and procedures for manipulating images. He often used chance events to create new compositions by distorting his sources. In several works made using a copier, he moved the source images while they were being scanned, yielding forms that blur the distinction between abstraction and figuration, handmade and mechanical, and copy and original. In his *Printing Error* works, he looked for irregularities in the grids of tiny dots that compose the halftone reproductions typically found in newspapers and magazines. He discovered meaning in the way such “errors” fail to maintain the perfection we expect from mechanical reproduction. The culmination of these techniques can be seen in the slide projections on view here, which bring together drawing, photography, and xerox to suggest a rudimentary film.

The so-called Lens Paintings, such as *The Illusionist*, were another major interest for Polke in the 2000s. Their surfaces are covered with an undulating, semitransparent layer that functions like a handmade hologram, optically animating and deforming the painting underneath as the viewer moves in front of it. *The Illusionist* suggests that both magicians and artists deal in deception, making things appear and disappear, and recalling the original Latin meaning of the word *alibi*: “in or at another place.”